

*The Education Future: High Stakes and  
The Basic School*

Glenn R. Bucher  
Executive Director  
The Boyer Center

*(Speech was given at the San Antonio Basic School Regional Conference (June 13, 2001) at Hardy Oaks Elementary School, San Antonio. May not be reproduced or quoted without permission.)*

## 1. Introduction

It is an honor to direct The Boyer Center and, in this role, to be with you here in San Antonio. Your work in the Basic Schools of this region is compelling and inspiring as your conference program here suggests. The national Basic School Network needs and indeed welcomes your expertise and involvement beyond the region.

The Boyer Center is an educational resource, research, service center focused on addressing critical issues, pre-K through baccalaureate. At the pre-K to 12 level, one of our important projects is working with the Basic School Network. My connecting here with your regional work is, therefore, most appropriate.

## 2. High Stakes

A few years into his tenure as Carnegie Foundation president, Ernie Boyer received the following note from one of his assistants:

My parents came from tiny villages at the end of nowhere in the heart of Russia, surrounded by incredible darkness and hostility. To them, education was light and hope. So it wasn't difficult for them after they got here to send me half-way across the country, though they had never been west of the Hudson, to the U. of Oklahoma with only \$12 in my pocket. I was scared to death but they weren't. I can't help thinking about how pleased they would have been to know that I'm involved in your quest to make education better. It's an honor.

I know many of you are thinking that anyone who goes to Oklahoma ought to be scared to death, but the point of my comment is different. The assistant's last name was Hochstein. The darkness and hostility in central Russia in the 20<sup>th</sup> century didn't pertain only to the indigenous culture, as the Holocaust made clear. Education was the light and hope.

A few years ago the chancellor of the University of St. Petersburg approached the president of Bard College in New York about establishing a liberal arts program at her university. A program like the critical reading/writing/thinking seminars for undergraduates at Bard. The chancellor is a nuclear physicist and the University of St. Petersburg specializes in science and technology. The program was intended for Russian students, not Americans studying abroad. Bard established the program which now has a substantial enrollment. One day the president asked the chancellor what motivated her to call for such a program there. After all, the liberal arts are about great ideas, famous texts, eternal verities, and developing one's ability to think and write and talk one's way through ideas. The chancellor replied that the liberal arts are needed because nothing less than the commitment of the next generation of Russian students to a more democratic Russia hangs in the balance.

Why, you ask, do I begin these reflections on such ponderous notes with the Russian stories: education as light and hope over against darkness and hostility; education as the bearer of democratic culture amidst rich (though not particularly democratic) traditions in Russia now in considerable disarray? Why? Because I think the stakes in our national education debate in this country now are of a similar order of magnitude as these ponderous first notes.

Here's how a group of American educators put it recently: "The decisions we make about education are really decisions about the kind of country we want to be; the sort of society in which we want to raise our children; the future we want them to have; and even—and perhaps especially—about the content of their character and the architecture of their souls." That sounds like Boyer but in fact these sentiments are the work of a group of contemporary educators (some from Texas!) with whom Ernie and some of us wouldn't necessarily always agree. If you were uneasy about education as light

and hope, or the bearer of democratic culture, then what about education in the U.S. and Russia as the architecture of character and soul and the role of educators like us. I said that the stakes are high!

I'm a relative newcomer to K-12 education, having spent my professional life to date in education but in the baccalaureate, graduate, and professional school worlds. So I'm impressionable. Indeed, my spouse, a professional educator at the elementary level for thirty years and now a school library director, wonders why it took me so long to get interested in *her* work! Nothing has been more gratifying in these first two years as Executive Director of The Boyer Center than my visits to Basic Schools, my involvement with the Basic School regional centers and the national network, and the creation of the national Best Practices Award program of the Boyer Center which has recognized a number of Basic Schools.

