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THE BASIC SCHOOL

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INTRODUCTION

As most of you may know, the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching just released a major new report called *The Basic School*, which focuses on elementary education.

While preparing this report, researchers at the Foundation visited literally dozens of elementary schools from coast to coast. We were in hundreds of classrooms.

And, frankly, I was repeatedly impressed by the eagerness of students, the dedication of teachers and the commitment of the principals, who are performing heroic acts every single day, succeeding, often under enormously difficult conditions. And I concluded that most school critics could not survive one week in the classrooms they so vigorously condemn.

Further, after talking with principals and teachers I also became convinced that the last thing we need in America today is yet one more pilot project or novel experiment in education.

How, then, should we proceed? After reading the literature, consulting with experts, surveying thousands of principals, teachers and parents in twelve countries, we conclude that there are, in fact, four priorities for a quality elementary education, four simple yet essential building blocks that form the foundation of excellence in education. Let me summarize them for you very briefly here this evening.

I. COMMUNITY

TEACHERS/PRINCIPAL

We say, in the new Carnegie report, that building a true community of learning is the first and most essential ingredient of an effective school.

We found in our study that it is simply impossible to achieve educational excellence at a school where purposes are blurred, where teachers and students fail to communicate thoughtfully with each other, and where parents are uninvolved in the education of their children.

Community is, without question, the glue that holds an effective school together. But by community we mean something far more than a sentimental slogan or a message to be sent home to parents at the beginning of the year.

What we really are talking about is the culture of the school, the way people relate to one another, their attitudes and values. And during school visits, we concluded that to achieve community, a school must have six essential qualities. The school must be a *purposeful* place, with a clear and vital mission; the school must be a *communicative* place, where people speak and listen carefully to each other; the school must be a *just* place, where everyone is treated fairly; the school must be a *disciplined* place, with clearly defined rules of conduct; the school must be a *caring* place, where students feel secure; and the school must be a *celebrative* place, with lots of ceremonies and celebrations.

And to create this spirit of community we conclude that The Basic School also should be small enough to assure that every student will be known by name.

During my days as Commissioner I'd often visit large overcrowded schools where only the good and bad were known. And I'd conclude that many students "dropped out" simply because no one noticed that they had, in fact, dropped in.

We also discovered during school visits that for the spirit of community to "come to life," teachers simply must have time to work and plan together—ideally several hours every week—with the principal acting as lead teacher, the one who guides the institution more by inspiration than directive.

Lillian Brinkley, principal of the wonderful Willard Middle School right here in Norfolk, captured the spirit when she said, "I believe that leadership is the ability to inspire others. I don't ask teachers to do anything I wouldn't do."

I'm suggesting that building community in any school begins with teachers with the principal as lead teacher. And frankly we found it enormously significant.

PARENTS

But in the Basic School the circle of community quickly extends outward to include parents, who are, after all, the child's first and most essential teachers since the family is, as Will Durant said, the nucleus of civility.

We hear a lot of talk these days about how the schools have failed, and, certainly, education can be improved.

And yet the longer it goes, the more I've become convinced, that it's not the school that's failed, it's the partnership that's failed.

Today schools are being asked to do what homes, and communities, and religious institutions have not been able to accomplish. And if they fail anywhere along the line, we condemn them for not meeting our high-minded expectations.

And yet thirty years of research reveal that it is simply impossible to have an island of excellence in a sea of community indifference. And that if we hope to achieve quality in the nation's schools, parents simply must become partners in the process.

Secretary of Education Richard Riley put it succinctly when he said, "The American family is the rock on which a solid education can and must be built." And in the Basic School, "building" a true community for learning, with parents and teachers working together, is the first and most essential goal.

II. A CURRICULUM WITH COHERENCE

Beyond community, the second building block of the Basic School is a "curriculum with coherence," which begins with proficiency in language.

Lewis Thomas captured the spirit of the Basic School when he said that childhood is for language. And the Basic School is a "language school" a place where every student is expected to read with comprehension, write with clarity, and effectively speak and listen, since it's through the miracle of words that we are socially connected to each other and intellectually empowered. But in the Basic School, language is defined

broadly to include not just words, but also mathematics, as well as the universal "symbol system" we call art.

