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Consultation on Competitiveness

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Tomorrow there will be a White House ceremony, so I will have to leave early. It's a ceremony which marks the fifth anniversary of the issuance of A Nation at Risk, and this morning's headlines show that while we have done a few things differently, we have not made very much progress in terms of an improvement of student achievement.

There has been this great concern, especially on the part of governors and the business community. However, that concern has mainly led to a shift in a pendulum which has been moving back and forth throughout our history. And that is, we have had two kinds of schools. We have schools that are tough and that have very high standards and as a result of the high standards and the toughness, do a terrific job in educating the top 15, 20 or 22% of the kids and tend to tell the other kids that they want to leave early because they can't cut it.

Then we take a look at all those who are leaving and say we would like to rescue them, and the pendulum moves to the other side and we say if we got a little easier and a little softer and told them if they would hang around and breathe a little longer, they would automatically get the ticket. We find that works very well but when you start giving everyone the ticket, the ones who used to work hard to achieve stuff stop working too hard because they know they can get it for free, and then we move the pendulum right back again.

So we move back from tough to soft, from a system that does a good job in educating the few, to one that does a better job with the many but puts less pressure on the few who used to achieve and we are unhappy with that. Very little is thought about whether we can develop something that is outside of this pendulum swing, can we develop something that is different. Before we ask whether something really different ought to be developed, it seems that one strategy on this would depend on how well or how poorly we are doing. After all, if we were educating most in our schools to a level of our satisfaction or near satisfaction, then the strategy would be to do a little more of the same and do a little better. If on the other hand, we are very, very far from our goals, then the strategy might be to look for something quite different.

Let me say that I think the public and the business community are not sufficiently alarmed. They are basically fed achievement scores that are given by schools all across the country that don't mean very much and that are easily tampered with. We recently saw the headlines that show that everybody in America (like all those in Lake Wobegone is above average. Because the test makers have decided that average doesn't mean what you think it means, and what I think it means. It means something else.

Therefore, we have got to look somewhere else in order to find out how well or how poorly we are doing and the best measure we have is something called the national assessment of educational progress. Now, they assess a large sample of youngsters aged 9, 13, and 17 and I will just share with you a little sample of the

17 year old achievement. A 17 year old because by that time most of the dropouts have dropped out, and we now have the 75% of the youngsters who are going to succeed. They are the ones we are going to be very proud of because they didn't drop out and when we test the ones who are about to graduate, the successful ones, here is what we find.

You ask a 17-year-old who's about to graduate to write a letter to the corner supermarket asking for a job. Spelling doesn't count and grammar doesn't count, as long as you can read the letter. The only thing that counts is, can he say something like "can you give me the job because I used to work in my uncle's store, and I know what it is like to work" or "I know what it is like to work at the cash register," to see whether he can communicate and give a couple of reasons. The percentage of graduating youngsters who are able to do that is 20%

Now we move to the next one, you take 6 common fractions, the kind you run into all the time, like $1/2$ and $2/3$ and ask the graduating seniors to arrange them in size places, the smallest first, the largest last, the percentage of graduating youngsters that able to do that is 12%.

Now the third, and this is a literacy test, is to give the youngster an old-fashioned bus or railroad timetable. It is the run from New York to Washington and you ask the kid what train or bus do you have to catch in Philadelphia in order to get to Washington just before 6 p.m. on a weekday. The percentage of youngsters who are able to do that, about to graduate, 17 year

olds, is 4.9%. If you take all blacks and hispanics out of the sample, it is 5.9%. Of course, it doesn't make much difference if you can read the timetable, you know the trains will run every hour so you can just go down, or you can call them on the telephone, but it really means these kids can't read a chart which has a few words and a few numbers.

That is where we are, and therefore anybody believes that all we have to do is get the kids to attend school for an extra half hour or an extra three weeks or get a slightly better teacher... I am not against these things, but they have got to be dealt with on their own merits. A little better teacher, or a little higher pay, whatever the long list of cures, I really think that no sane person will argue that given, these results, any kind of modest changes will bring us to where we want to be.

