

READY TO LEARN: TELEVISION AS TEACHER

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On the 31st day of March, 1994, President Bill Clinton signed historic legislation that provides the backdrop to our forum here today. The new education law, called Goals 2000, declares as the number one objective for the nation that by the year 2000 every child in America will come to school "ready to learn."

This is, of course, an audacious, hugely optimistic proposition. Yet, dreams can be fulfilled only when they've been defined, and if "ready to learn" *would* become a central mandate for this country, if we, as a nation, would prepare every child effectively for school, then I'm convinced that all the other education goals would, in large measure, be fulfilled.

Ashley Montagu once observed that "the child is the most avid learner of all living things on this earth," and, as parents know, it's in the early years when a child's curiosity is most intense. This is the time when learning exponentially expands, and if a child's perspectives on learning are restricted during the first years of life, it will be difficult, if not impossible, fully to compensate for the failure later on.

"Ready to Learn" is America's most essential educational mandate. The future of the nation rests on effectively serving and educating our youngest children. Yet, the sad truth is that we still have a very long way to go to meet the first educational goal. Several years ago at The Carnegie Foundation, we conducted a survey and received responses from seven thousand kindergarten teachers from coast to coast. Thirty-one percent reported serious problems in "social confidence" among their new students. Thirty-eight percent reported serious problems in their students regarding general

knowledge. Forty-three percent reported serious problems in emotional maturity among their young students. And a shocking fifty-one percent of kindergarten teachers reported serious problems in language development among students at the start of their formal schooling.

Even without adding the other 30-45 percent of teachers reporting "moderate problems" in these areas, we get a most disturbing picture of the overall "school readiness" of five- and six-year olds in America today. And even more disturbing is the *direction* of the trend. Forty-three percent of the teachers said that *fewer* children are "ready to learn" today than they were five years ago. Only 25 percent said *more* students entering school were "ready to learn" than five years ago.

One teacher wrote on the back of her questionnaire: "It's really heartbreaking to realize how many children are not ready to learn when they come to school." Another said, "Too many of my children come to school hungry and with deep emotional problems that interfere with learning." And a third observed: "It's terribly discouraging to see children come to school who don't know where they live, who can't identify colors, and who are unable to recite their full and proper name."

Frankly, I wonder how this nation can tolerate such neglect. I wonder how we can live comfortably with the fact that so many of our children experience such crippling deprivations. How is it possible to ignore, year after year, these conditions that place our youngest citizens *educationally* at risk? Surely this country has the power and the resources to give all children a good beginning, but do we have the will?

I. FAMILY

There is, of course, no easy solution to this tremendously complicated problem. What is clear, however, is that school readiness begins at home. This is the place where children must be nurtured, clothed, and fed. It's in the family where life's most basic lessons must be learned. No outside program, no surrogate or substitute

arrangement, can ever quite replace caring parents or other committed caregivers who first give love, then language, to their children.

And speaking of family influence, children need the guidance not just of parents, but of grandparents, too. Several years ago, it occurred to me that one of the most influential people in my own life was my Grandfather Boyer, who lived to be one hundred. At the age of forty he moved his family into the inner city and spent the next forty years serving needy people, teaching me by example that to be truly human one must serve. From him I learned lessons I could not have learned nearly as well in any classroom.

Anthropologist Margaret Mead suggested that the strength of any culture is sustained as three generations vitally interact. And school readiness surely means recognizing, once again, that children learn best when they're socially and emotionally bonded across the generations.

II. HEALTH

Beyond love and beyond language, school readiness also means physical well being. Last year, more than four million babies were born in the United States. If there is *one* right that *every* child can claim, it is the right to a healthy start. And yet the harsh truth is that, in America today, one out of every four children under the age of six is officially classified as poor. One-fifth of all pregnant women in this country get belated prenatal care—or none at all. Thousands of infants *in utero* often are denied sufficient protein. And more than 10 percent of all babies born in this country are damaged by alcohol and drug abuse.

In a Carnegie Foundation survey of twenty-two thousand teachers, more than half of the respondents said that "undernourishment" is somewhat of a problem at their school. Sixty-seven percent cited "poor health" among students as somewhat of a

problem. And then we wonder why hundreds of thousands of children come to school each year ill prepared to learn.

Winston Churchill said there is no greater investment for any community than putting milk into babies. It's indisputable that good health and excellence in education are inextricably interlocked.

III. HEAD START

Beyond these essential mandates, the lives of preschoolers also are profoundly influenced by the neighborhoods in which they live, and by the preschool experiences they encounter. I celebrate the fact that today, Head Start is both expanding and reaching down to the earliest years of learning.

James Agee wrote on one occasion that "in every child who is born, under no matter what circumstances, the potentiality of the human race is born again." Quality preschool can surely tap this marvelous potential. I'm suggesting quite simply that "ready to learn" is, in fact, everybody's business. It means caring parents and grandparents, a healthy start, quality preschool, and safe, supportive neighborhoods.

