An Education Agenda for the Next President

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The posters and flyers for this talk indicate that the title is “Why We Educate.” That is indeed the title I thought appropriate when Richard Williams invited me to make this presentation several months ago. Perhaps that’s because I had just finished editing two volumes for the National Society for the Study of Education (NSSE) titled “Why Do We Educate?” and the topic was very much on my mind. So I set out to write this address on the theme of why we educate and quickly ran into a problem. I got bored.

I’m not sure why. I may simply have exhausted the subject, or myself, after working on the NSSE yearbooks for the past four years. Or it could be the result of struggling with this topic, in one form or another, for nearly the entire 40 years of my professional career. Whatever the reason, such cognitive abilities as I could muster were insufficient to turn the sow’s ear I was fashioning at the keyboard into a silk purse. As you might imagine, this left me more than a little frightened by the prospect of coming here without very much to say.

I cast about for something different to talk about—something that would offer a measure of excitement for you and for me, something that would become the basis for a good conversation about education. But my muse appeared to have taken flight. Each time I sat down to write, either nothing came or what did appear was awful. Just as I began to wonder whether my career was over in more ways than simply being retired, the muse returned. She appeared right in the middle of the presidential debates. “Yo, Gary,” she called, “why don’t you tell them what you would do to reform education if you were elected president?” Hmm, I thought, that suggestion has some appeal.

I returned to the computer, and, sure enough, the words began to flow. Even better, I was not bored. Instead, I was scared. The ideas spilling out were quite different from the systems of schooling now in place. Some might call them radical. And now I wondered whether this was fit material for public presentation, inasmuch as the ideas appearing on the screen would most likely ensure that I would not stand a chance of ever being elected president. Yet the more I wrote, the more it became clear to me that educational reform depends on some serious surgery
on the educational institutions currently in place. As these notions tumbled forth, I recalled a favorite verse from the book *Archy and Mehitabel* by Don Marquis. Archy, as some of you may know, is a cockroach who fancies himself a poet as he hops from typewriter key to typewriter key, pecking out his verses. Mehitabel is an alley cat who is Archy’s companion and occasional antagonist. One of Archy’s poems is about a conversation with a moth who was trying to get inside a lightbulb and, as Archy says, “fry himself on the wires.” Archy asked the moth why he does this, and the moth’s reply goes like this:

> we get bored with the routine
> and crave beauty
> and excitement
> fire is beautiful
> and we know that if we get
> too close it will kill us
> but what does that matter
> it is better to be happy
> for a moment
> and be burned up with beauty
> than to live a long time
> and be bored all the while
> so we wad all our life up
> into one little roll
> and then we shoot the roll
> that is what life is for
> it is better to be a part of beauty
> for one instant and then cease to
> exist than to exist forever
> and never be a part of beauty

Though I doubt that what I have to say today comes anywhere near being “burned up with beauty,” I am emboldened by the lesson of the moth. So I plan to wad up those 40-plus years in education into a roll and shoot that roll. In your view, I may fry myself on the wires, but, maybe, in the words of the moth, “that is what life is for.” So what follows is my sense of a proper education agenda for a U.S. president, with annotations that are rooted in my sense of why we educate.

As president, my first act pertaining to education would be to convene a yearlong White House conference on the education of children, youth, and adults in America. The conference would begin by assembling in the nation’s capital the very best minds on the topic for a week-long exchange on issues and problems of contemporary education and a design for education two decades hence. During the remainder of the year, three week-long assemblies would be held at various retreat sites, with a final three-day event in Washington, D.C., to present the findings and recommendations of the conference.
Why should the new president begin with a White House conference instead of proposing legislation? Because, whether I ran as Republican or Democrat, I would be cautious about the place of the federal government in the education of children and youth. My reason for this caution is more or less Jeffersonian: Decisions that have a great impact on the everyday lives of citizens ought to be made as close to these citizens as possible. Furthermore, these citizens ought to have relatively easy access to the processes of decision making that affect them so directly. I fear the alienation and sense of anomie that so often accompany shifts of power to higher and higher levels of a system of governance. As power and authority shift to the upper levels of a system, those who occupy the lower levels often feel much less of a stake in the enterprise. This loss of ownership breeds a disinterest in the affairs of governing and, quite often, an unwillingness to take responsibility for the consequences of decision making.

