EDUCATION FOR A NEW CENTURY

Remarks by
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INTRODUCTION

I'm delighted to join you at this 1990 Annual Meeting of New York State's 10th In-Service United Teachers' Conference.

New York is—in a very real sense—my adopted state and meeting with you here in Albany is like coming home.

Further, it's my conviction that those of you assembled in this room are the "real experts" on school reform.

- You fight for excellence every single day.
- You keep the faith when others are skeptical—even hostile.

And I must tell you that I have unrestrained admiration for your dedicated service to the nation's children often under enormously difficult conditions.

This evening I'd like to talk to you about education in the year 2000.

And I must tell you that

- my first impulse was to paint an idyllic picture,
- or children sitting at their well programmed computers,
- chatting with each other in a thoughtful discourse that Mortimer Adler likes to call the Socratic Method.

Still, I am convinced that there are consequential changes in the wind.

And this evening I would like to focus briefly on five priorities for American education that I believe are absolutely crucial as we more toward the year 2000 and beyond.

I. EARLY YEARS

First, I'm convinced that in the decade of the 90's this nation must give top priority to early education.

Last January President Bush, in his State of the Union message, set forth—

- for the first time in our history,
- six specific goals for all the nation's schools.

And one month later the governors

- from all 50 states
- endorsed unanimously these proposals.

I applaud this focus on education by the highest officials in the land.

I'd sure rather have the president and governors talking constructively about the nation's schools than ignoring or condemning them.

But what I found most compelling was the president's first goal.

In his State of the Union message he declared that by the year 2000

- every child should come to school ready to learn.

This is an audacious proposition. And I'm convinced that for this goal to be accomplished

- we must give top priority to the preschool years.

- And focus especially on children who are least advantaged.

The harsh truth is that in the United States today nearly one out of every four children under the age of six is officially classified as "poor."

- They are undernourished—hugely disadvantaged.

- And if we continue to neglect the crisis of poor children in the country, it seems quite clear that,

    - both our schools and the future of the nation will be imperiled!

A recent report by the Harvard School of Public Health revealed that a child who is undernourished will have a

- lower I.Q.
- shorter attention span,
- and get lower grades in school

And it's clear that if all children are to come to school prepared to learn we must provide better nourishment—even prenatally—for our children.

Some good nutrition and good schooling are inextricably interlocked.

I'm also convinced that before we reach the year 2000.

- We must have *preschool* education for *every* disadvantaged child

- to help them overcome

    - not just poor nutrition
    - but linguistic deprivation, too.

Frankly, I consider it a national disgrace that

- two decades after the federal Head Start program was authorized by Congress to help three- and four-year olds who are educationally at risk

- only 40 percent of the eligible children are being served.

President Bush—at the Charlottesville Summit put the challenge this way:

- In the final analysis, he said, improving schools means "bringing hope to those who need it most.

- "Let no child in America," the President declared, "be forsaken or forgotten."

Fulfilling this inspired vision means universal preschool education.

And I'm convinced that Head Start must become at least as important as the

- the Savings and Loan crisis,
- troops to the Persian Gulf,
- or shooting a telescope into space.

There's a third step that we should take to strengthen *early* education.

Several years ago—at the National Press Club—I suggested that we reorganize the first years of *formal* education into a "single unit" called The Basic School.

The Basic School

- would give top priority to language and to composition,
- and children, from the very first, would be
  - reading
  - writing,
  - listening to stories,
  - talking about words,

in a climate the foreign language people like to call "the Saturation Method."

Lewis Thomas wrote on one occasion that childhood is for language.

And I'm convinced that if little children are linguistically impoverished before they come to school it will be almost impossible to compensate fully for the failure.

Further, I'm convinced in the Basic School there should be no class with more than 15 students each. It's absolutely ludicrous to say class size doesn't matter.

And perhaps if we would give as much status to first grade teachers in this country as we give to full professors, that one act alone could revitalize the nation's schools.

I'd also like to see the Basic School give priority to the important system we call the Arts.

I'm suggestion that as a national priority we must focus first on programs of good nutrition for poor children and then on early education.

And our goal must be that every child by grade 4 will be able to

- write with clarify,
- read with comprehension
- communication through the Arts,
- and accurately compute.

The early years are absolutely crucial.

