

**What We Owe Our Children**  
**Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools National Conference**  
**The Hon. Lee H. Hamilton**  
**August 15, 2005**

Let me begin by acknowledging the outstanding work that is done by the Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools of the Department of Education. No office of government has a more important charge.

I want to applaud the interest you have, and the work you do, for safe and drug-free schools – you earn, and really deserve, the highest esteem and appreciation of all Americans.

You are all experts on education and school safety; I am not. In the panels and workshops of this conference, you will learn important lessons to take back to your schools, communities, and administrations.

What I hope to offer are some broader thoughts on a fundamental question: What do we owe our children?

My guess is that you have asked yourself this question many times. For many of you, it is the reason that you went into your line of work.

There are, of course, many answers: a decent opportunity to become the best they can become; a strong economy; a secure country; a reasonable safety net; an open society. Yet education must be a top priority.

I agree with – and I suspect you would, too – the long time Senator from Rhode Island, Claiborne Pell, who said: “The strength of the United States is not the gold at Fort Knox or the weapons of mass destruction that we have, but the sum total of the education and the character of our people.”

Of course, over the years, people have disagreed about how important America’s schools are to the education and character of our people. Mark Twain once said, “I have never let my schooling interfere with my education.”

I do not agree with Twain. What happens in our schools is vital. This afternoon, I would like to focus on three elements of schooling that we owe our children:

- 1) a safe and secure learning environment;
- 2) an opportunity, through education and participation, to make this great country even better – or, as we call it, civic education;
- and 3) character education that stresses the simple virtues, with special

emphasis on the virtues needed to make this big, diverse country work better: dialogue, tolerance and respect.

### **A Safe and Secure Learning Environment**

What can be more essential in education than offering our children a safe and secure learning environment? Without that environment, education is impossible.

Safeguarding schools is a tough job. Some years ago when I was a member of Congress, I would hold regular conferences for educators on the key issues of the day. I'm struck by how much some of those issues have changed.

Then, much of the focus was on federal aid to education, grant formulas, paperwork requirements, equal opportunity for all children, teacher training, or new special and vocational education programs. Certainly, those issues are still with us today.

But schools are now faced with gang violence, school shootings, bomb threats, and drug abuse – in Indiana, for instance, we face serious problems with methamphetamines in our schools.

Events beyond school walls – notably, the threat of terrorism – have also contributed to a sense of insecurity among all of us. I am struck by the pervasive sense of vulnerability that surrounds us in the post-9/11 environment, and the deep concern we feel for personal safety, especially for our children. Indeed, that is why you are here.

Many people have approached the 9/11 Commissioners and asked us what they can do to make their homes and communities more secure. We always answer that public awareness and involvement are absolutely essential.

On a general level, Americans must educate themselves. We must identify the enemy we face; we must acquaint ourselves with the world of radical Islam; and we must prepare to live in the new world coming – a world of greater risk; a world where technology opens doors of opportunity, just as it heightens the damage that can be caused by a small cell of terrorists.

On a more specific level, Americans must be alert closer to home – and be prepared to act. Look around and see if your own communities are prepared:

- Is your local hospital equipped to handle an anthrax attack?
- Are your emergency responders prepared to respond?
- Is the chemical plant on the edge of town secure?

Your efforts will do more than protect you from terrorism – answering these questions will bring complementary benefits, like bolstering the public health system, or

better securing dangerous infrastructure.

For schools, the issue goes beyond protecting our children from danger – though that is the top priority. Very few schools will experience terrorism as Stuyvesant High School in lower Manhattan experienced it – with students evacuated, and unable to return to their building for a month.

Yet all schools will experience terrorism indirectly – when 9/11 took place, our young people identified, in an impressively compassionate way, with those who were victims. And they found out about 9/11, learned about it, and responded to it, at school.

Ask yourself:

- How will children be notified if they are at school during a major terrorist attack?
- What kind of support can the school provide to children who are confused, upset, or simply curious?
- How will you educate children about the complex phenomenon of terrorism?
- How can our schools stress the importance of tolerance and respect for different peoples – particularly Arabs and Muslims – in the wake of a terrorist attack?

