BUSINESS AS A CHILD ADVOCACY GROUP:

A CALL TO ACTION

REMARKS BY

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During the years I have been involved in public education, I have addressed many different groups - business leaders, educators, government officials, students, volunteers.

This is, however, the first time I have had the privilege of addressing an organization of national standing that is active on so many different levels and in so many different communities, all at the same time. My preparation for this luncheon has given me an entirely new understanding of the term grassroots organization. Your work is very impressive.

I particularly admire your willingness to change with the changing times, without compromising the basic integrity of your organization's mission. Your current agenda - child care, the special problems of the at-risk child, and the *need* for broader representation on your own boards - is very much in tune with the critical issues this country must deal with over the next several years. So is the emphasis you have placed on making the child, rather than the educational system, the primary focus of your activities.

The emphasis on the child is the general theme of my remarks this afternoon, but before I get to that let me also offer some words of praise for your leadership role with respect to the AIDS issue. AIDS is a frightful disease. You should be pleased and we should be thankful that your efforts to provide information that can help communities and school districts develop rational, factual responses when AIDS arises within the context of the schools will be instrumental in rendering this disease less frightening to the public.

Recently, as I have assumed the chairmanship of the Board of Directors of the Institute for Educational Leadership, I have had an opportunity to review some of the major developments that have occurred in public education during the past five years.

When I finished that review, I was somewhat surprised. In the early 1980's public dissatisfaction with the educational achievements of public school students - combined with a political climate dominated by Reaganomics - were forcing many of us to wonder if public education had a future in this country. Today, however, these trends have reversed themselves. The tendency to view government as the problem rather than the solution is on the wane, a serious and wide-ranging inquiry into public education is underway, and public support for improving education is on the upswing.

In view of all this, the natural inclination would be to take a few moments off and congratulate ourselves. I would like nothing better than for us to savor that moment.

But when we look ahead we quickly see that we cannot rest on our laurels or take any recent progress for granted. There are three issues in particular which I think we need to address.

First, the children coming into our public school systems today are increasingly poorer, more ethnically and linguistically diverse, and have more handicaps that affect their learning.

Second, many of these problems cannot be solved until we look beyond the traditional boundaries of the classroom and begin to focus on the impact that non-classroom events and settings have on children and the educational process.

Third, although the schools will be called upon to play a fundamental role in helping to formulate some solutions, the base of political and social support upon which the public schools must draw in order to be successful may be in decline.

Let's begin by looking at what we know about our school-age population, especially the disadvantaged or educationally at-risk child.

Consider the following:

- Twenty percent of all children in this country live in households whose incomes are below the poverty line.

- Nearly half the black children under the age of six live in poverty. In fact, the average black child can expect to spend five of the first fifteen years of his or her life in an impoverished home.

- Forty percent of Hispanic children live in poverty.

- More and more children are coming from broken or single parent homes. Some sixty percent of children born in 1983 will live with only one parent before they turn 18.

- One of every six children under the age of six lives in a family where neither parent has a job.

- There are an increasing number of children, particularly among Asian-Americans, for whom English is not the native language.

- **A full fifty percent of the children born out of wedlock in this country are born to teenage mothers who, by and large, receive little medical care and follow very poor diets. The results are not hard to predict. Poor medical care and improper diets lead to premature births. Premature births result in low birth weight babies. Low birth weight is a reliable predictor of major learning difficulties.**

Put this all together and it adds up to a situation where, by conservative estimates, one of every three children in this country is educationally disadvantaged or educationally at-risk.

The terms are somewhat vague and impersonal, but everyone knows what they mean. They mean a child who either is not able to take advantage of the educational opportunities that are out there for the taking, or who is provided with educational opportunities that are inherently inferior and unequal.

Poverty is the main reason so many children are in this position, but other factors also contribute: poor nutrition, cultural and social patterns and norms, emotional and learning disabilities, physical handicaps, language difficulties, racial and ethnic prejudice.

