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Invitations to Michigan Literacy: Our Initiatives

Annena Z. McCleskey is a past president of MRA and a former item writer for MEAP. She is now an independent educational consultant. She delivered this address on March 13 at the 1999 MRA Conference.

Good morning, Michigan!
How lucky can one get to be asked by our president-elect, Paul Booker, whom I consider our renaissance leader, to share the stage with Elaine Weber and Dorsey Hammond and to share a few remarks to the most articulate, blatantly charismatic, definitely effective, freethinking, fantastic, good-natured, heartfelt, incredibly just, and knowledgeable leaders, you, who motivate and nurture and outshine other professionals quite often in reading and reasoning strategies, as well as in technology.

What role models you are for not only your students, but role models for parents, community, and your colleagues in our sister states.

Do you know that the general public is now turning to you for answers on how they can do a better job of educating their children academically and socially? We are the gift-givers in Michigan and the nation.

Yesterday is history, tomorrow is a mystery, today is a gift. That is why we call it the present. Every day that you go into your schools, classrooms, and offices to reach and teach children you are giving them the gift of a lifetime. These gifts can never be taken, never lost or stolen. The gifts you bestow to our Michigan students are: a sense of mission, the gift of how to read, the gift of reading to learn, the gifts of reasoning, problem-solving, and writing, to name a few. You, Michigan teachers and administrators, then package the gifts by modeling for your students in daily lessons the gifts of courage, responsibility, justice, respect, hope, compassion, justice, and wisdom.

In addition to being the present gift-givers of this nation, you are very special in other ways.

- Only 32 percent of the general population have a college degree, but all of us teachers have one.
- We are the only profession in which half of its members have voluntary advanced degrees.
- We give the credit card companies the gift of making them rich.
- We are avid readers and in many cases pass this love of reading on to our students.
- Our median age is 42.
- Seventy-five percent of us are married, and 72 percent of us have children.

In his book *The First Days of Schools*, Harry Wong states that when comparing teachers

with doctors, teachers make more complex decisions than doctors do and make them far more frequently. We are the only professionals that make all other professions possible. That is how important you are. What power, what a gift! We are the only profession concerned with *all* youth and realize that our children today are our most precious resources—that through them we will realize a better tomorrow. Yet our most precious resources, our children, our students, are considered an endangered species.

Each year, 700,000 students drop out of school. Never before in the history of our country are so many children being raised by strangers, before- and after-school-care workers, babysitters, and the number one babysitter, the television. As our former first lady Betty Ford shared with the nation, "... the nation's number one babysitter is the television." And that has not changed. In fact television watching by our youth has gotten worst. The average child in our country, the number of hours they have watched TV they could have earned a BA degree by their 5th birthday. This fact has been shared by our past president of IRA, Jack Pilkulski. What are they watching? Some the discovery and educational channels, but too many are watching junk. That saying you are what you eat is true of the social diet one partakes of as well.

This is frightening. Researchers are predicting that our social structure will not grow or get better. In my family, my mother and father always taught my sister and me that we must do better than the past generation. And so that occurred for generations in our family, each doing better than the past generations. I know that you, too, experienced this same improvement code, doing one better in your families. Now researchers are saying that too many in our country will not improve, in this land of the free and the home of the brave, America the beautiful, America, that tells all who come to her shores "... give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses"

We may be the only people in the lives of many of our students to pass on the culture of not only academics, but ethics and morality as well.

Unfortunately, our tired and poor and huddled masses are too many of our students. I'm sure that the average 4-year-old who receives 438 negative messages a day and only 38 positive messages is tired of hearing negatives. And then many of us question why our students come to us with such poor attitudes and wonder why they are so negative. Again, unfortunately, our poor are our students that number more than 100,000 that are homeless. Sixty-six per cent of our students are from single-parent homes, and the average father has a meaningful conversation with his children only 8 to 10 minutes a day; the average mother only 12 to 15 minutes.

Our students are caught in a maelstrom of cultural and social problems: drugs, poverty, teenage pregnancy, broken homes, broken dreams, broken self-esteem, and permissiveness with just about everything from roaming the malls to surfing the net.

We teachers may be the only stable adults in the lives of many of our students. We may be the only people in the lives of many of our students to pass on the culture of not only academics, but ethics and morality as well.

Michigan has demonstrated that we educators, legislators, concerned citizens are MAD about the data I just shared with you. Our MAD is **M**aking **A** Difference in the lives of our students, and that difference is positive. We, right now today, are developing, implementing, giving hope and dreams for a brighter tomorrow for Michigan, our Michigan, through initiatives.