Thus I believe that the default condition for the democratic governance of educational matters is to vest with the people as much authority for governance as is feasible. This default condition is expressed in the reserved powers clause of the Tenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution and is enshrined in the widely known notion of local control of the schools. Some of you hearing me say this may already be guessing my political persuasion, perhaps speculating that my party affiliation might tend more to shades of red than blue. If, perchance, such a thought occurred to you, you may wish to suspend judgment for just a bit.

Given my views on government, why then convene a major conference at the federal level? The answer is that it is, first, a convenient way to bring many of the very best minds in the nation, perhaps the world, to a reconsideration of an educational system that was designed in an age that is no longer with us. It is a way to focus national attention on such critical issues as the achievement gap, equality of opportunity, the forming of a national character, and the role of schooling in the formation of the well-lived life. Second, a central purpose of the conference is to provide guidance, policy advice, and proposed model legislation to all branches and departments of government, whether federal, state, or local. And, finally, it is a way for me to present my agenda to a listening audience.

Note the move here. My agenda is not immediately embodied in legislative proposals but rather in a conversation with the best minds that my staff could find. Why proceed in this fashion? Because if I believe that most decisions pertaining to the education of children, youth, and adults should be made as close as possible to where this education takes place, I cannot simply convert my agenda into legislation. Absent great moral imperative, as was the case for desegregation, my commitment is to ensure that as much
authority as possible for educational policy is vested to the several states and their localities. But I still have what all presidents have: a voice that speaks with the authority of the office, a voice that can initiate and engage a national conversation on the subject. It is with this voice that I address the initial assembly of the conference, setting forth my views while assuring all in attendance that whatever I say should be treated as grist for their respective mills, as notions that encourage the exercise of their imagination and their vision without limits. With this caveat, here is what I would ask them to consider.

First, I would argue for a greater investment in the welfare of unborn children and infants that includes guaranteed health care for unborn children and infants that covers nutrition and prevention as well as illness and disease. This investment should also include a television channel devoted to good parenting, with a mandate that this channel be a centerpiece in the public service commitment of all broadcast and cable channels.

Parents are both the primary caregivers and first educators of children. Yet these are roles for which many are ill prepared. Fortunately, physicians, midwives, and hospitals are now giving more attention to preparing parents for their new roles, but there is much to be learned. Different insights and understandings are needed at different times in the life cycle of the child—hence the need for a television channel that instructs parents on the various phases of care and education from pregnancy to young adult.

Second, I would press for a reconsideration of when compulsory schooling begins and ends. It is my hope that the conference would embrace the notion of starting compulsory schooling no later than age three and ending it no later than the current grade 10. As many of you know, the evidence continues to mount that the last two years of high school are unproductive periods for many students, while at the same time we have abundant evidence of the value to be gained by early education. An Associated Press story that appeared in our local paper just a few days ago carried this headline: “US Kids Less Likely Than Parents to Graduate High School” (Arizona Daily Star, 24 October 2008, A3).

If you spend much time in high schools, especially urban high schools, this datum will come as no surprise. Absent the extracurricular and cocurricular activities, high school is perceived by an increasingly large number of students as an experience strongly disconnected from their lives. The increase in examination requirements for promotion and graduation, along with the often mindless cramming that occurs in preparation for these examinations, adds to the disconnect between schools and their students. As will be noted in a moment, I believe there are better ways to engage the minds and talents of 16- and 17-year-olds.
Along with this change in the age of children in public schooling should come a reconsideration of the school day and calendar. Once again we have evidence indicating that early start times for middle and high schools is utterly out of whack with the biological clocks that dictate the sleep rhythms of most teenagers. Starting and ending the school day at a later time could make a considerable difference in productivity of learning. The same is true for ending the long summer hiatus, which research shows has negative effects on retention of material learned in the prior grade. The school calendar should be adjusted to shorten the summer break and distribute vacation periods more evenly across the year.