It should come as no surprise then to learn that one of every six children under the age of six eventually will drop out of school. Or that they will be only marginally literate and virtually unemployable when they leave. Or that another 700,000 kids who stay in school won't gain much more by sticking around.

Twenty or 30 years ago, when we had a ready supply of unskilled jobs, we could "hide" this dropout rate and the lack of education. It was possible then to literally disappear into the workforce. Technology and global competition have changed that. The factory and farm jobs that were so prevalent before the 1950s aren't around anymore. If you want a good job today, you have to be literate and have some better-than-average problem-solving skills.

All the problems young people have finding a job and a place in today's world, though, can't be tied exclusively into the disadvantaged and impoverished child. There are an awful lot of children who have never known a day of hardship who aren't doing much better.

And, many low-income and minority youth attend school powerfully sustained by their parents' desire to see them succeed.

But it's the increasing number of disadvantaged kids, both as a percentage of the population and in terms of how little they receive during their school years, that is so shocking and harrowing.

The factors and forces that inhibit disadvantaged kids from enjoying a better life can work in different ways at different times. The results, however, always are the same: wasted lives and shattered dreams. And much of it is attributable to a well-developed social sleight of hand on our part.

Which brings me then to my second point.

Clearly, problems like this are beyond the ability of the schools or any other single institution to solve by themselves. Yet for the most part we still seem to view terribly complicated social issues in terms of a one-on-one solution. It's a little like basing social policy on the man-to-man defense rule of the National Basketball Association: you take poverty and I'll take the trade deficit.

We cannot continue to set before our educational system a task that no single institution, no matter how well equipped, how well staffed, or how well funded can handle by itself.

We cannot reasonably ask or expect our public schools to tackle poverty and all the associated problems poverty brings to bear on children. To do so is to set an inescapable trap of failure.

We have come to expect so much of the schools because they have guided so many people out of poverty in the past. But this pathway out of poverty and deprivation, as a recent report by the Committee for Economic Development noted, is a lot more complicated today than it was in 1930 or even 1950.

The Committee for Economic Development, a research and educational organization composed of over 200 business executives and educators, spent several months last year examining the same issues.

The CED recommended changes in the ways that schools defined their purpose and the ways in which they organized, structured and managed the educational process, especially schools serving large numbers of disadvantaged students.

It recommended a broad range of early and sustained childhood intervention programs, such as pre- and post-natal care for pregnant teenagers and other high-risk mothers, preschool and day

care programs, nutrition and immunization programs, and programs to help parents.

And it recommended programs aimed at students at risk of dropping out of school and those who had already left school.

I was a member of that study group, and while I fully agree with the recommendations, I believe the main contribution of this report lies in the overall context in which it asks all of us to look at public education.

The CED report asks us to recognize how extensive and how ingrained poverty has become in this country and how difficult it is for families and individuals to find their way out, no matter how hard they try.

This poverty is unlike any we have seen before. It is a poverty characterized by an insidious hopelessness; a poverty which threatens to reverse the traditional American dream that the child's future holds greater promise than the parent's past. It is a poverty that, as University of Chicago sociologist William Julius Wilson points out, might not even change very much if such factors as racial discrimination were eliminated. It is a structural poverty whose outlines and persistence are only becoming apparent to us as the manufacturing economy of the post-war period finally disappears.

The CED report also asks us to move beyond the classroom. It recognizes the role the school plays in the lives of children, but it does not view the school as the only institution that affects children. Nobody wants to let the schools off the hook. But by the same token we want to make sure everybody else gets their rightful place on the hook. If disadvantaged children are going to succeed, then everyone must be involved. Nobody can do the job alone. Not the schools. Not parents. Not business. Not government.

Finally, the CED report reminds us that we already have all the information we need in order to act. The report contains nothing we did not know before. But lack of knowledge has never been our problem. Lack of effort has; lack of commitment has. As the report itself notes:

"This is not the first time that the education of disadvantaged has been targeted as a top national priority. Efforts have been made since the Great Society programs of the 1960s to improve the literacy levels and graduation rates of minorities and the poor.

