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ABSTRACT

The fundamental structure of American society is made up of the family unit, the home, and the neighborhood community. If we are going to make any dramatic improvements in learning, we must regain a commitment to values in the home that will nurture learning and bring stability into the life of children. To build a more viable home-school partnership, we must systematically redefine the roles and functions of our schools. If the neighborhood elementary school is going to help get parents involved and committed to education, we should conceive of the school as a source for delivery of many services to the home. The parents of preschool children ought to be taught the fundamentals of home-based incidental teaching. We must persuade and even, in a friendly way, coerce parents to get involved in education. We need to emphasize that if they do not hold up their half of the responsibility, we will not be providing all the ingredients necessary for success. (Author/JC)

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BUILDING A STRONGER AMERICA THROUGH A MORE

VIABLE HOME-SCHOOL PARTNERSHIP *

T. H. Bell

U. S. Commissioner of Education

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I appreciate the opportunity to address one of the general sessions of this annual convention of the American Association of School Administrators. Since I hold membership in AASA, I feel a special kinship with this association, and I express warm greetings to all of my colleagues in this vast audience. Gathered here this evening are the chief leaders and prime administrative officers of the great American system of free public education. You are the backbone of America, and you represent the hope for the future as this great country of ours moves through a most difficult time in its economic and social life and as we prepare next year to observe our 200th anniversary as a Nation.

AASA is a venerable organization in itself. This is your 107th annual meeting. Any organization that can remain vital and progressive for 107 years is probably going to make it through the 1970s, despite all of our education problems. I express my admiration for your president, your executive director, and your very able board of directors, who manage this great education organization and provide such excellent leadership.

Speaking of venerable organizations, you might be interested to know that the United States Office of Education is also 107 years of age. So it is a pleasure to express to you, on behalf of all of my colleagues in the Office of Education, warm greetings and best wishes as you assemble here in your 107th annual meeting.

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* Prepared for the Annual Convention of the American Association of School Administrators; Dallas, Texas, February 23, 1975, 8:30 p.m. CDT (9:30 p.m. EDT.)



Certainly this great city of Dallas is an appropriate place for school administrators to get together. According to one source, Dallas began back in the year 1841 as a single hut built at the confluence of the Elm and West forks and has been growing "soberly and ambitiously" ever since. There is a great spirit in this city, and a tremendous sense of community and pride. We certainly need these qualities in all of our cities today. It is fitting that you meet here to contemplate the future of American education and the future of our great Nation.

In thinking somewhat soberly about the central theme for a message that I should try to convey to you, I have considered carefully the prime problems that we face as a nation in this month of February of 1975. I have considered our responsibilities as education leaders as we strive to be of service to our country at this time when there appears to be a considerable amount of apprehension about our future, our economy, our social system, and our relations with other peoples and nations around the world.

I have concluded that the problems we perceive today in American education are rooted in the problems of our Nation. I firmly believe that we have some basic problems reaching down into the roots of our society. And I believe that education must come to grips with those problems and help to solve them if we are to move on past our 200th anniversary and live as a people worthy of the great blessings of this rich and abundant country. I believe that these basic problems are found in the homes, the family structure, and the fundamental values of our people, the elements that are essential to success in education and to a free society.

The fundamental structure of our American society is made up of the family unit, the home, and the local neighborhood community. These units are in deep trouble today. As education leaders, we must help our schools to reach out to these basic elements that make up the strong fibers that hold us together. American education, as I see it, must reach out to the family, to the homes that are served by the neighborhood school, and to the local community. We must regain some commitments that we had at one time but have been slowly but certainly losing over the past 10 or 15 years. We must reach into these basic elements to see if education can help to straighten our values, strengthen our will, put more starch in our people's spine. We must regain a dedication to those eternal verities that are fundamental to life and happiness.