IV. TELEVISION

But beyond all of this, school readiness is also profoundly shaped by television—which penetrates almost every home and touches the life of almost every single child. By the time they march off to school at age five or six, small children here in the United States have spent more than *four thousand hours* in front of the electronic teacher. All told, the nation's nineteen million preschoolers watch television about *fourteen billion* hours every year.

It's incontestable, I believe, that after parents, television is a child's most compelling, most influential teacher, one that can either profoundly enrich or dramatically diminish the quality of life and capacity to learn. How can anyone deny

that TV is powerfully, relentlessly gripping, especially for young children who absorb without judgment what they hear and see.

The reason we've come together today is to consider how TV can enrich rather than diminish a child's readiness to learn. As Newton Minow, former chairman of the Federal Communications Commission, put it: "All of television is education. The question is, what are we teaching and what are we learning?"

V. HISTORY

The Broadcasting Act of 1934 unambiguously declared that the airwaves belong to all the people, that service to the public—including children—is both a legal and ethical obligation. In that spirit, one enthusiastic mother writing in *Good Housekeeping* magazine nearly half a century ago described television as "Momma's best friend." She praised *Kukla, Fran & Ollie*. She applauded Dr. Roy K. Marshall, the science teacher, declaring enthusiastically, "Seeing what he can accomplish in fifteen minutes proves the great potentialities of television in the field of education."

Since the 1950s, literally millions of young children have, in fact, been both wisely instructed and richly entertained by *Captain Kangaroo*, by *Ding Dong School*, and by the pathbreaking *Sesame Street*. More recently, children have benefitted from *Reading Rainbow*, *Barney & Friends*, Shari Lewis's wonderfully creative *Lamb Chop, Play Along, Story Time*, and, of course, from *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood*, the longest-running children's program, which is, I believe, a national treasure. And with the coming of cable, children have been transported to the moon, they've climbed the Himalayas, traveled to the bottom of the sea, and looked inside a human cell on the Discovery and Learning and Disney Channels.

And let's also celebrate such children's specials as *Ronald McDonald Theatre*, as well as creative features such as CBS's "*In the News*," NBC's "*The More You Know*," and "*School House Rock*"—ABC's imaginative commercials that taught lessons about life,

including "*Conjunction-Junction*" that's still recited with great delight by 30-year-old colleagues around my office. And the good news is that "*Schoolhouse Rock*" is returning with lessons on grammar, math, and history. And incidentally, I'm convinced that children can be taught with 3-minute as well as 30-minute segments, so let's not just focus on time. Let's focus on content.

But there's a dark lining to this silver cloud. Frankly, I find it discouraging that for almost a decade no commercial network had a regularly scheduled educational program for young children. I find it discouraging that today's cartoons and commercials during the so-called "Children's Hour" are often more degrading than enriching. And I find it doubly discouraging that in recent years the big "regulatory battles" have been fought over how much commercial time would be allowed on Saturday morning programs rather than how much good programming could be offered. Why is it that we seem more concerned about benefitting *from* children than we do about benefitting *them*? As Peggy Charren put it: "Is it possible that in the 1990s, we'll stop worrying over regulations and start thinking creatively about renewal?"

I understand, of course, that broadcasters have to worry about the bottom line. Financing will be an important topic at this conference. But as Bill Baker, president of New York's Channel 13, recently observed, "To aim *only* at the bottom line is to aim too low."

VI. OUR CHALLENGE HERE

The challenge of *this* conference is to aim high. And in that spirit, could we agree, at the very outset, that school readiness is, indeed, an urgent mandate for the nation? Could we all agree that in pursuing the nation's first education goal, television does, indeed, have a critically important role to play? And could we also agree that it's time for all members of the industry to develop, collaboratively, a

coherent children's television plan, to assure that all preschoolers are well prepared for learning and for life?

Frankly, I believe this a very special moment for television, and most especially for children. It's really rare to have such a distinguished group of broadcasters come together to consider a common goal. In the past, we've had workshops on children's television that generated lots of interest, but when the enthusiasm died down, it was pretty much business as usual. But last evening, as I talked with many of you, I sensed a feeling of hope, an expectation that this forum will be a beginning, not an ending, a serious effort from which a creative plan of action will emerge.

The good news is that many pieces are in place. *Sesame Street* and *Mister Rogers* and all the other PBS programs are, I believe, at the very core of television's commitment to young children. We also have the Learning Channel's bold new initiative called *Ready, Set, Learn*, which devotes six hours of commercial-free preschool programming, Monday through Friday—a truly significant commitment to our children.

Further, as a legislative backdrop, we have the Children's Television Act of 1990, which imposes advertising limits and establishes a National Endowment to support good programs. Especially consequential is Senator Kennedy's Ready to Learn Act of 1992. And recently the producers of Nickelodeon announced plans to focus more programming on preschoolers. ABC's literary efforts have been dramatic. And the commercial networks have a wonderfully rich menu of children's programs lined up for the fall.

Taken together, these initiatives offer a superb foundation on which to build a Ready to Learn crusade. But I'm convinced that these efforts are still only a tantalizing taste of what really could happen if we had clear goals and became organized for aggressive action.

