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## Mackinac Center Address, delivered on September 7, 2000

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# **Mackinac Center Address**

Thursday, September 7, 2000

To examine the cost in terms of dollars is a valid exercise when applied to any educational program or institution. Professor Greene analyzes the cost of remedial education and concludes that its cost for both high school graduates and dropouts in community colleges, universities and business is too high, and that cost demonstrates the failure of the public schools to teach the basic skills to adequate numbers of their students for success in college or in the workplace. He provides another study added to many that point out the weaknesses of the public school system to accomplish its mission. For me the concern he expresses dramatically entered the public consciousness with the report, "A Nation At Risk" more than two decades ago.

I am neither professionally prepared, nor do I feel inclined to debate his statistical analysis. With many qualifications I am however persuaded, as he is, that many public schools must change their ways. I, therefore, will turn to his suggestions for things to be done on Page 19 of his report and comment. He suggests that public school districts and private schools should implement a rigorous test that students must pass before graduating from high school. I agree wholeheartedly.

For years I have heard that tests don't reflect true knowledge, that tests are discriminatory, that teachers will teach only to the test, that the tests don't examine what they should. After listening and sometimes sympathetically understanding I still observe that too many students can't read, write, or calculate. Too many can't think analytically. I heard recently that over a third of our citizens 18 to 25 years of age could not identify the United States on a world map, and that Abraham Lincoln was virtually unknown to them. I am ready for the test before the diploma is granted. Perhaps I am ready for tests at different levels of K-12 education requiring a student to pass before moving on to the next level. The question is what do we do with those who fail the test? At least remedial education would begin where it should.

Dr. Greene's second suggestion is that public school districts and private schools should shoulder at least some of the financial burden of addressing the lack of basic skills among their graduates. My question is, "Would such a financial requirement have the effect of forcing a district to take the steps necessary for improvement?" For some it might. I fear that some of the districts with the worst record have a tradition of bureaucratic incompetency, a politicized school board, featherbedding, and a self-serving teachers union. This kind of penalty isn't a big enough stick for them to feel the blow.

If passing a test is required for a student to move from the school district to college or to the workplace, with proper qualifications, and the district is required to be available to those who fail to assist them when they are ready to try again, then they will shoulder some of the cost. The remedial work will be where it should be.

Dr. Greene's third suggestion allows families to choose the elementary and secondary schools their children attend. There is no doubt in my mind that our higher education system is the most successful in the world because of competition. High school graduates as a cohort are not as well educated as they are in many countries. Our college graduates have caught up and surpassed those of other countries in many fields. I have had public school administrators indicate to me that charter schools in their districts have helped them make positive changes because of the competition. My hope is that the public school districts would charter their own schools or allow universities to charter them in a mutual cooperation and that the charter school movement could be used to improve, diversify, and bring about some useful specialization to K-12 education. For the most part, this has not happened though there are successful exceptions. I have never understood why school boards and teachers' unions didn't take this opportunity. It demonstrates that long-standing structures can become rigid as they sometimes lose sight of their mission. When they are a protected monopoly they have even less motivations to change for the better.

The school districts served the nation well, almost without exceptions, for generations. Now there are too many districts that are not doing the job. My observation is that charter schools do not threaten districts where an overwhelming majority of parents are satisfied. Competition is no threat to those who can compete. Public schools are the hallmark of our nation. Those who are concerned about their effectiveness in certain places have successfully brought into being the charter school experiment. It provides limited competition, and it is a public school movement. Our law also allows parental choices and movement within a school district, another limited competition. I think many public school teachers and administrators would serve themselves and the students if they accepted competition and made it work for the improvement of their own districts. Yes, I favor choice, so long as economic and social factors do not unduly restrict that choice.

Dr. Greene's things to be done, if done, I believe, will reduce the need for remedial education, but they, nor anything else, will eliminate the need for it. Social conditions, intelligence, maturation will combine to keep some from learning at the rate normal for most. The more that can be dealt with in K-12 schools the better.

I have used my time. But, if I had more I would devote it to an expression of my views on teaching theories, teacher education, and where the basic skills should lead a person as a positive member of society. Perhaps we can touch these areas in open discussion.