The American Heritage Dictionary states that "INITIATIVE is the power, ability or instinct to begin or to follow with a plan or task. Initiative is enterprising and determination.

Initiative is being self motivated. Initiative is the first step and action, initiative is an active role."

I have been fortunate to have been asked to speak on our initiatives in this our first general session titled *Invitations to Michigan Literacy: Our Initiatives, Our Legacies, Our Visions*.

The initiatives that we are engaged in today, March 13, 1999—a mere 293 days before the new millennium—these initiatives began even before 1837 when Michigan became the 26th state to join the Union.

We come from "good stock"; our elders were pioneers in the field of education. Our first superintendent of public instruction, John D. Pierce, stated more than 162 years ago "... in laying the foundations of a new state, it is all important to provide not only for the education of every individual of the present but of each one of all succeeding generations."

He had all of us in mind and passed on the torch of following a plan of achievement and success for future generations. There is a saying, "Do not go where the path may lead; go instead where there is no path and leave a trail." That is what our elders did and what we do in MRA; Michigan is doing today. Clearing a path, leaving a trail of successful initiatives, and engaging educational reforms as the entire country looks to us. We are truly leaders in education because of the following:

- MEAP, our creative state assessment instrument is the first of its kind that called for continued discourse in reading, real-world reading, and writing, to name a few of the unique and innovative features of MEAP. MEAP has served as the model for state assessment across the country. Do you know that other states assess their students with *our* MEAP, as we have done in the past with the Iowa and CAT?

- Michigan Content Standards and Benchmarks are other innovative initiatives that have been nationally recognized and copied. I wish to name two of the gift-givers of these innovative initiatives, and they are Sheila Potter and Deanne Umloff.

- Michigan is actively making sure that today our students are being readied to learn and are motivated. You are making sure that happens by your attendance here today. By partaking of this professional development menu, you are nourishing your minds and adding to your repertoire of academic strategies that will lead to our students "drinking from your fountain of knowledge." Our summer literature conference and your wonderful local reading council conferences also contribute to your professional diet. which then pass on to your students, parents, and communities. Right now, today, we, you Michigan teachers and administrators, are building understanding and holding sacred the teaching and learning processes. What an initiative! What a gift to give to others!

- We must also remember social capital. When we invite, include, involve, and invest in our parents and communities by letting them in on the learning processes of their children, we gain, because those enlightened parents and communities become our best supporters and advocates.

- Another innovative initiative gift that Michigan adopted is thematic units, which bring the best practices, assessment, and content standards together to form a positive whole that is working for our students. Our children are able to transfer, to connect, and to have success because of this. Many of our sister states are now writing thematic units.

- Another initiative gift is our collaborative effort which has paid off in a big way. We, MRA, the Michigan Department of Education, and our legislative body are another famous *first* initiative. We were among the first to have our state reading association hold hands with our state department. Whenever I am in another state speaking, I always get the question: How did your reading association, your state department, and politicians

begin communicating with each other for the good of your students? I say this trailblazing was done by Gwen O'Donnell Graham, and Elaine Weber, two visionaries who took the initiative to plant the seeds of communication that have sprouted and grown into the wonderful gift of collaboration we have today. We truly are number one in education because of the discussions, observations, and ideas of MRA, the State Board of Education, legislators, interested community from all walks of life—coming together for one purpose, our children.

- Almost as soon as a new Michigania enters this world, another initiative or gift springs into action with our Readiness Kits. Parents, new babies, and communities are given the gift that will last a lifetime, books and reading. Of the thousands that were put together, we could not meet the demand, the need, the requests of parents seeking our Readiness Kits. I thank the gift-givers of this initiative, the Early Literacy Committee and Deanna Birdyshaw.

We in Michigan are where we are today because of our elders and the educational initiative trails they have blazed. This trail is one of success, commitment, hope, achievement and inclusion.

We in Michigan can truthfully say one hundred years from now it will not matter what kind of car we drove, how much we had in our bank accounts, or what our clothes looked like. But the world will be a better place because of the Michigan initiatives and the importance they had in the life of a child.

Socrates once stated, "You judge a nation by the way they treat their children." Because of MRA and our collaborative efforts in Michigan, we will be judged as successful, innovative, gift-givers that made a positive difference in the lives of children, not only in Michigan but the world.

Yesterday is a history, tomorrow is a mystery, but today is a gift. That is why we call it the present.