From Willard in Norfolk to Weber in Iowa City to Jackson-Keller here, your schools' schools are models of what happens when egalitarianism, dissatisfaction with the status quo, innovation, idealism, a common core of learning, ethics, socialization, consensus building, and advocacy come together. You may not recognize your school or its agenda in quite this way. That's because what I just said—egalitarianism through advocacy—is the way Ernie Boyer's brother, Paul, described Ernie's commitments in a biographical essay recently. It's a good description.

I don't want to claim that Basic Schools are the incarnation of Ernie himself, but the description is pertinent to your schools and to you (innovators, idealists, and so on). Some have said that the Basic School book is Boyer's summative work; in his final days where he brought all of his thinking on common learning, high school, college, and scholarship to bear on the elementary school. How proud he would be if he were here—or sitting on the floor in your school library reading to some kids—or

listening to all of you talk about the joys and challenges of school life that are apparent in the national debate and in the future of your schools.

I said that the educational stakes are high. Thank goodness, it's about time, and thanks in part to President Bush. You may not like all of his proposals but you can like his use of the bully pulpit for education. I don't just mean the debates on testing and standards, or vouchers and new forms of privatization in education. By high stakes, I also mean what Jonathan Kozol keeps calling the "educational apartheid" in the south Bronx and other places and of course the more overt forms of violence which we all know.

### 3. Four-Letter Words

I also mean the kind of high stakes agenda I heard recently from a wise, informed, tough-talking pediatrician with forty years of experience. Listen to these seven four-letter words which he said point to realities that are up for grabs in kids' lives today—realities which fall to all of you "surrogate parents"—I mean teachers—to address:

**Play:** He said it's necessary for good learning, not just a reward for good behavior;

**Diet:** Yes, you may deserve a break today, but not always at a fast-food restaurant where the chairs are bolted to the floor, thus insuring a clean plate rather than an adequate meal;

**Talk:** Education is not a 100-yard dash; it's a marathon which necessitates listening and talking;

**Care:** If it doesn't feel right, get the child out of it;

**Pray:** The research says that kids who are exposed to supportive faith communities have

higher grades and less trouble;

**Read:** Readers are kids who are read to;

**Love:** It needs to be authentic and unconditional; kids can spot a phony a mile off.

What makes these four-letter words so timely? There are factors, so said the pediatrician, in the lives of kids these days that aren't much good: *Churry* (All Grown Up and Nowhere to Go); *television*; the person who bought it should decide where it is located, when it is on and for what, and when to turn the damn thing off; and the *loss of parents*—the number one fear for half of the younger age population in this country now is losing a parent—and many have!

The bad news is that on some of the fundamental conditions for growing up, the stakes are far too high. The good news is that there are districts and schools and administrators and teachers—like you—who provide a full-service facility; a safety net; an extended family; a safe place; the right conditions for *ordinary resurrections*,<sup>®</sup> to use Kozol language, where the hard pieces of life are at least made softer and kids also learn to read and write and think.

Can you think of an institution, a place, a community in our culture that is more strategically located and addresses essential and critical human needs more effectively than the school? I can't. There is no more important an institution in our society than the school, especially the elementary school. The school requires the safety, the respect, the care, the resources, the funding, the commitment that its kids and its high calling deserve. Our students are the national treasure of this society and you are the *Angels at the door*<sup>®</sup> of this national treasure.

#### 4. Basic School: Successes and Challenges

In my first two years at the Boyer Center I have been fortunate to serve on the national Basic School Network board, its search committee for a new full-time executive director, and as the representative of the Center which now owns the copyright and authority of the Basic School book and its agenda. To my Basic School work, I have brought my instincts as a sociologist and educational administrator, not experience as an elementary school teacher. I know that from the sad gathering of educators at the Boyer home in Princeton a few days before Ernie's death in 1995, people like Alicia Thomas, Richard Middleton, Mary Ellen Bafumo, Victor Herrera, Celia Berger, Gus Jacob, Nancy McCullom, and many others have led the way as teachers have studied, adopted, and implemented the Basic School program now in close to 200 schools. I know something of the work of the regional centers, of the mentoring, of the many informal connections.