Third, in place of high school grades 11 and 12, there should be a requirement of 18 to 30 months of national service to be completed in the public sector, either military or civilian. Although often discussed, we have done little to bring this idea to fruition, save for such programs as the Peace Corps and VISTA. This national service requirement should continue the education of youth in ways that reflect the application of things learned in school as well as the cultivation of new skills and understandings. The military currently fulfills much of this requirement with its enormous range of education and training programs for both enlisted and officer ranks. The Peace Corps and VISTA also can serve as models for continuing the education of youth in a fashion different from what is typical of middle and high school settings.

Fourth, every school should be a public school, regardless of the source of funding. Use of the word public here is not the same as is typically the case, where public generally means tax supported. Here the term points to a particular kind of geopolitical space where citizens assemble to do the business of governance, whether that be the governing of neighborhood and community affairs; local, state, and national government; or the governance of associations, businesses, and volunteer agencies. It is a space where ideological interests and personal preferences are subordinated to the common good. A public school is a school that has as one of its core missions assisting in the formation of a public by preparing students for their roles and responsibilities as citizens. Such preparation involves the cultivation of attentive listening, respect for differences that define us as a people, the encouragement of critical and analytic skills, a regard for the role of fact and evidence in the forming of arguments, and a mutual caring for the welfare of one another.

Hence, no matter whether the school is fully tax supported and governed by an elected board, a private school, a charter or voucher school, or a religious school, it must also be a public school, insofar as one of its primary missions is preparing students for thoughtful, productive participation in the public square. To meet
such a requirement, any school with an avowed ideological purpose must clearly separate that purpose from its equally important public purpose. It must explore and cultivate conceptions of the common good, wherein all students—regardless of faith, heritage, language, or creed—are made aware of what we the people, as a nation and as a species, must hold in common if we are to prosper and flourish.

Fifth, each state should be required to expend approximately 10 percent of its school budget in support of experimental forms of schooling—with such schools to have clearly stated purposes and objectives as well as fully developed programs of evaluation. We are blessed with rapidly expanding bodies of knowledge, remarkable advances in health care, amazing feats of technology, and ever-deepening understandings of mind and brain. How might these advances be incorporated into our systems of schooling in the U.S.? The answer lies in fostering limited experiments in cutting-edge schooling, where students are assured an excellent education while participating in new ways of coming to understand their world and their places in it. These schools are not simply different, as might be the case for a magnet or charter school. Rather, the innovations they attempt are rooted in well-developed theory accompanied by bodies of evidence and executed according to a plan that looks to eventual replication on a larger scale.

Sixth, an expanded and enriched curriculum should be created that attends as carefully to social studies, civics, and the performing arts as it does to language, science, and mathematics. This curriculum would be specifically designed to capitalize on this very simple but much ignored concept: as human beings, we are different—not just in matters of race, language, and religion but also in what interests us and what does not, what we are handy at and what we are not, and what we care about and what we do not. This variation on Howard Gardner’s notion of multiple intelligences must become far more obvious in the setting of the school than is currently the case.

To argue for forms of schooling that recognize our individual differences and seek to nurture them does not permit us to diminish attention to that which we must have in common: proficiency in reading, writing, and arithmetic; in rhetoric, the arts, and the social and physical sciences; and in the understandings and skills that make us exemplary citizens. But it does mean that no one of the multiple subject areas will dominate the curriculum or be presented as more worthy or more important to success than other subjects. Moreover, students will be encouraged to explore the entire range of human achievements as well as be allowed to focus their studies in one or more of these areas after a careful sampling of the broad range.
Seventh, there should be options for advanced vocational and technical schooling following the period of national service. Such schooling would serve as an alternative to what we now know as the four-year collegiate program leading to a baccalaureate degree. It should be subsidized so that enrollment would be available at modest levels of tuition. It should include a liberal arts education component as well as disciplinary studies pertinent to the chosen vocation. This schooling may be considered terminal, insofar as it would be sufficient to adequately sustain the student in a productive career, or it could serve as the basis for more advanced studies in colleges and universities as we now know them.