Some of these questions apply to the other crises that schools might face – a school shooting, a natural disaster in the area, or even a bomb threat.

Terrorism and these other problems are a part of our world. We would all prefer that the business of education be limited to reading, writing and arithmetic. But education must also consider the threatening and upsetting forces that children confront as they grow up – drugs, violence, and tragedy.

Careful preparation by you and your peers is key. We must:

- educate ourselves and our children about these challenges;
- take all necessary measures to prevent them from occurring and to protect our children;
- and prepare ourselves to respond to the dangers that do come.

No one in this room would rest easy if an attack or incident occurred in your community or on your watch. Surely we owe to our children schools that are safe and secure, even in an uncertain world.

And that is why the information you share and learn here is so vital. It is my

thought that each of you must feel a measure of satisfaction as you work to make the schools in your community safer, more secure, and more capable of responding to whatever scenarios may come.

## **Civic Education**

But we owe our children more than that. We owe them an opportunity to make this great country even greater – to make it “a more perfect union.”

So the second element of schooling that I want to focus on is civic education. You and I work on civic education because we are concerned about it.

David McCullough, the historian, recently said, “Our very freedom depends on education, and we are failing our children in not providing that education.”

McCullough was talking about our failure to educate American children adequately about this country’s history. And I agree. Today, too many Americans lack a basic understanding of our representative democracy. With that lack of understanding comes a lack of appreciation and a lack of engagement.

I was a part of a group recently that met with students to answer the question: What does it mean to be an American? Some of the answers we got were rather disappointing:

- “Being an American is no big deal.”
- “There’s nothing all that special about being an American.”
- “Everybody I know is American, so it doesn’t really matter much.”

These statements are not universal – but they are not uncommon, and they are worrisome. I know of young people in Indiana who – when asked about the meaning of Memorial Day – respond by saying that it is the day that pools are opened, or the occasion for the Indianapolis 500 auto race.

When we fail to educate our children about our history and our representative democracy, we miss an opportunity to enrich our children’s lives. We also miss an opportunity to enrich our country through their involvement.

Our responsibility is to do what the ancient Greeks pledged at the birthplace of democracy: we must “transmit this country greater, stronger, prouder, and more beautiful than it was transmitted to us.”

How do we give our young people today what Lincoln called “a new birth of freedom”? We must instill in them a deep and abiding understanding and appreciation of our heritage.

We need to know, and teach, the robust American story: the full, truthful, unvarnished account of our successes, our failures, our ideals, our flaws, our progress, and our heroes.

We need to know, and teach, the techniques of healthy democracy: participation, consensus building, compromise, civility, and rational discourse.

We need to know, and teach, the responsibilities of citizenship: staying informed, volunteering, speaking out, asking questions, writing letters, signing petitions, joining organizations, working in ways small and large to improve our neighborhoods and communities, and to enrich the quality of life for all citizens.

What happens if we fail to do this? People vote less. They pay less attention to their communities and their civic responsibility. They do not strengthen their churches, improve their schools and libraries, and enhance their hospitals. Participation falls, and people are isolated from one another. But more than that, we deny our children an important opportunity, because civic education helps people reach their full potential:

- Civic education can make a young person feel a part of something larger than themselves by connecting them to the endless line of splendor of American democracy;

- Civic education can foster positive social interaction with friends and co-believers, within schools and communities;

- Civic education can challenge a young person to take a stand, speak in public, ask a question, develop an idea, and learn about what they believe and to become the best they can be;

- and civic education is the surest antidote to cynicism and apathy because it shows a young person that you can, indeed, make a difference.

Justice Brandeis once said: “The only title in our democracy superior to that of President is the title of citizen.”

We must instill within our children that same appreciation: by teaching them what it means to be an American citizen, and by teaching them how to participate as citizens. We owe that much to our children, and we owe it to our country.

### **Character Education**

But we owe our children even more – more than a secure environment to learn in; more than a sense of obligation and an opportunity to participate in making the community and the country better. I want to discuss a third thing we owe our children: character education.

