

Melissa Institute Keynote

Oct. 21, 2004

Ladies and gentlemen, it is a privilege to be with you this noontime. A privilege to be anywhere the memory and legacy of Melissa Aptman are being honored by the important work of the institute established in her honor. A privilege to be anywhere Modesto Abety is being honored because he has toiled for more than a quarter-century now on behalf of the children of this community. Melissa made a difference, still does; Mo made a difference, still does. So do Kirk Landon, our community's best example of philanthropic purposefulness, and Dr. Dale Willows, who brings this community great early literacy expertise, and Julie Astuto at Palmetto Elementary...and so many others. It is all about leadership and vision and commitment.

When I was asked to speak, some three months ago now, I was "hounded" – and perhaps that word is not quite fair – by Dr. DeLaurier for a title for this speech. He needed to go forward with a program, and I just wasn't prepared yet to focus on a topic. Eventually, because I had to say something, I came up with "The Littlest Criminals to Be." So I am "stuck" with that today, and it is the thesis I want to make.

Short and simple, the case I make today is that there is a demonstrable, crucial link between early literacy and the prevention of violence. Our cause is moral and just, but it also a

most practical imperative: Early investment in our children's futures is in everyone's self-interest.

The Melissa Institute already knows a great deal about this. Indeed, it demonstrates its expertise in a model literacy program at Hialeah Elementary. These things we do know:

- A child who can read by the third grade is unlikely to ever be involved with the criminal justice system.**
- Four of five incarcerated juvenile offenders read two years or more below grade level; indeed, a majority of them are functionally illiterate.**

You and I live in the most interesting community in America. And, not infrequently, the most stressful. A place where up to 30 percent of the children start school way behind. A place where there were 9,447 reported incidents of fighting last year in Miami-Dade schools. A place where there were 16,503 cases of domestic violence last year. A place where 35,000 children need mental health services. A place where 2 of every 5 children who start ninth grade drop out. A place where violent teen crimes have increased dramatically this past decade.

And yet you and I choose to live in this place. Indeed, I know of no community of more promise and potential than this one, but ours will be an unrealized potential unless we can build real public will for the early years. You and I live in a place of great

wealth and great poverty; real beauty and real misery. The 2.4 million people in our county make us larger than 16 of these United States. No major urban area better describes diversity than ours: 58 percent Hispanic, 21 percent African American or black, 21 percent non-Hispanic white (producing only 15 percent of the babies). Moreover, more than half the people who live in Miami-Dade were born in another country (the largest such percentage in this country). We are truly living the “great American adventure.”

One topic we could unite on -- through all our challenges of poverty, of culture, of language – is children. Shame on us, and our future, if we cannot.

You do not have an expert speaking with you this noontime. Instead, you have a “recovering” journalist.” Someone who came to believe that the future of our country and community depended on delivering our children in far better shape to kindergarten and first grade.

In the five+ years since my “retirement,” I have had much to “unlearn,” including any sense that this was about children learning to read, say, by age 3. (Rather, it is about the right blend of health and education and nurturing, and the growth of children – cognitively, socially, emotionally, physically.) In any event, I came to know the research, and continue to follow it closely: The research that told us that if 50 first graders have

problems reading, then 44 of them will still have problems reading in the fourth grade. The study that told us if we ever spent a dollar wisely up front in children's lives, we would save seven dollars or more in money we wouldn't have to pay for police, prosecution, prison and remediation of all sorts.

Armed with all this research and knowledge, I came to believe the tragedy of early childhood unpreparedness was preventable. I came to believe that however well intended we might be, we would never make more than incremental change unless we could create real "public will" for real change (most particularly the public awareness on the part of parents for what their children really needed). I came to work on many fronts because children need all the basics, and all those basics of high quality, in these early years. No one thing will make the difference.

And nothing significant will be possible unless, and until, we build a "movement" in behalf of everyone's child and everyone's family. What happens most often is that well-intended people focus their resources on the deeply disadvantaged in one corner of the community or another. Then others see what is being done, and conclude, "Oh, I see it is about those children." But, in fact, all children need all the basics. Remember, too, that the children with "readiness" challenges are frequently children who do not come from poor and distinctly disadvantaged homes and families and neighborhoods. Some of these children may well live down the street from us, or even in our own homes.

When I talk about building a “movement,” I most frequently use kindergarten in illustration. While kindergarten was "invented" in 1837, and came in this country a century and a half ago, it took more than a century to be genuinely widespread. Kindergarten was frequently fought as unnecessary and, even, "anti-family." For decades, kindergarten was seen as mostly for society's worst off and society's best off. Only when it became a "movement" in behalf of everyone's child did it become a full reality. Today, a high-quality kindergarten experience for all children has become an expectation on the part of every parent of every 5 year old. Kindergarten isn't mandatory in two-thirds of the states, including our own, but I have yet to meet the parent of a 5 year old who wants anything less than a high-quality kindergarten-like experience for that child.

