READY TO LEARN
A Mandate for the Nation

Summary of Recommendations

The Carnegie Foundation
for the Advancement of Teaching

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READY TO LEARN

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America is losing sight of its children. In decisions made every day we are placing them at the very bottom of the agenda with grave consequences for the future of the nation. It is simply intolerable that millions of children in this country are physically and emotionally disadvantaged in ways that restrict their capacity to learn, especially when we know what a terrible price will be paid for such neglect, not just educationally, but in human terms, as well.

For nearly a decade, education has been high on the national agenda. Graduation requirements have been raised. Teaching standards have been tightened and school assessment has become a major new priority for the nation. A host of bold new innovations—"teacher empowerment," "school-based management," "parental choice," "new schools for a new century"—have been proposed in quick succession. Most consequentially, perhaps, governors and corporate leaders have become vigorous advocates of school reform.

The quality of education and the nation's future are inseparably related. It's through a network of public and private schools that this nation has chosen to pursue enlightened ends for all its people and academic excellence must remain high on the national agenda, and, through education, we must prepare a productive work force to remain economically competitive in world markets. People who cannot communicate are powerless. People who know nothing of their past are culturally impoverished. People who cannot see beyond the confines of their own lives are ill-equipped to face the future.
While focusing on school reform, children have somehow been forgotten. In our search for excellence, we've ignored the fundamental fact that to improve the schools, a solid foundation must be laid. We've failed to recognize that the family may be a more imperiled institution than the school, that many of education's failures may relate to problems that precede schooling and even birth itself. We've not sufficiently acknowledged that if children do not have a good beginning, it will be difficult, if not impossible, to compensate fully for that failure later on.

Thus, one point is clear: If America hopes to secure its future, children must come first. Children are, after all, our most precious resource and if we as a nation cannot commit ourselves to help the coming generation, if we cannot work together compassionately to assure that every child is well prepared for learning and for life, then what will pull us all together?

In America today we seem to have lost a sense of common purpose. Not only is family life under stress, but the nation's spirit of community seems to be eroding. In neighborhoods and towns, shared purposes have been replaced by separations that imperil the quality of life and weaken the very fabric of the nation. Meanwhile, our most pressing problems go unresolved.

The good news is that priorities may be shifting. On January 31, 1990, President George Bush, in his second State of the Union Message, announced six ambitious goals for all schools. By the year 2000, the President declared, every child in America should start school ready to learn; the number of school dropouts should decline; our education system should become world class in math and science; and all schools should become disciplined and drug free. He proposed, as well, that students be tested in core subjects. And he called for universal literacy for adults.
Every one of these new goals is consequential. Each should be vigorously pursued. But it’s the President’s first goal that stands out far above all the rest. To say that, within a decade, every single child will come to school “ready to learn” is a bold, hugely optimistic proposition. Still, dreams can be fulfilled only when they have been defined. If we as a nation can, indeed, assure that every child is well prepared for school, it seems reasonable to expect that all of the other education goals will, in large measure, be fulfilled.

Thus, what’s so encouraging about the nation’s first education goal—the part we find so refreshing—is that the school reform movement which for years has been searching for the right ending, suddenly has been given a challenging new beginning. We’re being asked to focus on intervention, not remediation. It is, after all, in the early years when a child’s curiosity is most keen. This is the time when children have a natural enthusiasm for learning. And creating a world in which every child, from birth, is well nourished, well protected, and intellectually challenged is, in the end, what excellence in education is all about.

The Ready-to-Learn goal offers America a shared vision—around which everyone can rally. It is, after all, a pledge we have made, not only to ourselves, but most especially to our children. And it is unethical to make a promise to children and then walk away.

What follows, then, is our seven-step plan with recommendations. In it, we hope to answer the following basic questions and in so doing, create a national Ready-to-Learn Agenda which touches on every aspect of our culture.

- How can we assure that all children have a healthy start?
How can every home become a place where children live in a supportive, language-rich environment, guided by empowered parents?

How can we make available to all children quality child care that provides both love and learning?

How can work and family life be brought together through workplace policies that support parents and give security to children?

How can television become a creative partner in a school readiness campaign, offering to preschool children programming that is mind-enriching?

How can we give to every child a neighborhood for learning with spaces and places that invite play and spark the imagination?

How can we bring the old and young together with new intergenerational connections that provide a community of caring for every child?

Our aim in this report is to suggest how all Americans, acting together, can assure that all children will be ready to succeed in school. But above all, our aim is to enrich the life of every child. Only then can America's future be made secure.
Step One: A HEALTHY START

Good health and good schooling are inextricably interlocked and every child, to be ready to learn, must have a healthy birth, be well nourished, and well protected in the early years of life.

- Today's students are tomorrow's parents; every school district should offer all students a new health course called "The Life Cycle" with study units threaded through every grade.

- The federal nutrition program for women, infants, and young children, known as WIC should be fully funded so that every eligible mother and infant will be served.

- A network of neighborhood-based Ready to Learn Clinics should be established in every underserved community across the country to assure access to basic health care for all mothers and every preschool child.

- The National Health Service Corps should be expanded to assure that a well-trained health and education team be available to staff the proposed clinics.

