

# **WHEN ABOVE AVERAGE ISN'T GOOD ENOUGH**

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**The one thing that you need if you want a high standard of living and to be a great power is a well-educated workforce.**

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**I** am happy to be here on this occasion when you are trying to put together plans to improve the schools of this state. There have been meetings like this across the country, and a good way to start them is with the same question that many preachers ask at the beginning of a sermon -- why are we here?

Maybe the best way to deal with that is to talk about the story of the Japanese man and the Frenchman and the American who went on a hunting expedition together. The first day they were successful. On the second day they were captured by a wild tribe, and they were all informed that they would be executed. However, they were told that before execution each could have one last wish granted. The Frenchman thought for a minute -- he did not have to think very long -- and said, "I would like one last time to be able to sing my national anthem." He was told that his wish would be granted. The Japanese man said, "Before being executed I would like one last time to give my famous speech on quality control," and he was told that his wish would be granted. The American thought and said, "And my wish is that I be executed before I have to listen to that speech on quality control yet again!"

The lesson in all of that, of course, is that we in the United States of America are beginning to realize that one of the reasons that our standard of living and per capita income have been declining and that we are facing deep trouble ahead is that we came late to learning the lesson that the Japanese learned after World War II.

I think that the Japanese during the 1930's probably were getting the same geography courses that I was taking. In those days, I learned that you couldn't be a great and wealthy and important power unless you had great natural re-

sources. You needed coal; you needed oil; you needed iron; and you needed to be fairly close to your markets. I guess that they read all the same geography books I did, and they decided to get the things they needed through World War II. Well, they lost. And at the end of the war they could have sat down and said, "We can never be a great power because we were never able to get those things."

Well, they did sit down, but instead of crying about the fact that they didn't have these resources, they asked themselves a question: "What is it that we *do* have that would enable us to become a great power?"

They found the answer. You can do without any of those resources -- you can get from elsewhere, and you may not need them at all. But the one thing that you need if you want a high standard of living and to be a great power in this world is a well-educated workforce. So that is what they decided to develop. And with that one insight, they were able to move ahead of not only where they were but also ahead of where we were and are.

**I** remember a few years ago visiting with H. Ross Perot in Texas shortly after the big education reform effort in that state got started. The first thing he asked me was, "I guess you are wondering why a businessman with a lot of money is spending all of his time in what I think is the dirtiest fight I have ever been in?" (That was the attempt to reform the schools.) He said, "Why would I be in something like this? I will tell you what I tell the business-

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men up and down this state. I tell them that the price of oil is not going to be high forever, and I tell them that the amount of oil we have here in Texas is very small by world standards. And when that runs out, if we don't have something else to take its place, we are going to go back to cotton picking. And the only sensible thing to do with that money while you have it is not to burn it or to spend it, but to put it into something which will guarantee that you will be able to maintain this state after that. And the only thing you can invest in that will guarantee that is education."

**I**n other countries they have national systems of education, so it would be their prime ministers or their presidents or their national parliaments that would be doing education reform. But we have a federal system of government, and therefore if we are to improve the education system, we are going to do it the way you are doing it here. We are going to do it in the states.

I would like to spend a few minutes chatting about just how tough your problem -- our problem, all across the country -- is. But first, let me take issue with one of your goals. Don't get me wrong: I think your goals are terrific. But one of them talks about West Virginia becoming above the national average in educational performance. Well, if the national average were great, being above the national average would be even better. But if you are a little oversized in the land of the pygmies you are still pretty short. And I am afraid that we have gone to a pygmy system of education throughout the United States. Being above our present national av-

erage in educational performance isn't good enough. Let me explain.

Earlier, Bob Chase properly pointed to some of the greatest, most shocking problems, the kids in greatest need. I am going to try to shock you a little more, but not by talking about our lowest-achieving students but about something we are proud of, and that is how well we are doing with those in the top half. You can't find that out from the standardized multiple-choice tests you're familiar with, the ones whose results get printed in the state and local newspapers. This nation spends more money and more time on those kinds of tests than any other country in the world, and yet we don't know what they are telling us. All you know is something like 57 percent of this district's or that state's students are above "average." Well, what does that mean? What does the average represent? What is a kid at the "average" able to do?