A movement for everyone’s child is basic American fairness. The American dream embraces all children. Building a movement depends on our ability to build genuine private-public partnerships. Collaboration must build from a shared vision. And collaboration must begin in genuinely respectful partnerships with parents. If they ever knew what their children are entitled to in a civilized society, we would have a mighty army insisting on real equity for all children.

We in Miami and Florida have elected no “children’s czar,” nor will we. Ours is collaboration with people from the business community, the faith community, the civic and political community, child care people, educators, health professionals, and the list goes on and on. I am not bragging – we have so far to go – but, together, we have a record of momentum that includes this progress:

- With Mo Abety and others, led the campaign in our community in which people raised their taxes so that we could have an extra \$65 million a year in Miami-Dade County for early intervention and prevention. The Children’s Trust is already making a difference in children’s futures, changing social, educational and political priorities and increasing the level of parental involvement in the future of our children.**
- Dramatically increased the number of high-quality child care facilities -- from 17 to 241 – and began using social, emotional and cognitive assessments with thousands of Miami-Dade 3 and 4 year olds. Early assessment leads to early intervention, which yields early success for children who might otherwise fail.**
- Created the best local early childhood website in the country, and accompanied by 24-hour phone lines – and everything in three languages.**
- Built partnerships for new-parent packets with 13 birthing hospitals and nine midwifery centers.**

- **Send a high-quality parent skill-building newsletter to more than 24,000 homes each month.**

And the list goes on and on.

The leadership also came from our community to pass a statewide constitutional amendment to provide parents the opportunity, beginning next year, of a high-quality pre-kindergarten experience for their 4 year olds. We will be the second state in the country to make this available for every 4 year old. We still have a great challenge remaining; that is, the Legislature will meet this December to decide the definition of the “high quality” the voters mandated. Watch this very closely.

But what is the connection between such an experience and violence? Everything. In the words of Palm Beach County Sheriff Ed Bieluch: “We need to invest in America’s most vulnerable kids so they never become America’s most wanted adults.”

So now we come to the point where we have real momentum in our community on behalf of children. We have organizations such as the Melissa Institute connecting the dots between literacy and violence prevention. So many fine organizations, many of them represented here today, that bring special expertise to the cause. What Miami is building increasingly is being seen nationally as a model for “school readiness.”

But let us not kid ourselves: Ours is a daunting mission. We really could fail. What keeps me going are many things, including these words from the educator and writer Diane Ravitch: "Perhaps in the past," she wrote, "it was possible to undereducate a significant portion of the population without causing serious harm to the nation. Today, education more than ever is the key to successful participation in society. A boy or girl who cannot read, write or use mathematics is locked out of every sort of educational opportunity. A man or woman without a good elementary and secondary education is virtually precluded from higher education, from many desirable careers, from full participation in our political system, and from enjoyment of civilization's great aesthetic treasures. The society that allows large numbers of citizens to remain uneducated, ignorant or semiliterate squanders its greatest asset, the intelligence of its people."

My friends, could we not be wise enough to come together to "own" a portrait of what we would want for every child? Can we not see this as an investment in their future and our own? Is it not so "American" that every child have a real chance to succeed? Can we not have the strength and compassion to embrace every child? Could we not build the "will" to do this?

“We know what an unhealthy early childhood does to a growing human being,” writes David Shipler in his recent book, ‘The Working Poor.’ (But) “Our understanding of the problems is ahead of the skills we have acquired to solve them, and the skills are ahead of our will to act.”

It is, I tell you, most profoundly a matter of “will.” We have known for a long time what we really have to do. Socrates asked us 2 ½ millennia ago, “Fellow citizens, why do you turn and scrape every stone to gather wealth, and take so little care of your children, to whom one day you must relinquish it all?”

And it that is not blunt enough, I give you the practical wisdom of the great psychiatrist Karl Menninger, who told us a half-century ago: “What we do to children, they will do to society.” That’s what I meant when I spoke about “The Littlest Criminals to Be.” No one begins life with a “criminal mind.” You and I will pay now or pay later. If we want a caring community, a safe community, an educated community, a thriving community, we will invest up front. We will embrace all children. This is not radicalism or revolution. It is plain common sense. It is plain American fairness.

The future of our children, and our community, depends on us. I thank you for caring. I thank you for doing. And I would hope that God would bless us all in this great cause.

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