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SHANKER AND MITCHELL DEBATE EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

JOHN LINDSAY: Educators believe that the early years of a child's education, or for a period of time in life from two to three years of age, say, to six, are crucial to that child's total development. This is particularly an important matter for the children of a large number of mothers who work and many others whose children come from families that are too poor to afford private nursery schools.

So today on Face-Off, we're asking: should early childhood education be incorporated into the public schools? Albert Shanker says yes. He's the President of the American Federation of Teachers. Grace Mitchell says no. She's a pioneer in the field of early childhood education. She also happens to be the mother of Good Morning, America's own lawyer, F. Lee Bailey.

Mr. Shanker, why should public schools assume this responsibility?

ALBERT SHANKER: The public schools are there. You have a system of governments across the country; you have elected school boards; you've got large amounts of space at the present time because of the decline of birthrates, so you wouldn't have to construct new facilities. And I think perhaps most important of all, we've seen in the recent nursing home scandals and Medicaid scandals and other things that when you take a public function and turn it over to private business, you get an awful lot of corruption.

LINDSAY: What would you say to that, Grace?

GRACE MITCHELL: Well, I think that that's throwing the baby out with the bath water. We have 45,000 licensed centers, and if we're going to discontinue all of that and put all of those people out of work because the public schools are there, and because there is a surplus of teachers, we're building a whole new empire. We should use all the means available to improve on the system that we have, not start something new.

SHANKER: Well, the system that we have is not just a

private system. For instance, in San Francisco there's an excellent children's center. There are centers operated by public schools all across the country, and I would maintain that there are a substantial number of reports that have been issued by groups like the Child Welfare League of America which show that many of these private centers do not meet either federal or state standards, have makeshift facilities, they are--in case they go out of business they usually build facilities that can be converted to office or other types of space. And the situation that exists in private day care today is scandalous, and--

LINDSAY: Aren't the public schools already overburdened financially? How can they assume any more cost encumbrances?

SHANKER: Well, I think that there's no question that if we are to have a development in early childhood, that most of the money will come from bills like the Mondale-Brademas bill, the Family and Child Services Act, and I doubt very much that localities and states can take that burden right now. That's going to be true whether it develops privately or in the public sector.

LINDSAY: What would be your comment on that, Grace?

MITCHELL: Excuse me--I'm not sure exactly what point it is you want me to make. The--

LINDSAY: Well, the public schools are already broke in this country. They don't have any money, don't have any money. Al's answer to that was that they get it from the federal government.

MITCHELL: Frankly, I can't see how this can be anything but an astronomically expensive program. The ratios required in early childhood education are high necessarily, and if we are going to--if in this program salaries are going to be paid comparable to those of public school teachers, the 25 or 30 billion that I've heard quoted would be minimal.

LINDSAY: But if you don't get federal funds, you're both out the window, aren't you? You can't have the program of early childhood education in either private or public sector, true?

MITCHELL: If they don't--well, we are having it now. I will admit--I'll be the first to admit--that there are situations that need improvement, but I think the improvement of what exists would be far less expensive than putting it into the public schools.

LINDSAY: Do you agree with that?

SHANKER: See, if you don't pay decent and adequate

salaries, you have the situation which you know about very well in the outfits that you're associated with in Massachusetts, where you pay people a minimum wage and get a tremendous turnover. Every Monday, Wednesday and Friday, when that little child comes in, they find a different person there. That's the wrong thing to do to little children.

MITCHELL: You couldn't document that. Sorry, you couldn't document that. That is not true.

SHANKER: Well, the Child Welfare League has a report out on those facilities, and it's been out for a couple of years. You haven't bothered to go to court on it, so I assume that you don't find it--that you can grab a handle on that. But you know, you're just going to have to--you can't operate a permanent service for millions of children all across the country on a make-shift basis of people who are going to take the job for a week or two when they're really hard up and then are going to go find something else.

And the only way you're going to get a permanent staff is you're going--you just have to face that reality. Now, if the public schools can't afford to do it, how can you afford to do it and at the same time make a profit in addition to that?

MITCHELL: I think we won't get into the profit-making situation right now.

SHANKER: Well, isn't that what we're talking about when we talk about the private sector? Why does the private sector want it? Do they want it as a public service, or do they want it so that somebody can make some money on it?

LINDSAY: Go ahead and answer that.

MITCHELL: No, we want it as a public service, but we're not making any--the private sector, and it was my understanding that we were speaking not just of the private sector but of all existing facilities for little children in early childhood education, privately and publicly funded, which I understand you would like to have all come under the aegis of the public school system.

SHANKER: I want to make one thing clear. I don't think that all these facilities, all these services, ought to be offered in public schools. I think that some of them ought to be offered in homes. Some of them should be offered at work sites. But what I'm talking about is which governmental agency within each community should have the prime sponsorship, should be responsible for seeing to it that standards are maintained.

LINDSAY: Grace, you represent quite a group that feel

opposite to Al Shanker. Is part of your objection the fact that in the private sector there's less unionization and--

MITCHELL: Absolutely. I would hesitate to see the responsibility for little children carried into the public schools because I don't think that the public schools have demonstrated that they really can work cooperatively with parents in every case, and it is so essential--this communication with parents, this parent input, is so essential.

SHANKER: Well, you know, all across the country it's parents who elect school boards, and it's parents who vote school budgets up or down. Of course, in big cities there are different questions on that, but for the most part, the parents and the citizens of this country do have control over their public schools; whereas they have no control over private institutions. So that I think that that's just waving a flag. It's just not so. They've got a lot more control over their public schools than they do over large private corporations.

MITCHELL: I'll grant you the parents can vote for the school board, but believe me, once that has passed, if you are having a problem with your child in school, there's very, very little that you can do.

LINDSAY: That kind of wraps up our time. Thank you very much, Grace Mitchell; thank you, Al Shanker, for being with us today on Face-Off. We appreciate it.