

## **Building a World Fit for Children**

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United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child  
Global and Multicultural Education Center

The Kauffman Foundation

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I would like to start by requesting a moment of silence for the hundreds of children who were killed and even more wounded in Russia this month after terrorists took them hostage at an elementary school and after soldiers stormed the school in an assault that ended in horrible bloodshed. Let me also ask for a moment of silence for the children killed in Rwanda, the children slain and maimed in the Sudan. Let us not forget the children who have been orphaned because of HIV/AIDS and the children who have died in the warfare in Bosnia, East Timor and Sierra Leon. Let me now ask for a moment of silence for the children who are suffering and dying here in the United States of America because of gun violence, because of abuse and neglect and because they happen to be among the millions who are living in poverty and are among the working poor and other destitute families without health insurance. So many children of color are in this ever-expanding waist-line of need. So many children are imprisoned in Third World ghettos here at home.

Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen and thank you for having me as your speaker today. As a journalist I get an earful of some of the most distressing things about life in our times. But I also get to hear some wonderful, encouraging things. That is one of the benefits of being in this profession. Another benefit is I then get to share both with people like you. One good thing that I heard a speaker say this year at a YWCA awards program for women in Kansas City, Kan., was this African proverb. She said:

*This world was not given to us by our parents but lent to us by our children.*

It is such a wonderful statement filled with inner beauty and deep meaning. I think it especially applies to the work that you are dedicated to and that's getting lawmakers in this nation to finally ratify the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. It would help end the tragic suffering of children – some of which I cited when I started this speech. Getting such tragedies to end through the ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child is long overdue.

This statement made on May 8, 2002, at the U.N. General Assembly's Special Session on Children is what we and our children are living with today, which saddles the children of the future with the same sorrow tomorrow unless action is taken now to reverse the terrible horror. The statement was:

We are the world's children.

We are the victims of exploitation and abuse.

We are the street children.

We are the children of war.

We are the victims and orphans of HIV/AIDS.

We are denied good quality education and health care.

We are victims of political, economic, cultural,  
religious and environmental discrimination,

We are children whose voices are not heard: it is time we  
are taken into account.

We want a world fit for children, because a world fit for us is a world fit for everyone.

That was from a book called *A World Fit for Children*. The book advocates for the world's children what everyone in this room wants and that is the eradication of poverty and hunger, universal and primary education, gender equity and the empowerment of women, a reduction in child mortality, an improvement in maternal health, all-out efforts – and not just lip service – to combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases, Herculean efforts toward environmental sustainability and a sincere partnership toward global improvement. Again it goes with the notion that if this world indeed was lent to us by our children and not given to us by our parents that we then must give it back to our children in better shape than how we received it. And that means making living conditions for children much better than they are.

But that all-out effort must begin with recognizing that children, as those who are often the weaker persons among us, have rights too, that must be protected. I hope to have a book out this fall called *A Teacher's Cry: Expose the Truth About Education Today*. It's rooted in my studies with the Class of 1999 at Washington High School in Kansas City, Kan., from the students' freshman year until they graduated to learn what it's like to be a teen and a teacher today. I wrote about 100 columns in *The Kansas City Star* during that look into the skyscraper called education to see what goes on day to day in efforts to educate our children. The book flows from that series, but it embodies a whole lot more. In the book I quote an education professional who has pushed for real standards in education and not just the awful "No Child Left Behind Act," which is under funded and is leaving many of our children

behind. That education professional said that when she pressed for real standards in education among our elected officials in the U.S. House and Senate, she was told by one legislator that if there were true standards and if children as a result graduated with knowledge and skills and ambitions to make something of their lives, then who would mow his lawn, take care of his children and tend to other menial chores around his house? I think that sort of logic is appalling, however, that is what's stopping progressive legislation that would benefit our children, and that also is what's holding up the ratification of U.N. treaties such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

If that's not enough, there is more. After a column that I wrote in the paper this year about students in that Class of 1999 at Washington High School trying to make the most of their lives in the inner city and live out their dreams, I heard this from a reader of *The Kansas City Star*. I call people like these my "fans." This person wrote in reaction to students' being upset over having to wear uniforms now in school. He said:

"No need for Washington High School students to be concerned over wearing uniforms. Many male students will be wearing prison uniforms a few years after leaving high school!"

So there is a mentality in this country that children like these are to benefit society only through keeping the nation's prison-industrial complex well-fed. Maintaining a high prison population helps the economic development of small towns where most of America's prisons are located. The state of Missouri just finished building a fabulous new prison in Jefferson City. This is a state in which 30,000 people are locked up – many for drug offenses.

