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READY TO LEARN: A MANDATE FOR THE NATION

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INTRODUCTION

I'm delighted to join you at the fortieth annual conference of the

- **Tennessee Association of Young Children.**

The teachers assembled in this room

- **meet with children every single day.**

You bring learning and inspiration to those

- **most in need of guidance and support and are, without question,**
- **the unsung heroes of the nation.**

I. READY TO LEARN

This evening I've been asked to talk about

- ***Ready to Learn: A Mandate for the Nation.***

And perhaps the best place to begin is January 20, 1990,

- **when President George Bush—in his second State of the Union message—**
 - **announced 6 ambitious goals**
 - **for all the nation's schools.**

The president declared—as a first objective for the nation—that

- **by the year 2000, hold your breath,**
- **every child in America will come to school**
 - **"ready to learn,"**
- **a mandate that has since been ratified by Congress.**

I recognize that this is an audacious, hugely optimistic proposition.

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

And if—during the decade of the 1990s—

- **school readiness would—indeed—become**
- **a mandate for the nation,**

if we would agree that every single child will be

- **well prepared for learning and for life,**

then I'm convinced that all of the other education goals

- **would—in large measure—be fulfilled.**

READY TO LEARN REPORT

In response to this audacious challenge, we prepared—at The Carnegie Foundation—a special report entitled

- ***Ready to Learn: A Mandate for the Nation.***

We insisted in that report that "Ready to Learn" is a pledge America has made

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

and that it's unethical to make a pledge to children

- **and then walk away.**

But where should we begin?

How can we assure that all children in this country

- **receive the care and the**
- **compassion they deserve?**

I. HEALTH

The first priority, we say, is that

- **if there is one right every child can claim**
- **it's the right to have**
 - **a healthy start.**

Good health and good education

- **are inextricably connected.**

And yet the harsh truth is that

- **one-fifth of all pregnant women in this country**
- **receive belated prenatal care,**
- **or none at all.**

Nearly one out of every four children

- **under the age of six**
- **is officially classified as "poor."**

More than twelve million children in this country are hungry

- **some time every month.**

About 40,000 babies are damaged during pregnancy each year by alcohol abuse.

More than 10 percent are born to mothers who used cocaine, marijuana, crack, heroin, or amphetamines sometime during pregnancy.

- **And then we wonder why children come to school not well prepared to learn.**

My wife, Kay—who's a certified nurse-midwife

- **who has delivered many babies,**
- **including 7 of our twelve grandchildren,**

worked with teen-aged girls

- **and she'd come home night after night**

telling about children having children,

- **who for nine months feed their unborn infants on
Coke and potato chips,**
- **not knowing about what was happening to their own
bodies**
- **and who were given the basic facts of life**
 - **in between the labor pains.**

There is simply no way for children

- **to be well prepared for**
- **learning and for life**
- **if they are physically deficient.**

In the Carnegie *Ready to Learn* report we call for

- **a network of children's primary care clinics in every community across the nation**
- **just like we have a network of public schools in every neighborhood**
- **to assure that every mother and every baby has essential care.**

Winston Churchill—who had a way with words—declared that

- **there is no finer investment for any community than putting milk into little babies.**

And it's absolutely clear that if all children are to come to school well prepared to learn,

- **we simply must have good nutrition for mothers and their children,**
 - **since good health and good schooling**
 - **are inextricably interlocked.**

III. PRESCHOOL

This leads to priority #2.

Beyond a healthy start

- **school readiness also means quality preschool**
- **for every disadvantaged child,**
 - **to help them overcome**
 - **not just poor nutrition,**
 - **but linguistic and social deprivation, too.**

The evidence is absolutely overwhelming that a quality preschool experience—

- **especially for children most at risk—**
- **can be enormously beneficial.**

And yet, when it comes to education, the early years

- **are still the most neglected.**

Frankly, I consider it a national disgrace that

- **nearly 30 years after Head Start was authorized by Congress**
- **less than 40 percent of the eligible children are being served.**

It's like having a vaccine for a dread disease

- **and callously denying it to children.**

How is it that America can spend

- **100 billion dollars to bail out the S&Ls?**

How is it that we can spend

- **300 billion dollars on national defense?**

How is it that we can send, continuously,

- **space shuttles into orbit?**

And still not seem to have enough money for our children?