The reference here is to something more than the trade schools of yesterday—it is instead to high-level technical institutes and to professional training that can be accomplished without a four-year baccalaureate program. In addition to preparation for careers likely to arise due to advances in technology and engineering, these advanced institutes might assume preparation for some of the professional roles currently housed in four-year and graduate collegiate settings.

Eighth, we should undertake an extended consideration of education from the student’s perspective. This consideration examines all the educational opportunities open to children and young adults from Scouting to church activities, from weekend athletic programs to parks and recreation programs, from television to the Internet, from elective reading to travel, from play in early childhood to part-time jobs in the teen years. For far too long we have viewed the education of the young as what takes place in schools while ignoring the enormous array of educative influences and opportunities provided by other venues. These other venues should be studied for how their educational value is currently realized in the life of the child and how this value might be extended and improved.

Examples are abundant. Scouting, church, and other youth activities make extensive contributions to the education of the young, as do parks and recreation programs, weekend athletic programs, and travel. The kids meals at fast-food restaurants and the backs of cereal boxes often contain facts and concepts that contribute to the education of the young. Today’s toys and games hold incredible opportunities for developing number skills, awareness of spatial relations, analytic abilities, and refined attitudes of fair play, cooperation, and competition. The educational devices based on microchips that are available at any Toys“R”Us or other children’s store promise an educational potential once available only though sustained instruction in school settings.

The central concept behind looking at education from the student’s perspective is to gain a sense of all the formal, informal, and nonformal educational
opportunities open to the young and to grasp the child’s education not simply as an expression of time in school but as a participation in this extensive range of opportunities for education. This notion is carried forward in national service, which is designed both to enhance the youngster’s commitment to the commonweal and continue his or her education through instruction provided by military and civilian agencies. It also opens consideration of employer training and education programs and how these might be more productively linked to what occurs in schools, national service, and technical institute or four-year collegiate settings.

Thus far my advocacy has been limited to the structural and organizational aspects of schooling and other means of educating children and youth. What about teachers and their activities in classrooms? Are there specific reforms that should be undertaken here—reforms unlikely to be noticed if our inquiry were restricted solely to structural and organizational considerations? I believe there are, and I propose that the conference attend particularly to three. They are (1) evaluating the teacher’s work environment, (2) focusing on teaching that cultivates both the intellectual competence and moral sensibilities of students, and (3) reallocating the responsibility for learning so that it is shared between teacher and student.

Before addressing these three reforms specifically, it is helpful to create a bit of context. Much of the talk about teaching in these times pertains to either professionalizing the occupation or allowing easier entry into it. In addition, there is talk about schools of education and whether they should be lauded or cursed—or whether they should exist at all. I will not address these issues directly—not because I am concerned about offending an audience consisting primarily of educators but because, for the most part, this talk about skilling or deskilling the profession and expanding or closing schools of education does not, as philosophers like to say, “wash any windows.” That is, it does not help us see the problems any more clearly nor focus more sharply on their solutions. Instead, we should attend to more substantive issues that, once addressed, place the idle chatter about professionalizing teaching and the disposition of schools of education in far better perspective.

I turn, then, to the first of the reforms of teaching: the teacher’s work environment. If you have not taught in school, it can be difficult to grasp the challenges of the work environment. Having to plan ahead to use the telephone or the bathroom is among the more minor, yet not unimportant inconveniences. Many of us are fortunate enough to work in settings where we can pick up the phone when we remember there is someone we need to call or go to the restroom when nature calls. In most cases, classroom teachers cannot do that. But these are
inconveniences they willingly trade for other more intangible and gratifying possibilities—possibilities that can quickly be eroded by poor administrators, clueless parents, school boards in conflict, negative media attention, and marginally valid standardized examinations that drive curriculum, instruction, school reputation, and pay raises.

