

THE BUSINESS ROLE AND STAKE
IN THE
IMPROVEMENT OF PUBLIC EDUCATION

REMARKS BY
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I am deeply honored to be asked to speak to such an influential group of state educational policymakers. The states, Georgia certainly included with its Quality Basic Education Act, have been in the lead in the critically important nationwide efforts to improve our schools.

This evening I will focus my comments upon three areas:

- my perception of the status and role of public education in the United States and the need to broaden the context in which we view schools and education
- the involvement of business leaders in public education and related issues
- what you as influential state policymakers can do to enhance and encourage business involvement with public education First, some Thoughts About Role of Public Education
- increasingly concerned about the willingness of the educational community to accept passively too much responsibility for all our social ills
- not only is this madness but it is extraordinarily dangerous to the long term support of an institution that is going to have to meet the needs of growing numbers of disadvantaged, "at-risk" children
- On the other hand I am not suggesting that schools can be let off the hook with regard to their fundamental educational responsibilities
- Let me expand on this point

A Nation at Risk and many other reports were necessary to focus public attention on the need to reform the education system

The more business people such as myself began to examine the state of the public schools the more some of us were struck by the fact that the problems in the schools are just one reflection of a set of very serious and escalating social and economic problems

- school problems represent only the tip of the iceberg for growing numbers of our children and their families

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- The drop out issue is a good example to use to highlight this discussion. Over the past several years, the press, the business community and the general public have repeatedly castigated the public schools for drop out rates which are unconscionably high. Educators, in turn, have dutifully acknowledged the problem, submissively accepted the responsibility, and earnestly promised to improve their performance.
- But how much of the drop out problem is singularly attributable to the poor performance of the education system.
 - If a student drops out because of drug problems or alcohol abuse is that really the fault of the school system
 - If a young girl drops out because she is pregnant is that the fault of the school system
 - Can the school system be held solely accountable for the failure of a parent or parents to convey a sense of the importance of education to their children
 - Can the school system be held solely accountable for the youngster who drops out or graduates late because of the demands of part time or full time work required out of economic necessity
 - Can the school system be held solely accountable for the young person who drops out -- not without cause -because he or she is alienated from the larger institutions of society, unable to cope with discrimination, or unable to see the educational or material value of a high school diploma in the complex economic and social times in which we live
- None of this is to suggest that the public schools are blameless for the drop out problem or that they cannot make a far better contribution to its resolution. It does, however, raise nagging questions -- questions which educators wrestle with all the time, but questions which really haven't been communicated well to those outside the profession who have gotten involved in the school reform efforts of the past few years.
- The central question has to do with definition or clarification of appropriate roles and responsibilities for

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the public schools. It would seem that perhaps we are holding our schools too accountable for

- the failures or inability of parents to provide appropriately for their children
- the failures of society and the economy to deal effectively with alienation, discrimination and poverty
- the failures of other institutions and government funded programs to reach out and help all those kids who ought to be participants in programs such as WIC, Head Start, Chapter One, etc.

Over-accountability is not a good way to run any system. Over the longer term, impossible goal setting breeds a mind-set where failure becomes tolerated and the best employees look for jobs elsewhere.

- I think this is happening in our public schools. But the consequences here are far more serious. We can discard manufactured products that are defective; we can't do so with kids.
- From another perspective, the willingness of our educators to seemingly accept responsibility for problems they cannot solve may be allowing other institutions to conveniently escape from responsibilities they should be expected to assume.

For relative newcomers to the education issue such as businessmen like myself, the willingness of educators to simply accept all the responsibilities we throw on their doorstep has the serious consequence of not pushing us to expand our horizons and consider a more complete picture of the problems confronting today's youth.

- It seems to me that we need to articulate and pursue a broader agenda, a comprehensive set of programs and policies -- including prenatal care, WIC, Head Start, health insurance for poor children, day care, youth programs, drug and alcohol prevention -- aimed at promoting the best possible development and opportunities for our children.

What about the role of the private sector? Will it participate?

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Five years ago corporations themselves often took the initiative in finding areas of public policy and public concern where they could play an active role.