... Although we do not know how to prevent every disadvantaged child from failing, we do know what works for many."

I am not advocating that everyone follow the CED recommendations. I am not claiming the CED recommendations, if implemented, will produce immediate change. But I do believe this report and others like it are examples of an approach that will serve us well, and serve children well, at both the national level and the community level.

This approach will serve us well and serve children well because it makes the child, not an agency or institution that serves the child, the center of our concern, something the National PTA already has done.

This approach will serve us well and serve children well because when we begin to see the child as the central actor within a social system, we then are able to look beyond the family and school and understand the broad set of networks, roles and relationships that make up the environment in which a child lives.

This approach will serve us well and serve children well because when we focus on the child, we stop asking ourselves what the schools and other institutions need in order to better serve children; and we start asking ourselves what the child needs in order to grow into a healthy, contributing adult.

A focus on the child also opens up the possibility of new roles for old institutions. Schools, for example, because of their unique social penetration in the grass roots of every community could become the center where children could get many other services they need, instead of being only the institution that delivers educational services.

In this new role, schools could help communities define the services and programs different populations of children require and begin exploring ways of coordinating those services in a form that assures continuity of growth and development. In fact, this is an ideal role for the school, because no other institution is so capable of reaching the entire community.

I understand several of your state PTA organizations are moving in this direction, organizing local resources to meet local needs and placing academic learning within the context of the social and economic environment we want children to have in this country.

This is a fairly new idea. The theory is sound. Now we have to make it work in practice. I think we can. I know it is important to try.

As we do this, I urge you to pay attention to the recommendations being developed by the William T. Grant Foundation's Commission on Youth and the American Future. In one of its earliest recommendations, the Commission has strongly advised that we not place all youngsters in the same mold. It has urged us to operate on the assumption that different children learn in different ways and develop academic standards flexible enough to accommodate and encourage these differences.

Now for the commercial and point number three: the declining base of public school support.

In the years that I have been involved in public education, I have received a lot of praise for what I and some of my business colleagues were doing in behalf of the public schools.

For a while, I was flattered and a little self-conscious.

Then it dawned on me. If there were more of us out there, we wouldn't be considered unusual. And if we weren't considered unusual, educators and school officials wouldn't pay so much attention to us an individuals. We could blend into the woodwork.

Frankly, that's what I would like to see happen. I am very pleased some members of the business community have played key leadership roles in trying to improve our public schools and develop support for our public education system.

But I think all of us would be better served by broader participation and less praise.

There has been some business concern for education at the national level. A group of business leaders jointly and effectively testified before Congress last year in behalf of Chapter I, for example. We *need* more national participation, but we also need to develop new links at the local level.

Coalitions between local PTAs and local business communities are a logical place to start. They would be broad-based and representative of the community. They would be well-respected. And they would fit in with your own goal of expanding contacts with business and industry.

Coalitions like this are needed because the demographics of the population are changing. Children's issues no longer automatically rise to the top of the agenda at the national or community level.

We must remember that the number of households with school aged children is in decline. Five years ago, people 65 and older surpassed teenagers as a percentage of our population. By 1990, people under the age of 20 will comprise less than 30 percent of our population for the first time.

As these numbers make clear, an increasing percentage of Americans -- particularly older Americans -- no longer has any direct and immediate contact with public education. Many already feel they no longer have a stake in what happens in our schools. Our task -- yours and mine, corporate executives, community leaders, educators and parents -- is to convince them that they do.

We need to develop a new social consensus, and we need to develop local coalitions that will play leadership roles in bringing back together those sectors of society that have drifted apart but still have more in common than they sometimes realize.

I find it difficult to believe, for example, that the elderly or the so-called yuppies cannot be persuaded to focus more attention toward children in need. If those are the messages we are hearing, however, then the rest of us better begin building some bridges, and better begin building them fast.

The truth of the matter is that we have entered a different period in our national life.

Once we worried about our own kids.

Now it's time to worry about someone else's

kids. Thank you.