

DISADVANTAGED CHILDREN
AND OUR FUTURE

PRESENTED TO: NATIONAL
COMMISSION ON CHILDREN

REMARKS BY:

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DISADVANTAGED CHILDREN AND OUR FUTURE

GOOD MORNING

TODAY'S NATIONAL FOCUS ON THE EDUCATION OF CHILDREN IN NEED IS PARTIALLY AN OUT-GROWTH OF EDUCATION REFORM THAT WAS SPURRED BY PUBLICATION OF A "NATION AT RISK", BUT LARGELY FROM MARION WRIGHT EDELMAN'S WORK WITH THE CHILDREN'S DEFENSE FUND AND OTHER PROGRAMS FOCUSED ON EARLY CHILDHOOD, THESE STRANDS WERE BROUGHT TOGETHER FOR PROBABLY THE FIRST TIME IN C.E.D.'S LANDMARK REPORT TITLED, "CHILDREN IN NEED" -- RELEASED IN 1987.

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THE C.E.D. "CHILDREN IN NEED" REPORT WAS THE FIRST TO RECOGNIZE THAT RESTRUCTURING SCHOOLS AND IMPROVING QUALITY OF TEACHERS LEFT OUT ENTIRELY THE EARLY AND SUBSTAINED INTERVENTION IN THE LIVES OF DISADVANTAGED CHILDREN, CONSERVATIVE ESTIMATES SHOW THAT A SHOCKING 30% OF OUR SCHOOL POPULATION ARE DISADVANTAGED.

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THE REPORT SHOWS THAT POVERTY CORRELATES CLOSELY WITH SCHOOL FAILURE, ESPECIALLY WHERE FAMILY STRUCTURE HAS BROKEN DOWN AS WELL, POOR STUDENTS ARE THREE TIMES MORE LIKELY TO BECOME DROPOUTS THAN STUDENTS FROM MORE ECONOMICALLY ADVANTAGED HOMES, THIS IS HARDLY SURPRISING: CHILDREN OF THE POOR SUFFER MORE FREQUENTLY FROM ALMOST EVERY FORM OF CHILDHOOD DEFICIENCY, INCLUDING INFANT MORTALITY, GROSS MALNUTRITION, RECURRENT AND UNTREATED HEALTH PROBLEMS, PSYCHOLOGICAL AND PHYSICAL STRESS, CHILD ABUSE, AND LEARNING DISABILITIES.

AND NOW FOR A FEW STATISTICS, WHICH I DO NOT EXPECT YOU TO REMEMBER, TO GIVE YOU AN OVERALL IMPRESSION OF THE MAGNITUDE OF THE PROBLEM,

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AS A GROUP, CHILDREN ARE NOW THE POOREST SEGMENT OF THE NATION'S POPULATION. THEY ARE NEARLY SEVEN TIMES AS LIKELY TO BE POOR AS THOSE OVER SIXTY-FIVE, OVER 20% OF ALL CHILDREN UNDER 18 CURRENTLY LIVE IN FAMILIES WHOSE INCOMES FALL BELOW THE POVERTY LINE, AND 25% OF ALL CHILDREN UNDER 6 ARE NOW LIVING IN POVERTY, ALTHOUGH ALMOST TWO-THIRDS OF ALL POOR CHILDREN ARE WHITE, BOTH BLACKS AND HISPANICS ARE MORE LIKELY TO BE POOR; 43% OF BLACK AND 40% OF HISPANIC CHILDREN LIVE IN POVERTY, BLACK CHILDREN ARE NEARLY THREE TIMES AS LIKELY TO LIVE IN POVERTY AS WHITE CHILDREN.

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THERE HAS ALSO BEEN AN EPIDEMIC INCREASE IN THE NUMBER OF CHILDREN BORN OUTSIDE OF MARRIAGE, ONE HALF OF THESE TO TEENAGE MOTHERS WHO TEND TO HAVE PREMATURE BIRTHS BECAUSE OF INADEQUATE NUTRITION AND MEDICAL CARE, LOW BIRTH WEIGHT IS THE SINGLE BEST PREDICTOR OF WHAT'S GOING TO HAPPEN DURING THE EDUCATION PROCESS, WEIGHT BELOW 5 LBS, COMBINED WITH INADEQUATE MEDICAL CARE HAS A TERRIBLE IMPACT, TODAY BETWEEN 20 AND 25% OF OUR ANNUAL BIRTHS ARE ALMOST ASSURED OF BEING EDUCATIONALLY RETARDED OR DIFFICULT TO TEACH AS THEY GO THROUGH OUR SCHOOL SYSTEM,