The arts are not a frill. They speak to us in an imaginative symbol system words cannot convey. And it's a language little children understand very early through color, through music, through rhythmic motion.

Several years ago, when the world-renowned scientist Victor Weisskopf was asked, "What gives you hope in troubled times?" he replied, "Mozart and quantum mechanics."

Cape Kennedy; esthetic term; technological achievement

And just last year, when Aleksandr Khazanov, a fifteen-year-old winner of the Westinghouse Science Talent Search, was asked why he stays awake studying mathematics, he replied that math is a "way you can apply a lot of connections to make very beautiful ideas, to obtain such beautiful proofs." Mathematics is beautiful," he said.

Equations are aesthetically pleasing. I'm suggesting that in the Basic School all students become proficient not only in the language of words, but also in the language of numbers, and in the symbol system of the arts, which one third-grade teacher called, the "language of the angels."

And in the Basic School students also learn how these symbol systems relate elegantly to each other.

III. CORE COMMONALITIES

Beyond proficiency in language, all students in the Basic School also study a solid general education curriculum—with coherence.

During our study we found that at most schools the curriculum is "disturbingly disconnected." Students complete the separate, isolated units, they move relentlessly from one grade level to the next. But what they fail to gain is a more coherent view of knowledge, and a more integrated, more authentic, view of life.

Young children come to kindergarten filled with curiosity and endless questions. They keep asking *why*? But somewhere around grade four they stop asking *why* and begin to ask, will I have this on the test?

Mortimer Adler asked on one occasion, "What happens between the nursery and college to turn the flow of questions off?" What happens, I believe, is a curriculum in which students study all the pieces but never see the pattern.

EIGHT CORE COMMONALITIES

In the Basic School we propose a course of study that is both comprehensive and coherent. But it's not so much a new curriculum as it is a new way to think about the curriculum.

Specifically, in the Basic School all of the traditional academic subjects are still there—from science, to history, to civics, and literature—but they are fitted within eight integrative themes based on the universal human experiences we all share.

These eight themes, which we call the Core Commonalities, include: the Life Cycle, the Use of Symbols, response to the Aesthetic, Membership in Groups, a Sense of Time and Space, Producing and Consuming, Connections to Nature, and Living with Purpose.

Simply stated, this thematic approach which spirals upward—vertically from kindergarten to grades 5 or 6 or even to grade 12, not only gives all students a core of essential knowledge but also helps them discover connections across the disciplines.

It also helps students understand how what they study in the classroom relates to their own lives, and how the various cultures all around the world express the commonalities in quite different ways.

More than 50 years ago, Mark Van Doren wrote: "The connectedness of things is what the educator contemplates to the limit of his capacity." Van Doren concludes by saying that the student who can begin early in life to think of things as connected has begun the life of learning. And "discovering the connections" is what the curriculum of the Basic School is all about.

ASSESSMENT

Before leaving the subject of the curriculum, I should stress the point that the Basic School is committed to another assessment, too.

High achievement standards and benchmarks are set for both literacy and general knowledge—with the expectation that every student will succeed. But in the Basic School assessment is imbedded in instruction. And we reject the use of testing as a game of gotcha in which schools end up measuring that which matters least.

James Agee wrote on one occasion, "With every child who is born, under no matter what circumstance, the potentiality of the human race is born again."

And in the Basic School assessment is embedded in instruction. The goal is to assure that the potentiality of every student is expanded, rather than restricted.

III. CLIMATE FOR LEARNING

This brings me to priority number three. Beyond community and beyond a curriculum with coherence, the third "building block" of the Basic School is providing a climate of active learning in the classroom.

Several years ago, I walked unannounced into a fifth-grade classroom in New Haven. Thirty inner-city students were crowded around the teacher's desk. My first impulse was to hurry down the hall and report an emergency to the central office. But I waited and discovered that what I was observing was not a crisis, but a magic moment. The children had just finished reading Charles Dickens' *Oliver Twist*, and they were debating with great vigor whether Little Oliver could make it in their own home town. They concluded that, while he was able to survive in far-off London, he'd never make it in New Haven, a much tougher city. They had discovered how great literature relates to the reality of life.