Seldom do we ask ourselves what kind of work environment is most likely to attract the very teachers we say we need and want for our children. Instead, many of the actions we take erode the quality of that environment, from a failure to govern schools well to shaping state and national policies that institutionalize mistrust of teachers and what they do. The massive testing program engendered by No Child Left Behind is a case in point. In a morally conscientious effort to identify and fix schools and teachers who were truly failing their students, the nation inaugurated a testing program that is having unintended consequences that far outweigh the modest good this program might do. These unintended consequences have brought about a huge decrement in satisfaction for those teachers who find joy in their work, who delight in developing instruction uniquely tailored to their students, and who seek fulfillment in realizing the outcomes of their own carefully developed plans and lessons.

It is fascinating that in the midst of the extraordinary economic downturn we are currently experiencing, we are reminded that trust is at the core of economic prosperity—a point made compellingly by Frances Fukuyama. His publishers summarize Fukuyama’s contention that social trust

is the unspoken, unwritten bond between fellow citizens that facilitates transactions, empowers individual creativity, and justifies collective action. In the global struggle for economic predominance that is now upon us . . . the social capital represented by trust will be as important as physical capital. [Book advertisement description for Francis Fukuyama, Trust: The Social Virtues and the Creation of Prosperity (New York City: Free Press, 1995), at http://books.simonandschuster.com/TRUST/ Francis-Fukuyama/9780684825250]

I would argue that trust is as important in education as it is in economics, yet so many contemporary policy initiatives in education are corrosive of trust and thereby diminish the quality of the teacher's working environment.

It would, I believe, be a great leap forward if we treated our teachers as we want them to treat their students—with dignity, with trust, with adequate resources, with allocations of time proportional to requested outcomes, and with a range of evaluative devices that permit recognition of differences in talent and specialty.

The second teaching reform is a renewed and refurbished focus on the
Gary D Fenstermacher

teacher’s preparation for and increased ability in cultivating the intellectual competence and moral sensibilities of students. On the notion of intellectual competence, it is vital to note that acquisition and retention of facts is not a sufficient condition for intellectual competence, though it is obviously a necessary condition. Sufficiency in matters intellectual involves far more than the mere possession of knowledge. It is also possession of a deep respect for the role of evidence and its place in establishing truth or falsity; it is possession of critical and analytical skills that enable facts and ideas to be poked at, reconsidered, and appraised; it is possession of healthy measures of skepticism, curiosity, and wonder—attitudes that allow us to make progress in our inquiries and stand in awe of the accomplishments, shortcomings, and potential of our species. Many of these characteristics are difficult to fathom with quickly scored and easily aggregated tests, yet they are bedrock for the knowledge and skill that we should acquire as part of our learning.

Moral sensibilities are much ignored in our talk about education, except when speaking of such things as character education or the founding of special schools espousing the ideological convictions of parents whose offspring attend these schools. When I speak of moral sensibilities, I mean those core human virtues so beautifully captured in a recent work by André Comte-Sponville. In A Small Treatise on the Great Virtues, he explores 18 different virtues, ranging from the foundational virtue of politeness through gentleness and prudence to the grander notions of justice and love. His argument is that these virtues constitute both “the essence and excellence of human-kind” (dust jacket summary, André Comte-Sponville, A Small Treatise on the Great Virtues: The Uses of Philosophy in Everyday Life, trans. Catherine Temerson [New York: Metropolitan Books, 2001]). Some of these virtues are more simply, though less elegantly, captured in Robert Fulghum’s All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten. Fulghum writes that what he learned in kindergarten is this:

- Share everything.
- Play fair.
- Don’t hit people.
- Put things back where you found them.
- Clean up your own mess.
- Don’t take things that aren’t yours.
- Say you’re sorry when you hurt somebody.
- Wash your hands before you eat.
- Flush.
- Warm cookies and cold milk are good for you.
- Live a balanced life—learn some and think some and draw and paint and sing and dance and play and work every day some.
- Take a nap every afternoon.
- When you go out into the world, watch out for traffic, hold hands, and stick together.
Moral sensibilities are variously communicated in classrooms, ranging from didactic and homiletic talk by teachers to their students to norms and values contained in lessons and readings to the general conduct of the teacher as he or she goes about the work of the classroom. The nurturing of moral sensibilities is a critical aspect of teaching, yet few beginning teachers are helped to understand their role here and the various ways they might engage in moral development. Even fewer, perhaps, understand the vital tension between indoctrination and interrogation and the central place this dichotomy plays in high-level instruction. It is worth the time it takes to linger on this point for just a bit.