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MY FOCUS IN EDUCATION THE LAST 10 YEARS HAS BEEN ON URBAN CHILDREN AT RISK, AND BECAUSE OF THAT, I HAVE AN APOCALYPTIC VISION OF THE FUTURE, DISTURBING FACTS ABOUT SCHOOL CHILDREN HAVE BEEN MARSHALLED TIME AND AGAIN, LET ME GIVE YOU 2 EXAMPLES:

LET'S TAKE A NATIONAL PROFILE OF THE CLASS OF 2001 WHICH STARTED KINDERGARTEN LAST FALL,

25% LIVING BELOW PROVERTY LINE

15% HAVE MENTAL OR PHYSICAL HANDICAPS

14% BORN TO TEENAGE MOTHERS

14% BORN TO UNMARRIED MOTHERS

DISASTER IS ALMOST GUARANTEED IF KIDS FALL INTO MORE

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THE FACTS ARE NOT NEW BUT OUR INCREASING RECOGNITION IS NEW, WE ARE BEGINNING TO ARRIVE AT A MORE REALISTIC UNDERSTANDING OF THE PROBLEMS FACED BY LARGE NUMBERS OF CHILDREN, WE ARE PUTTING ASIDE THE TRADITIONAL COMPARTMENTALIZED VIEW THAT LOOKS AT EDUCATION AS ONE PROBLEM, HEALTH AS ANOTHER, FAMILY INCOME AS A THIRD,

IN ITS PLACE, WE ARE ADOPTING A MORE COMPREHENSIVE VIEW THAT TAKES INTO ACCOUNT THE WAYS EDUCATION, HEALTH, NUTRITION, HOUSING, FAMILY INCOME, SOCIAL SUPPORTS AND EVEN POLITICAL DECISIONS ALL INTERACT TO FROM THE ENVIRONMENT IN WHICH YOUNG PEOPLE LIVE AND THE OPPORTUNITIES THAT ARE AVAILABLE TO THEM,

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THESE ARE IMPORTANT SIGNS OF PROGRESS, BUT IF OUR
OUTLOOK HAS CHANGED, THE OBSTACLES BEFORE US HAVE NOT
CHANGED,

ONE OF THEM IS OUR OWN HISTORY,

WHEN IT COMES TO DEVELOPING RHETORIC ABOUT CHILDREN,
I DOUBT WE HAVE AN EQUAL IN THE WORLD, EXCEPT FOR A
BRIEF PERIOD IN THE SIXTIES WHEN WE DEVELOPED AND
IMPLEMENTED A RANGE OF PROGRAMS AIMED AT PROVIDING
ALL CHILDREN WITH A RELATIVELY EQUAL OPPORTUNITY IN
LIFE, OUR RECENT PERFORMANCE HAS NOT COME CLOSE TO
OUR RHETORIC.

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TAKE INFANT MORTALITY AND CHILD HEALTH,

EVERYONE AGREES THAT CHILDREN WHO RECEIVE EARLY HEALTH CARE FARE BETTER IN LIFE THAN CHILDREN WHO DO NOT; FOR 60 YEARS WE HAVE KNOWN THAT QUALITY PRENATAL CARE CAN REDUCE INFANT MORTALITY AND ELIMINATE MANY OF THE PROBLEMS THAT LEAD TO HIGH-RISK BIRTHS AND SUBSEQUENT POOR HEALTH AMONG INFANTS, AS WELL AS PROBLEMS IN LATER LIFE THAT ARE ASSOCIATED WITH POOR CHILD HEALTH.

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YET THE UNITED STATES CURRENTLY RANKS 19TH AMONG INDUSTRIALIZED NATIONS IN INFANT MORTALITY, AND 15 MILLION WOMEN OF CHILDBEARING AGE HAVE NO PRIVATE OR GOVERNMENT HEALTH INSURANCE THAT COVERS MATERNITY CARE,

IN ADDITION, WE MAKE THE HEAD-START PROGRAM AVAILABLE TO LESS THAN 20 PERCENT OF THE CHILDREN WHO NEED IT, PLACE SHARP RESTRICTIONS ON THE NUMBER OF WOMEN AND CHILDREN WHO RECEIVE THE BENEFITS OF FOOD AND NUTRITION PROGRAMS AND DRAMATICALLY LIMIT THE CHAPTER I ASSISTANCE WE PROVIDE OUR PUBLIC SCHOOLS,

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THAT'S THE HISTORY WE HAVE TO OVERCOME,

THE NATURE OF THE POVERTY IN WHICH SO MANY CHILDREN NOW LIVE IS THE SECOND MAJOR OBSTACLE IN OUR PATH,

IT IS A POVERTY UNLIKE ANY WE BECOME FAMILIAR WITH IN THE PAST, IT IS NOT A POVERTY THAT HAS A TEMPORARY HOLD OVER ITS VICTIMS, IT IS A POVERTY THAT IS BOTH EXTENSIVE AND DEEPLY INGRAINED, IT IS FAR MORE SEVERE AND OPPRESSIVE THAN MOST OF US IMAGINE, AND IT OFTEN DEFEATS THE BEST EFFORTS OF DEDICATED AND HARD-WORKING PARENTS,

