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PROCEEDINGS:

The Ninth Conference of the
University / Urban Schools National Task Force

Restructuring the Schools

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The Graduate School and University Center
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URBAN EDUCATION AND THE NATION'S FUTURE

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It has been four and one-half years since the National Commission on Excellence in Education declared: "If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war." Since that hyperbole hit the headlines, this nation has engaged in the most serious and sustained bipartisan drive for school renewal in our history. Thanks to governors, educators, and legislative leaders, including many assembled in this room, education has been at the top of the national agenda, and I applaud the remarkable progress that we have made.

Still, the report card is very mixed. The reforms seem to be working fairly in schools that are already stable and advantaged. What I worry about are the urban schools and schools that serve the rural poor. And I am convinced that if we do not find ways to develop a radical, new agenda for the least advantaged students, this reform movement will have failed at its most essential task. History will not look kindly on our efforts if, with all of our talk about renewal, we simply benefit the privileged.

During the last eight months, we at the Carnegie Foundation have been in six cities across the country looking at the schools. We asked: "Is the reform movement working in our inner cities?" My conclusion is that many urban schools are imperiled and that today's strategies for renewal simply

are not adequate to meet the problem. I recognize that there are no easy answers. If there were, we would have found them long ago. Still, I do have several priorities to propose that may serve as a framework for discussion.

First, poverty and education are inextricably connected, and there is no way to talk about urban education without confronting the problems of the poor. Frankly, I find it shocking that for the past decade this nation has not placed the highest national priority on confronting poverty among our children. Consider this: in 1985, the poverty rate was 20.5 percent, or one in five, for children under 18. The poverty rate for children under six was 23 percent.

Malnutrition affects almost a half-million children in this nation. The report of the Physicians Task Force on Hunger in America documented the issue. Mothers and babies who are nutritionally deprived will, in later years, be intellectually and academically deficient. If we do not understand the linkage between good nutrition and good schooling, we have failed to make a connection that is absolutely crucial.

If I had one recommendation for reform, I suggest that we start talking about nutrition. And a top priority must be full funding of federal child nutrition programs. Winston Churchill said on one occasion that "there is no finer investment for any community than putting milk into babies." This is a far higher priority than putting weapons systems into space.

Second, to be successful, urban schools must give priority to pre-school and early education. The first years are absolutely crucial. It is here that the foundation will be laid. I believe we can compensate for a poor beginning, but surely the task of education is far more difficult if the child has been educationally deprived in the early years of life.

I predict the time is not far off when pre-kindergarten programs will be available for three- and four-year olds, as the nation's governors recommended. Incidentally, the recent governors' report on education is both enlightened and creative. The document speaks in imaginative ways about pre-school education. Did you think you would see the day when governors would urge schools to enroll students who are three years old?

Missouri has launched a model program, one that provides parent education. To promote parent involvement in the schools, I suggest we also need a national policy to give parents time off from work occasionally to participate in the education of their children. After all, we give time off to vote and to serve on a jury; surely excellent education is a civic obligation, too.

Further, to strengthen the first years of school, I would like to see a non-graded unit--kindergarten through grade four--an arrangement in which children would not be moved along chronologically but would move primarily on the basis of their linguistic proficiency. The goal of this "Basic School" would be the language empowerment of each student.

The focus would be on language: the reading of stories, the telling of stories, and the writing of stories. There would be room for the arts as well. In the "Basic School," class size would be restricted. One cannot have urban classes of 20 or 30 children and expect a teacher to give personal attention to each student. So, if I had my way as "Secretary of School Reform," I would insist that there be no more than 15 students for every teacher.

Third, to improve urban education I am convinced the school calendar must be changed. The day is not far off when we will have to reorganize

both the school day and the school year in order to reflect changing work and family patterns in the nation. When the current school calendar was organized a hundred years ago, almost all families were living on farms. Children had the summer off to help tend the crops. We are now living with an obsolete school model that does not fit the reality of home or work life. Today, almost all families have parents who are working and many live in a single parent home.

I am suggesting that the school has both an educational and a custodial function to fulfill. And it seems absolutely clear that between now and the year 2000 we will have a radically reorganized school calendar, one that mirrors the realities of family life. Instead of nine months of classes and three months off, we might have shorter terms of three months and then a week to ten days off: a time for teacher renewal and teacher development.

I also see the urgent need to have afternoon enrichment programs in every school. This extended school arrangement should be available on a voluntary basis to all families where the child is not cared for after school. Such a program is an essential response to the latchkey problem or, stated more precisely, the "street drift problem" we have in urban communities today. We also need enrichment programs in the summer for children whose parents are not able to pay for such opportunities.

What I worry about is that affluent families will be able to pay for these services, while poor children are allowed to drift. To close the gap between the haves and have nots, I would argue strongly for a new chapter in the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, one that would provide federal vouchers for every poor parent so they could secure afternoon enrichment and summer services for their children. Families who can afford it should pay

for the extra services so the program would be self-supporting. I am suggesting that we should start adjusting our public policies to accommodate the changing school and family patterns of the nation.

Fourth, there is the matter of school size. I am convinced that if urban schools are to succeed, we must break up large schools into smaller units. Some of the warehouses we call schools are frighteningly overcrowded, impersonal places; and if I were to choose one pathology that is at the heart of the dropout problem, it is the anonymity found in high school today. As students move into junior and senior high school, they become faceless and nameless at the very moment they need their identity established. Again, if I were "Secretary of School Reform," I would organize all urban schools into small academic villages and insist that every student be known and counseled by a mentor.

The fifth priority for urban schools is the cluster school arrangement, an educational program that combines service, work, and learning. It is shocking that seventeen- and eighteen-year olds are still being confined to schools, moving in rigid lockstep from eight o'clock to three o'clock, just as they did when they were four and five years old. What we need is a far more flexible relationships between schooling and the world outside.

Specifically, I would like to see the last two years of high school converted into what might be called a "transition school": an arrangement in which students spend part time in school, perhaps part time in work, and part time in service. Some might even spend time taking college courses.

Further, urban schools should provide for easy reentry for those who have dropped out. What we have now is a structure where students become nonpersons. Once they leave there is no way to get back into the system.

I am suggesting that young adults should have available more flexible alternatives, especially young mothers who have perhaps dropped out because of childbirth.

Finally, to have better urban education we must give more autonomy to the local school and then hold principals and teachers accountable for the educational outcomes. Autonomy and accountability go together. What we have now are more regulatory obligations and less flexibility and freedom. This formula simply will not work. The rigid system will defeat enterprising teachers and drive principals to despair. What I am suggesting is that we give greater freedom to the schools but hold them accountable not on process but on outcomes, and we should define those outcomes very clearly.

I would add a related point. If year after year a school is not able to educate its children, it cannot be allowed to drift. The crisis calls for outside intervention, carefully guided to be sure, based on criteria that have been well established.

Is there any good news in all of this? I am encouraged that this nation continues to believe in public education. I am also encouraged that the spotlight is beginning to focus, once again, on urban education. And, as far I can tell, we agree, in large measure, on strategies to be pursued.

But is there a willingness to act? Let us agree that by the year 2000 all children who enrolled in school this year will leave high school with a quality education. To do less will shatter lives and imperil the future of our nation.