If Ready to Learn is, in fact, to be a serious mandate for this nation,

- **we urgently need full funding of Head Start,**
- **and we also simply must have better pay for teachers of young children.**

The average pay for preschool teachers

- **is \$12,000-14,000, and**
- **the turnover is 40 percent in some schools.**

Yet all the evidence suggests that what young children

- **need the most is continuity and caring.**

III. EMPOWERED PARENTS

This leads to priority #3.

Beyond a healthy start, and beyond quality preschool, Ready to Learn also means

- **empowered parents.**

Parents are, after all, the child's

- **first and most essential teachers.**

It's in the home where a child is

- **socially and linguistically empowered.**

This is the place where learning matters most. And I'm convinced that the obligation of every parent

- **is to first give love,**
- **then language, to their children.**

EARLY LEARNING

Language begins, of course, long before a child marches off to school.

- **It begins even before birth itself, as the unborn infant**
 - **monitors the mother's voice**
 - **and listens to the rhythm of her heart.**

And it's no accident that the three middle ear bones,

- **the hammer,**
- **the anvil,**
- **and the stirrup, are the only bones that are fully formed at birth.**

Following birth, a child's language exponentially expands.

- **First with cries and coos,**
- **then with phonemes and isolated words,**
- **followed by complicated syntax.**

And by the time a child marches off to school he or she

- **has mastered, on average, more than 3,000 words.**

Lewis Thomas wrote on one occasion that

- **childhood is for language.**

Wouldn't it be wonderful

- **if every home had children's books**
- **instead of knick knacks and**
- **plastic flowers on the bookshelves?**

Wouldn't it be wonderful if every child

- **received thoughtful answers to their questions**
- **instead of "shut up" or "go to bed"?**

And wouldn't it be wonderful if every parent would

- **turn off TV and read aloud to their children**
- **at least 30 minutes every single day?**

VII. A RESPONSIVE WORKPLACE

But parents cannot do the job alone.

As a fourth priority, in the new Carnegie report, we say that

- **employers also must become partners in the process.**

Less than a century ago

- **90 percent of all American families lived on farms.**
- **In those days work life and family life were**
 - **inextricably intertwined.**

Today, fewer than 3 percent of America's families

- **live on farms.**
- **And nearly 60 percent of all mothers with preschool children**
 - **are employed away from home.**

And to adjust to this new reality, what we urgently need

- **are "family friendly" work policies**
- **that make it possible for parents to spend more time with their children.**

In the Carnegie Ready to Learn report, we call for a national parental leave program

- **so parents can bond with newborns.**

We call for "flextime" arrangements

- **so that home and family obligations can be better blended.**

We call for "child care" in the workplace.

And we propose "parenting days"—time off with pay,

- **so that mothers and fathers can occasionally spend time with their children**
 - **in day care**
 - **in preschool**
 - **or in school.**

I'm suggesting that, if all children are to be

- **intellectually**
- **and emotionally**
- **and socially well prepared,**

American industry and business must become

- **part of the solution,**
- **not the problem.**

V. TELEVISION

This leads to priority number five. In the Carnegie report we say that in a National Ready to Learn campaign television also has a crucial role to play.

We have, in the United States today,

- **19 million preschoolers.**

These children

- **watch television**
- **14 billion hours every single year.**

And, frankly, what's so disturbing is what they see.

