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REFLECTIONS ON BUILDING COMMUNITY IN EDUCATION

Ernest L. Boyer

President

**The Carnegie Foundation
for the Advancement of Teaching**

Education Commission of the States

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Thank you very much for those generous remarks.

I am deeply honored to receive the

- **James Bryant Conant Leadership Award.**

There is, in my opinion, no recognition in education that carries with it

- **more dignity and**
- **more status.**

And I'm most appreciative and deeply humbled by this citation

- **that honors the memory of one of the**
- **giants in American education.**

The Education Commission of the States is itself

- **a tribute to Dr. Conant.**

ECS has for almost 30 years

- **pursued excellence for all.**

ECS has influenced consequential legislation,

- **it has shaped the national school reform debate.**

And I congratulate Frank Newman

- **and all other ECS members**
- **for contributing so vitally to the quality of American education.**

Dick Riley

want to say he's the best

I don't have any idea who I'd put above him.

I

As all of you know, the theme of the 1994 ECS Conference,

- **"Building Communities," is**

a candid recognition that in America,

- **public education**
- **and the building of a democratic nation**

have, from the very first, been inextricably interlocked.

Scholarship has always been a grass roots community effort.

In 1647, 129 years before the Declaration of Independence,

- **the Massachusetts Bay Colony passed a law requiring**
- **every town and village of 50 or more souls**
- **to hire a schoolmaster to teach all the children**
- **to read and write.**

Even in that day education was a community concern,

- **one that was far too important to be left to chance.**

George Washington declared that knowledge

- **is the surest basis of public happiness.**

John Jay called knowledge

- **the soul of the republic.**

Thomas Jefferson, our first education president, defined ignorance as

- **the enemy of freedom.**

Daniel Webster said it is the duty of government

- **to provide for the instruction of all the nation's youth.**

Horace Mann called the common school

- **the greatest discovery ever made.**

Frankly, I find it truly amazing that in the United States today

- **more than 40 million children hurry off each morning**
- **to 83,000 public schools**
 - **from Bangor, Maine,**
 - **to Mission Bay, California,**
 - **and the islands of Hawaii.**

And all of this has been accomplished

- **not by a Washington directive,**
- **but by local citizens committed to the audacious dream**
 - **of the common school for the common good.**

II.

That's the good news—the school as community.

The distressing news is that in recent years this historic commitment to public education

- **has drastically eroded.**

In an increasingly diverse culture, the partnership which

- **built the common school has weakened.**

And yet, the irony is that at the very time

- **the trust in public education has gone down,**
- **the obligations of the nation's schools keep going up.**

And today, our public schools are being asked to do what the

- **home,**
- **and neighborhoods,**
- **and churches,**

have not been able to accomplish.

Teachers in today's classrooms are not only expected to

- **teach the basics,**

they also are being called upon

- **to eliminate graffiti,**
- **to stop the drugs,**
- **reduce teenage pregnancy,**
- **and teach morality to the young.**

And if they fail anywhere along the line,

- **we condemn them for not meeting**
- **our high-minded expectations.**

And yet I'm convinced that most school critics

- **could not succeed in the classrooms they condemn.**

In a Carnegie Foundation survey of 22,000 teachers,

- **87 percent reported that lack of parental support is a problem at their school,**
- **89 percent said abused and neglected children is a problem, and**
- **67 percent reported poor health among their students.**

And in another Carnegie survey of 5,000 fifth- and eighth-graders, we found that

- **nearly 36 percent go home every afternoon to an empty house.**
- **60 percent said they wish they could spend more time with their mothers and fathers.**
- **And about 30 percent said their family never sits down together to eat a meal.**

And then we talk about failing schools. I'm beginning to believe that

- **the family is a more imperiled institution than the school.**

I'm suggesting that today many of the nation's schools

- **are almost overwhelmed by the pathologies that surround them.**

And that in many neighborhoods the public school is, in fact, the only institution

- **that is holding the community together.**

Several years ago, while visiting an inner city school,

- I walked through broken glass,
- I passed by burned out buildings,
 - that looked exactly like a war zone.