Some did so because they were encouraged by an Administration that wanted to scale down its own involvement in social issues. Some became involved because local institutions, needing help from anyone prepared to give it, lobbied hard, sometimes desperately, for corporate assistance in all areas.

Nevertheless, a lot of corporate involvement occurred because corporations sensed they had important ties to local communities, ties worth building, ties worth maintaining. After all, these were the communities where they were located, where many of their employees lived; these were the cities and towns to which their long-range future was connected.

Today, those bonds between the corporation and the community are showing the signs of strain. Instead of seeking out new opportunities or deciding how to improve upon existing relationships, the American corporation is turning inward once again, withdrawing from involvement in social issues and focusing on only one bottom line--its own.

The growth of conglomerates, mergers, acquisitions and hostile takeovers are making it difficult for many corporations to sustain ties that once existed between themselves and local communities.

How do you convince a company to keep its eye on the workforce of the year 2000 when its vision of the future increasingly is seen in 90 day cycles?

The sad fact of the matter is that educational achievement for young children could decline precipitously in this country and it would not have an iota of IMMEDIATE impact on the corporate bottom line. As for the future labor force issues, the year 2000 looks far away to corporate executives preoccupied with quarterly profit statements.

None of this is said to discourage efforts to involve business leaders in public policy issues. It is said because we need to understand, as clearly as possible, the environment in which we are working.

It is also said because the nature of public private relationships is changing. Any public official who wants to seriously involve

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the private sector in new efforts to improve public education is going to have to instigate the process. Don't expect many large corporate executives to knock on your doors to volunteer their assistance. In fact, be prepared to be increasingly persistent and insistent in mobilizing corporate support for the kinds of public private partnerships that were so popular just a few years ago.

Enough forboding about the business community's role!

What can state policymakers do to enhance and encourage business involvement?

In Georgia, as well as elsewhere throughout the country, business leaders became involved earlier in this decade when they began to realize that the economic well-being and competitiveness of their state was linked to improving the schools.

State-by-state comparisons gave reform in Georgia a special impetus as the state ranked quite low on measures such as education spending per pupil and the percentage of population completing high school.

The governor in 1983 created an Education Review Commission (ERC) which was greatly influenced by business interests, as the linkage between education and economic development became quite explicit in Georgia.

The recommendations of the ERC in turn significantly influenced the passage of the Quality Basic Education Reform Act, the legislative cornerstone of Georgia's reform movement.

The major question in Georgia as well as elsewhere concerning business involvement is whether it can be sustained and whether business will stay in for the long haul. All of us in this room know there will be no "quick-fix" with regard to education problems here or anywhere else.

Business and political leaders must understand and articulate the larger set of problems confronting today's generation of children and adolescents and acknowledge that school based problems represent only the tip of a very dangerous iceberg which could threaten the future of this country.

We cannot reasonably ask or expect our public schools to tackle poverty and all the associated problems poverty brings to bear on children.

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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 (CED) a research and educational organization composed of over 200 business executives and educators, spent thousands of hours over the last three years examining these issues. I was a member of that task force.

The CED in its report, Children in Need, 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.

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 structural poverty whose outlines and persistence are only becoming apparent to us as the manufacturing economy of the pre and post-war period rapidly diminishes.

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

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the job alone. Not the schools. Not parents. Not business.
Not government.

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 the 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.

One of the major challenges in Georgia and elsewhere, is to find an appropriate balance between legitimate state requirements geared to ensure minimal standards and levels of student achievement and the need to provide Georgia's 186 local school systems with the flexibility they need to meet the special needs of students.

Now for the commercial and a final point: 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 some of my business colleagues and I 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, educators and school officials wouldn't pay so much attention to us as individuals. We would blend into the background.

Frankly, that's what I would like to see happen.

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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 One, for example. We need MORE national participation, but we also need to develop new links at the state and local levels.

Coalitions including influential business leaders 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, state 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 since such statistics have been kept as Bud Hodgkinson's IEL reports have made abundantly clear.

As these numbers indicate, 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, state and 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 state and 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. We need to build bridges and build 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.

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