

1000 0001 6428

THE BASIC SCHOOL: A COMMUNITY FOR LEARNING

Ernest L. Boyer
President

The Carnegie Foundation
for the Advancement of Teaching

New Jersey School Boards Association
Atlantic City, New Jersey

October 27, 1995

As most of you know, the Carnegie Foundation 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**
- **the energetic empowerment of school board members,**
- **and, above all else,**
 - **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 schools and classrooms**
- **they so vigorously condemn.**

EXPERIMENTS

And after talking with principals and teachers and parents, I also concluded that the last thing we need in America today

- **is yet one more "pilot" project,**
- **or "novel" innovation or untested gimmick.**

And we certainly don't need to wait for Washington to fix the nation's schools.

What we really need to do is take the school reform movement back to the local school,

- **to the first years of formal learning,**
 - **which are transcendently the most important.**
- **And begin to introduce in every school**
 - **practices that work.**

Which is, in the end,

- **what the Basic School is all about.**

And, 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 broadly here this morning.

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.**

A school is not a row of isolated classrooms

- **held together by polished corridors**
 - **or even a rigid construct.**

Rather, a school is a place where students and teachers come together each day

- **collaboratively to promote learning.**

During our study we found 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.**

And we conclude that community is, without question, the glue that holds an effective school together.

But we also found that community is something far more than a sentimental speech at the beginning of the year.

What we are really 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. The school must be

- **a *purposeful* place, with a clear and vital mission;**
- **a *communicative* place, where people speak and listen carefully to each other;**
- **a *just* place, where everyone is treated fairly;**
- **a *disciplined* place, with clearly defined rules of conduct;**
- **a *caring* place, where students feel secure; and**
- **a *celebrative* place, with lots of ceremonies and celebrations.**

And for a community such as this to "come to life," teachers in the Basic School—who are considered leaders—

- **simply must have time to work together—ideally every week—**
- **with the principal as lead teacher,**
- **someone who guides the institution**
 - **more by inspiration**
 - **than directive.**

PARENTS

I'm suggesting that—in a quality institution—community begins with teachers,

- **with the principal as lead teacher.**

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.**

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,

- **it's not the school that's failed,**
- **it's the partnership that's failed.**

Today the nation's public schools are being asked to do what

- **the homes,**
- **and the communities,**
- **and the 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 continuing indifference.**

And that if we hope to achieve quality in the nation's schools, parents simply must become partners in the process.

Secretary Riley declared recently that

- **"The American family is the rock on which a solid education**
 - **can and must be built."**

And in the Basic School, building community

- **is the first and most essential goal.**

II. A CURRICULUM WITH COHERENCE

This brings me to priority number 2.

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 in the Basic School every student is expected to

- **read with comprehension,**
- **write with clarity,**
- **and effectively speak and listen.**

There is simply no way to talk about quality education

- **if large numbers of our children are linguistically deficient.**

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.**

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."**

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 to make very beautiful ideas,**
 - **to obtain such beautiful proofs."**

"Mathematics is beautiful," he said.

Equations are aesthetically compelling.

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."**

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 elementary 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 curriculum with coherence.

Specifically, all of the traditional academic subjects—

- **from science,**
- **to history,**
- **to civics,**
- **and literature—**

are fitted within eight integrated themes

- **based on the universal human experiences we all share.**

These eight themes, which we call the Core Commonalities, include:

- **the Life Cycle—which teaches children about health and the sacredness of their own bodies;**
- **the Use of Symbols—which teaches how to communicate with each other;**
- **Response to the Aesthetic—which teaches the beauty of music, dance, and the arts;**
- **Membership in Groups—which teaches about social instruction;**
- **a Sense of Time and Space—which teaches astronomy and history;**
- **Producing and Consuming—which teaches about the essentialness of work;**
- **Connections to Nature—which teaches through service; and**
- **Living with Purpose—which teaches values.**

Simply stated, this thematic approach,

- **which spirals upward vertically**
 - **from kindergarten to grades 5 or 6,**
- **not only gives all students a core of essential knowledge,**
 - **it also helps them discover connections across the disciplines,**

and understand as well

- **how what they study in the classroom**
- **relates to their own lives.**

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 Basic School curriculum is all about.

ASSESSMENT

Before leaving the curriculum, I should stress the point that

- **the Basic School is committed to assessment.**

High achievement standards and benchmarks will be set

- **for both literacy**
- **and general knowledge.**

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 the goal is to assure that the potential of every student

- **is expanded,**
- **rather than restricted.**

III. CLIMATE FOR LEARNING

This brings me to priority number three.