ALTHOUGH THE NATIONAL POVERTY RATE HAS BEEN HELD STEADY AT 14 PERCENT, CONSIDER THESE FACTS:

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- 0 THE "POVERTY GAP," THE AMOUNT BY WHICH THE INCOME OF THE POOR FALLS BELOW THE POVERTY LINE, IS LARGER THAN AT ANY TIME IN 27 YEARS, EXCEPT FOR THE HIGH UNEMPLOYMENT YEAR OF 1983.

- 0 THE PROPORTION OF POOR WHO FALL INTO THE CATEGORY OF THE POOREST OF THE POOR IS AT THE HIGHEST LEVEL IN MORE THAN A DECADE,

- 0 THE POVERTY RATE AMONG YOUNG FAMILIES WITH CHILDREN DOUBLED BETWEEN 1974 AND 1983, BY 1985, HALF OF ALL YOUNG FAMILIES WITH CHILDREN WERE LIVING IN POVERTY.

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THIS ISN'T JUST POVERTY, THIS IS A POVERTY IN WHICH CHILDREN FREQUENTLY END UP WORSE THAN THEIR PARENTS,

THE AMERICAN ECONOMY, AND THUS AMERICAN SOCIETY, HAS BEEN BUILT AROUND THE IDEA THAT TOMORROW'S GENERATION WILL DO BETTER THAN TODAY'S, THE POOR BELIEVED THAT, TOO. BUT IF THOSE AT THE BOTTOM OF THE ECONOMIC LADDER STOP BELIEVING THE CHILD'S FUTURE HOLDS MORE PROMISE THAN THE PARENT'S PAST, WE WILL BE IN SERIOUS TROUBLE,

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WE CANNOT ALLOW THE NUMBER OF PEOPLE WHO ARE NOT RECOGNIZED AS EQUAL PARTICIPANTS IN OUR SOCIETY, EITHER BY THEMSELVES OR OTHERS, TO GROW LARGER,

NOBODY IS SUGGESTING WE START FROM SCRATCH AND BUILD A NEW SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC STRUCTURE, BUT WE CAN IDENTIFY THOSE AREAS WHERE WE CAN MAKE A SUBSTANTIAL DIFFERENCE AND BEGIN TO BUILD ON THOSE SUCCESSSES.

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AT THE PRESENT TIME, THE MOMENT SEEMS RIGHT FOR SOME INTENSIVE EFFORTS TO IMPROVE THE EARLY LIVES OF CHILDREN; TO PUT INTO PLACE, ON A MORE EXTENSIVE SCALE THAN CURRENTLY EXISTS, PROGRAMS THAT WILL IMPROVE THE ODDS THAT CHILDREN WHO ARE DISADVANTAGED TODAY WILL HAVE A BETTER FUTURE TOMORROW.

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THOSE

INITIATIVES THAT FOCUS ON THE EARLY LIVES OF
CHILDREN SHOULD INCLUDE THE FOLLOWING:

- 1, ACCESS TO PRENATAL CARE FOR ALL PREGNANT
WOMEN,
- 2, FULL PARTICIPATION IN THE WIC PROGRAM
AND SIMILAR STATE PROGRAMS.
- 3, ENDING CHILDHOOD HUNGER IN AMERICA,
- 4, IMMUNIZING EVERY CHILD AGAINST INFECTIOUS
DISEASES,
- 5, MAKING QUALITY DAY CARE ACCESSIBLE TO
CHILDREN OF PARENTS WHO MUST WORK.

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6, EXPANDING HEAD START AND CHAPTER ONE TO ALL
ELIGIBLE CHILDREN,

7, EFFECTIVE TEENAGE PREGNANCY PREVENTION
PROGRAMS,

NOT A NEW IDEA IN THE LOT AND ALMOST ALL PROVEN TO BE
VERY COST EFFECTIVE,

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ARE THEY EXPENSIVE? MY ANSWER IS--COMPARED TO WHAT?
THE NUMBERS FOR THE 3 VERY IMPORTANT PROGRAMS --
PRENATAL CARE, CHILDCARE AND HEADSTART -- NET OUT TO
\$11.5 BILLION, IS THIS A LOT OF MONEY? YES -- BUT
IT'S NOT MUCH MORE THAN ONE YEAR'S COST OF LIVING
INCREASE IN SOCIAL SECURITY, WE KNOW PRENATAL CARE
AND NUTRITION PROGRAMS SAVE AT LEAST \$3 FOR \$1 SPENT
IN HOSPITAL COSTS ALONE, WE KNOW THAT HEAD-START
PROGRAMS RETURN \$6 FOR EVERY \$1 SPENT. RECENT
ESTIMATES ARE THAT IT COSTS THE NATION \$240 BILLION
IN FOREGONE TAXES OVER THE LIFETIME OF EACH YEAR'S
CLASS OF DROPOUTS. AND THIS NUMBER DOESN'T INCLUDE
THE BILLIONS MORE FOR CRIME, WELFARE, AND HEALTH CARE
THAT THIS GROUP COSTS THE U.S. THE COSTS ARE FAR
GREATER TO ACCEPT THE SYSTEM AS IT IS RATHER THAN TO
TRY TO CHANGE IT.