In addition to these successes in less than a decade, there are others about which you may not know:

- \$ The recent hiring of Dr. Teresa VanDover, principal of Shepherd Elementary School in Columbia, MO, as the new full-time executive director of the Basic School Network (she would be here except for another commitment);
- \$ The relocation of the network administrative offices to the School of Education , U. of Missouri (Columbia) where a supportive dean, Dick Andrews, is advocating the network agenda;
- \$ The additional financial support of the Kauffman Foundation in Kansas City to enhance Teresa's work.

- \$ The restructuring of the Board to ensure full national representation;
- \$ The support of NAESP and the interest of Bush administrative officers in the work of the Basic Schools.

From where I sit, the challenges of the Basic Schools and the network are at least the following:

- \$ Development and use of evaluative instruments so that the case for the success of the Basic School can in part be legitimized with reliable and compelling data;
- \$ Preparation and sharing of curriculum materials between schools;
- \$ Development of strategies for outreach and dissemination in order to engage other educators and schools;
- \$ Regional and national visibility;
- \$ Leadership at the local, regional and national level;
- \$ Funding

#### 5. Jackson-Keller: A Decade Later

Next year is the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Jackson-Keller as a Basic School. When I visited there in February, I urged Lola Folkes and a number of teachers to begin thinking about a major event to celebrate the ten years of success. Sponsor an education symposium, bring back the alums, have a party, plan for the next ten years at Jackson-Keller and in this region, and get the attention of the President (Crawford is only up the road) and Secretary Paige. Later today, a number of us are meeting about this matter. This is the kind of opportunity which can't be missed if we are to move the Basic School forward from an extended family to an organization, from local to national visibility, from one of the best kept secrets in education to a national presence. So folks, let's go for it!

We know what it means to implement the principles of curricular coherence, character education, community, and a learning climate in schools. Now we need to make certain that at the local, regional, and national levels, these convictions also shape our identity and presence in a *network of educators* committed to renewal. It is time to move from being an extended family to being a national organization with all the rights, privileges, and responsibilities thereunto!

#### 6. Angels at the Door

I began with two ponderous notes on education as *A*light and hope@ and as the *A*bearer of democratic culture.@ I also want to end on a ponderous note and I refer you to the two poems on the Boyer Center handout. William Blake, the eighteenth-century English poet, painter, engraver, is best known for his *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience*. Two of them, *Holy Thursday*, are about childrenCchildren who in innocence were the *A*flowers of London@but who, in the real life experience of that city, were the poor children housed in *A*charity schools@to keep them in their place, to assure a supply of domestic workers and servants, and to guarantee the upperclasses of their charity.

Blake=s eloquent imagery caught my eye as I prepared these remarks; not his philosophy and social satire which are important topics for another time. Two by two, says the poem, children entered St. Paul=s Cathedral annually on *Holy Thursday*Call 6,000 of themCfull of radiance and innocence with voices like a mighty wind to heaven raised. But for them, says the poet, in fact there is only misery and poverty and eternal winter. This was the imagery for Blake=s sharp attack on a wealthy country that allowed such wretchedness and contradictions.

The *Holy Thursday* poem of innocence (front side of the handout) provides an appropriate conclusion for my remarks: *A*Beneath them sit the aged men wise guardians of the poor; Then cherish

pity, lest you drive an angel from your door.@

As educators, classroom teachers, administrators, we are not in the pity business. But in the presence of all the complicated realities of kid=s experience today which we too much see, we are the Guardians of the poor@Cthe deprived in far too many ways. Our calling is not to keep them in that place, as did the London charity schools, but to free themCcall our kidsCfor a future of opportunity through the education we provide. In that role, we areCyou areCin Blake=s language, the Angels at the door.@

Be well, blessings and best wishes. Thank you!