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"If You Do Not Have 'Stakes,' You Have A World Where Nothing Counts"

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Let me start with a picture of where our kids are. At last night's discussion, people in this room were like a lot of people all across the country, including policy makers and educators. They basically have the view that our education problems are in the New Yorks and the Baltimores, with a focus on poor minorities, and everybody else is doing pretty well. Not as well as we would like, but not bad. And that is a very wrong picture. Let me give you the evidence.

We have a system of assessments called the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). Unlike most standardized tests, NAEP doesn't just tell you who is above average and below average. That doesn't tell you much: You can have most of your kids above average; in the land of the Pygmies, you can be above average and still be pretty damn short. But NAEP deals with qualitative descriptions and categories, so that you can identify youngsters who are just barely above illiteracy or innumeracy and then move over to very simple skills, all the way up to what would be high school level work.

The NAEP results look roughly similar in almost every subject matter tested. Let's concentrate on math and on the 12th grade. The 1992 results show that 100 percent of our seniors are numerate, that is, they can do very simple addition and subtraction. If we go beyond simple addition and subtraction to also being able to multiply, divide, perform simple measurements and two-step problems, 91 percent of our 12th

graders reach that level.

The next level involves reasoning and problem solving using fractions, decimals, percents and elementary concepts in geometry, statistics and algebra. Many people think that is math work covered before high school and certainly mastered by the 12th grade. But only 50 percent of our 12th graders reach that level.

NAEP's highest level taps reasoning and problem solving involving geometric relationships, algebra and functions. In the other industrialized countries of the world, no one could enter college without being able to perform at that level. Yet only six percent of our seniors performed at that level -- and about half of our high school graduates will nonetheless be admitted to postsecondary schools. By the way, when you look at the highest NAEP levels in reading and writing, you'll find a similarly small percentage of our seniors able to comprehend a sophisticated reading passage or write a good essay.

Moreover, essentially, private or public schooling has no independent effect on these results. In some instances, private school youngsters do slightly better, but this is due to family background and the parental level of education. If you do a computer run and separate public and private school kids out by their parental level of education, all of the kids whose parents graduated from college are within one point of each other, whether in public or private school. Those private schools are not subject to regulations, they have no collective bargaining, they don't have problem kids and they have small class size -- all the things that teachers say they want. But private school achievement is still very poor. What I say to teachers in public schools is that if you had all the ideals you want -- if you could have

smaller class size, no bureaucracy, get rid of the kids who are causing all the trouble, and everything else -- what this shows is that your kids wouldn't be learning any more because they are not learning any more in private schools, so that fulfilling all of your wishes would not lead to different outcomes.

Now what does this mean? It means that probably 95 percent of the kids who go to colleges and universities in the United States would not be admitted to college anywhere else in the industrial world. It means that the academic standards we set for our kids are very low. It means that what we call a college education in the United States is largely a junior high school or high school education, with the exception of our elite institutions.

It also means that since we are producing three to seven percent of kids who are really functioning on this college level, and since those kids go to the Yales and Harvards and the Stanfords, and the percentage of those kids who become teachers in our elementary and secondary schools rounded off to the nearest whole number is zero, that basically we are selecting teachers in this country from a category of people who would not be admitted to college in any other country.

It also means that in spite of the fact that people look around for better schools, they may be getting schools that look a little better than the ones in the neighborhood they were moving from, but all they are doing is dealing with marginal differences from one community to another; they are not dealing with intellectual standards on any sort of a world-class basis. They are getting minor comparative advantages, but the overwhelming majority of parents who say their kids are getting a good education, that they moved to a certain community to get it, don't

know what a good education is if they think that is what their kids have gotten.

Now the shocking thing is that I am talking mostly about middle-class kids here. I am talking about the kids who do not have the problems of inner-city kids. I am not talking about massive unemployment, discrimination, racism, or ghettos or anything else. We are saying that kids who have every damn advantage are not learning. There isn't any place in the world where poor kids learn a whole hell of a lot, and kids of discriminated against minorities have troubles. I am not saying that they can't learn or that they don't make breakthroughs, but there are some kids in our society who have some damn good excuses for their difficulty in achieving. I am talking about kids who have no excuses. And until we solve the educational problems we have with kids who have no excuses, we are never going to be able to figure out what to do about the kids who do.

How should we think about this? If we were in some business and other people were in business and we suddenly noticed that they were pulling way ahead of us and they were making a profit and getting a bigger share of the market and we were falling behind, we would not engage in the kind of thinking people engage in in the field of education. What kind of thinking is that? It goes: Let's develop something totally new. But the first thing you would do in any other field is look at what the guys who are winning are doing. You would say what are they doing in Japan, what are they doing in Germany, what are they doing in Sweden? You wouldn't close your eyes and allow an entrepreneur to come along and say, let's smash the system and start something that nobody has ever done. But that is what we are talking

about in education when we talk about "choice."

