

1984 Distinguished Teacher of the Year

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Thank you.

Good morning, students and colleagues. I am proud to receive this award and I am proud to be at a university that honors teaching. I am proud not only as a teacher, but also as a member of a department of exceptional student education within a college of education, where we work as teachers of teachers.

This annual award recognizes the importance of teaching. And in this year, 1984, I find that recognition particularly valuable. Because in this year teaching – and teachers – are being assaulted. This assault is not new, and it is not isolated. Yet aside from the possibility of nuclear war, the assault against education threatens our future as nothing else.

Because in our culture we tend to separate ideas and practices, the *idea* of education is for many separate from the *practice* of education. As a result, citizens can favor quality education as an idea and at the same time oppose activities, and social changes, necessary for quality education to materialize. To complicate matters further, not everyone agrees what “quality education” means.

One way to approach the definition of quality education would be to imagine its results. To achieve the results of quality education, one would need an educational system offering equal opportunity to all, regardless of conditions of birth. By this I mean equal opportunity and an appropriate education for every child no matter the affluence of parents, and no matter the physical or familial challenge that might cause a child to have exceptional educational needs. If this were achieved, one result would be a society with a level of individual competence far above what we now have in the United States. Other results would range from reduced crime and social tension to enhanced national technological capabilities.

The system of educational quality that I am discussing is, in fact, the system our government has called for by law. But it doesn't exist. In fact, in 1984 we may be farther

from our goal than at any time in the last 10 years. Why is our educational system not meeting its stated goals?

Blame usually is directed at four groups:

First, the students.

Second, the parents.

Third, the teachers.

Fourth, the teachers of the teachers.

Students are said to be watching too much TV, reading too few books. We hear they spend too many hours absorbed in cars and fashionable commodities, and in the part-time jobs required to pay for them.

Parents, we're told, aren't home as they used to be. They – and here comes the attack on the mothers – now work outside the home as never before. They don't read to their kids as they should. They don't seem to be around as much as our parents were for adequate discipline and guidance.

Teachers, it's said, are not competent and need to be tested so the bad ones will be rooted out. Teachers don't do what we expect them to do. And it's thought they don't want to improve.

We hear that teachers of teachers may be the worst of all. Their students tend to perform at lower-than-university-average levels. And they're attacked for their students' performance.

All told, these attacks demonstrate a spreading epidemic in the United States, blaming the victim. Yet neither students, nor parents, nor teachers, nor teachers of teachers designed their situations. Nor do they particularly profit from them.

What must be changed is the fact that a system that ensures quality education, as I have defined it, is denied. That students are more enamored of Camaros than of Camus is not something they have chosen, but the work of a market society that channels desire in the direction of goods for sale. The cultivation of a desire for commodities has enormous social costs, and the schools are not equipped to compensate. Students drop out of high school in staggering numbers in order to play and work – some 28 percent of ninth graders nationally, some 36 percent in Florida.

Parents are not immune to these market pressures, of course. But it's not only rising appetites for goods and services – and the rising installment payments that follow – that lead to fewer hours at home with children. Nor is it just the rising divorce rate (up to about one marriage of two). Nor the rising cost of living. What's involved may be more fundamental. It's a combination of women's freedom to work in the job market and the relatively static level of men's willingness to stay at home. Fifty-six percent of all mothers in America work. Over 10 percent of all mothers are single parents. And in about 8 percent of American families, the wife is the major earner. At the same time, the continued underpayment of women for their work – including teaching – forces them to be away for more hours to attempt to earn the same money as their male counterparts.

So for reasons aside from the conscientiousness of individual parents, family life in America has profoundly changed. And yet, for the most part, the schools have not changed with them. With a calendar organized according to life on the farm, the schools have not reformed to cope with the new realities of family life. School boards and legislators still too often view schools as if they were operating in the 1950s, and so when the schools fail, the officials declare that the fault must be with those who teach. Yet, politicians' rhetoric to the contrary, we can never go back to the school and family situations of the past – even if that were desirable.

We can hope that the advertisers will be muzzled when it comes to manipulating children. And we can hope that men will increasingly share the joys and responsibilities for children and work at home. Yet until schools are provided with the resources to fill the gaps left by parental absences, to compete effectively for the interest of students with General Motors and MTV, they cannot provide quality education. And in 1984 the federal share of school budgets is at its lowest point in 20 years, at 6.4 percent nationally.

While the schools are not being funded to cope as institutions with the new American family, the public battering of teachers continues apace. A sure way to get space in the newspapers, it seems, is to attack the work of teachers. If you find that the best students in the universities tend to shun teaching, propose that those already in the profession be tested for competencies not always directly related to their work. Say you want RESULTS. But if you want media attention don't spend too much time explaining the complexities of measurement and evaluation. In short, separate the idea of quality education from the practice.