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I'M NOT SUGGESTING THAT ALL WE HAVE TO DO IS SPEND A FEW BILLION AND EVERYTHING WILL BE GREAT, IT WILL TAKE YEARS OF CONTINUED COMMITMENT OF ENERGIES AND FUNDS TO MAKE MAJOR IMPROVEMENTS IMPACTING THE EDUCATION OF DISADVANTAGED KIDS AND THE POVERTY FROM WHICH THEY EMERGE.

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IS THIS TRIP NECESSARY? YOU CAN BET YOUR SURVIVAL IT IS! I MENTIONED EARLIER THAT THE DROPOUT RATE FOR U.S. IS 25%, BUT ITS 50% IN MAJOR CITIES WHERE MANY OF YOU ARE LOCATED, WHERE WILL OUR FUTURE WORK FORCE COME FROM OR ARE WE WILLING TO SETTLE FOR NEW YORK TELEPHONE'S EXPERIENCE OF 18,000 APPLICANTS TO FILL 2,000 ENTRY LEVEL JOBS? WHAT WILL HAPPEN TO THE CRIME RATE, THE TAX BASE, THE CITY'S CULTURE UNLESS WE DO SOMETHING TO HELP ENSURE THAT WE PRODUCE EDUCATED AND TRAINED YOUNG ADULTS WHO CAN PLAY A MEANINGFUL ROLE IN OUR SOCIETY?

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IF WE SPREAD OUR VISION FURTHER, WE CAN SEE THAT WE ARE DOOMED AS A WORLD POWER, DOOMED IN A CONSTANTLY FALLING STANDARD OF LIVING UNLESS WE DO A BETTER JOB WITH OUR DISADVANTAGED YOUTH, THERE HAS NEVER BEEN A CASE IN HISTORY WHERE A LEADING NATION WAS NOT ALSO AN ECONOMIC LEADER, AND YET HOW CAN WE COMPETE WITH JAPAN AND GERMANY, IF 25% OF OUR WORKFORCE DOES NOT EVEN HAVE A HIGH SCHOOL EDUCATION AND THAT, AN INADEQUATE ONE.

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MOST IMPORTANTLY, I THINK WE'RE TALKING ABOUT SURVIVAL OF DEMOCRACY IN THE U.S. THE 2 TIERING OF OUR SOCIETY IS DESTROYING THE SHARED VISION OF OURSELVES TOWARD WHICH WE'VE BEEN STRIVING FOR 200 YEARS AND WHICH IS THE ESSENCE OF OUR DEMOCRATIC PROCESS, IF WE ARE NOT PREPARED TO ADDRESS THESE ISSUES, SOONER OR LATER WE WILL WIND UP IN 2 ARMED CAMPS, THE WORLD HAS MANY TRAGIC EXAMPLES OF THIS -- MEXICO, PHILIPPINES, PUERTO RICO, VENEZUELA -- ALL PLACES WHERE THE HAVES LIVE IN COMPOUNDS WITH WALLS, BARBED WIRE, BROKEN GLASS AND ARMED GUARDS, TO PROTECT THEMSELVES FROM THE HAVE NOTS, NONE OF US WANT OUR CIVILIZATION TO BE DESTROYED IN THIS WAY.

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THIS IS WHY THE PROBLEMS AND THE SOLUTIONS HAVE A
TERRIBLE URGENCY, I WOULD LIKE TO CLOSE WITH A POEM
BY CHILEAN POET, GABRIELA MISTRAL WHO WON THE NOBEL
PRIZE FOR LITERATURE IN 1945, I HOPE THAT HER WORDS
CAN SERVE AS A GUIDE FOR OUR EFFORTS, HERE IS WHAT
SHE WROTE:

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"MANY THINGS WE NEED CAN WAIT,
THE CHILD CANNOT.
NOW IS THE TIME HIS BONES ARE BEING
FORMED,
HIS BLOOD IS BEING MADE,
HIS MIND IS BEING DEVELOPED,
TO HIM WE CANNOT SAY, 'TOMORROW,'
HIS NAME IS TODAY."

THANK YOU VERY MUCH.