1964: EDUCATION'S TIME FOR ACTION*

An Address by
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In our meetings this morning and again this afternoon, we are observing a new season for United States education and, hopefully, the start of a new era.

Looking back to 1963, we may reflect that never have the possibilities been brighter for the house of education. In its first session, the 88th Congress passed more significant educational measures than perhaps any Congress in history. Looking ahead in 1964, we have the opportunity to act without delay in using these new ways and means available to us...and the opportunity to focus intensive public attention on the still unfinished business of education.

In our meetings here, we are gathered at the direction of President Johnson to shorten the lead time between the passage of acts in Washington and specific action in cities and States across the land. The President, in his first address to the Nation, set a high priority on improving the quality and broadening the opportunity for education in America. In this

task, as in others before the country, he urged that now is the time for action. That is why we are here today.

Our deliberations are turned to three major legislative acts passed last year by the Congress—for higher education, for vocational education, and for the education of the Nation's handicapped and retarded children. These acts, as the President declared, are "new landmarks in educational progress." They are also a financial landmark in national educational support. Our measure of success, however, is not the Federal authorization of $3 billion, as massive as it is. The real measure is how wisely and well we employ the funds that are appropriated.

We would woefully deceive ourselves if we regarded these measures, however well we administer them, as more than steps along a difficult road. There is still important unfinished business in our Nation's schools.

I, for one, see no limitation to the potential of education. I see it as the principal lever to lift and move our society forward. If this makes me a salesman of education, I have no apologies to offer. I am delighted to promote this product whenever and wherever I can.
Now, in 1964, I suggest that it is time for us to make a fresh start...time to deal with the total needs of American education...time to proceed without further delay. It will not be enough for us to plan for the expansion of our universities and colleges—we will fail if our efforts stop here. Nor will it be enough to modernize and expand our facilities for vocational education—again, we will miss our ultimate chance if we do this alone.

If we mean to succeed, we must go to the heart of American education and here we will find two great tasks awaiting us. One is an old problem. We have recognized it for more than a generation. The second is rather new, even for us, and it might seem somewhat revolutionary for the public generally. But revolutions should not be too alarming in this country, which began with one.

Our first task, the first essential of our unfinished business, has to do with the state of American elementary and secondary schools. Here are the neglected but basic foundations upon which every educational program depends. If our Nation is to achieve the intellectual, moral and economic greatness we seek, we must improve the quality of these fundamental
educational resources. To do so may not, by itself, insure the happy destiny we seek as a Nation. But to fail in this effort will assuredly destine our Nation to fail in meeting its ideals.

From the halls of Congress to the gatherings of educators, these woes of basic education are already an old story. Here the fine edge of debate has long since been dulled by almost endless repetition. The needle has nearly worn out the grooves of the record. And yet the faint and gloomy melody lingers, a scratched mockery of our democratic precepts.

Through neglect of our elementary and secondary schools, we have inherited a chronic shortage of qualified teachers and of suitable classrooms. Indeed, there is only one essential to education that is not in short supply— and that is the students who enroll each year in growing numbers and with such large and often frustrated expectations.

These shortages of teachers and classrooms need not exist. If what we say in 1964 is clearly and firmly said, perhaps it may not need to be said again in 1965, or again and again through the remaining years of the decade.
Clearly, we must improve the quality of teaching, for our schools cannot be better than the teachers we employ. And we can hardly expect excellent teaching until we bring teacher salaries within shouting distance of salaries paid to other professional groups.

Across the Nation during 1962-63, the average annual salary of public school teachers was about $6,000—and in many depressed areas, the averages were under $3,000. Such salaries are from 50 to 100 percent lower than those paid to other professionals such as accountants and chemists, auditors and lawyers. And yet to these under-valued and under-paid teachers we entrust our children.

Obviously we must make teacher salaries competitive with other professions if we hope to raise the level of education. We must increase beginning salaries and maximum salaries if we mean to encourage able young people to become teachers. This is no mere statistical problem for the Federal Government and its Office of Education, or for the harried bookkeepers in your local boards of education. It is a problem for every responsible American family.
Our next shortage is in classrooms and here, too, we have neglected to balance our educational budget. An inventory of the Nation's school facilities made recently tells us that about one-sixth of all American classrooms were constructed before 1920, and that more than 154,000 are built of combustible materials, and that 37,000 of the classrooms now in use are in such make-shift quarters as quonset huts and abandoned military barracks.

For more than 10 million American school children today, classrooms are seriously overcrowded, with 30 or more pupils in every room. To reduce this average to 30 or less will require more than 66,000 new classrooms--aside from the construction of schoolrooms needed to meet present hazards of health and safety. These additions to our national school plant, however, will merely remedy the deficiencies of 1964. They will not prepare us for the growing enrollments of public schoolchildren, an increase from some 40 million today to 45 million by the end of this decade.

Our need for better paid teachers and more classrooms can afford no further semesters of neglect. But if we--all of us--make our voices heard in the country, I hope we can meet
a year hence, in 1965, and be able to say that we are making significant progress in solving these problems which we have recognized and talked about for so many years.

Even more important than meeting these chronic and evident flaws in American education is coming to grips with acute areas of trouble which recent understanding and awareness are bringing to our attention. And here I am talking about our second great task. Today we are accustomed to seeing a world division between the developed and privileged nations and the under-developed and under-privileged. We have learned that this gap between the poor and the well-off is intolerable if our world is to achieve stability and peace. But we have not yet accepted the fact that this division also characterizes our own country. Here at home we are also dangerously divided between the haves and the have-nots.