Shortly, this forum will break into small groups to consider five essential issues that go to the very heart of a comprehensive plan. The first group will discuss what kind of TV programming young children need. The second will consider how Ready to Learn programming can serve child care providers, especially the parents. A third panel will consider how technologies besides television can help promote the school readiness of children. The fourth group will talk about the challenge of money. And the fifth panel will ask what role regulations should play in promoting a ready to learn campaign. The answers to these questions will come, of course, from your deliberations, but before we turn to the real work of the forum, I'd like to insert a few brief suggestions of my own.

VII. PROGRAMMING

Regarding programming, there is, I am convinced, a desperate need for children to have heroes who inspire and who introduce them to life's essentials, from good health to good behavior. Let's stop pretending that Bucky O'Hare and G.I. Joe and Bugs Bunny meet the public service mandates. Does anyone really believe that parents would believe for one minute that such programming would be "educational" if used in our schools? What we really need are programs that consider the whole child, that focus on the full range of children's needs.

Several years ago, I chaired the National Education Goals Panel Committee on how to measure the "school readiness" of children. We concluded that "Ready to Learn" has five essential dimensions: good health, emotional well-being, social confidence, general knowledge, and proficiency in language. I'd add to that list *values*, including self-discipline, honesty, diligence, and compassion. Could we imagine a coherently planned Ready to Learn TV curriculum that provides for all six of these essential aspects of children's lives, which is, of course, what some programs have been doing all along?

I'm also convinced that in designing a new Ready to Learn TV curriculum, parents and other care providers must be included, too. Tricia McLeod Robin, of the National Council for Families and Television, says: "Parents are desperate for help and television should not just be a partner in the ready-for-school campaign; it should be the leader." Again, the best children's programs already promote good parenting. I'm especially impressed that in the new PBS Ready to Learn initiative, stations will actually help organize what might be called neighborhood Ready to Learn Councils. Already, WGTE in Toledo, Ohio, reaches more than 125,000 children in a Neighborhood Child Care Partnership, and WNIJ in South Bend serves children in homeless shelters.

And speaking of bringing communities together, is it unthinkable to suggest that all commercial networks feature at least once a month a special family night program like NBC's *Bedtime with Barney*, or Nickelodeon's *Stranger Danger*, which aired just last night? Frankly, in our increasingly fragmented world, we desperately need to find ways to bring America together, and I have a growing feeling that television, in its own special way, can help to rebuild community and strengthen family bonding.

VIII. FUNDING

Finally, let me add one brief word about how to pay for all of this. I do not have a "billion dollar Carnegie grant." But it is obvious that Congress is serious about its own Ready to Learn mandate. The National Children's Television Endowment must be better funded, and commercial programming must be well sponsored, too. Two years ago the advertising budgets of such key companies as General Mills, Kelloggs, Coca Cola, Mars, and Nestles totaled more than two billion dollars.

I'd like to see at least 5 percent of such budgets set aside for the next five years to support Ready to Learn television programming. Already, Kellogg supports *Reading Rainbow*. And Kimberly-Clark backs *Barney and Friends*, just to name two.

Why not have all the major commercial advertisers compete not just for ratings, but also for their commitment to the nation's children? And to celebrate, the winners could have an annual Ready to Learn television award to compete with the Tonys and Grammys and Oscars and Emmys and Obies. If TV *commercials* can be winners, why not children's shows?

IX. CONCLUSION

The nation's first education goal—readiness for all—is a mandate. It's not a slogan. It's a promise America has made not only to itself, but most especially to its children. And what's crueler or more unethical than to make a pledge to children and then walk away from it?

Journalist Tom Bradbury reminds us, "No one is against children. The enemy," he said, "is the attitude that business as usual is enough . . . , that a few changes and a little more money will suffice." Frankly, children deserve better. And I'm convinced that what we *now* need is a sense of urgency, plus a creative strategy for action, one established *not* by government officials, but by the industry itself—a plan that focuses finally on the possibilities, not the problems.

Author Sylvia Ann Hewlett put the challenge this way: "Nothing is more worth doing," she said, "than easing the pain and improving the life chances of vulnerable, blameless children." When I'm tempted to become frustrated about the lack of progress we've been making, I think about the fact that almost overnight the Berlin Wall has come down, the Soviet Union has disappeared, the Palestinians and Israelis have signed a peace accord, and Nelson Mandela is now president of South Africa.

Given these breathtaking, historic changes, which I never would have even remotely believed could happen in my lifetime, is it unreasonable to suggest that we can design something as simple as a Ready to Learn television strategy for the nation's children—even perhaps before lunch!

Children are, after all, our most precious resource, and if we as a nation can't help the coming generation, if we cannot work compassionately together to assure that every child is well prepared for school, then I really do wonder what will bring us all together. Newton Minow recently observed: "A new generation now has the chance to put the vision back into television." And it's my urgent prayer that our deliberations at this conference will not simply result in just one more report, in one more feel-good headline, but rather that somehow we'll be able to help create for all the nation's children a more compassionate and more caring world.

When all is said and done, this is really what the National Ready to Learn Television Conference is all about. It is, above all, to enrich the life of every single child.