If I may be so presumptuous, I would like to offer some constructive criticism through expressing to you a critique of the will, the character, and the orientation of many, many people in these great United States:

We have become a materialistic nation. We are -- more and more -- becoming a rootless society and a nation of restless seekers of thrills and kicks. As a people we are spoiled by our affluence. There are too many pessimists and doom-sayers across this great land of ours. Our values have been misplaced. We think more about money than marriage -- more about chrome than children.

Too many of us are scared to death that we might have to stay at home at night with our children and read a good book because there will be no gas for the car or money for the country club dues. Too many Americans want federally guaranteed security and freedom without realizing that these must be earned. I fear that we have been spoiled by several decades of wealth and easy living. We need a new will, and inner toughness.

We must somehow get away from the immature thinking that leads us to believe that we can have more as a people than we are willing to produce. We must seek to teach a new generation that sensuousness and materialism bring neither lasting joy nor promise for their children or their children's children. As a people we must reorient ourselves and assume our stewardship by keeping the faith with those who gave us what we have today.

What has happened to that inner power that crushed an enormous depression and defeated our powerful enemies in World War II? I fear that it is being eaten away by sensuous lives, materialistic values, and personal greed.

The foregoing may sound a bit harsh and unfair. But the truth is that these conditions are having a profound impact on education. We are not so "bad off" that we have to be so "up tight." Even some of the lower middle class live better than the kings and the very rich of a few years ago. In our insatiable demand for more and more we have lost sight of how good life is in this country. True, we have cases of extreme poverty and suffering, but these are few in number compared with those in our past history. Our great discontent is more a mass obsession for an easy, affluent life than it is a problem of much suffering and deprivation. And this obsession is touching the life of the children we are striving to teach.

Your schools cannot educate the youth of America without the solid support and backing of the families, the homes, and the communities from whence these children come. Many critics of American education ask me why achievement has been declining in the basic skills. They have asked why our increased efforts in such programs as Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act have yielded such small results.

Have our increased efforts in compensatory education been negated by a decline of the home and a neglect of the education responsibilities that parents traditionally and absolutely must assume? I submit that this is precisely the situation. And, if we are going to make any dramatic improvements in learning, we must regain the orientation and commitment to the values in the home that will nurture learning and bring stability into the life of children.

A large percentage of the preschool-age children in the United States are hauled off to a day-care center, a home day-care service, or to a neighboring surrogate-mother babysitter while both parents hustle off to a job so that the two-income family can keep up with the fast pace and the somewhat misplaced values found in today's way of life. This would not be so bad if the after-working hours, homelife, and the weekends and vacation times were more stable and more conducive to a life that nurtures learning in the home.

With this set of circumstances, and with these values and lifestyles, the task of the schools is extremely difficult. The studies of Christopher Jenks, James Coleman, and others point out the strength of the home as an educator. A recent publication by Columbia University Teachers College adds further credence to this concept. What is done by the family in the home environment has a far greater influence on children than anything that a school can do or undo. Unstable homes, with parents in motion day and night and over weekends, make your job difficult if not impossible.

Speaking of misplaced values, I suggest that the cost of many of the tax levy and bond proposals that some of you saw defeated last year could easily have been covered with the sacrifice of a few whitevall

tires replaced with blackwalls. I suggest that we could solve our education problems, our energy problems, and both inflation and recession if we just had the will to solve them -- if we just had our values in the right place so that we took care of first things first.

Thomas Henry Huxley once said that the greatest challenge in life and the greatest lesson to be learned is to do what one ought to do when he ought to do it, whether he wants to do it or not. I suggest that the fundamental challenge in our society at the present time is to take care of our necessities and give up a few (but not all) of our luxuries, whether we want to or not.

Well, what does all of this have to do with you and me and with our responsibilities as education leaders in this great country? As I see it, we must seek to build a much more meaningfully viable partnership with the parents, homes, and neighborhood communities we serve. At least one of the keys to dramatic progress in American education is to gain a rededication to learning in the home and to build a new commitment and a new education partnership with parents. We must teach the parents of our school-age children and the parents of the preschoolers who will soon be our future customers that good schools require solid, stable, and actively committed families and homes. To do this, our schools must become community centers and institutes for strengthening the home and solidifying the family. Entirely too many of the children coming to us are emotionally disturbed and psychologically unstable. To strive to teach the child, without reaching out to the source of this difficulty, is to treat the symptom and ignore the basic cause.