I consider it a shocking indictment of our culture that

- **not one of the four major networks**
- **has one single hour of educational programming for young children.**

Rather—on Saturday morning—during the so-called "children's hour,"

- **the youngsters of this country are served up**
 - **a steady diet of junk food commercials,**
 - **and cartoons that contain—on average—**
 - **26 acts of violence every single hour.**

And then we wonder why we have

- **troubled children,**
- **failing schools**
- **and violence in the streets.**

In the Carnegie report we propose that a "Ready to Learn" children's channel be created.

- **After all, we have channels for**
 - **news,**
 - **and for sports,**
 - **and for weather,**
 - **and for sex**
 - **and for junk jewelry.**

Is it unthinkable that we would have

- **at least one channel**
- **devoted exclusively to young children?**

The good news is that—as a follow up to our report—

- **Congress just six weeks ago did pass**
- **a "Ready to Learn Bill" that provides funding for preschool programming on public broadcasting stations all across the nation.**
- **And President Bush signed the bill in the heat of the campaign.**

And there's more good news. Just 4 weeks ago I received a letter from the President of the Discovery Channel about preschool television programs.

I'm suggesting that "school readiness" means

- **good health,**
- **good parenting,**
- **universal preschool education,**
- **a family-friendly workplace,**
- **and it also means television that enriches,**
 - **rather than degrades.**

NEIGHBORHOODS

Finally, to achieve school readiness for all,

- **we need neighborhoods for learning,**
- **with safe, friendly parks and**
- **public libraries that are well funded.**

Chattanooga renewal

Andrea Caldwell

Children's museum

Creative discovery

GENERATIONS

And we also need

- **connections across the generations.**

Margaret Mead said on one occasion that

- **the health of any culture is sustained when 3 generations**
- **are vertically interacting with each other.**

And yet in the United States today we've created a horizontal culture—

- **one in which "older people" are separated from the young.**

- **Infants are in nurseries;**
- **toddlers in daycare;**
- **children march off to schools where the different age groups are isolated from each other;**
- **college students are on campuses**
- **adults are in the workplace;**
- **and older people are in retirement villages living and dying all alone.**

One of the most important mentors in my own life was my Grandpa Boyer, who incidentally lived to be 100.

Grandpa—at the age of 40—

- **moved his little family into the slums of Dayton.**

He then spent the next 40 years

- **running a city mission and working for the poor,**
- **teaching me that to be truly human, one must serve.**

In the Carnegie report, we say

- **the time has come to break up the age ghettos.**

We say it's time to build

- **intergenerational institutions**
- **that bring the old and young together.**

For several years my own parents lived in a retirement village

- **where the average age was 80.**

But they had a "day care" center there

- **and all the 3- and 4-year-olds had adopted grandparents**
 - **to meet with every day and have a sense of bonding.**

I'm suggesting that there's something magical about

- **bringing the old and young together.**

As children see the courage and pain of growing older,

- **the old are inspired by the energy and**
- **innocence of youth.**

I'm suggesting that when all is said and done

- **a national Ready to Learn campaign means**
- **a healthy start for every single child.**

It means

- **quality preschool,**
- **empowered parents,**
- **a responsive workplace,**
- **television that teaches, and**
- **neighborhoods for learning.**

And it surely means

- **building connections across the generations,**
- **and creating in this country**
 - **a public love of children.**

THE BASIC SCHOOL

This brings me to one final observation.

If all children are to be well prepared for school,

- **it's equally important that all schools be ready for the children.**
- **They must accept them for who they are.**
- **And understand that all children are, in fact,**
 - **learning from the moment of their birth.**

But where do we begin?

Several years ago—at the National Press Club—

- **I proposed that we reorganize the first years of formal learning**
- **into a single unit called the Basic School.**

The priority of the Basic School would be on language—reading, and listening, and thinking about words—

- **and language would include the arts,**
- **which is absolutely crucial**

if all children are to be fully self-expressive.

Art is the language of the angels.

It is not a frill; it is the language children learn first.

