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THE BASIC SCHOOL

**Ernest L. Boyer
President**

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

**National Association Of Elementary School Principals
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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**
- **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.**

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

- **is another "pilot" project,**
- **another "novel" innovation.**

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

- **to the first years of formal learning,**
- **which are transcendently the most important.**

We need to stop looking for "quick fixes" and promising panaceas and begin to put in place

- **the tried and true practices that really work.**

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.**

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.

As Patricia Bolanõs, at the Key School in Indianapolis, told us:

- **"You have to have community before anything else."**

But community doesn't just happen. 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, a school must have six essential qualities. 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

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

Lillian Brinkley, principal at Willard Middle School in Norfolk, Virginia, 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."**

And frankly we found it enormously significant in our national survey that

- **nearly 70 percent of the elementary school teachers in this country rated the performance of the principal at their school**
 - **"excellent" or "good,"**
- **which is a far better rating than either the President or the Speaker of the House can get these days.**

And I congratulate all of you for your leadership and vision.

PARENTS

I'm suggesting that 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 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 continuing indifference.**

And if we hope to achieve quality in the nation's schools, parents simply must become more actively involved,

- **not in running schools,**
- **but in the education of their own children.**

Sam Sava, the distinguished leader of this Association,

- **and member of the board of Carnegie trustees,**

said it best:

- **"Children absorb as many unspoken lessons**
 - **about love and work in their homes**
- **as they do the spoken lessons of the classroom."**

Secretary Riley echoed the same conviction 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 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.**

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 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."**

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,**
- **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.**

At the Carnegie Foundation we are now developing

- **a curriculum framework,**
- **plus sample "lesson plans,"**

for each of the eight commonalities, which is a long-term project.

And teachers at local schools have been working, too.

For example, the Milford School District in Delaware recently adopted the commonalities framework for all schools,

- **kindergarten through grade 12.**

Kae Keister, principal at Banneker School, and her teachers are developing lesson plans.

Summer institutes are planned, and Charles Moses, the district superintendent, said that

- **not only do the core commonalities *include* the disciplines,**
- **they *connect* them.**

And the new curriculum also allows us to meet all of the statewide curriculum requirements

- **in a more thoughtful way.**

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 is all about.

ASSESSMENT

Before leaving the subject of 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.**

And we are working with ACT, the assessment organization in Iowa City, to determine the best, most appropriate ways

- **to measure the progress of each student.**

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 community and beyond a curriculum with coherence,
as the third building block, the Basic School**

- **has a climate that promotes "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.

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 he 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.**

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.**

SCHEDULE

We also need a more 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 also recommend that students be grouped in a variety of ways,

- **homeroom grouping, for a sense of family;**
- **mixed-age grouping, for cooperative projects;**
- **focused grouping, for intensive coaching;**
- **independent grouping, for independent study;**
- **and "all school" grouping, for ceremonies and celebrations.**

In the Basic School, the grouping pattern should fit purpose.

GRANDPA BOYER

We also recommend 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.

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 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.**

We recommend that Basic Schools have intergenerational connections.

And we found such programs at David Cox Road Elementary School in Charlotte, North Carolina, where John Fries is principal,

- **and at other elementary schools across the country.**

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

RESOURCES

The climate for learning in the Basic School also includes basic resources,

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

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 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 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.**

**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.

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

- **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, a commitment to character,

- **relates the lessons of the classroom**
- **to the ethical and moral lives of students.**

Will everything we propose for the Basic School actually change the lives of children?

VALUES

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

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

Values taught at home were reinforced at school.

In 1837, Horace Mann, the father of the common school, insisted that public schools 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.**

And 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 standards.**

Even though 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 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 your 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."**

CONCLUSION

Here, then, is my conclusion.

The Basic School is a community with a clear purpose.

- **It has a curriculum with coherence.**
- **There is in the school a climate for creative learning,**
- **with a commitment, ultimately, to building character.**

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 is that they all be brought together in the Basic School,

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

And to help the cause, we'd like to create a national conversation about the Basic School. We have already set up a special "Basic School" telephone line in Princeton.

And, in association with NAESP, we'll have a Basic School connection through "America On-Line."

And I'd love to have every principal contact us about joining the informal Basic School Network,

- **to exchange information and ideas.**

Our goal is to be supportive of the nation's elementary school principals and teachers

- **who are working so selflessly for all the nation's children.**

BENEDICTION

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 that I am most grateful to God

- **for the help I've felt in completing the report during a time of illness.**

And that my concern is that the Basic School will be especially beneficial to the children who are least 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 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.**