We play this national game, looking at those test numbers going up and down. Don't get me wrong: I am all for testing, because I think we have to know what we are getting for our education dollars and because the only way that we can improve what we are doing is to have some notion as to what works and what doesn't. You only get a notion of that if you keep finding out what is happening. So this is not an argument against testing. It is an argument against the kind of testing that doesn't give you any information at all. The testing system we have now is something like the Vietnam body count. I don't mind body counts if they really tell you whether you are winning the war. But I do mind them if they are totally irrelevant.

Fortunately, we do have a federally funded, national system of assessment

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that does give us some concrete and understandable information as to how well we are doing, and I would like to share a few of the results with you because they ought to convince us of something. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) has been around now for over 20 years, and a representative sample of youngsters all across the country are regularly checked out in reading, writing, mathematics, science, social studies, and in a number of other areas. These tests really tell you something. For instance, what percentage of the kids are totally illiterate? What percentage can read and write, but at a low level? And then there is another level that is usually called adequate -- they read and write, but not at too high a level. And then there is an advanced level, and, finally the highest -- those who can understand something like a *Wall Street Journal* editorial in some depth, write a good letter or good essay, or do a two-step mathematical problem. NAEP provides concrete examples of test questions for all these levels.

**N**ow let us see where we are as a country. What percentage of 17-year-old youngsters in this country are able to read an editorial or an article in a good newspaper and understand what it is about? What percentage is able to write a good letter or an essay? What percentage is able to do a two-step mathematical problem that goes something like this: Mary Jane deposited \$500 in a bank at 9 percent interest. How much money would she withdraw at the end of one year? Remember, the students who take the NAEP tests are 17-year-olds who are still in school;

the dropouts aren't taking the tests, they're gone. In other words, this assessment is of kids who are about to graduate high school. These are the most successful youngsters -- 55 percent of whom will go on to higher education.

Well, depending on the subject you are talking about -- reading, writing, mathematics, science -- the percentage of youngsters who are able to do those things is three, four, five and six percent. Far less than 10 percent of the youngsters who are about to graduate and are not dropping out are able to comprehend something that is worth reading or write a decent essay. And that suggests that the rest are not really able to handle college-level material.

So let's forget about writing a really good essay or letter. How about a kid at the age of 17 being able to write a one or two paragraph letter of job application to the manager of a supermarket in which he has to give one or two good reasons for why he's suited for the job. He can have some spelling errors, as long as you can make out the word. Some grammatical errors are okay, it doesn't have to be perfect. What percentage of youngsters who are about to graduate are able to write a one- or two-paragraph letter like that? The answer is 20 percent. Eighty percent cannot.

What does this tell us? If we compare ourselves with other countries, I guarantee that there is no other industrialized country in the world where you can get into college without performing at at least the level of that top NAEP group in the United States. You couldn't get into college in Canada, Japan, Germany, Australia, Great Britain, France, Netherlands, Belgium. You cannot get into college in those places if you cannot write an essay or a good

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letter. As a matter of fact, the exam to get into college in many of these countries is usually five days of essay writing on various academic subjects. You couldn't get into college in many of those countries without competence in algebra, geometry, and trigonometry, let alone that simple NAEP math question I gave you that is supposed to be high level. You couldn't get in -- I didn't say something harder, like couldn't graduate.

But a lot of people in the United States of America feel that their kids are getting a great education. Why? Because their kids -- about 55 percent of them -- are going to college. But the only reason many of their kids are going to college is because, with the exception of a few institutions, we don't have college standards in this country that are world class. It's not unreasonable to say that 95 percent of the kids who go to college in the United States would not be admitted to a college or university anywhere else in the industrial world. And that is the nature of the problem. That is why being "above average" in the United States isn't enough, not unless the average for the whole United States moves up.

**H**ave the kinds of education reform packages we've seen in the last few years been adequate to the task of making the great improvements we need?

Consider what Jack Bowsher, a former IBM Vice President who was in charge of internal education, said at an American Federation of Teachers council meeting about a year ago.

One of our members said, "Dr. Bowsher, can you tell us what you think about all of these educational reforms that are going on around the country?" And Bowsher said, "If I were in charge

of an IBM plant, and if 30 percent of the computers fell off the assembly line before they ever reached the end and we didn't know how to find them to put them back on, and if 95 percent of the computers that did reach the end of the assembly line did not work well, we would not want to run that assembly line an extra hour a day or an extra month a year. We would be trying to rethink what we are doing wrong, instead of doing the wrong thing an extra hour a day or an extra month a year or doing the wrong thing faster." And that's exactly the kind of rethinking we need to do in education.

