

In Appreciation of Joseph A. Whelan *

It is a threefold privilege and pleasure to be present at this testimonial dinner in honor of our mutual friend, Joseph A. Whelan; first, because it is always a privilege to meet with the alert and responsible citizens of this community who are so interested in education and civic affairs. It is a particular joy to break bread with you whose loyalty, support and friendship for Mr. Whelan have helped him to do such an outstanding job as Superintendent of the North Providence Schools. And, in recognition of my deep friendship and admiration for our guest of honor, this occasion offers a happy opportunity to join with you in paying him special appreciation and tribute.

Because of my own great interest in educational affairs and my particular good fortune to be in Government at a time when that interest is shared to such a high degree by the people I serve, it is most pleasant to visit with all of you who hold similar interests.

We honor Mr. Whelan tonight because we are so sure that he is eminently fitted for the unique opportunity which lies ahead of him. It is not so important that he is changing his title and his mailing address as it is that he is bringing his exceptional background of scholarship, experience and understanding to new challenges and opportunities.

* Background material prepared for Congressman Fogarty's use in North Providence, Rhode Island, June 12, 1960.

As a matter of fact, I am not so sure that Mr. Whelan's new duties or his new address will be as much different as it may appear to the casual observer. The other day as I was listening to representatives of the Postal Employees who were appearing before Congress in behalf of new legislation, I could not help but think that the problems of a mailman are not much different than those of an educator, or a Congressman, or, for that matter, any citizen who is engaged in the business of serving the public. I happened to come across a clever little verse written by a school superintendent, who expressed aptly the dilemma so many of us find ourselves in. I think you may enjoy it:

The mailman's load would bring dismay
To dromedary, horse or gnu;
His feet get flatter every day.
Me, too!

The mailman's grin gets mighty grim
And yet he makes no great ado;
He takes the pack they pile on him.
Me, too!

The mailman has no time to play;
His hours of toil are never through;
Come storm or sleet he plods his way.
Me, too!

But as he rubs his aching spine
Does he, perchance, feel somewhat blue?
Not so--he thinks his job is fine.
Me, too!

Seriously, these are crucial and challenging days in education because so much is happening so fast. Within our own lifetime man has entered the age of atomic energy and space.

He can transmit events with the velocity of light and travel faster than the speed of sound. His achievements in science and technology are spectacularly increasing, with the result that every other day seems to bring a new and breathtaking headline. This is having a profound effect upon public thinking in respect to education, upon public concern that the education which our children receive shall be adequate to the needs of our times.

It is because of this belief to which we, as Americans, subscribe so firmly that nearly two years ago the Congress passed the National Defense Education Act, a law which has been characterized by many people as one of the three most important milestones in the history of Federal action to strengthen our schools. It was my privilege to have been in the chair during the debate on this important legislation, and I was highly gratified, as were other friends of education, when the bill was enacted into law. It touches every level of education, public and private, from the elementary grades through the graduate schools, and is a major breakthrough in the effort to see that every young person, from the day he first enters school, should have an opportunity to develop his gifts to the fullest extent. It is the recognition that in a free society the individual is the first line of defense.

It is significant that one of the most important phases of education fortified by the National Defense Education Act is the recognition of the need for increased guidance in the schools, for this is a field in which Mr. Whelan has pioneered and in which he has unusual competence and where he will be able to bring particular understanding and leadership. The program launched under the National Defense Education Act will provide during the coming year additional counseling and guidance training for more than 800 teachers--most of them in the field of secondary education.

But in the educational structure we have sometimes failed to recognize that guidance of a somewhat more informal type is just as important in the elementary school as in the high school, and parents of the children in your new school may consider themselves most fortunate in securing the benefit of Mr. Whelan's experience and dedication.

I suspect that our honor guest is leaving his present position with mingled joy and regret--joy and satisfaction in the progress he has seen in the past decade, the regret which one always feels in leaving the scene of much of his greatest progress and many of his outstanding triumphs. But, even more important, I am sure that he feels a sense of challenge to make new contributions to an increasingly important facet of education. It must be a great satisfaction to him to know that he carries with him the confidence and support of the community.

For the challenge of the elementary schools is a "grass roots" challenge which offers bright and shining visions. It gives a unique opportunity for "the opening of doors"--it deals with the future and, it may be, with a little of immortality. Therein one may find and pass on a way of being, of living, of becoming. Therein one may lay the foundation for future alert and responsible citizenship. Therein, in the climate of children, youth and growth are great and challenging opportunities for service.

In honoring Mr. Whelan tonight, I think, indirectly that we are honoring all our teachers, our school administrators and all those who unselfishly serve the future of America. I would not minimize the importance of those who work in school administration or higher education, for their efforts are vitally necessary in carrying forward the concept of education of which our fathers dreamed and for which they willingly gave of their means and substance.

But, in the path which Mr. Whelan has chosen to follow, it seems to me that there are very special satisfactions. He returns to his first love. It becomes his privilege to work closely with children--to stress the competencies which give our children the tools with which they may hew out a path so clear that they shall not stumble or fall; to teach truth, for only in the understanding of truth can man hold fast his dignity and his freedom; to teach friendship, which is understanding and fair play

and loyalty and honesty and integrity--for these are the binding substances of a free world. Through his supervision and understanding he can bring to every child the vision of freedom, the glory of democracy and the joy of an abiding faith in America.

In the increasing need for strengthening a foundation education from which our boys and girls may go forward to new heights, it is necessary that we not only re-emphasize the fundamental learnings (the three R's), but also stress the concept of democracy which has made this country strong. At the same time, we must never forget that while the schools must be primarily concerned with the intellect, they must assume broad responsibility for stressing the moral and ethical concepts which are the warp and woof of the American heritage. In these days when we must be increasingly concerned with preserving that precious heritage, it means that the work of the elementary school is increasingly significant.

In a salute to the importance of the elementary school principal, my friend, the U. S. Commissioner of Education, Lawrence G. Derthick, has said that in his view the elementary school principalship is one of the truly rewarding jobs in American education. "The early years of schooling are among the most critical, for there the foundation for the child's future is being laid," says Commissioner Derthick. "These are years which require the strongest and most understanding leadership

that we can possibly have. The elementary school principalship should challenge our most talented leaders. It is a field where the ability and effort must be great but at the same time it offers unique rewards and satisfactions."

This is why, it seems to me, that our celebration tonight is a very special occasion and why Mr. Whelan's decision is so important to the community. This is why we come together to honor him. Our warm regards and best wishes go with him as he accepts his new responsibilities, for we know that we will continue to have the benefit of the outstanding service which he has always given to the North Providence Schools in such great measure.

INSERT--for page three following line eight.

In order that we may hold fast to such a standard of adequacy, in these days it becomes doubly necessary that all citizens continue to take the keenest possible interest in their schools, that we accept individual and community responsibility for the well-being and the progress of our educational system, that we understand the importance and participate in the responsibilities for our children's education. For in the long run, no school can ever be better than the community wishes it to be, no educational system will be stronger than the strengths of the people it serves, no democratic institution can be more forward-looking than the combined efforts of the people who pay the bill. This responsibility for quality in our educational system must not rest upon any one individual or any group of individuals, but upon the shoulders of all the parents of all the children and upon every other citizen in the community.