There was, I discovered,

- no health clinic for families and children in the neighborhood,
- the branch library was boarded up,
- churches had drifted to the suburbs,

and yet, good old PS 103 opened its doors every single day.

It was, for children, the only beam of hope

- in a climate of despair.

And then we have the audacity to say,

- **it's the school that's failed,**

when, in fact,

- **it's the partnership that's failed.**

Clearly, rebuilding community—the theme of this convention—

- **is our most urgent challenge.**

III.

Having said all of this, let me make it absolutely clear that

- **I am not taking education off the hook.**

While the social and moral fabric of the nation

- **urgently needs renewing,**
- **many schools need fixing, too.**

And in the decade of the 1990s, I'd like to see

- **the school reform movement**
- **move beyond the endless pilot projects and innovations**
 - **and begin, finally, to bring best practice up to scale,**
 - **as Americans like to say.**

And I applaud ECS, and Frank Newman's leadership

- **in promoting "systemic" change.**

But what is best practice?

Recently, at The Carnegie Foundation, we

- **completed a study of elementary education,**

and we found 4 components of a successful school.

First, the effective school had shared goals,

- **with students,**
- **teachers,**
- **the principal, and**
- **parents**
- **forming a true community of learning.**

Second, the effective school had high academic standards

- **with literacy for all,**
- **a curriculum with coherence,**
- **and continuous assessment.**

Third, the effective school had a climate of

- **active,**
- **not passive, learning,**
 - **with creative classrooms**
 - **and technology for enrichment.**

And fourth, the effective school focused on the whole child

- **with a flexible calendar,**
- **with support services for children,**
- **and with character education,**

all of this in a

- **climate of discipline**
- **and caring.**

And beyond all of the components, we know that

- **excellence in education**
- **means excellence in teaching.**

It's all reduced to that magical encounter

- **between an inquiring mind**
- **and an inspiring mentor.**

As for conviction, it was vividly reinforced for me several years ago

- **when as Commissioner I walked unannounced into a 6th grade classroom in New Haven,**
- **and discovered 30 inner-city children**
 - **crowded around the teacher's desk.**

At first, I was alarmed. But then I paused to

- discover that the children were not angry,
- they were enthusiastic.

They had just finished reading Charles Dickens' *Oliver Twist* and were

- vigorously debating whether little Oliver
- could survive in New Haven.

They concluded that while Oliver had beat the odds in far off London,

- he's never make it in New Haven,
- a much tougher city.

I had, quite by accident, discovered a

- corner of excellence
- in a classroom in New Haven.

The influence of great teachers lives forever.

Let's stop pretending that we have to wait for the year 2000

- **to figure out what makes an effective school.**

The simple truth is

- **we know what works.**

And the challenge now is

- **to provide the resources,**
- **demand the accountability,**
- **and make every school**
 - **a school of choice.**

IV. READY TO LEARN

As we move toward the year 2000, I'm convinced we must focus

- not just on schools,
- but most especially on the children.

And we surely must begin to take seriously

- **the nation's first education goal that says**
 - **by the year 2000 every child in America**

will come to school

- **"ready to learn."**

I realize that this is an audacious, hugely optimistic proposition,

- yet dreams can be fulfilled
- only if they've been defined.

And if we as a nation would commit ourselves to

- the school readiness of all children,

if every preschool child in this country

- would, in fact, be lovingly supported,

then I'm convinced that all of the other goals

- would in large measure be fulfilled.

V. BARRIERS

But the sad truth is that

- **we have a very long way to go.**

HEALTH

We know, for example, that every child, to be most successful in school

- needs to have a healthy start.

And yet, in America today, one out of every four children under the age of 6

- is officially classified as poor.

One-fifth of all pregnant women in this country

- gets belated prenatal care
- or none at all.

Thousands of infants, in utero, do not get the protein

- that is required for healthy brain cell growth.

More than 10 percent of all babies in this country

- are damaged before birth
- by alcohol or drug abuse.

And then we wonder why hundreds of thousands of children
come to school

- ill prepared to learn.