The simple truth is that excellence in education, means excellence in teaching.

CLASS SIZE

But for teachers to succeed, we need smaller classes, especially in the primary grades, where little children often need one-on-one attention. Frankly it's ludicrous to say class size doesn't matter. They never taught kindergarten or first grade or never took their grandchildren to McDonalds.

SCHEDULE

Beyond small classes we also need more flexible scheduling throughout the school day, with the "clock" adjusting to the "lesson plan," not the other way around.

GROUPING

In the Basic School we also recommend moving beyond the tired old "graded" versus "non-graded" debate, and we urge the students be grouped throughout the day or week in a variety of ways, to fulfill a variety of teaching and learning goals.

First we propose homeroom grouping, to secure for each child a sense of family; second, we propose mixed or heterogeneous grouping for cooperative learning projects; third, we propose focused or homogeneous groupings, for intensive coaching in reading, math, art, or music; fourth, we propose independent grouping, for independent study; and finally we propose and "all school" grouping, for community building and celebrations. Simply stated, in the Basic School each grouping patterns fit the purpose.

GRANDPA BOYER

We also recommend in our report grouping across the generations so that older and younger people can learn from one another. Several years ago it occurred to me that one of the most important people in my own life was my Grandpa Boyer, who lived to be 100. Grandpa, at the age of 40, moved his little family into the depressed section of Dayton, Ohio.

He spent the next forty years running a city mission, helping people who were poor, and teaching me lessons about life I could not have learned in school.

Margaret Mead said on one occasion that the strength of any culture is sustained as three generations vitally interact, and yet we seem to be building in this country a kind of horizontal culture in which the older and younger are separated from each other, with infants in nurseries, toddlers in day care centers, children in schools organized by age, college students on campuses, older people spending hours at the workplace, and the elders in nursing homes, living and dying all alone.

MESSIAH VILLAGE

The Basic School should bring the generations back together

Retirement village

Grandteacher program

RESOURCES

The climate for learning in the Basic School also includes basic resources, from building blocks to books, to the new electronic teachers that can connect children in classrooms to networks of knowledge all around the world, which is so excitingly revealed in the new Batten Learning Center here at Norfolk Academy.

SUPPORT

And we also urge that every Basic School have health and counseling services for children who are hurting.

One of the saddest parts of our study of elementary education was the frequency with which principals and teachers told us about children who are neglected and abused.

One Friday afternoon we talked with a group of tired teachers at an elementary school in a midsized city. The conversation soon turned to troubled children, and one veteran fourth grade teacher told us, "I know I'm supposed to teach the basics, but how can I neglect these children who are so deeply troubled?"

Several years ago at the Carnegie Foundation we surveyed 5,000 fifth- and eighth-graders and 36 percent said they go home every afternoon to an empty house. Sixty percent said they wish they could spend more time with their mother and father. Two-thirds said they wished they had more things to do. And 30 percent said their family never sits down together to eat a meal. The harsh truth is that America is losing sight of its children. In decisions made every day we are putting them at the very bottom of the national agenda. And while people endlessly criticize the schools, I'm convinced that the family is a much more imperiled institution than the schools, and that in many neighborhoods the public school is, in fact, the only institution that's still working! Schools cannot solve every social problem.

On the other hand, they cannot ignore children who are hungry, neglected and abused. And in the Basic School we propose a middle ground. Specifically we conclude that every Basic School should have at least one health and counseling professional to handle the basic physical and emotional needs of troubled children. But the Basic School should also have a partnership with other social service agencies in the community to refer problems that are acute, helping to build in every neighborhood, continuing support for children.

Children are our most precious resource. And if we—as a nation—cannot commit ourselves to help the coming generation, if local communities cannot work collectively on behalf of children, then what in the world will bring us all together?

And I must confess that at the completion of our study, I concluded that the most urgent obligation America now confronts is to build in this country, a public love of children.

IV. CHARACTER

Thus far, I have considered three priorities for the Basic School: bringing people together to build community, bringing the curriculum together to achieve coherence, bringing resources together, to enrich learning.

The fourth building block of the Basic School we call a commitment to character, which means relating the lessons of the classroom to the ethical and moral lives of children.

