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From: "Today we learn to read"

It was a balmy September morning. My mother and I walked along together. It was my first day of school. My stomach churned with that special blend of fear and anticipation. Halfway there, I broke the silence and asked, "Will I learn to read today?" "No," my mother replied. "You won't learn to read today, but you will before the year is out."

I have often thought about that question. I am convinced most children go to school to learn to read. They want to break the adult code and find out what all those secrets are about.

That first day of school, my teacher, Miss Rice greeted 28 frightened, eager children, and said: "Good morning class. Today we learn to read."

All day we focused on four words. I go to school. We traced them, we sang them, and we recited them together. That afternoon, I ran home feeling 10 feet tall. I whipped a crumpled piece of paper from my pocket and announced proudly to my mother, "Today I learned to read."

I had actually learned to memorize, of course, but on that first day of formal learning, Miss Rice taught me something profoundly important.

She taught me that language is not just another subject; it is the means by which all other subjects are pursued.

In Miss Rice's class, day after day, we learned that reading and writing go together. Spelling and word choice mattered, to be sure, but ideas mattered most.

Miss Rice taught me that excellence in education is measured not by true-false tests or by putting Xs on a piece of paper.

Excellence, I learned, is measured by the mastery of language--by the ability of each student to communicate with care.

Our Carnegie Foundation reports on high school and college place great emphasis on language. In High School we devote a chapter to "Literacy: The Essential Tool." We say that language defines our humanity. It is the means by which we cope socially and succeed educationally. The advent of the information age raises to new levels of urgency the need for all students to be effective in their use of the written and spoken word. The mastery of English is the first and foremost goal of education.

In the Carnegie Report on the American college, we focus on the full range of the undergraduate experience--from enrollment to graduation. But we begin with the conviction that proficiency in language is the first prerequisite for an effective education. All college students, we say, should be able to write and speak with clarity and to read and listen with comprehension.

While it is almost embarrassing even to suggest that such proficiencies are college-level skills, we heard repeatedly during our study that many students do not have the language proficiency needed for academic study. One mathematics professor put the problem this way: "There's a lot of talk around here about preparing more scientists and engineers, but the biggest problem I have with my students is getting them to read and write."

In our nationwide survey, we found that more than half the faculty at U.S. colleges and universities rated the academic preparation of incoming students as only "fair or poor." And in large measure the concern relates to language.

Literacy comes first in education. On this point, everyone agrees. But what we can't agree upon it seems is the level of literacy to be accomplished. Will we settle for the simple vocabulary and word matching tests now required, even at the

college level? Is this what it means to be linguistically proficient?

Historically, major social changes have caused shifts in literacy standards and in estimates of the adequacy of the American population's literacy. In colonial New England, one who could read a simple Lutheran catechism met the needs of his community. By World War I, defense of the nation demanded a higher level of reading proficiency. Today, complex demands are made of an individual who seeks to support himself financially, contribute to efforts to increase American economic competitiveness, and participate in the increasingly complex civic society that surrounds him.

The National Assessment of Educational Progress reports that American schools have succeeded in bringing 95 percent of young adults to a fourth-grade reading level, which is the international standard. However, the report also revealed that

over 40 percent of those surveyed had trouble drawing meaning from the message. There was word recognition, but not sufficient insight or understanding. It is here, in the realm of "functional literacy" (the ability not only to read and write but to apply these skills), that we get into those tragic statistics which say that as many as 23 million Americans are illiterate.

The literacy movement must emphasize the skills that will allow students and adults to keep on learning. Literacy, if it means anything at all, means teaching students to think critically, listen with discernment, and communicate with power and precision. And this process must begin the first day of school.

- o I propose that every district organize what might be called The Basic School, with priority on language. Given one wish for guiding the curriculum toward the year 2000, I would wish that we would organize the first three years of schooling and call it a "Basic Language School."

- o Let us leave the child free for several years, in terms of structured grading, but let us have them absolutely saturated in the use of symbols and becoming confident in the use of the written and spoken word. From the very first, children in this school--one that combines kindergarten through grade four--would be speaking, writing, reading, listening to stories, talking about words, building a rich vocabulary, creating a climate the foreign language people like to call "the saturation method."

The goal would be to assure that every child becomes proficient in English. As everyone in this audience well knows, if children do not gain a fundamental grasp of language in the early years it is difficult for them to compensate later on. It's like playing tennis with a broken racquet.

One would hope that such priority given to proficiency in language in all grades would achieve--at the least--basic and functional literacy for our citizens--allowing them to meet the demands of our changing workplace.

But the school curriculum should also embrace cultural literacy, to use E.D. Hirsh's helpful formulation. Students need to know about our western heritage, our institutions, literature, geography and the arts. And they also must become familiar with languages and cultures other than our own.

- o During our research on the American high school, we discovered that only two states require students to complete a course in non-western studies.
- o And three years ago, in a survey of 5,000 undergraduates, we learned that over 30 percent of today's college students said they had "nothing in common" with people in underdeveloped countries. Is this acceptable in a world that is politically, economically and environmentally connected?

We live today in a global village that's ecologically imperiled:

- o The protective ozone layer is endangered.



- o Our shorelines are polluted.
- o The tropical rain forests are being depleted at the rate of 100,000 kilometers every year.

And yet for far too many students, their knowledge of nature and its resources goes about as far as the refrigerator door, the VCR knob and the light switch. I'm suggesting that to be a responsible citizen in the twenty-first century means becoming literate in science and understanding our connections to the larger world.

Isn't it a bit ironic that more than five years after A Nation at Risk, we're still talking about what students do not know? Isn't it time for master teachers and research scholars to come together--in a kind of peacetime Manhattan Project on the school curriculum--to design, for optional state use, courses of study in language, in history, in science and propose ways to link the content of schooling to the realities of life?

But beyond functional literacy and cultural literacy, at its highest level, literacy means something more. It means teaching students that language is a sacred trust.

We hear a lot of talk these days about instilling values in the schools.

- o Frankly, I'm not sure this can be accomplished with a separate course in morality or ethics.
- o I am convinced, however, that values are sustained by the honesty of our own words and by the confidence we have in the words of others.

Good communication means not just clarity, but integrity as well. Education means teaching students that truth is the obligation they assume when they are empowered with the use of symbols.

Literacy, then, means much more than the ability to read and write. It is more than mechanics--it is understanding. It is making connections between what we learn and how we live.

Literacy means the ability to think clearly and creatively, and engage in constructive discourse. Above all, we need integrity in literacy--an understanding that the use of language is a sacred trust

John Gardner once wrote that a nation is never finished. You can't build it and leave it standing as the Pharoahs did the pyramids, he said. Instead, it must be recreated for each new generation.

The people assembled here today are builders too. You are working to build a more literate Virginia, and with the more than 2000 independent literacy councils and programs nationwide, you are building a better America.