**I** did not give you all of this information in order to make you think that once upon a time there were the good old days and that we have fallen from those good old days. Bill Bennett, former U.S. Secretary of Education, believed that. He wrote about what ideal schools should be like, and they were something like the schools that I used to go to in New York City. To parallel the statements of Bob, when I went to school, I never heard of drugs -- never heard of them. Families were intact. There was plenty of homework. If you didn't pass the exams you got left back. There was a traditional curriculum. There was no television in those days. Few kids in my neighborhood had any radios, either, during the depression. If I came home and criticized the teacher I got a beating, so the school had plenty of parental support. But what percentage of the kids in this country graduated from high school in 1940 when we had that wonderful system of family support and community sup-

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port and our schools were very traditional? Twenty percent graduated from high school in 1940. Eighty percent dropped out. The first year in which a majority of kids graduated high school in this country was 1953.

So I am not saying the schools are doing a worse job than they used to do. In fact, they're doing a better job. It is a lot like the automobile industry -- the cars we are producing in this country this year are a lot better than the cars we used to make in 1950. How come in 1950 our automobile industry was not in trouble when they were making worse cars and today, when we are making cars that are a lot better, we are in trouble? It is simple. There were not any Japanese cars in 1950. It is not that we have gotten worse, it is that others around us have done other things and have moved ahead. We now have competition. That is what has happened.

So there is no point in dumping on people and saying things have deteriorated, and we used to live in this wonderful world before teacher unions or television wrecked our schools. Remember my story of 1940, when 80 percent of the kids dropped out, and the other 20 percent represented the highest percentage of kids who had ever graduated from high school in our nation's history. Moreover, dropping out in those days was very different. You dropped into a different world, a world that could use every one of those kids as a productive worker. And I wouldn't be surprised if, when 20 percent of the kids graduated in 1940, there were articles written saying we are getting too many educated people that we won't be able to use.

So we must thoroughly rethink what we are doing, because school as we know it never worked for most kids. The schools that we know today were created in the middle ages. Maybe a father had 12 kids, he took a look at two of them who were always reading books and decided to send those two to school. School was a voluntary institution. It is like saying, "I am going to give that one piano lessons and that one art lessons and that one something else." It was never conceived of as an institution where everybody would have to go and make it.

**S**o how do we begin to rethink what we do in mass schooling? Let's start with learning. We all know that with anything you have to learn, whether it is how to type or to play some sport or something else, we all learn in different ways and over different periods of time. If we are allowed different ways and different time spans we can do pretty well. But if we are all asked to do it in the same way and in the same fixed amount of time as somebody else, we can't. But school is organized in such a way that everybody has to learn in the same way. Kids have to sit still and keep quiet for five or six hours a day and listen to a teacher talk. How many adults can sit still for five hours a day and listen to somebody talk without starting to get sexual fantasies after a while? It is very difficult, isn't it? So why do we expect all kids to learn passively and mostly through lectures and textbooks? Do we have to organize schooling this way? Once upon a time we had to because we didn't have any other ways of doing it. But what about videotapes? What about audio tapes? What about computers?

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What about older kids helping younger kids?

Think about all of the different ways you learned what you now know. Most of the things we know we did not learn in school. Most of the things we learned by leaning over to somebody next to us on the same job and saying, "Hey, am I getting this right?" Out there in the real world when you lean over and ask somebody a question and ask them to help you that is called intelligence and common sense. But in school if a kid leans over and talks to the kids next to him and asks him the same question that is called cheating. Why can't we have a more cooperative, team-based approach to learning?

We must fundamentally rethink what we are doing. We must have schools that are as different from the way they are now as the old-fashioned bank with people sitting there with a quill pen is different from computerized services banking. They must be as different as factories of yesterday are from those of today.

That is why the Japanese are beating us. They don't have the same type of old-fashioned factory which assumes that every worker is going to do one boring job and you are just hiring a person's hands, not his mind and not his soul. Hired hands doing the same thing over and over again. That worked for a long period of time. It doesn't work anymore. The main thing about Japanese management is that they treat workers as human beings, and they expect each worker to be watching the process to see what goes wrong and each worker to use his mind to figure out how to improve

the product. What the Japanese found out is what all of us know. If you have everybody in on trying to make something better, it is a heck of a lot better than having one person trying to figure it all out while everybody else is just following orders. We have to apply that same philosophy to our schools. And that is a big job.