VALUES

There was a time when the focus of public education was on the whole child—in their body, mind, and spirit, and when values taught at home were reinforced at school.

In 1837, Horace Mann, the father of the common school, insisted that education should help students develop what he called "reason and conscience." And the highest and noblest goal of education, Mann said, pertains to our "moral character." Schools should, he insisted, teach virtue before knowledge.

TODAY

Today, not only has this commitment to teach virtue before knowledge dramatically declined, but we now feel uncomfortable even talking about such matters. It's all right these days to talk about academic standards, but it's not all right, we're told, to talk about ethical and moral standards.

And yet if history has taught us anything at all, it's taught us that knowledge unguided by an ethical and moral compass is more dangerous than ignorance itself. The British philosopher George Steiner defined the challenge this way: "We now know," Steiner said, "that a man can read Goethe in the evening, that he can play Bach and Schubert at sundown, and go to his day's work at Auschwitz in the morning.

What grows up inside "literate civilization," Steiner asks, that seems to prepare it for barbarism? What grows up, of course, is information without knowledge, knowledge without wisdom, and competence without conscience.

The harsh truth is that America's children are growing up in a world that glorifies physical violence and offensive language and sexual degradation.

They are bombarded endlessly with evil actions. And on the so-called children's hour Saturday mornings, they see 26 acts of violence every hour. And then we have the audacity to suggest that it's the nation's schools that are failing to develop the morality of our children.

THE CHALLENGE

The challenge is to teach all children respect, resilience, and responsibility, and in the fourth priority of the Basic School, a commitment to character, we propose seven core virtues which are, we believe, appropriate for every school and for every student.

Specifically, we suggest that every elementary school commit itself to teach—by word and deed—such old fashioned values as integrity, respect for others, responsibility, compassion, self-discipline, perseverance, and giving to others through service.

The poet Vachel Lindsay put the challenge this way: "It is the world's one crime its babes grow dull./ Not that they sow, but that they seldom reap, /Not that they serve, but have no gods to serve, /Not that they die but that they die like sheep."

The tragedy is not death, the tragedy is to die with commitments undefined, convictions undeclared and service unfulfilled.

Martin Luther King, Jr., said on one occasion, that everyone can be great because everyone can serve. And I'm convinced the children of this country are ready to be inspired by a larger vision.

Shortly before his death, the Jewish leader, Abraham Joshua Herschel, was asked what message he had for young people, and he replied: Let them remember that there is a meaning beyond absurdity. Let them be sure that every little deed counts, that every word has power, and that we can—everyone—do our share to redeem the world in spite of all absurdities and all frustrations and all disappointments.

"And, above all"—he said—"remember that the meaning of life is to build a life as if it were a work of art," which means affirming the theme of this Fourth Common Wealth Conference, Learning and Living with a purpose.

CONCLUSION

Here, then, is my conclusion. The Basic School is a thriving community of learning, a place with a curriculum with coherence, a climate for creative learning, and a commitment to build character. And in this final moment I'd like to close with what Grandpa Boyer would have called "a benediction."

On a very personal level I want to say how grateful I am to God for the help I've felt in completing this report during a time of special challenge, and express the hope that The Basic School will be of special benefit to all children but most especially to those who are less advantaged.

PRAYER

A year or so ago, my good friend Marian Wright Edelman sent me a copy of a prayer. And it occurred to me that, with a bit of paraphrasing, this might be an appropriate way to close my remarks this evening.

The prayer begins,

Dear Lord, we pray for children who like to be tickled, who sneak popsicles before dinner, and who can never find their shoes.

And we also pray for children who can't run down the street in a new pair of sneakers, who never get dessert, who don't have any rooms to clean up, and whose pictures aren't on anybody's dresser.

Dear Lord, we pray for children who spend all their allowances before Tuesday, who throw tantrums in the grocery store, who pick at their food, who squirm in church and in the temple, and who scream into the phone.

And we also pray for children whose nightmares come in the light of day, who rarely see a doctor, who have never seen a dentist, who go to bed hungry, and cry themselves to sleep.

Finally, we pray for those we smother with love, and we pray especially for those who will grab the hand of anybody kind enough to hold it.

In the end, the Basic School is not about buildings or about budgets, it's about building a better world for children.