Our schools must do a better job of teaching values and of expounding the fundamental truths rooted in our economic system and

in our basic doctrine of equality of opportunity for all humanity under our American system of government. The end result of our instruction in social studies classes, in the literature that we teach, and in the citizenship building experiences that we offer must be a rededication to the good life founded on increased productivity on the job, on stability for all family members in the home, and on a conscious commitment to strengthening and preserving all of that which we include in our thinking when we euphemistically refer to the so-called American way of life.

I urge you as the education leaders in this Nation to strive hard for these fundamentals. We must, for example, teach that a rich and abundant life comes from productivity and hard work and from nothing else. We must teach well meaning parents that children need love, stability, and constant positive reinforcement and support in the home. This cannot be done by absentee parents or by a busy social whirl that never ends. We must teach both parents and children that books and reading and scholarly effort are the prime foundations of success.

We must also examine our own efforts. Have we included so much in the curriculum that the fundamentals are being watered down? Are we concentrating on our prime mission to teach fundamental subject matter in a solid and systematic way that will lead to scholarship, critical thinking, and a life of learning and growing all through the adult years? Are we providing the kind of results oriented management that measures every year the effectiveness of our schools in attaining our prime mission? Are we identifying and constructing school performance

profiles each year, and are we planning and systematically managing by objectives and results as has been advocated many times by publications of the AASA and others?

In our quest to build a more viable home-school partnership, and through this to build some new values and attain some new commitments in our homes and neighborhood communities, we must systematically redefine the roles and functions of our schools. As we talk about our many education problems, we must recognize that trouble at school and trouble at home seem to go hand in hand.

Less than a year ago I was serving as superintendent of a school system with more than 60,000 students. We operated 53 elementary schools. I soon learned that I could identify troubled schools by identifying troubled neighborhoods, with their troubled homes, high divorce rates, bankruptcies, and economic problems. I could come close to ranking my 53 elementary schools from first to 53rd without looking at any achievement test data but by looking at the mobility rate, the economic level, and the single-parent families. From this and from subsequent observation around the country since assuming my present responsibilities, I am convinced that we must build a solid outreach program that strives to involve the home and commit the parents to education.

Without this commitment and rededication, we are not going to help education become the key to active and successful participation in the good life by our citizens of the future and the key to success in our economic system. Troubled schools are located in troubled neighborhoods, where families are becoming unglued and where children are being shocked and torn psychologically.

For some time I have been advocating a new role for the neighborhood elementary school. Perhaps this should be enlarged and the basic concept applied to all schools on all levels. To convey this idea to you, let me discuss the neighborhood elementary school as a child development center.

We are learning more and more that the first five years of life are vital for the human being. The psychological makeup, the emotional stability, the attitudinal health and vitality of the child are all largely formed before the youngster reaches school. Indeed, recent research indicates that the intellectual power of the child is greatly influenced by those first five years of life.

If the neighborhood elementary school is going to play its role in the great effort to get parents involved and committed to education, we should conceive of the school as a source of delivery of many services to the home. Health and welfare agencies ought to be encouraged to utilize the neighborhood school as a source of services.

I would hope that early diagnostic screening and treatment of both health and social problems could be accomplished with considerable contribution and assistance being offered by the school. We certainly have a stake in the quality of this service, and we should do all that we can to help to improve it and to provide some type of base for delivery of services. With hundreds of thousands of elementary school plants located in virtually every neighborhood and community in the Nation, we have a vast resource here that should be utilized more effectively.