Indoctrination is an important aspect in the instruction of the young, for it is typically how we look after their health, safety, and social needs. It occurs when we issue such imperatives as “Don’t touch the hot stove!” or “Don’t go anywhere with someone you do not know” or, in the case of Fulghum’s kindergarten rules, “Share everything. Play fair. Don’t hit people. Say you’re sorry.” These imperatives for the young are normally communicated without reason or explanation because obedience is far more important at this age than understanding. But as the child matures, we are obliged to shift away from the imposition of rules and beliefs to their interrogation. That is, we have both a moral and an intellectual duty to assist the learner to question rules and beliefs, to subject them to examination and critique, and to subsequently determine for himself or herself whether to adopt these rules and beliefs as one’s own or to modify or discard them.

An example may help here. A few years ago I observed a fifth-grade teacher covering a unit on the environment. She taught the lessons with zeal, discussing greenhouse gases, global warming, recycling, and energy sources. Given the passion with which the lessons were presented, there was little doubt that the teacher was a committed environmentalist—what some might call a “tree hugger.” What was missing from the lessons was the possibility of alternative explanations for many environmental phenomena, as well as a consideration of the pros and cons of different energy sources and an acknowledgment of the harm that sometimes results from the unintended consequences of doing good.

On hearing this example you may think that fifth grade is too early for such scrutiny. If that contention occurs to you, then you are right in the middle of the tension between indoctrination and interrogation. Should we be more concerned that the 11-year-old is acquiring a respect for the environment by pressing upon him or her a particular view of environmental issues or should we be starting, at this
age, to prepare the child to interrogate claims, beliefs, and arguments in an effort to begin the extended process of making up his or her own mind? This tension goes to the very heart of the cultivation of intellectual competence and moral sensibilities, yet if you were to ask a teacher emerging from training, or one in the early years of instruction, to discuss this tension in relation to her or her subject matter, I’ll wager that the primary response is a blank stare. We have a great deal of work to do here in teacher training, in staff development, and in the education of parents about the role of education in questioning what may well be cherished beliefs and traditions.

The third concern and final teaching reform deals with the allocation of responsibility for learning. In these times, when the student does not learn what is taught in school, it is often the teachers who are believed to be responsible. Seldom do we hear that responsibility should also be apportioned to the students. Yet we know that students enter the school with radically different backgrounds, interests, and preparation. Somehow teachers are expected to take this potpourri—which may also be made even more diverse by vast differences in physical and mental abilities—and instruct in such a manner that no child is left behind. And teachers are expected to do this in a social and cultural setting where less fortunate students are typically viewed as the victims of birth or circumstance. As such, these students are thought to be relatively helpless in the school setting, which in turn leads us to cast the teacher as rescuer. Those students later found to be “unsaved” by their teachers are no longer viewed so much as victims of birth and circumstance as victims of the schools and their teachers.

This state of affairs arises for a number of reasons. One of these is what I’ll call our “moon shot” mentality: With enough desire, ingenuity, and brains, we can do anything we set out to do. Thus if teachers showed the necessary traits, they could succeed with all their students. A second reason is that schools and teachers are easy targets. They have historically been the primary social institution for the education of the young, and they have accepted that role with a fair degree of relish. But they are also a relatively weak social institution in that they have little political or economic clout. So when things go poorly for the schools, they are caught between a tradition of accepting responsibility for education of the young and a lack of power to explain away their faults by showing how outside factors may bear a greater share of the responsibility.

From the point of view of the student, it can be difficult to assign responsibility for a failure to learn because he or she has so little choice in what, when, where, and how to engage in studies covered in school. The curriculum is increasingly mandated, as is the format for engag-
ing with it. Lacking a chance to make informed choices, to give or withhold consent, and to exhibit much variation in how to approach one’s studies, it should come as no surprise that the student does not feel a sense of responsibility for much of what takes place in school. Consider your own experience: What is your level of commitment to, or willingness to accept responsibility for, things over which you have no say? Is it that difficult to imagine why the student would feel the same?