The United States, on one hand, is an affluent society, shaped by a complex and expanding economy. More scientists are alive and working today than in the whole history of mankind. The mind of man is now unlocking the secrets of nature not merely on this third planet from the sun, but throughout our universe. We have come to an era in history in which almost every boundary of knowledge is yielding to the trained and exploring mind.
But in this day of unlimited possibility, we are also out-distancing millions of our fellow Americans, consigning them in growing numbers to a shadowland of ignorance and deprivation. We are failing dismally to bring to them an equality of educational opportunity, or even a hope for equality. I place this failure squarely before the house of education because it is here that the revolution in thinking and attitude is long overdue.

We must make good on the concept that no child within our society is either unteachable or unreachable...that whenever a child appears at the doors of our schools he presents a direct challenge to us and to all our abilities. These are not new words or ideas, of course--but to carry them to reality would be revolutionary.

I say this fully aware that children in our city slums and in our depressed rural areas are hard to teach; that their family and neighborhood environments are generally inhospitable to learning; that they bring to our schools, already beset with problems, a whole new range of serious problems. Their parents are frequently unemployed. Their homes are usually shabby and
often dangerous, without space for a school child's desk for the labors of homework. Their language abilities are often very limited.

At a time when education and skills are indispensable to economic and social achievement, these children become high school "dropouts" because they find neither success nor stimulus in our elementary and secondary schools. Moreover, while their numbers are large and increasing, our efforts to improve their lot remain largely ineffective.

One reason for our ineffectiveness with these children, I believe, is our habit of applying vague and general labels to them. We call them "culturally deprived" and "disadvantaged," "socially underprivileged" and "handicapped."

These sweeping terms of reference, however well they may describe social and economic backgrounds, are of little use in solving the problem of educating children as we find them. Such labels merely blur our vision by offering excuses for educational neglect and for the substandard schools to which these children are all too often consigned. They lead many people, including some educators, to say that these children are not merely difficult to teach, but that they are virtually unteachable.
A second reason for our neglect of the substandard schools is our failure to develop and use meaningful comparative criteria of achievement. We need to measure the achievement of our schools on a broad basis, from city to city and State to State. We need to bring these criteria into the open if we hope to succeed in raising the quality of education where the needs are greatest. Without such criteria, our combined efforts—Federal, State and local—will continue to be uncertain and unsure.

And third is our failure to apply effectively to slum schools the knowledge we already have. The educational community has been exploring specific means for improvement—a higher quality of teaching in these schools; educational materials designed for use in these classrooms; particular attention to the needs of deprived children for excellent teaching. There is no need for these children to remain uneducated. But if we mean to succeed, we must begin to employ our knowledge through concerted funds and purpose.

Clearly, this effort will call for a new degree of candor on the part of the Nation's school systems. Today there are
few cities where the facts have been made available. And without facts, there is little prospect of finding solutions.

One city, however, has recently and commendably removed the cloak of silence from this area of acute need. The New York City Board of Education has boldly opened the records of achievement in Central Harlem schools to public scrutiny. Among those who have examined the record is a study group called Harlem Youth Opportunities Unlimited. The results of its study, which will be shortly published, reveal a picture of intolerable educational neglect which can be duplicated in most of our largest cities.

Consider, for example, these findings in the elementary and junior high schools of Central Harlem:

--In the third grade, Central Harlem pupils are fully one year behind the achievement levels of other New York City pupils. By the sixth grade they have fallen nearly two years behind; by the eighth grade they are about two and one-half years behind.

--Approximately three-fourths of the pupils in the Central Harlem junior high schools are performing below grade level in both Reading Comprehension and Word Knowledge. In no
junior high school is the proportion of under-achievers less than 70 percent—and in some schools it is more than 80 percent.

--The pattern of test and I.Q. scores shows that education in Central Harlem is marked by massive educational deterioration. The longer pupils are in school, the greater is the proportion who fail to meet established and comparative norms of academic competence. By the eighth grade, the gross damage has been done and acceptable grade levels thereafter are never attained.

From its extensive study of test results, the Harlem organization adds fresh coals to the growing controversy over substandard schools. It counters one popular view, advanced by those who emphasize the "cultural disadvantages" of students, that the problem of education in the slums is a problem of social environment outside the schools. When children of poverty go to school, it is held, they are already so handicapped that no school system can bring them up to standards.

The Harlem youth study, however, places far less stress on the economic and social environment of the child and far more on the educational environment he finds in the school itself.
In Central Harlem, the study observes, school teachers are the least experienced of any in the New York public school system. And they are particularly inexperienced in coping with the particular problems of their students.

If the weakest teachers are sent to teach the most deprived, how can one hope for better educational achievement?

The education of slum children today confronts this Nation with a clear and present emergency. It is a challenge and a deep moral responsibility now unmet by the cities or States or Federal Government. It calls for action at all levels.

For educators, the question is not what children bring to the school from the outside. It is what the school provides from the inside. For these children, for all Americans who "live on the outskirts of hope," as President Johnson said last week, we must help to "replace their despair with opportunity."

If our schools are weak from a poverty of teachers and classrooms, they are specifically weak for the children who require the best of education and get the worst of our efforts.

If we fail these children who need education most, where shall we take pride for success?