I am not opposed to choice -- that is, public school choice -- but it is not the way that we would think in any area that really concerned us. The first thing we would say is, don't try to develop something totally new, which always has a practically zero chance of making it the first time, even the second time. To experiment on 40 million kids with choice, something that is totally untried, when every other industrial country in the world has something that works, makes no sense at all; in fact, it is immoral. In Germany, 30 percent of the youngsters surpass our three or seven percent; in France, 25 percent; in England, the lowest, 16 percent. So the rest of the world outperforms us by a huge amount.

Next question: But, Al, isn't it true that they are elitists, that they only educate the kids who are going to go to Oxford or Heidelberg, and they throw the other kids away? Well, not so. The kids who are in the middle track and the kids in the bottom track in Germany do about as well as our average kids and are in many ways better on academic subjects. It is true that other English-speaking countries do a poor job with the kids who are not headed to college. The United Kingdom has a big problem with that, and so do Australia and Canada, but not the other countries. So I suggest that we take a look at what they are doing that we are not doing.

Now, of course, the German system is different from the French system and different from the Dutch system and the Japanese system. But in spite of the substantial differences, what do they have in common? What they have in common is that they know where their kids are headed. They have decided as a society that they want their kids to read and write

and to calculate and to know something about their history and culture. They have a picture of what an 18- or 19-year-old should be able to do, and they map it backwards -- in order to get there, it means you need to do this in the first grade, this in the fifth grade, and so forth. If you don't know where you're going -- and we don't -- you won't get there.

So the first thing you have to develop is a curriculum. You can have textbooks which are focused and you can train teachers to teach that curriculum. But the most important thing about having a curriculum is this: Right now, I have kids in my class and I say to them that the only way they are ever going to learn is to work hard at it. If you want to be a good writer, you have to write often and somebody's got to read it and has to talk to you about it, and then you do it again and you keep working at it. And what happens when I give my kids all this work? They say, "Mr. Shanker, you're mean. I've got other things to do. I'm going home to tell my mother." And the big advantage in other countries is that the teacher can look up and say, "You know, that is what every other kid in the fifth grade is doing in this country this week or this month, and that is what they did last year and the year before that. I am your friend helping you to learn this so you can pass the external examination they are going to make me give to you."

Now that changes the entire relationship between parents, teachers and students. In the United States, if I have to negotiate that curriculum with my kids, how much work will they do?

Please remember that all the other countries that I am talking about whose students do so much better than ours run government schools, which are a hell of a lot more bureaucratic and centralized than we are.

Maybe -- big maybe -- by smashing our "monopoly" public schools eventually we will be able to get 15 percent of our kids to do what 30 percent do in Germany, but for the time being let's turn our "monopoly" and bureaucracy into as successful a one as they have done.

What about those kids who don't want to go to college? Every other country has some form of tracking; we're not unique; we just do it poorly. One of our problems is the single standard for all students. If you have a single standard, it is going to be low because politically we can't fail large numbers of students. So we've opted for minimum competency standards -- and few kids exceed them. Also, in the United States, when we put kids in the bottom tracks, we basically don't give them any work to do. And then we say, "See that? They didn't learn anything." But is that the fault of tracking? Every other country has shown that you can have a system in which you provide tracks that challenge all youngsters to operate to their maximums.

Here's another big difference: In other countries, employers look at some form of national certification or some standards the kid has met so that the graduate can go to a major company and say, "Look at how well I've achieved on those standards." In the United States, employers don't look at transcripts because they don't believe they mean anything -- it is only an individual teacher's judgment. The best thing business could do now is to say that they are only going to hire kids for afternoon jobs on the basis of merit in high school. You would get an awful lot of kids who would start studying very, very hard.

The other big difference has to do with stakes. Every other country has incentives, or consequences, for kids to work hard at school because it counts for college and for employment. If you do not have stakes,

what you have is a world where nothing "counts." We are, in fact, being very immoral by saying to students that they can move from semester to semester and get into a college even if they don't achieve in school because eventually someone finds out whether you can cut it or not. And let's face it: If you can get what you want without working too hard, most people don't work hard.

I think there ought to be stakes for adults, too, for the staff of a school and for districts. What we ought to do is set up a system of rewards and punishments for adults on a school-by-school basis. What would make experiments work better is to announce that every three years or so you are going to measure where the kids are. I would essentially give big bonuses to an entire faculty that substantially brought up the achievement of the youngsters over a three-, four- or five-year period; and to those who didn't bring them up quite so far, I'd give a lesser bonus. I might freeze the salaries of the staff of a school that did poorly consistently and close all those schools that were at rock bottom and have them reorganized in a sort of hostile takeover, or something like that. So you can take a monopoly or a bureaucracy, give schools autonomy and their own budget and put in a system of incentives, and it will act just like a good private business will.

Finally, I think one of the things we need to do when we talk about choice and vouchers and privatization in this country right now is to ask whether, given the kinds of things going on here, we want a system of finance for schools that would provide public finance for the David Koreshes or the Ku Klux Klan or other groups. Even if they were only one or two percent of the schools in the country, it could cause a tremendous amount of social damage. In Great Britain, because they have

no provisions separating church and state, the state can choose who the money will go to. When a group says it's none of your business what we are going to teach our kids, they don't get the money. In the United States, if you fund one group you're going to have to fund them all, and I think we need to focus on the social consequences of this.