- Funding for two key federal health programs—Community and Migrant Health Centers and Maternal and Child Block Grants—should be significantly increased.
Every state should integrate the various federal, state, and local child health programs to assure more efficient and more effective service.
Step Two: EMPOWERED PARENTS

The home is the first classroom and parents are the first and most essential teachers; all children, as a readiness requirement, should live in a secure environment where empowered parents encourage language development.

- Every child should live in a language-rich environment in which parents speak frequently to their children, listen carefully to their responses, answer questions, and read aloud to them every day.

- A comprehensive parent education program should be established in every state to guarantee that every mother and father of a preschool-age child has access to such a service.

- A national "Parent Education Guide," focusing on all dimensions of school readiness, should be prepared collaboratively by state departments of education and distributed widely to parents.

- A new "Ready to Learn Library Series," one with recommended books for preschoolers, should be prepared under the leadership of the American Library Association.

- Every school should organize a Preschool PTA—supported and encouraged by the National Congress of Parents and Teachers—to bring parents of young children together and to build a bridge between home and school.
Step Three: QUALITY PRESCHOOL

Since many young children are cared for outside the home, high-quality preschool programs are required that not only provide good care, but also address all dimensions of school readiness.

- **Head Start** should be designated by Congress as an entitlement program and be fully funded by 1995 to assure that every eligible child will be served.

- **Every school district in the nation should establish a preschool program** as an optional service for all three- and four-year-olds not participating in Head Start.

- **The new federal child-care initiative** should be used by every state to start new programs that expand the quality of care for small children, especially in disadvantaged communities.

- **A National Forum on Child Care Standards should be convened by the National Association for the Education of Young Children. The Forum's recommendations should be adopted by all states, so that by the year 2000 every day-care center in the country is licensed to meet these standards.**

- **Every state should establish a new preschool division in the governor's office to better integrate health and human services, child care, and education.**
• Every community college should make it a special priority to establish an associate degree called the Child Care Professional.
Step Four: A RESPONSIVE WORKPLACE

If each child in America is to come to school ready to learn, we must have workplace policies that are family-friendly, that supply child care services, and give parents time to be with their young children.

- All employers should make at least twelve weeks of nonpaid leave available to parents of newborn or adopted children, to allow time for the bonding that is so essential to emotional well-being.

- Flexible scheduling and job sharing should be available to employees to help better balance work and family obligations.

- Parents of preschool children should be given at least two parenting days off each year, with pay, to visit with their children in day care and preschool programs and consult with teachers.

- All employers should help their workers gain access to high quality child care and preschool services, either on-site or at local centers. A child care information and referral service also should be available to workers.

- A center to help employers promote family-work policies should be established by the National Alliance of Business.
Step Five: TELEVISION AS TEACHER

Next to parents, television is the child's most influential teacher. School readiness requires television programming that is both educational and enriching.

- Each of the major commercial networks—CBS, NBC, ABC, and FOX—should offer, at an appropriate time, at least one hour of preschool educational programming every week.

- A "Ready to Learn Television Guide" should be prepared. This guide should list programs on both commercial and cable channels that have special educational value for young children.

- Companies producing and selling products geared to young children—toys, breakfast cereals, fast foods—should sponsor quality educational television for preschoolers.

- Every hour of children's programming on commercial networks should include at least one sixty-second "Ready to Learn Commercial" that focuses on the physical, social, or educational needs of children.

- Twenty million dollars should be appropriated immediately to the National Endowment for Children's Educational Television to support the creation of educational programs for preschoolers. By 1995, this funding should be increased to $100 million.
• A "Ready to Learn" Cable Channel should be established to offer programming aimed exclusively at the educational needs and interests of preschool children.

• A National Conference on Children’s Television should be convened to bring together broadcast executives, corporate sponsors, educators, and children's advocates to design a decade-long school-readiness television strategy.
Step Six: NEIGHBORHOODS FOR LEARNING

All children need spaces and places for growth and exploration. Safe and friendly neighborhoods will contribute to a child's readiness to learn.

- A network of well-designed outdoor and indoor parks should be created in every community to give preschoolers opportunities for exercise and exploration.

- "Street playgrounds" should be established in every urban area to make open spaces for creative play and learning immediately available to children.

- Every library, museum, and zoo should establish a School Readiness Program for preschoolers. The funding of such services should be given top priority.

- Every major shopping mall should include in its facility a "Ready to Learn Center," an inviting, creative space where young children can engage in play and learning.

- A "Youth Service Corps" should be organized to make it possible for school and college students to serve as volunteers in children's Ready to Learn Centers, libraries, and playgrounds in every community.
Step Seven: CONNECTIONS ACROSS THE GENERATIONS

To be ready to learn in the richest, fullest sense, connections across the generations are needed to give children a sense of security and continuity in communities of caring.

- **Schools, day-care centers, and retirement villages should redesign their programs to bring young and old together, building bridges across the generations.**

- **A "Grandteacher Program" should be created in communities across the country, one in which older people participate as mentors in day-care and preschool facilities.**

- **Every community should organize a series of intergenerational projects—called "Grand Days" perhaps—in which senior citizens engage in activities and excursions with young children.**

- **A national "intergenerational" clearinghouse should be established to promote and publicize projects that bring young and old together.**