Beyond the school as community,

- **beyond a curriculum with coherence,**

the third priority of the Basic School

- **is a climate for active learning.**

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.

And 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 whether Little Oliver

- **could make it in their own home town.**

They concluded that, while Oliver was able to survive in far-off London,

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

The simple truth is that excellence in education,

- **means excellence in teaching.**
- **And these children had learned to relate the lessons of**
 - **19th century literature to their own lives.**

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.**

The harsh truth is that class size in the primary grades in this country

- **averages 26,**
- **while research reveals that optimum learning occurs**
 - **when the student-teacher ratio is about 18 to 1.**

SCHEDULE

Research reveals that to achieve excellence we also need a flexible class schedule throughout the school day,

- **with the "clock" adjusting to the "lesson plan,"**
- **not the other way around.**

GROUPING

And in the Basic School we recommend that students be grouped in a variety of ways.

- **First, we recommend homeroom grouping, for a sense of family;**
- **second, mixed-age grouping, for cooperative projects;**
- **third, focused grouping, for intensive coaching;**
- **fourth, individual grouping, for independent study;**
- **and "all school" grouping, for ceremonies and celebrations.**

In the Basic School, each grouping pattern fits purpose.

And we reject the tired old

- **graded vs. nongraded debated,**
- **when it is—in fact—both.**

GRANDPA BOYER

In the Basic School we also recommend going outside the school and grouping across the generations.

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.

Margaret Mead said 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.**

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.**

Simply stated, we recommend that Basic Schools have "intergenerational connections,"

- **with older students mentoring the younger ones.**
- **And grandteachers serving as tutors, too.**

The Basic School should help to bring the generations back together.

RESOURCES

The Basic School also includes basic resources for learning,

- **from building blocks to books,**
- **and includes as well technology that can connect children**
- **to networks of knowledge all around the world.**

SUPPORT SERVICES

Ultimately, the Basic School is concerned about the whole child—

- **children who are in physical and emotional distress.**

And we urge that every Basic School have

- **health and counseling services**
- **for children who are hurting.**

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 troubled?"**

Several years ago 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 agenda.**

And while people endlessly criticize the schools,

- **I'm convinced that the family is a much more imperiled institution than the schools.**

I'm further convinced that,

- **in many neighborhood schools,**
- **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.

Every Basic School should have at least one health and counseling program to handle the basic

- **physical**
- **and emotional,**
- **needs of children.**

But the Basic School should also have a partnership with other social service agencies—in the center that surround them—

- **to refer problems that are acute,**
- **to help to build in every neighborhood,**
- **a public love of 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?**

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 is called a commitment to character,

- **which seeks to relate the lessons of the classroom**
- **to the ethical and moral lives of students.**

VALUES

There was a time when the focus of public education was on the whole child—

- **body,**
- **mind,**
- **and spirit.**

And values taught at home and in synagogues and churches were reinforced at school.

Horace Mann, the father of the common school, captured this spirit in 1837 when he said, that public schools should help students develop

- **what he called both "reason and conscience."**
- **The highest and noblest goal of education said,**
 - **pertains to our moral character.**

And Mann concluded that schools should teach virtue before knowledge.

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 for our children.**

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 know now," Steiner said, "that a man can

- **read Goethe or Rilke in the evening,**
- **that he can play Bach and Schubert,**
- **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 violence**
- **and sexual degradation.**

They are bombarded endlessly with evil actions. 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 the nation's schools are failing to develop the morality of our children.

The poet Vachel Lindsay wrote on one occasion,

- **"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.**

**And so 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.**

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.

PAUSE

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—"let them remember that

- the meaning of life is to build a life**
- as if it were a work of art."**

CONCLUSION

Here, then, is my conclusion.

The Basic School has four priorities and within these priorities are the 10 components of an effective school. They include:

- **a shared vision;**
- **teachers and leaders;**
- **parents as partners;**
- **the centrality of language;**
- **a curriculum with coherence;**
- **measuring for success;**
- **flexible patterns to fit purpose;**
- **resources for enrichment;**
- **support services for children;**
- **a commitment to character.**

And every single proposal we make in the Basic School report is already going on, to one degree or another, in schools across the country.

What we propose to do is bring them all brought together in the Basic School,

- **with every elementary school still retaining its own distinctive mission.**

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 morning.**

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 especially pray 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 budgets,

- **it's about building a better world for children.**

And I salute the members of this great association

- **for your sacrificial service on behalf of children.**