

[The following is the full text of the speech delivered by Melinda French Gates to the audience attending the 4<sup>th</sup> Annual Jacqueline P. Danzberger Memorial Lecture, presented during the National School Boards Association's Annual Conference, March 29, 2004.]

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## **I. [Introduction]**

Thank you. I want to thank Anne Bryant — and everyone involved with the NSBA (Deputy Executive Director Joseph Villani, Board President Carol Brown, President-elect George McShan) — for inviting me.

I am proud to be giving the Jacqueline P. Danzberger Memorial Lecture for many reasons. Since you created this forum four years ago, it has become one of the most important platforms in the country for discussing the hard issues facing educators and school boards. I also wanted to honor the spirit of Jackie Danzberger — a woman for whom the struggle to improve our schools never ended. Jackie was influential at every level — in her hometown of Darien, Connecticut; in her state; and at the national level through her work with the Institute for Educational Leadership. Her efforts to improve school governance still stand today. School districts have been lucky to have selfless people like Jackie, and they're lucky to have you. I'm glad for this chance to speak to the officials of America's school boards. You are a cornerstone in the effort to build an educational system worthy of our students.

## **II. [Vision: All Students College-Ready]**

At the Gates Foundation, we too have been working hard over the last few years. We've been in school districts around the country, meeting with teachers and administrators, consulting with a wide variety of educational experts and learning about the crucial work being done to improve our schools.

Good educators do not shy away from a spirited conversation, and I'd like to begin my speech today with a controversial idea that I have come to believe in, passionately. Today I'd like to talk about the importance of preparing every high school student to go to college. Let me repeat that: **All students should graduate ready for college.**

I recognize that this is an extremely ambitious vision — after all, only *one third* of today's eighth graders will graduate ready for college four years from now. But what great changes have not been ambitious? In the time it takes me to give this speech, two dozen students will drop out. Tomorrow, 3,000 will do the same. This year, a million. How could we possibly have a greater impact on the future of our country? How could we explain our failure if we let our children down?

William Butler Yeats said, "Education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire." And it is in that spirit that I hope to talk with you this afternoon.

But first, let me back up for a second. What do I mean by "all students college-ready?" Let's break it down – beginning with the word "all." Why can't we do more for every high school student? Most high schools do a good job preparing roughly a third of their students for college. But that means two-thirds either drop out or graduate totally unprepared to do college-level work or hold a job that can support a family. The news is even worse for African American and Hispanic students — *almost half* will not graduate at all. I'm sure that you've all seen recent reports along these lines.

It's also crucial that these students graduate ready to take on advanced coursework. According to a recent report by the American Diploma Project, more than half of all college students take at least one remedial English or math class. Our high school graduates should not be forced to

catch up with their fellow freshmen.

The word “college,” too, can mean many things to many people. Most people think of college as a four-year institution offering a B.A. degree. But that’s only one of the many and varied educational possibilities that can follow high school. They take a lot of different forms: community college, technical school, and apprenticeships, to name a few. But that doesn’t take away from the fact that some kind of education is vital for our high school students after they graduate.

Why? Obviously, it’s important from an **economic** point of view. In almost every line of work, from high tech to manufacturing to running a small business, you need much higher reading, writing and math skills to earn a wage that can support a family. This includes chemistry and statistics.

Our economy is changing fast, as we have seen vividly in Seattle over the past 20 years. Where we used to have a deep dependence on manufacturing, we now have a much more diverse economy that places a high value on knowledge, adaptability and service. The statistics are pretty clear: Eighty percent of the fastest-growing occupations will require some education after high school.<sup>i</sup> It’s important for the business community — by the end of the decade we will need close to 12 million skilled employees in the fastest-growing sectors of the job market.<sup>ii</sup> It’s even more important for the students themselves. A college graduate earns 70 percent more than a high-school graduate. Seventy percent.

I would also argue, as we enter another election season, that getting every student ready for college is important from a **citizenship** point of view. Our schools must train more than future consumers or future workers — we need to train engaged citizens who embrace their

responsibilities. A strong democracy requires it. We do not want a two-tiered system where a small number of well-educated professionals are making decisions for everybody else. We must equip all of our young people to make the right decisions for themselves — and for our country.

In particular, we need to reemphasize a bedrock principle — that the United States is now and forever committed to **equal opportunity**. It is a grave social injustice that our high school system continues to steer low-income African-American and Hispanic students away from college prep and college attendance. Only six percent of young people from lowest economic quartile will earn a four-year college degree. Six percent.

Our large comprehensive high schools were built for the industrial age, not the information age. Fifty years ago, we mistakenly thought that only select students could do serious academic work. So young people were separated like machine parts onto different tracks. Some learned to work with their heads. Others with their hands. And once that decision was made, there was no going back. It made some sense then, but today, it is an economic and social **disaster**. We wouldn't think of asking our children to research a paper using only an encyclopedia, or giving them a slide rule instead of a computer.