In Kansas, the figure is about 10,000. In the United States, the number of people behind bars is 2.1 million – more than any nation in the world, and most of the people who populate our prisons are black and Hispanic even though together, those two minority groups only constitute about 26 percent of the U.S. population. The removal of those individuals from the community is creating a horrible hardship for families and children. The greatest nation on the face of the earth needs to find another way to provide for its neediest citizens.

One of many other important things that the book, *A Teacher's Cry*, will say is that the No Child Left Behind Act grants military recruiters greater access to school records so they can go after our children with greater efficiency. It all means our children are being viewed by the wealthy and the powerful in this country as servants providing menial labor, or they are the fodder for the prison-industrial complex or they are fresh meat to serve in the military in the endless wars like the one we have now against terrorism. Many of the other options to them in this land of plenty have simply been closed. Anyone who has seen Michael Moore's new documentary, "Fahrenheit 9/11" saw on the big screen what military recruiter's do and how they go after kids in the poorest rural and urban communities. I was speaking to a mother last week whose daughter was to get out of the service and out of Iraq in April. Her time had been extended to April 2005. The mother told me that her daughter said the Iraqis are selling Michael Moore's movie, "Fahrenheit 9/11" on the street for \$2 for a DVD. The film is selling like hotcakes. The mother also said that her daughter told her that the movie is making our troops very angry. That was a curious statement to me so I asked what her daughter meant by angry. She said the troops are angry that they have been put in

such a place to fight for a cause that they now see as being unjust. They are not angry at Michael Moore for doing the movie. They are angry at the people in the U.S. government behind all the senseless fighting and dying in Iraq. Adults are being injured and dying and so are the children – theirs and ours.

None of this is right, and none of it is fair and none of it fits on a world that was lent to us by our children instead of given to us by our parents. We must, as the Convention for the Rights of the Child states, have respect for the rights of children. We must ensure that they have a safe, secure, clean environment – not just those children living in wealthy suburbs, but children in the poorer communities and countries, too.

The exploitation of children must end. We must stop others from using them as labor in factories for multinational corporations for goods that are being shipped overseas to Western consumers. We have to stop victimizing our children otherwise they will grow up to continue a generational cycle of victimizing children.

I know this takes another hard swipe at politics, but we also need a person in the White House who will act sincerely, act with true compassion instead of hokum and conservative malarkey, and act in a forthright way to benefit our children and our future. Never has so many been in such great jeopardy.

We also as a great nation must show that we can share the resources of the world and not go to war under false pretenses just to take oil or other natural resources that are in another sovereign country. No longer must we continue to consume the lion's share of the world's energy and raw materials giving back only a pittance to others but telling everyone how wonderfully benevolent we are as Americans. These are among the grandest of the grand 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century lies, and everyone in the world seems to know it but us.

We need to partner with our children to let them help us create a better future for young people. Too often we do things in the name of helping children, but we never ask them whether it is the right thing that should be done for them. That sort of paternalistic action must end. Our children need to have a hand in the future that will soon be theirs.

I think that we have to view what's taking place now during President George W. Bush's reign as being akin to a runaway train. That train is long and that train is powerful, but that train is also running low on fuel. It's traveling at a speed and it's on a course that is unsustainable, and again, the world knows it. To get the fuel it needs the captains of this locomotive are ordering those compliant folks aboard this destructive juggernaut to take axes and chainsaws to the last car. Cut it up and throw it into the fire so the train of unbridled multinational corporate greed and the train of unchecked capitalism can continue. But that sort of behavior can't go on forever. The people in those train cars that have been cut up have to squeeze into the remaining cars, which means the long runaway unsustainable train continues to shrink. Eventually some will be thrown overboard as the captains of the

operation make the decision to jettison those whom they feel are unworthy to stay aboard. The children are the first to go. The world also is that train running on track and at a destructive speed that is economically, socially, judicially and humanistically unsustainable. The people must unite to take a brave new stand to stop the madness and the train wreck that lies ahead. That is where the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child comes in, providing our world with the necessary foresight and sanity. That is where U.N. treaties on the environment, gender equity and racism also play a part. It all goes back to that proverb from Africa, the mother of civilization, which instructs that the world was not given to us by our parents but lent to us by our children.

Ladies and gentlemen, let me close by saying we must redouble our efforts on behalf of giving back this world to our children in better shape than what it was in when we got it. It's the only chance any of us have for survival. As Mohandas Gandhi said, "we must be the change that we wish to see in the world." It starts with taking better care of our children. Ladies and gentlemen, thank you very much.