I would like to see the parents of preschool-age children taught the fundamentals of home-based incidental teaching. Parents should learn that they have a great influence upon the intellectual power of their children. They should know that the episodes that they have with their children and the experiences that they share with them are powerful teaching and learning opportunities. We should teach a few fundamental concepts that will generate an awareness that parents are the child's first teachers and that the quality of life at home during those preschool years will largely shape the life of the child for the rest of his years.

The neighborhood school should sponsor opportunities for instruction of parents. Indeed, we should reach out in a very powerful and persuasive way to bring parents to school, where we can teach them, support them, and encourage them in their efforts. Our school libraries should offer educational toy lending libraries and books and other instructional materials that parents could use in the home. We should seek every way possible to influence the quality of living and the impact of life's initial experiences on each and every child. Those day-care centers and those home care centers where the children of working mothers and fathers are left should have a strong education component in their programs. I fear that this is not being done and that the creativity and dynamics of a child will largely be stifled if this is not accomplished. As I see it, we must get involved in everything that goes on that touches and reaches the child since he is our client and our responsibility.

I am convinced that our outreach efforts to strengthen and revitalize the home as the basic unit of our society must be planned on a very

systematic basis. We should devise ways to attract parents to school by telephone contacts, through special invitations, and through programs and events involving their children. We must persuade and even, in a friendly way, coerce parents to get involved in this great game of education. Each neighborhood school and each unit in every one of your school systems should, as I see it, strive to enlist the other half of this educational partnership that has been constantly degenerating and decreasing in its effectiveness. Most parents love their children and want to do the best that they can do for them. We need to call upon them for help. We need to convince them that they are needed and wanted and necessary. We need to emphasize that, if they do not hold up their half of the responsibility, we will not be successful in providing all of the ingredients necessary for success.

I trust that my observations and criticisms of our people and of their misplaced values will not be interpreted as being excessively negative. I want to emphasize to all of you that I know that there can still be found a solid core of hard working, caring, committed, concerned parents who love their children and will sacrifice for their future.

But it is easy for us to become obsessed with possessions and to seek out material things that are not the priorities that ought to come ahead of fundamental education and solid love and care for children. I fear that this is the situation in all too many instances at the present time. The double-income, two-car family must be persuaded that child stability, love at home, and basic support of education are values that must come ahead of many things that now are higher priorities in far too many homes. I would most sincerely urge that we strive as diligently

as we can to build a partnership between our homes and our schools that will help us re-establish the values and priorities that are necessary for educational success in this country. In the process, we may be able to persuade our fellow Americans that a reorientation of values and priorities would make it possible for us to solve the great energy problem and the enormous economic difficulties that we are facing today.

It's really only a matter of putting first things first and letting a few luxuries go begging for awhile. If we did this, we might strengthen our national character along with our Nation's schools and our Nation's economy.

In conclusion, let me express to all of you my appreciation for your support. I have had many fine letters and messages that are genuinely appreciated. It is a great privilege for me to serve you as the U.S. Commissioner of Education. This is a time, I believe, when we should all be deeply concerned about the quality of education leadership in America. We hope that we can do our part in the U.S. Office of Education. We want to launch a new effort to rejuvenate and revitalize education leadership through providing inservice training opportunities and other avenues to growth and development for school administrators. I have long been convinced that the school administrator has not received enough attention in the order of things in our country.

To have good schools requires dynamic leadership. Sometime in the future I hope that we can announce to you some new plans to work with many of you in a broad-scale effort to strengthen and build the quality of leadership for America's schools. We respect the efforts of the National Academy of School Executives that has been sponsored by AASA,

and we hope that we can find ways to join hands with you in strengthening our great profession of education Administration. I hope we can all support and strengthen our AASA...

If the future lies in the quality of the education offered in schools and homes across the country, certainly the future rests in the hands of your school administrators. We will be striving to seek ways to strengthen, sustain, and reinforce you in your very challenging roles and responsibilities.

I compliment our AASA as an organization dedicated to serving youth. May we all strive to support the leadership of AASA and strengthen the leadership of American education in the process.

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