Educating all children well is a new challenge requiring a bold new vision for our high schools. This current educational inequity matters a lot to me as a parent, and it matters to me as the co-founder of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. The central purpose of our foundation is to address the problem of inequity — to help ensure that people have an equal opportunity to make the most of their lives, no matter where they live. Internationally, the greatest inequity lies in global health. Millions of children die each year from preventable diseases, and we're fighting hard to change that. Here in America, one of the greatest inequities has to do with education.

This includes access to information. That's why the foundation set — and last year, reached — a goal of providing computers, Internet access and training to libraries in every state in the country. Today, no matter where you live, if you can reach a public library, you can reach the Internet for free. That seemed radically ambitious not too long ago. But we did it.

And we are not done. The greatest remaining inequity in our country is that we do not provide all of our children with the quality education needed to succeed in high school and graduate ready for college or a challenging career.

### **III. [What the Foundation Is Doing to Help Prepare All Students for College]**

Obviously, no one can wave a magic wand and make this happen. Getting a student ready for college takes work at every level of the school system. We know that to graduate every student from high school you have to **start early**; high school is the culmination of all that comes before.

**Teaching quality** and high-quality **instructional materials** are the foundation for any great school. Teachers must have **high expectations** for every student at every level. And finally, schools and their staffs must work to ensure **smooth transitions** from elementary to middle school and from middle school to high school.

There has been a lot of exciting progress in early childhood education. Test scores are rising for younger students, they are learning better, and school boards have played a vital role in making it happen — creating a vision and following it through. Now the question is: How can we harness that momentum at the high school level? High schools have been ignored for a generation, and it shows. When we compare our students' test scores to those from other countries, our elementary students do very well — but not our high school students. In math and science, U.S. fourth graders are among the top students in the world. By 8<sup>th</sup> grade, they've slipped to the middle of the pack. In 12<sup>th</sup> grade they are scoring near the bottom of the

international scale in math and science. High school reading scores have dropped steadily over the past decade.

That's why the Gates Foundation has targeted high schools as the area where we can make the most difference. They are certainly not the only area deserving of support, but they are where we feel we can make the biggest impact. No one debates how important high schools are. But at the same time, they are the most neglected part of the great American public school system. Too many of them are big schools where students are bored and teachers feel disconnected.

It doesn't have to be that way. There are great schools, and we've found that they have three things in common. I'm sure you all remember the 3 R's from your school days. We think that great schools all incorporate a new version of the **three R's: rigor, relationships, and relevance**. Courses that *challenge* children, not bore them. One-on-one relationships with caring teachers who have a stake in their students' success. Motivating curricula that relate to students' lives and aspirations. I'm talking about *work-based* learning instead of *worksheets*.

So the foundation is partnering with school districts around the country to start new schools and transform large, impersonal high schools into new ones — small schools where students get personal attention and a rigorous curriculum that is relevant to their lives. We're currently supporting 1,400 innovative high schools across the nation. But that's only *eight percent* of our country's public high schools. We hope to see an infusion of rigor, relationships and relevance in *every* American high school. Ultimately, we want to lift the graduation rates of the least-advantaged students and ensure *all* students are college-ready

#### **IV. [Obstacles and What School Boards Can Do]**

We are not for a second under the illusion that we at the Gates Foundation have all the

answers. Nothing we do will ever compare to the work all of you do on your school boards. I cannot say enough to thank you for your efforts translating all of our hopes into something workable. Day after day, all of you are on the front lines. And you've had some tough pressures in the past few years.

It's no secret that state education **budgets** are being slashed around the country. It's amazing how quickly yesterday's top priority can turn into tomorrow's budget casualty. Even when budgets are not slashed, they are uncertain, depending on school bonds and election cycles, and that uncertainty too has a corrosive effect.

**Standards and Accountability** are important too. The No Child Left Behind Act reflects an important national consensus that every child deserves to receive a high-quality education. This is breaking new ground, but I know that the design and execution of something like NCLB can be challenging at every level.

You also have to deal with **legislative constraints on school boards**. Jackie Danzberger expressed the need for local autonomy well when she wrote, "The idea of separate citizen governing boards at the community level for the public schools is deeply embedded in grass-roots American political values." But you need the freedom to do your jobs well. Your role is to be great policy-makers; concerned citizens who can envision the promise of our schools and make it possible for our educators to turn that vision into a reality.

So **what can school boards do?** These challenges are hard, but you can still take concrete actions to help every student graduate with the skills needed to succeed. **To begin, you need to set the vision:** If we believe that all students can graduate college ready, and that our democracy demands no less, then we need to get that message out. We need to let everyone

know, around the country and around each of your school districts, how important this goal is. We need to ensure that all students have access to classes that prepare them for college. And we need to make sure that students know they have this access. Young people want to be challenged—and they excel when they are.

Let me give you an example: In the San Jose School District, all students now take college-prep courses. The result? Reading and math scores are up, with the largest gains among African American and Hispanic students. Test scores for African Americans rose seven times higher than their peers statewide. How do they do it? The district sets high expectations but provides support and safety nets as needed so students are not overwhelmed. It is better for a student to learn algebra in three semesters than to waste two taking low-level math.