For the practice of teaching is an extraordinarily complicated activity. It is hard work. It requires unusual attention and patience and caring. Learning, that wonderful activity, is not simply measured, although we can make sure that basic material and skills are

mastered in a timely manner – and continue the most difficult sort of teaching when they are not. Only those prepared and committed should be allowed to teach. But when school boards find themselves with classrooms of kids needing a teacher, all they can do is hire the most qualified they can find. And as teaching pay is low, the applicant pool lately is often quite thin.

Until relatively recently, teaching was one of the few professional fields that welcomed women. Bright women who wanted to work – and didn't want to become nurses – were channeled by parents and counselors into the schools. Fortunately for the prospects of individual women, that sort of discrimination has eased. But as a result teaching has had increasingly to compete with other fields for bright candidates. And teaching ends up short. The National Education Association reports that the average starting pay for a teaching graduate in June 1984 was \$14,780 a year. Marketing, for example, paid \$17,500.

In a number of states, legislators have been willing to raise teacher salaries a percent or two more than inflation and in return have demanded staggering jumps in performance. In Florida, we've had important curricular reforms, but Governor Graham's active efforts to raise teacher salaries much more than inflation have largely failed. Business leaders in the state say they don't want to pay for substantial raises, so they come out for quality education as an idea.

But implementing ideas costs money. And even friends of quality educational practice don't understand just how much would be involved. For example, there's Jack Gordon, the Miami Beach state senator who has done much for schools in this state. Aside from the Gordon Rule reforms in the universities, which force us to require our new, first-year students to write 6,000 words in four different courses, the senator's work has led to enhancement of writing in high schools. High school writing teachers are supposed to require a paper a week from their students. In return, their teaching load has been CUT to a maximum of 100 students in four courses. But if each paper is to receive a close evaluation, how long beyond the student contact hours will it take for the average teacher to grade 100 papers? Twenty-five hours? Fifty hours?

And how will the schools recruit teachers for this work at something like \$15,000 a year?

At Florida Atlantic, this year we saw substantial reform in the College of Education. Hard-nosed consultants and faculty agreed that, among other improvements, education professors here need to produce more research, in line with the quite reasonable belief that informed, stimulating teaching depends upon an active research program.

Yet attempts at higher education reform, especially in teacher education, will be unproductive if fiscal and human resources are not provided to implement them. Here at Florida Atlantic University, it continues that no one teaches more than the teachers of teachers, and few receive less in the way of research resources. And none of the reforms speaks to the need for higher teacher salaries in order to attract better candidates for the teaching profession.

Although added funding doesn't necessarily lead to quality education, in my own department we have found that added resources can make a substantial difference in producing quality teachers. In the late 1970s, we were designated as a Center of Excellence, and we have received special Quality Improvement Program funds. Being an island of comparative affluence in an institution strapped for funds has created morale problems. But we have been able to hire outstanding faculty, to conduct research and to travel to national conferences where we exchanged information with our colleagues. With special assistantships for graduate students, we have been able to attract students with above average preparation and dedication. With the wherewithal to put together grant proposals, we have been able to conduct special programs for area teachers and children that both helped them and enhanced our research.

Support can come in other forms. Senator Ernest Hollings of South Carolina has suggested a new federal grant program to raise teacher salaries \$5,000 in districts where teacher standards are enforced. Doing so in four years would begin to improve radically the academic quality of our new teachers and raise the morale of those already in the field.

For the cost of what President Reagan has proposed spending on the military in the first two weeks of 1988, Hollings' goal could be accomplished in every school district in the United States.

Unfortunately, I do not see such general improvements on the national or state agendas. We seem to be trapped in a time when private power regulates public expenditures to an unusual degree.

While handouts of public subsidies to private capital accelerate in Washington and corporate profits soar, investment in education declines. Student aid is cut, research funds are slashed.

In Florida, legislators respond primarily to the short-sighted interests of citizens and business people who pay among the lowest state taxes in the country yet yelp at the

thought of paying even a bit more so that Floridians as a whole might better read and write.

Students of Florida Atlantic University, what I want most to say to return the honor you have given me is this: none of this will change unless we work to make it change.

In a sense, the educational system in this country is working. It provides the elite and their children with quality teaching. It provides America's businesses with the limited technical support they are willing to subsidize. For the most part, despite all the complaints, it helps to legitimize the state. Almost as a byproduct, it seems, it educates millions of people. Dedicated and caring people continue their efforts despite the assaults and the institutional impoverishment. I have been privileged to work with many of them here, particularly my colleagues active in the United Faculty of Florida.

Sometimes American education reminds me of the cities and neighborhoods that once flourished, that once MADE America, but now hurt, denied access to capital that seeks higher return elsewhere. But sometimes, too, I'm reminded that the very existence of public education in this country is the result of hard work by millions of people in this nation's cities and towns. Over the last century, they worked to tax their resources so that young people might learn. Over the last 50 years, they worked to make sure schools would have no barriers based on race or handicap.

We need to continue their struggle, as citizens and as teachers. We need to turn our ideas into practice. That is how I see my work here and also the work of many others. And for acknowledging that by this award, I am grateful to you.