So that leads to a question of: why is this happening? One possible theory is that God only makes 4.9% of us smart enough to be able to read a timetable. You don't think so and neither do I. There is something that happens to a large number of kids. School is a very special institution. School is an institution where some kids find out very early that they are successful. Those who are successful, feel good about it and keep trying. And those who are very early told, "you are not smart, you are dumb and everytime you try to compete here you are going to be humiliated because you can't make it, they may keep coming to school-- most of them do-- but they drop out in their own heads because it is not their game.

Now, the problem is that a lot of kids who could stay in the game and be very productive and do things are convinced very early that it isn't their game. Essentially, the schools are organized for those kids who are able, starting at the age of six, (and now at some schools where there are graduation examinations for kindergarden), to sit still for 5 or 6 hours a day, (most adults can't), and listen to someone talk and retain what the person has said and read a book. Those are the two ways in which you can learn. You can either listen to somebody or you can read a book. We give kids no alternatives. If you move around, you are disruptive. If you can learn by watching a video tape or an audio tape or learn from an older person, or from some sort of assimilation, it is a place where you manipulate symbols, context free. Not only do a lot of people not learn that way, but what you do learn can't be applied to very much afterwards anyway. So we have a world after school in which most people learn through apprenticeship by turning to the person next to them and asking, "how do you do this?"

If we could use a medical analogy; if doctors were schoolpeople, what you would have would be a doctor prescribing some remedy for a patient and when the patient came back a few days later complaining that not only didn't he get cured but it made him worse in certain way, the doctor would scream at the patient for failing to adjust to his remedy, saying that is the only remedy and if it didn't cure you last time, here is twice as much of it or here is a half an hour more of it. Unlike the

doctor, we don't say, "well, I am sorry, that works with a lot of people, now try this, now try that". That is, we do not have a series of alternatives, we have one set system and you either fit the system or the system gets you to feel pretty horrible about yourself. So what we need (and we really know quite a bit about this), is a greater use of technology, a greater use of peer tutoring, a greater use of practical situations rather than purely symbolic ones. Essentially what we need to do is to keep more and more students in the game, keep them playing. We therefore need schools that operate on very, very different models. The model we have now assumes that the kid is an inanimate object on an assembly line. And that we, the teachers are the workers who are doing something to produce that product.

Actually, it is the student who is the worker. A British expert on management, I think, had the best explanation of what our basic fallacy is. He said that schoolwork for kids is most like office work. Not exactly, but if you compare all the other jobs in this world, it is most like office work. And he said that no person who runs an office would have a new worker come in and say "here is your desk. You have thirty people around you, but don't talk to them, you do your own work. There is your manager and your manager will tell you what to do. Every 40 minutes we will move your room. We will change your manager. We will give you a totally different type of work to do and you must never talk to the other people who are doing the other work around you, you have got to learn how to do it by yourself." Well that is our

secondary schools.

Now, it makes a lot of sense if you view the student as an inanimate object moving along an assembly line to whom the teachers are doing something. It makes no sense at all if you view the student as a person who has to be engaged as a worker.

Now I would like to conclude by saying that, to develop a different type of school that looks different and feels different, will be very difficult. Even people who are failures in our school... that is, the minute you try to change something, the illiterate mother or father who did not succeed in this system will come to school and want to know why the schools are not providing the same wonderful education for her kid that they provided for him or her. That is the only kind of school we've known.

The Europeans have this type of school, but they are satisfied to have it geared to the top 20% or 22% and let others fall by the wayside. There is a lot of discussion of dissatisfaction there. None of them have a view at the present time that everyone should have the opportunity as we do. We could compete with them. The Japanese are a different issue.

I would like to conclude by saying that there are really two things that are very much needed if we are to develop schools of a different type. One is if we are to get involvement of teachers and others in less adversarial forms. You should know that teachers are the most unionized part of the workforce in the United States. 90% of all the public school teachers in this

country are unionized. You need less adversarial labor/management relations and therefore we have to look at the issues which provide disincentives for workers. Essentially tell workers that if you participate in things that are traditionally dealt with-- quality, which is management's function, then you may lose your bargaining rights. That is an issue.

But beyond that, we will need great support from the business community and from the political community to engage, to construct new types of schools that do not look and feel like the schools do today and to give them a sufficient period of time, as we have to do. We have to apply to our public schools the same types of judgments, philosophy, ideas that are now being talked about in terms of the operations of some of our best businesses.