But setting a vision is not enough. **We need to learn from the success of other schools.**

**Schools all around the country are doing this well.** I can't overstate how much I've learned

from the simple act of going around and meeting dynamic school administrators. There is simply nothing like going outside one's own district. You can benefit from seeing creative solutions first hand, brainstorming and sharing resources with others who are achieving results.

To outline some of the most innovative ideas we've discovered from our own work and from

going to districts around America, I recommend a publication, "Breaking Ranks II: Strategies for Leading High School Reform" from the National Association of Secondary School Principals.

This publication explains the steps schools can take to create great learning environments. It has been sent to every high-school principal in America. Copies are available [here](#), and I hope you'll take as many as you need.

I'd like to tell you about a few of the districts that I've visited. None of these are extraordinary exceptions — they are simply places where teachers and students have found new ways to



make progress together. Just outside of Seattle, where I live, the Truman Center used to be a place for the district's unwanted teachers and students. Now it's exactly the opposite — two smaller schools of real learning and hope. There are no bells. No lockers. The students work all year in big open spaces they designed themselves. Everyone knows their names. Teachers give their students their home phone numbers... their attention... their confidence. At the Truman Center I saw young people totally engaged in school — often for the first time — because teachers tapped into their skills and interests.

The students shared how their innovative internships had motivated them in new ways. They could now imagine themselves as professionals: doctors, legislators, and yes, teachers. They could understand why it was important to take hard classes and go on to college. In just one year, dropout rates are considerably down, while the percentage of students going on to college and technical school has more than doubled. For the first time in Truman's history, 75 percent of the 2003 graduates are pursuing further education.

Another model school is Boston Arts Academy. Highlighted as a “breakthrough” high school by the National Association of Secondary School Principals, it is the first high school in Boston that focuses on the arts, and does it in an innovative way that brings in science, math, technology, and world cultures. Students may take courses for college credit at one of five area colleges. And the local arts community contributes by offering classes and internships at local museums and theaters. Boston Arts Academy faces all of the challenges of a school in an urban setting. Yet, it is seeing higher passing rates on exit exams than the *rest of the district*. Ninety percent of Academy students are graduating and continuing on to college.

Drawing from these trailblazers, you can **create a responsive school** within your own school system. What does being a “responsive school” mean, exactly? It means being aware of the

needs of students, teachers, and parents. It means being accountable at every level. It means, especially, knowing when a school or a principal or a teacher needs a little extra help.

A final example I'd like to talk about is Withrow University High School in Cincinnati. Eighty two percent of the school population is African American—50 percent qualify for free and reduced lunch. Withrow is a small redesigned high school, housed with two others in a large traditional building built in the 20s. Yet, Withrow is anything but traditional. Its motto and operating assumption are that "every student is college bound". And they are. Since the school opened in 2002, attendance rates are over 95 percent and test scores have dramatically improved. Students have posted 40- to 55-point gains in state proficiency scores.

How has this happened? For starters, all ninth-graders attend a five-week program called "Summer Bridge" at a local university. This improves their skills; gets them thinking about college and explains the steps to get there. Parents sign a contract committing themselves to actively engage in their child's education. And the school hosts an on-site social service agency to address any outside needs its families might have.

In school, students receive personal attention, an individually designed academic plan, mandatory after-school tutoring if they fall behind, and *college-level* classes. Above all, students gain confidence that they can succeed in college, and they're motivated to get there. Withrow's principal, Sharon Johnson, has said, ""When I say that my students are college-bound, I know they are — and I make sure they and their parents know it, too."

These schools, and others like them, are making a tangible difference. But a few good schools here and there are not enough. We need to provide 10,000 great high schools in the next ten years to meet the needs of this country's children. It will require political will, money, and a

great deal of hard work. But there is no valid reason that it cannot be done.

## V. Conclusion

I know how daunting these challenges are. I also know that they are not insurmountable. Just look at the improvements many of you have already made. Just think of all the high school students who have graduated on your watch, and how many more can graduate if we all work together. Progress starts and ends at the local level. That's where all of you come in. You are change agents. The future will happen because you will it to happen.

So let me conclude by thanking you for upholding Jackie Danzberger's legacy and fighting hard for our schools and our children. Jackie put it perfectly when she wrote, "local school boards are among the last grassroots governing bodies that touch us all — children, ... parents, educators, business leaders, and elected officials." This isn't just about education – it's about **democracy**.

America's greatest educational thinker, John Dewey, once said, "Education is not preparation for life; education is life itself." That's why it's so important that we dedicate ourselves to the goal of getting every high school student to see that college is a real possibility. Imagine if all our young people arrived at their high school graduation ready to attend college and lead our country afterwards. If I leave you thinking about only one thing today, I hope it is this: "Every student in my district can graduate ready for college, and I can go home and do something about it." I hope you believe that. I know that I do.

**[End]**

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<sup>i</sup> Occupational Outlook Survey 2002-03. Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor

<sup>ii</sup> Occupational Employment Projections to 2012. Monthly Labor Review, February 2004, Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor