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Charter Schools Speech, delivered on October 20, 2014

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Charter Schools
October 20, 2014
Arend D. Lubbers

What happened on the way to educating our children? When I was moving toward adulthood finishing Holland High School in 1949 there was nothing in my public school experience, beginning in 1936, that was negative. In Holland High, as I remember, there were only two weak teachers; one because of indolence and another because of less than adequate communication. The rest were good to excellent. Because of its high quality teaching Holland High School transformed me. I continue to benefit from the knowledge, commitment and communication of several of my high school teachers. Isn't that what we want from our schools?

Something else was happening. The women were usually paid less than men only because of their gender. I suppose that seemed natural to the society of the 19th Century when men had families to support, though often male teachers were single young men, and the women were nearly all without immediate family financial obligations. After the Second World War that reasoning was no longer acceptable to women.

The immediate post war period brought rapid inflation when price controls were lifted. For the most part school districts did not pass millages that would allow teacher compensation to keep up with pay increases in other fields. The teachers were being left behind.

There may have been other factors that made teachers feel disenfranchised, but these two were enough to give impetus for collective bargaining. So the process began that led to teachers unions and the MEA became one of the most powerful forces in Michigan politics. Over the years school boards and administration adjusted to the confrontational style of collective bargaining; a style formed by the English model of trade unionism and adapted earlier by the

American labor movement. A bureaucratic structure was put in place. How did this contribute to better educate children? It really did not. It did win better salaries and benefits for teachers.

For the most part the MEA and the NEA accomplished their original objectives, but like so many justified movements at their inception they have failed to reform themselves to be a positive force as we desperately try to fit education today to the needs of children and youth. They always want more of the same; more money, less work. The 2008 recession brought some reality to the bargaining table but not a creative new approach to the working conditions and relationships between teachers and administrators. Though some excellent school districts in West Michigan have good enough working relationships with their teachers unions and remain excellent, the union model is no longer a positive force. In fact, it is usually negative when it comes to the education of students. It is worn out. Those who love to teach and are good at it have not found a way to universally change this worn out way to set the rules and wages for the teaching profession. My Executive Assistant, who in a previous job represented the School Board and administration at the bargaining table, related this incident. When a union demand was met by the response, "That will not help in educating kids" the reply was, "When kids pay dues we will think about kids." Because I see matters as I have explained, I embraced the opportunity for charters as a way for teachers and parents to be free from the negative aspects of collective bargaining.

Another unavoidable development influenced the quality of education at the same time collective bargaining fixed itself in the education process. After World War II with the return of 10 million servicemen there was a baby boom. The increased number of children began filling the school system at a time when the supply of teachers could not adequately meet the demand. My generation was born in the great depression years. There were fewer of us and we were

graduating from college as the wave of children hit the schools. Those who hired teachers dipped deeper into the pool of college graduates lowering the overall quality of teachers at the same time collective bargaining negotiated protective tenure rights. This was a toxic condition undermining the standards for teaching excellence. I have no statistical evidence for my theory, but observation over 60 years re-enforces my commitment to it.

A final theory I will present to you, one which dedicated educators are attempting to address, deals with children born to parents who have no positive skills for raising them. They are often children in a house with a single parent. These children and youth are often a significant proportion of urban school districts. As children they were not read to, nor were they ever engaged in conversation that contributed to positive learning skills. They often disrupt. They are usually slow to learn. For a parent who cares about her child's education, does not want it weighted down by an impossible classroom cohort, a charter school provides her only hope.

When I am confronted by opponents of charter schools they argue that charters are taking the most promising students leaving the less competent to the traditional public schools. The traditional public schools have never completely changed themselves to educate the varied populations that now inhabit the schools. Parents who have an immediate need to educate a child are not willing to risk that education just to have their child improve the cohort of a classroom. I must state that there are several school districts in West Michigan that have no or few charter schools. Parents in those districts are satisfied though the districts must still often deal with the non-productive weight of a worn out collective bargaining structure. I am particularly impressed with the Grand Rapids Schools, a district with all the challenges that a varied school population brings. The leadership there and a majority of teachers with a mission

offer the most hope in an urban school that I have seen in some time. For the kind of students I described new disciplines and expectations are required; even new kinds of schools. Grand Rapids is trying. I advocate separating children from the worst kinds of home environments and placing them not in foster homes, but in old fashioned orphanages that gave nurture and security to my grandparents. This controversial idea awaits further development at another time.

The critics of charter schools often try to frame their argument in terms of public versus private. Unfortunately, many citizens who don't know much about charters can be persuaded to understand it that way. We, the advocates for charters, have to continuously explain that charters are public schools. They exist because enough people were disenchanted by what they were getting. They brought about a new format for public education that could provide better education.

That is the heart of the matter. Theories, laws, traditions, power struggles count for very little when it comes to what is best for my son or daughter. If we are dissatisfied with his or her education we are going to do everything we can to change that. We are like mother bears with their cubs. Americans were among the first to establish education as a responsibility for the whole society. Good education, we believe, is essential for our democracy. When some of us became concerned by weakness in some sectors that we felt would affect the personal lives of our children, and in the long run endanger democracy, we sought solutions. Charter schools are the result. You represent total commitment to overcoming these concerns. So what is in place to help us?

1. Every societal structure builds over the years a bureaucracy and habits of doing things. Charters are free of many of those burdens. Charter boards are closer to the teaching of children and youth than traditional boards. Change and improvement can move more rapidly.
2. Charters are free of the negativism that usually characterizes the collective bargaining process.
3. Charters are free to explore new ways of forming relationships between teachers, the principal, and the board.
4. Charters can more easily remove teachers and principals who are not competently filling their positions.
5. Charters can move more rapidly when curriculum additions or changes are required.
6. Charters can more easily allow teachers to be teachers; practicing in the best way the wonderful art of teaching.

What then are our responsibilities?

1. Since we have the opportunity, the quality of our teaching must always be high. We should demonstrate that our pedagogy is the best.
2. The chartering entity should be involved in the improvement of all the schools it charters, and decertify those that do not meet high standards.
3. When charters are granted to for-profit companies or to any organization that operates multiple schools, the chartering entity must monitor their effectiveness and integrity.

4. Charters should strive to provide better education at lower cost. This is a secondary objective; the first being quality education for children. It is a great experiment and charters are a laboratory to test the premise.

If Charters fulfill their purpose, I believe we will see their positive public impact throughout K-12 education. I like to speculate what that impact will be. At the beginning of the charter school movement the Superintendent of the Grand Rapids Schools, Jeff Grotsky, and I began planning a charter school jointly certified by the Grand Rapids Public Schools and Grand Valley. Our plan was nearly formulated when he abruptly terminated our cooperation. The experiment was too threatening to the traditionalists in the system including the teachers union. Not too many years ago Mr. and Mrs. Robert Thompson offered the Detroit Public School system 200 million dollars to reform their high schools. The local union insisted it be rejected. Grand Valley and others are trying to fill the quality vacuum in that troubled district. When it was announced Grand Valley planned to charter schools I received a letter from a local attorney accusing me of doing so for the money the university would receive. I replied that all the money will be used for the office that supervises the schools. At that time we could also provide money for the schools special interests. The success of charter schools will slowly begin to allay the fears and dissemble the power struggles that these three examples illustrate. This, too, can be a secondary objective for charter schools.

In the 19th Century a missionary zeal permeated the Christian churches. Throughout the world missionaries attempted to spread the gospel and more successfully brought scientific medicine and agriculture. I have advocated that the same kind of zeal that propelled the foreign missionary movement be directed to the education of our

children and youth in the homeland. We cannot fail in this endeavor if our nation is to succeed as we hope. We have our mission, clear and necessary. We must now find ways to fulfill it. We have chosen charters for that purpose; by serving our personal interests in our children's education and thusly serving the nation.

John Locke, in the 17th Century, wrote, "He that has found a way to keep a child's spirit easy, active, and free, and yet at the same time to restrain him from many things that are destructive to him has, in my opinion, got the true secret of education." In the 19th Century, Thomas Huxley wrote, "I care not what subject is taught; only if it is taught well." Of course, we do want specific courses taught, but the point Huxley makes is that there is no value in poor teaching. Combine his thought with Locke's and we have our charter school credo. Charters give us the best chance to practice what we preach.