Every child's right to receive excellent education

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Half of the adults in the United States cannot read or do arithmetic, skills normally taught during elementary and secondary school. So said the U.S. Department of Education in September.¹ Such statistics probably do not shock the residents of Kalkaska, Michigan. Their public schools actually closed down three months early last year due to a lack of money; funds are so short there again this year that students do not even have enough textbooks.² Little Kalkaska is not a fluke—it is more an omen. As the academic year gets under way this fall, school systems around the country find themselves strapped financially, plagued by inequities in funding distribution, and unequipped to provide top quality or, in many cases, even adequate education.³

The strange thing is that this education debacle is occurring in the world's only remaining superpower. How is it possible that in the United States, a fabulously wealthy, highly developed country, there is a national education crisis of such menacing proportions that fully one half of the population is illiterate? Blame can, no doubt, be lodged in many quarters. After all, the public schools are confronted with the daunting task of educating children who are all too often the victims of poverty, family instability, crime-ridden environments, and other societal ills.⁴ It is a tall order to expect schools to educate successfully children whose stomachs are empty or whose psyches are traumatized.⁵ Yet, deleterious social conditions and the magnitude of the educators' task cannot justify giving up on the schools' mission. "Students,

¹ William Celis 3d, Study says half of adults in U.S. can't read or handle arithmetic, N.Y. Times, Sept. 9, 1993, p. A1, A16 [hereinafter Half of adults can't read].
³ Susan Chira, Schools open soon (with luck), to more trouble than usual, N.Y. Times, Sept. 5, 1993, §4 (The week in review), p. 5; Bob Herbert, On spelling kat, N.Y. Times, Sept. 12, 1993, §4 (The week in review), p. 19; see also Report offers more evidence of literacy woes in schools, N.Y. Times, Sept. 16, 1993, p. A9 (reporting that federal officials have found that many American students read too poorly to understand simple written passages).
even from the most difficult backgrounds, can academically . . . succeed." The public schools, as the outgrowth of the common school movement, were conceived of and have functioned to embrace and educate all children, be they poor, traumatized, or otherwise troubled.7

Now, however, massive numbers of children are emerging from the public schools undereducated and frequently unprepared to join the work force even in low-level jobs or to participate in meaningful political decision-making.8 It is no exaggeration to say that the very economic and political pre-eminence of the nation has been jeopardized, not by some aggressive foreign enemy, but by the humble local classroom.9 Alarmed by these developments, state governments have experimented with an array of education measures.10 Their efforts have been complemented by exhortations and proposals from national political leaders and by a plethora of studies and reports issued by education experts.11 In spite of these efforts, the crisis has persisted with unnerving intractability.12

With such vital interests at stake, intractability is simply not an option. However, there is considerable controversy over what kind of reforms should be instituted to ameliorate the education crisis.13 Proposals have varied widely, ranging from enhanced parental involvement in the schools to expanded privatization of the education process to enhanced governmental involvement.16 Some leading education experts and political leaders have been courageous enough also to focus on the substantive and most obvious point: that what American children need most of all from their public schools is the guaranty of real excellence in education and that any schemes for structural changes in the provision of education should flow from this premise.17