If learner and teacher are jointly responsible for learning, then failure to learn on the part of the student is not, simply and totally, the fault of poor teaching. If it is a shared responsibility, then there are a number of things we can do to assure this will result in higher levels of satisfaction for teachers and students and higher levels of learning on the part of students.

First, from the early grades through the later ones, focus on study skills. But note that in order to do this, there has to be something worthwhile and interesting to study. The notion here is to engage the learner in thoughtful, fairly complex, challenging material and simultaneously teach the student how to engage with this material.

A second approach is to offer more opportunities for the student to decide what to study and how to do that—permitting him or her to make a commitment to the task of learning and take responsibility for the decisions made.

A third approach is to develop expectations for parent involvement in the student’s learning and where there is no or little parent involvement offer a remedy other than simply doubling or tripling the burden faced by the school. Herein lies a reason for some of the structural reforms described earlier: to provide more programmatic options for students, thereby allowing them to make choices previously unavailable to them. With the provision of choices, we can allocate responsibility, as we do when as parents we say, “You made that decision, now you must accept the consequences for it.”

Well, there you have it—my presidential agenda for education. Recall that it includes eight aspects of the structure of education and three aspects for the activities of teaching. The eight structural aspects are:

1. A greater investment in the welfare of unborn children and infants.
2. A reconsideration of when compulsory schooling begins and ends, with consideration for beginning at age three and ending at what is now grade 10.
3. A requirement for 18 to 30 months of national service, to be completed in the public sector, either military or civilian, and to occur during that time that the student would otherwise be in grades 11 and 12.
4. A requirement that every school should be a public school, regardless of the source of funding.
5. A stipulation that each state be required to expend approximately 10 percent of its school budget in support of experimental forms of schooling.

6. An expanded and enriched curriculum that attends as carefully to social studies, civics, and the performing arts as it does to language, science, and mathematics.

7. Options for advanced vocational and technical schooling following the period of national service.

8. An extended consideration of education from the student’s perspective, encompassing all formal, nonformal, and informal opportunities to advance the education of children and youth.

The three aspects of teaching that I proposed for serious study and change are the following:

1. Improving the teacher’s work environment.
2. Preparing teachers to foster both the intellectual competence and moral sensibilities of students.
3. Apportioning responsibility for learning to both teacher and student.

I hope these proposals are sufficiently provocative to launch an exciting and productive White House conference. As I was framing these ideas, I was reminded of an idea voiced by a good friend and fellow philosopher of education, Thomas Green. He was commenting on a rather famous little book written three-quarters of a century ago by George S. Counts. The provocative title of that work is *Dare the School Build a New Social Order?* Tom Green thought that in this day and age we should turn the question around, asking the now more vital question “Dare the social order build a new school?” I believe that is precisely the question before us, whether we are sufficiently daring and courageous as a nation and a society to redesign education so that it not only meets and exceeds the needs of the times ahead but also helps to shape those times in ways that advance and ennoble humankind.

As we ponder this question, it would be well to keep in mind another Tom Green notion about the perils of policy making in a technological age. He writes:

*There is . . . a profound and tenuous balance that must be secured in our institutions. They must be malleable enough so that good and skillful persons who dream of what is not yet, but might be so, can be set free to decide and to act. But our institutions must also be sufficiently resistant to change so that those whose conscience is merely technical and limited to skills of managing the political apparatus, but who are rootless in their souls, may not do irreparable harm. Rootedness and vision ultimately [are] what [provide] both the only salvation there is of those institutions and the only fixed point for the guidance of persons engaged in public policy.*

[Thomas F. Green, *The Formation of Conscience*]
Rootedness and vision—what remarkable desiderata they are, especially for sustaining the education of our young. I wonder, though, whether in their zealous pursuit we might just “fry ourselves on the wires.” But as the moth would say, “That’s what life is for.”