PRESCHOOL

We also know that a quality preschool

- **enriches a child's prospects for successful learning,**
- **especially the least advantaged.**

And yet it's a national disgrace that 30 years after Head Start

- **was authorized by Congress,**
- **less than 40 percent of the eligible children are being served.**

It's also a disgrace that preschool teachers in this country

- **are the least respected**
- **and the lowest paid,**

and yet their work is

- **the most essential.**

It is, I believe, a case of "child neglect."

Frankly, I'm convinced that if this country would

- give as much status to preschool teachers
- as we give to full professors

that one act alone

- would revitalize the nation's schools.

Quality preschool is the key to excellence.

And let me say parenthetically that I am

- **profoundly impressed by President Clinton's deep commitment to Head Start.**

PARENTS

And speaking of school readiness, we also know that

- **the home is absolutely crucial—**
- **that parents are the first and most essential teachers**
 - **who must first give love**
 - **then language to their children.**

And yet, in far too many homes, bookshelves are filled with

- **knick knacks,**
- **and plastic flowers.**

Children hear "shut up," and "go to bed,"

- instead of thoughtful answers to their questions.

And instead of being read to every day,

- the nation's 19 million preschoolers
- watch television 14 billion hours every year.

It's also true that in America today, we have millions of

- **children having children.**

And my wife, Kay, a certified nurse-midwife who has delivered many babies,

- **tells of teenage girls feeding their unborn children**
 - **Coke and potato chips.**

These girls learn about what's happening to their bodies

- **in between the labor pains.**

Ready to learn surely means

- **empowered parents.**

GRANDPARENTS

And speaking of home and family, we know that children need the influence

- **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 40 he moved his family into the inner city and

- spent the next forty years helping needy people,
- teaching me by example that to be truly human one must serve—lessons I could not have learned in school.

VI.

Here then is my conclusion.

Ready to learn is a pledge America has made

- not only to itself,
- but most especially to its children.

And what's crueller than to

- make a promise to a child,
- and then walk away.

Children are, after all, our most precious resource.

And if we, as a nation,

- **cannot commit ourselves to help the coming generation,**
- **to assure that every child is well prepared for school,**

then what will bring us all together?

VII

In a speech at the University of California in 1940,

- James Conant launched a 30 year ____

And in this historic statement, he described the public schools

- as the best hope for creating in this country what he called
 - a "classless society."

He presented a gripping picture of a culture where

- opportunities for all children
- would be expanded
 - not restricted.

And to Conant, learning was the key.

A half century has passed.

And when I'm tempted to become frustrated by the

- **lack of progress,**

I think about the fact that in less than a decade

- **the Berlin Wall came tumbling down,**
- **the Soviet Union disappeared,**
- **the Palestinians and Israelis signed a historic peace accord, and**
- **Nelson Mandela, who spent 27 years in exile, is now president of South Africa.**

Given these breathtaking changes, which frankly

- I never even remotely believed would happen
 - in my lifetime,

is it unreasonable to suggest that by the year 2000, America will, in fact,

- finally be achieving excellence for all?

Is it too much to hope that we will begin

- to create in this country
 - a public love of children?

VII.

Nearly 40 years ago, I began my first job in education at

- a small college of liberal arts in California.

And I still have a deep love for

- higher education.

But in the intervening years, I've begun slowly

- to understand that education is, in fact,
 - a seamless web,
- that teachers in the nation's schools are
 - the unsung heroes of the nation.

And that when all is said and done, the communities we must build range all the way

- from postsecondary education,
- to prenatal care,

a thought that would have been almost impossible for me to comprehend

- a few short years ago.

**Author Sylvia Ann Hewlett put the challenge this way:
"Throughout the ages," she writes,**

- **"people have striven for meaning**
- **that goes beyond the narrow scope**
- **of individual lives. . . .**

**As we head toward the twenty-first century, . . ." Hewlett
concludes, "[n]othing is more worth doing than**

- **easing the pain and improving the life chances**
- **of vulnerable, blameless children."**

Again, my deep thanks,

- to Governor Edgar,
- to Frank Newman,
- and to all of you

for making this a very special evening I shall always cherish.