II. CURRICULUM

This brings me to Priority #2.

As we move toward the year 2000, I'm convinced we must begin to shape a school curriculum with a core of learning that focuses on the future-not just the past.

Do we believe in education not just for economic , but civic and moral education, too.

Thus far in the Reform Movement we've added more Carnegie units to the requirements for graduation, but in the process we have not examined what's behind the label-

- more history—yes, but which history should be studied?

- More science. But should it be a curriculum for the specialist or nonspecific as well?

- More English is required. But an English course can mean anything from Shakespear to creative writing!

What we need is not more units, but more insights and understanding.

And I propose that between now and the year 2000 this nation launch a peacetime Manhattan Project for the school curriculum.

What we need is

- a panel of school and college teachers to work together to shape a 21st century curriculum for the nation's schools.

- one that would be an option for the states and local districts.

It's my opinion that such a curriculum should, of course, focus

- on the history
- the civics,
- the literature,
- of our nation and western civilization.

But in our dangerous, interdependent world it's also urgently important that all students become familiar with language and cultures other than their own.

Secretary Bennett had to agree

- western civilization—understand our past
- nonwestern—understand our future.

Several years ago—when we completed our study of secondary education—

- we found that only two states required a course in non-Western studies.

And when we surveyed 5,000 college students several years ago,

- we discovered that 30 percent said they had "nothing in common" with people in underdeveloped countries.

The simple truth is that our students increasingly will live in a world that is

- economically,
- politically,
- and environmentally connected.

And I worry that education in the United States is becoming increasingly parochial at the very moment the human agenda is more global.

Lewis Thomas wrote on one occasion that if this century does not slip forever through our fingers

- it will be because education will have directed us away from our "splintered dumbness" and helped us focus on our common goals.

When I was Commissioner of Education, Joan Ganz Cooney, who is the brilliant creator of Sesame Street, came to me one day. She wanted to start a new program in science for junior high school students.

It subsequently was developed and is called "3-2-1 Contact."

The Children's Television Workshop surveyed junior high school students.

They asked such questions as, "Where does water come from?" Over 30 percent of the students said, "The faucet."

They asked, "Where does light come from?" And the students said, "The switch."

"Where does garbage go?" "Down the chute." I should explain these were young people in New York City so what can you expect?

As we approach the year 2000, it is urgently important that students understand that our connection to the natural world reaches farther than the refrigerator door or the light switch on the wall.

I'm suggesting that the goal of education must be to give students a core of basic knowledge to gain "cultural literacy" to use E.D. Hirsch's helpful information.

But students also must go beyond the isolated facts to gain more comprehensive, more coherent, more reverential understanding of our world.

Over 40 years ago Mark Van Doren wrote that—

- The student who can begin early in life to see things as connected

- has begun the life of learning.

This, it seems to me, must be a priority for the year 2000—and beyond.

III. ASSESSMENT

This leads me to the critical issue of how to measure school results.

At the Charlottesville Summit the president and governors—for the first time in our history—

- called for a national report card on school performance.

And, I'm convinced that, between now and the year 2000, we must demonstrate to the public that this nation's $180 billion investment in public education is paying off.

But I'm also deeply concerned that in this "number happy" culture, we'll become so preoccupied with testing that we'll divert the priorities of the classroom.

- And—in the end—measure that which matters least.

Is it too much to hope that by the year 2000 we will have

- more subtle and
- more intellectually authentic ways
- to measure the progress of our students?

Howard Gardner in his provocative book, *Frames of Mind*, reminds us that children not only have textual intelligence.

They also have

- logical intelligence,
- spatial intelligence,
- aesthetic intelligence,
- intuitive, and social intelligence, too.

And these intelligences must be encouraged, not neglected.

James Agee wrote on once occasion that

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

And this must be the vision for school assessment we look to the year 2000 and beyond.

IV.

This leads me to say a word about the attitude of students.

I'm convinced that as we move toward the year 2000

- we urgently need to help students see a connection between
  - what they learn
  - how they live

During our study of the American High School, I became convinced that

- we have not just a school problem,
- but a youth problem in this nation.

Family: Far more imperiled institution than the school.

Teenagers in this country are sadly adrift.

- They feel unneeded,
- unwanted,
- and unconnected to the larger world.