Indeed, character education is connected to my first two points:

-- we need a safe and secure environment to allow the character of our young people to grow;

-- and we need to develop the character of our young people by teaching them to be good citizens.

To put it simply, we need to be deeply concerned, not just about the education of our children in general, but about the character of the young people who are emerging from American schools. I agree with the philosopher, Herbert Spencer, who said: "Education has for its object the formation of character."

The Founding Fathers were quite clear on which particular quality of character they thought most important: that quality was virtue. It is an old-fashioned word that is not much in vogue at the moment; yet, in the Founders view, the vitality of our democracy depended upon virtue. They did not step back from defining that word – "virtue – with specificity: integrity, industry and responsibility.

Listen to the words of James Madison: "I go on this great republican principle: that the people will have virtue and intelligence to select men of virtue and wisdom. If there be not, we are in a wretched situation. To suppose that any form of government will secure liberty or happiness without any virtue in the people is a chimerical idea."

Madison and the other Founders believed that in a political sense the people must be informed, alert, intelligent, and uncorrupted. They also needed to possess virtue.

That is why character education is necessary for what Thomas Jefferson liked to refer to as "the dialogue of democracy": the countless exchanges that take place – from school halls to the halls of government, from PTA meetings to town-hall meetings – that allow us to resolve our differences peacefully and productively in a huge and complicated country, with huge and complicated problems.

The dialogue of democracy should be conducted at all times with civility and with constructive advice and debate. I worry that the dialogue of democracy is on dangerous ground in this country. Look at how poisonous, how toxic, how absent of virtue the public forum is today:

-- Look at Congress, where too often extreme partisanship and the art of winning are honored far above the obligation to extend mutual respect to all, and the art of governing;

-- Look at the media, where talk radio and television talk shows prize raised voices and open disdain for the other side;

-- Look at the bestseller lists, where a steady stream of books provides attacks and counter-attacks from the fringes of the political debate;

-- Look at our culture, where vulgarity and combativeness seem to have eclipsed civility and consensus building.

Sometimes I wonder whether we, as a Nation, are still capable of talking with one another constructively and with civility about the issues that confront us.

The 21<sup>st</sup> century is going to bring with it tough challenges. Terrorism. Nuclear proliferation. Declining energy resources. A changing economy. Competition from China and India. Environmental crises. Immigration. New diseases. Difficult medical and ethical questions.

If our young people are going to be successful in confronting those challenges, we need to teach them how to get along together in an open and democratic society. We need to teach:

-- mutual respect, so that results of lasting consequence can be achieved;

-- tolerance, so that differences are valued instead of feared;

-- deliberation and consultation, so that open debate can lead us to consensus rather than conflict;

-- empathy, so that we can put ourselves in the place of others;

-- civility, so that we can disagree and still find common ground;

-- humility, so that we can always keep in mind that we might be wrong about something;

-- and resolve, so that setbacks can be overcome, and challenges surmounted.

This is a task for more than schools alone – it is a task for the families and communities in which our children are raised. All of us must resolve to do better – not just in teaching students, but in setting examples as well.

Character education, after all, strengthens our communities. By focusing on the character of our children, we diminish the likelihood of drug abuse and violence, and we raise effective citizens and leaders.

We owe our children our best efforts to instill within them the traits of character that allow them to lift up this huge and diverse country. We owe it to our children to set an example that allows them to succeed together, rather splitting apart.

## **Conclusion**

An ancient Greek philosopher once observed that: “Only the educated are free.”  
That is why we are here today:

-- If our children do not feel safe and secure in their schools, then they are not free to learn;

-- If our children do not learn about our country and its government, then they will not be able to effectively appreciate or participate in our representative democracy;

-- If our children are not shown the attributes of character necessary to succeed in a democratic society, then our democracy cannot flourish.

What do we owe our children? We owe them the ability to be free: the security to learn, the opportunity to contribute, and the character to thrive.

You accept the responsibility of providing this freedom to our children. Fortunately, there are many more Americans like you – but not enough. That is why you must cherish, defend, and work to meet the great promise of America, a promise unparalleled in human history – that with each generation there lies the opportunity to be part of a new birth of freedom.

PAGE

PAGE 1