Also, I must tell you that I find it absolutely ludicrous

- **to hear school critics say that class size doesn't matter,**

especially in the early years, which is precisely the time when

- **children urgently need one-on-one attention.**

And, I'm convinced that most school critics couldn't

- **survive one week in the classrooms they so**
- **vigorously condemn.**

In the Basic School there would be

- **no class with more than fifteen students each.**

I've never taught kindergarten or first grade, but I do have 12 grandchildren, as I said,

And frankly, just taking four or five of them on an outing to MacDonald's

- **is a hugely complicated task—**
 - **getting on the boots,**
 - **taking all the orders,**
 - **wiping up the spilt milkshake,**
 - **and keeping ketchup off the floor.**

And none of this has anything to do with formal learning.

Teachers in the Basic School would be given

- **special recognition and**
- **"time off" for planning.**

The first years of schooling matter most, and I believe that

- **if this country would give as much status**
 - **to first-grade teachers**
 - **as we give to full professors**
- **that one act alone would revitalize the nation's schools.**

ASSESSMENT

This leads me to say a word about assessment.

Howard Gardner, a psychologist at Harvard, reminds us that children have

- **not only "verbal" intelligence, they also have**
- **social intelligence,**
- **intuitive intelligence,**
- **spacial intelligence,**
- **aesthetic intelligence.**

And yet the sad fact is that most of the testing instruments we use today—which focus only on the verbal—

- **"screen out" the marvelous abilities of children!**

And we end up testing that which matters least.

Years ago my wife, Kay, and I were told by school officials that one of our children was a "special student"

- because of his performance on a single test**
- and because—as another teacher put it—**
 - "he's a dreamer."**

Craig did dream, of course.

- He dreamed about the stars and about places far away.**
- But we were absolutely convinced**
 - that he was gifted**
 - and that somehow his talents just didn't match the routine of the classroom or the structure of the system.**

Well, let the record show that for ten years this so-called "special student" has lived successfully in a Mayan village

- **he knows the language,**
- **he understands the culture,**
- **he runs Mayan schools,**
- **he builds fantastic bridges.**

And he's survived living in conditions that would have totally defeated the psychometricians

- **who concluded years ago he simply "couldn't learn."**

Recently, I reflected on why the testers were so wrong.

And it suddenly occurred to me that the answer was quite simple. The problem was that the testers simply

- didn't have the right instruments to measure his potential.**
- They didn't have a test on how to survive in a Mayan village.**
- They didn't have a test on how to build a bridge,**
 - or how to understand empathically another culture!**

James Agee wrote on one occasion that

- **with every child who is born, under no matter what circumstances,**
- **the potentiality of the human race is born again.**

And celebrating the potential of every single child

- **in the end must be the goal of education.**

CONCLUSION

Here, then, is my conclusion.

Ready to Learn, I'm convinced, is

- **the nation's first and most essential mandate.**

Children are, after all, our most precious resource, and if we as a nation

- **cannot commit ourselves to help the coming generation,**
- **if we cannot work together to assure that every child is well prepared for schooling and life,**
- **then just what *will* pull Americans together?**

Recently my good friend Marian Wright Edelman sent me a copy of a commencement speech she delivered at Sidwell Friends School—which ended with a prayer.

And it occurred to me that with a bit of paraphrasing

- **this prayer might be an appropriate way to close my remarks this evening.**

Her prayer begins:

"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 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 never see a dentist,**
- who aren't spoiled by anybody,**
- and who go to bed hungry, and cry themselves to sleep.**

"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,**
- **whose pictures aren't on anybody's dresser.**

"Dear Lord we pray for children who want to be carried

- **and for those who must be carried.**

"We pray, for those we never give up on

- **and also for those who never get a second chance.**

And 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."**

John Gardner said on one occasion,

- **a nation is never finished,**
- **you can't build it and leave it standing,**
- **as the pharaohs did the pyramids.**

It has to be rebuilt with each new generation.