I want to refer to what happened here in your teachers strike. It is quite clear that the teachers strike was not brought about by people coming in from New York or Washington or Los Angeles or Chicago and fanning the flames and telling the teachers to strike. As a matter of fact, if I had come into the state a couple of years ago and suggested to any of the teachers that, within a couple of years, they might be out on strike, they probably would have called a psychiatrist to have me examined. These individuals did not become teachers to go out on strike. They did not want to. Yet, it was something that you could see, you could feel, and you could smell -- anger, frustration, bitterness, a feeling of not being treated with respect and with dignity. It just blew up within them.

**T**here is a very special relationship that has to exist in communities between people and their teachers. That relationship, at least temporarily, has been broken here. You have to find a way of fixing it. You cannot fix schools without the people who are going to have to make them work. And not only do they have to work at what they always did, but they are the ones who are going to have to figure out

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the new ways of educating youngsters. Otherwise, all you are going to get are the same lousy results I was talking about: three, four, five, six percent of 17-year-olds able to read, write and do mathematical or scientific problems at NAEP's not-so-high highest level. Just think about it. If every teacher were to teach a little bit better, if you were to get somewhat better textbooks, a little better conditions -- if you were to do everything that you are doing now a little bit better -- how far do you think you are going to go toward meeting a world standard? We get three percent of our kids to be able to write a decent essay -- in Germany 28 percent are able to write a college-level essay. That is a big difference, and Japan is a lot higher. We are very, very far away from the standards of most modern, democratic, industrial nations.

It is the teachers who are going to have to bring about the changes we need to make that progress. They can only bring them about if they are on board. There are not any other teachers you are going to get. You even could lose the ones you have. Our whole country has the same problem. We used to have lots of good teachers because we had a depression in the 1930's. Then we got a lot of good teachers because women had no other place to go if they wanted a decent job. Then we got a lot of our teachers because there was a choice between fighting in Korea and then Vietnam or teaching school, and a lot of them chose the schools. Now this is the first time in American history where we have to compete for teachers on an open market. There is no more captive labor pool of teachers, and there is no more surplus of educated people. And so you have to treat teachers the

way you would treat people that you value in order to create the quality that you need in your workplace.

**I** would like to conclude by saying that you really need to develop a compact in this state, and I hope that this is the beginning of it. You need an agreement, not a one-shot answer. Sure, teachers need a raise, but you need more than one raise. You also really need a commitment to teachers, saying, "Here is where we are going to go in three, four, five years. We are going to go from where we are now, which is right near the bottom, and we are going to go up there. We mean it, and in exchange for that, we need you -- the teachers -- to play a different role in transforming our schools and really changing them. We don't just want to be above the national average but really to breakthrough the whole thing."

Don't just take your cues from other states -- just remember everybody else is doing it wrong. They are all a little below average or a little above average, and they are all bad compared to world standards. In doing something new you can break through this. You can do something that will make the rest of this country come and take a look at what you are doing. You can do it if you work on it together -- and you should.

**S**o let me conclude with a story. I'm reminded of it because I met Bob Chase a couple of weeks ago in Czechoslovakia. We were there to observe the new free elections. I had been there a couple of years ago working with Polish people who were underground and with some of the dissidents in Czechoslovakia. These coun-



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tries are in very bad shape. Poland, for example, needs a 4.5 percent economic growth rate for the next 50 years to reach the same standard of living as the rest of Europe has right now -- 4.5 percent for each of 50 years. And I'm reminded that when I came back after I was first there two years ago, I read a story in the *Wall Street Journal*, an interview with a Polish economist. When I first read it I thought it was a Polish joke. I realized that this Polish joke was just as, perhaps more, applicable to our national situation in education and to our situation here in West Virginia, as well. Let me share it with you.

The *Wall Street Journal* asked the Polish economist whether it was indeed possible to lift the Polish economy from a state of poverty into prosperity. The economist said, "Yes, there are basically two ways of doing it." The *Wall Street Journal* asked what they were. He said, "There is a natural way and a miraculous way. The natural way would be if a host of angels descended on Poland and lifted it into prosperity." The *Wall Street Journal* asked, "If that is the natural way, then what is the miraculous way?" And he said, "The miraculous way would be if the Poles did it themselves."

I want to suggest to you that we are not about to get a band of angels to improve the schools of this state, and it would indeed be a miracle if we did it ourselves, since we have not done it up to now. But we must count on that miracle, because nothing else will make it happen.