And even in the school itself there is an apathy and anonymity among students who are unknown and unsupported by adults.

May drop out—no one noticed that they had dropped in.

We have in America today a "generational separation."

A "layering" of the age groups in which young people and older people are isolated from each other.

I'm convinced that a school where the average age is 16 is as unhealthy as a retirement village where the average age is 80.

I'm suggesting that the separate age groups do belong together. The young can learn from older, older from the younger.

Recently, I heard a cynic say that the reason grandparents and grandchildren get along so well together is because

- they have a common enemy.

In our survey of 22,000 teachers I was struck that

- 90 percent reported that lack of parental support is a problem at their school.

- 89 percent say that "abused" or "neglected" children is a problem.

- And 70 percent report "poor health" among their students.

One teacher put it this way:

- I'm sick and tired of seeing my bright-eyed first grade kids

  - fade into the "shadows of apathy" and become deeply troubled by age 10.

Another said that the difficult part of teaching is not the academics.

The difficult part is dealing with the great numbers of kids

- who come from physically, socially, and financially stressed homes.

What is the future of this country, this teacher asks,

- when we have so many needy children?

Last year we decided to go directly to the children.

We surveyed 5,000 5th and 8th graders, which I've already mentioned, and we found that

- 40 percent said they go home to an empty house.
- 60 percent said they wish they could spend more time with their mothers and fathers.
- Two-thirds said they often wish they had more things to do.
- And 30 percent said their family never sits down together to eat a meal.

What we found—in a word—was alienation.

Doc How put it perfectly when he said that today's youth are

- an island in society cut off,
- but yearning to belong.

In response to this pathology we suggest in our report, *High School*, a new Carnegie unit.

- A community service term in which students work at
    - retirement villages,
    - day care centers,
    - youth camps
- and tutor other students at the school.

Vachel Lindsay wrote:

It is the world's one crime
Its babes grow dull
Now that they sow—seldom reap
serve-no god to serve
die—die like sheep.

V. TEACHERS

Finally, I return to those assembled in this room. When all is said and done

- excellence in education means
- excellence in teaching.

And if this nation hopes to have good schools, we simply must give

- more dignity,
- more status, and
- more authority
- to the teachers.

The harsh truth is that today we expect teachers to do what the family, home, and churches have not been able to accomplish.

- And if they fail anywhere along the line, we condemn them for not meeting our idealized expectations.

And yet, I'm increasingly convinced that most school critics could not survive one week

- in the classrooms

- they so vigorously condemn

Last year at the Carnegie Foundation, we surveyed 22,000 teachers from coast to coast and we discovered that:

- nearly one-third have no role in "shaping" the curriculum they are asked to teach.

- Over 50 percent do not participate in planning their own in-service education.

- Seventy percent are not asked to help shape retention policies at their school.

- Fifty percent said morale is lower than it was 5 years ago.

And then we wonder why our most gifted students do not go into teaching!

I'm suggesting that to achieve excellence in education we don't need more rules and regulations. We need more teacher recognition.

- We need a teacher innovative fund in every school.

- We need a teacher travel fund in every school.

- We need a federally-funded summer fellowship program so teachers can be intellectually enriched.

- And we need at least one full week of in-service education every year to English teachers, so teachers can work together on common tasks.

- Teachers know what kind of programs serve the best.

- And I'd like to see a teacher-run teacher center in every district in the country.

And speaking of teacher recognition, I suggest that Mr. Bush—who wants to be the Education President—invite the "teachers of the year" from all 50 states to a dinner in the East Room of the White House.

- It's a symbolic act, but we live by symbols.

And to celebrate teaching in the White House would send a powerful signal to the nation. It would say that teachers are the unsung heroes of the culture.

CONCLUSION

Here then is my conclusion.

The President and the Governors have given us six education goals.

That's the easy part.

The question we now confront is,

- Do they really mean it?
- Does this nation really
    - have the will.
    - Do we really have the commitment to provide excellence for all children—
    - not just the most advantaged?

John Gardner said on one occasion that

- A nation is never finished.
- You can't build it
    - and leave it standing as the Pharaohs did the pyramids.
- It has to be recreated for each new generation.

And I'm convinced that the most urgent task

- our generation now confronts
    - is a reaffirmation of the nation's schools.

And—above all—a recommitment to the future of our children.