

TESTIMONY PRESENTED TO  
JOINT ECONOMIC COMMITTEE  
EDUCATION AND HEALTH SUBCOMMITTEE

DECEMBER 14, 1988

REMARKS BY

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Mr. Chairman, I am William S. Woodside. I am Chairman of Sky Chefs, Inc. Before that, I served six years as chairman and CEO of the Primerica Corporation, formerly known as the American Can Company.

I am active in several organizations in which education is the primary focus. I co-chair the New York City School and Business Alliance. I chair the Institute for Educational Leadership, which is located in Washington, D.C. I am vice chair of the Committee for Economic Development, an organization composed of business and educational leaders that has been extensively involved in educational matters. I am president of the Primerica Foundation, which has made public education its major priority.

Mr. Chairman, I want to thank you for inviting me to testify. The two issues you have asked me to address this morning -- the need for more preschool programs, and the need to provide full access to post-secondary education -- are of long-standing concern to me.

At first glance, it seems that these two topics exclude precisely those years we should be talking about: the years between kindergarten and high school graduation, the years that form the core of the educational experience.

It is not my intention, just as I am sure it is not the intention of this committee, to detract from those years. But I do believe that we need to expand our view of the educational process, expand the boundaries as it were.

Let me begin with preschool.

Almost 25 years ago, when the Johnson Administration developed its War on Poverty, one component of that effort was Head Start, a program to provide preschool education for disadvantaged children. The theory behind the program was straightforward enough. Since disadvantaged children frequently had difficulty in school, a preschool program would put them in a better position to learn and grow.

Head Start succeeded beyond anyone's expectation. For more than a dozen years, it has been recognized as one of the most successful social programs ever developed in this country. Some view it as the most successful social program of the last quarter century.

This isn't an intuitive or subjective opinion. This is a judgement backed up by a wealth of data.

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That data tells us that children who participate in Head Start do better in school than children who do not. They attend school more frequently, and their grades are higher.

The data also tells us that as these children grow into adults, they are more likely to find jobs, more likely to form stable families, less likely to go on welfare, and less likely to have trouble with the law.

With the public, the Congress and the Administration clamoring for social programs that "work", you would think that, given this record of success, we would fund Head Start to the hilt; or failing that, find some way of ensuring that all eligible children had the opportunity to participate in something like Head Start.

That is not the direction in which we are moving, however.

At the present time, some 2.4 million children are eligible for Head Start, but only 456,000 are enrolled. In other words, four of every five children who could benefit from Head Start are denied the opportunity to participate.

There is no question in my mind, and in the minds of many others, that this country needs to expand its publicly and privately supported preschool programs so that every child who can benefit from a preschool program has access to one.

But at this stage in our social history, when we are facing a poverty that is intractable and difficult to escape, we cannot focus only on preschool programs. We need to move beyond preschool and look at the broader economic and social environment in which so many millions of disadvantaged children are being raised.

We need, for example, to give serious consideration to the recommendations of such organizations as the Committee for Economic Development.

In a report entitled, "Children in Need: Investment Strategies for the Educationally Disadvantaged", the CED recommended that the nation give "the highest priority" to a broad range of early and sustained childhood programs designed to meet the educational, health and social needs of disadvantaged children.

These recommendations included an expansion of preschool programs, but they also included pre- and post-natal care for at-risk mothers, expanded programs of family health care,

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nutritional guidance, quality day care for working parents, an expansion of the Chapter I program, and special programs to help parents raise their children.

In addition, the CED recommended ongoing support systems within the schools themselves that included health and nutritional services, psychological and career counselling, and a variety of programs designed to keep young people in school.

That's not a complete program. But it was the CED's hope that, when combined with major educational initiatives, the program could help achieve two goals. One would be to provide support, health and sustenance for children who have more than their share of obstacles to overcome in order to succeed in this society. The other would be to make today's disadvantaged youth part of tomorrow's economic growth.

"This nation", the CED said in its most widely quoted statement, "cannot continue to compete and prosper in the global arena when more than one-fifth of our children live in poverty and a third grow up in ignorance. And if the nation cannot compete, it cannot lead. If we continue to squander the talents of millions of our children, America will become a nation of limited human potential."

There is not a radical proposal in the entire CED report. In fact, they are relatively modest. But if all of them were implemented, we would finally have the national commitment to improve the lives of children that we have talked about for years -- but which we never have actually undertaken.

Now for the second topic on the agenda: full access to post-secondary education.

Here I would like to move a little off center.

During the last 10 or 12 years, there has been a steady increase in the desire of young people to attend college and a steady increase in the numbers actually attending college.

Those are welcome developments. The fact that our colleges have a wider range of students from which to choose is one indication of our success. So is the increasing academic competition among college students.

That is as it should be. We should be encouraging all those who want to attend college to do so. We should reach out to those who have the ability but not the information or encouragement

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they need. We should be developing financing mechanisms that make college possible for bright young people of modest or limited means.

But I wonder if we are not focusing too much attention on the college-bound. I wonder if our preoccupation with those attending college, and those who want to attend college, causes us to lose sight of young people who are not likely to attend college.

There are 20 million young people who fall into this category, and, in the words of a national commission on Youth and the American Future, they are "the Forgotten Half."

Who are these young people? What do we know about them? What do they do? What happens to them?

The William T. Grant Foundation commission that spent a year studying non-college youth had this to say:

"They are the young people who build our homes, drive our buses, repair our automobiles, fix our televisions, maintain and serve our offices, schools and hospitals, and keep the production lines of our mills and factories moving."

"To a great extent they determine how well the American family, economy and democracy function. They are also the thousands of young men and women who aspire to work productively but never quite 'make it' to that kind of employment. For these members of the Forgotten Half, their lives as adults start in the economic limbo of unemployment, part-time jobs and poverty wages. Many of them never break free."

The problem, we are told, is that, as a nation, we prepare our college-bound youth for the future but assume our non-college bound youth will make it on their own.

But that's not how it works out.

The data the Grant Commission collected showed that young people between the ages of 20 and 24 who do not attend college earn less today than their counterparts earned ten years ago. It also shows 56 percent not even earning enough to keep a family of three above the poverty line. And when incomes decline, the odds start increasing that families will begin to break up, single parent households will be the norm, and children will start having problems at school.