

*Remarks by
Governor James R. Thompson*

*University of Illinois Library's
Sixth Stack Dedication
Urbana-Champaign*



October 11, 1984

Mr. President and Mr. Chancellor, other members of the family of the University of Illinois, our neighbors from Champaign-Urbana and perhaps from around the State. I had been provided, by those who advise me, with significant amounts of material for this morning. But in deference to our setting and in response to your patience, I think I will try to elaborate on the major themes of this address without giving you all of it. And I was going to dedicate the manuscript to the University of Illinois, but I thought that might provoke an eighth stack so I'm going to take it with me.

This is the second time within recent months that I've had the privilege of visiting this campus for the purpose of a dedication. The last visit was the dedication of a new facility in the ongoing program of Food for Century III, which has brought much progress and much advancement to the College of Agriculture on this and other campuses throughout the State of Illinois, and which I count on as part of the renewal of Illinois' economic base in the important sensitive area of agriculture and agri-business.

Today's dedication ceremonies are much more fundamental. They probably can't be repeated too often, but the importance of a library to a great university and in the case of the University of Illinois, the world's greatest public university library to the world's greatest public university, cannot be overstated.

And yet we must remember as we dedicate the sixth stack today, that as impressive as brick and steel and glass and stone and wood combined with the newest in retrieval technology are, still the men and women who's creativity the library houses and the men and women who will be served by the library on this campus, on other campuses and throughout the community of Illinois, is even more important than the magnificence of the structure. Sometimes that thought gets lost in dedication ceremonies. For all of us are rightly impressed by and pleased with technological progress, whether on a university campus or elsewhere. I suspect that thought is not lost on, nor will it get lost in, today's ceremony, or on this campus.

Four hundred years ago, Francis Bacon observed a profound, short and simple truth that "Knowledge is power." And so for my State of Illinois, your State of Illinois, for the United States, knowledge and skilled intelligence are the raw materials of international commerce and of course, beyond that, the foundation for world peace.

And so this linkage, between education and a strong, prosperous society, is why the people of Illinois and of our nation were willing to support education as the number one priority in the tough economic times through which we've recently passed, as well as the better times which we're now enjoying, and I believe in even better times, which I think we can enjoy with some significant State and American effort. The result is an educational system which gives us both educational and economic opportunities unmatched anywhere in the world.

And we ought to be number one. We ought not to settle for less than number one. And we certainly ought not to strive for anything but the excellence that number one stands for.

And so this bond between education and a stronger, more prosperous Illinois is one that ought to consistently drive public policy in this State now and in the future...educational policy, governmental policy, fiscal and tax policy as well.

As we reflect on the progress that we would like to achieve for Illinois and for the nation in economic development and education and the linkage between the two, I think it's appropriate that we reflect on that which has been achieved thus far. Almost more than any other country of the world, the American educational system has been extended to a greater portion of our people, not only more than ever before in this nation, but in comparison with other nations as well. In keeping with this nation's egalitarian spirit, a spirit which directly led to the founding of this country more than 200 years ago, we have succeeded in constructing a system of education which is open to all, and which ought to work for all regardless of race, sex, social or economic status.

And this system, which has brought many of us to our present place in life, is reflected in the spirit and the attitude of the people of America toward education. Everybody's fond of consulting the pollsters, especially at this season of the year, and we've elevated the art to overnight polls, and now if recent news stories concerning the debates are to be believed, instant polls.

No sooner had I switched off the Presidential debates the other day, than I switched to a channel which had an instant poll. I didn't know we were all wired and sitting there pushing the button as the debates progress, but apparently so. And so it's appropriate that we ask the pollsters what the people of America think about education. Ninety-five per cent of our people, a pretty good percentage as polls go, thought it was important for America to have the best educational system in the world. I don't know where those other five per cent are, but we ought to find them and start working on them.

You and I know that. And it's just not just because of some overconfident sense of patriotism or parochial pride in America. The link between education and our ability to perform economically in the world is so strong that I think most Americans today understand it.

As a parent, in addition to being the Governor, I know that the quality of the education that my daughter receives as she begins her grade school life in first grade, along with the nurturing of education that she'll receive in our home, will mold her future more than any other factor. And so I am no different in that sense than the millions of Illinoisans who hold the same hopes and have the same dreams for their daughters and their sons and their grandchildren.

Just as I share this common dream, I also share the general concern of our citizens that we quickly take steps in Illinois to assure that we will give our children and grandchildren the very best education available in the world.

And I recognize that education, at both the elementary and secondary levels as well as at the college and university level, faces significant challenges in the decades ahead. The reports, the commission documents, task force results, are piling up and they all said basically the same thing. And they ought to be a source of grave concern to us if we are not content to rest upon the achievements of the past but are striving to achieve the best educational system in the world.

For example:

-- Studies of student achievement suggest declining, not increasing, levels of proficiency in our elementary and secondary schools across America.

-- From an international perspective, and it's ever more an international world these days, levels of achievement of students in the United States do not compare favorably with those of students from other industrialized nations.

-- Finally, only in the last two years have we begun to see a turnaround in the decline in scholastic aptitude test scores which were dropping significantly in this nation beginning twenty years ago.

The nation has not been sitting idly by and simply reflecting on those serious trends. Nor have we in Illinois been inactive in the search for solutions to our educational problems.

-- 46 states, including Illinois, are working on comprehensive plans to improve public schools.

-- 44 states, including Illinois, have stiffened high school graduation requirements.

-- 13 states have passed tax increases specifically to help fund greater advances in education.

-- 27 states have lengthened the school day or school year, reduced class size, and provided state funding to increase instructional time.

-- 29 states have tightened teacher certification.

While Illinois has not been standing still, neither have we been fully participating in the wave of educational reform which hopefully is sweeping our nation. I believe we must do more than we have done to help secure our future, and our children's future.

And I believe that revitalization of education in Illinois from our elementary and secondary schools to our university campuses, must be the most important state priority in 1985...nothing is more important than that.

No other issue facing Illinois is as important, but in terms of the quality of the very foundation on which our children will build their lives, nothing is more important.

Earlier in my time as Governor, as I traveled from Rockford to Cairo and from Quincy to Danville, I heard the people of Illinois express outrage and frustration and dismay at what they perceived as a lack of backbone in our criminal justice system. And so for the next several years I worked with the General Assembly to toughen the laws to ensure that criminals served the sentences they deserved and that the fundamental safety of our people was enhanced. Together, we, the Governor and Legislature, found the money, even in tough economic times, to build the prisons needed to keep those persons off our streets who couldn't be dealt with in any other fashion.

While the safety of the public is not only important, but basic to a free society, prisons house failures, at least momentary ones, and in a sense are monuments to the basest behavior of mankind.

Our educational institutions, however, from our elementary and secondary classrooms to great university campuses, represent what is the best in mankind's nature. And there can be no greater monument in a healthy society than schools that prepare our children to compete successfully, prepare them to lead this nation and the world into the next millennium. There is no new discovery in that statement, only a reaffirmation of the wisdom of our forefathers.

And so, as we dedicate this important addition to the library, let me tell you my view as to how Illinois can bolster our educational system to ensure the continued diffusion of knowledge and wisdom to those who will build a sound future for our State and for our nation.

First, with regard to elementary and secondary education, the bottom line is, we must attract and retain the best of our young people to and in the teaching profession. It all starts there.

If we want our children to learn from the best teachers, we must shape the rewards and incentives necessary to ensure that an appropriate share of the nation's top talent each year enters the teaching profession.

But enrollment in teacher education curricula in our colleges has declined. From 1973 to 1981, for example, undergraduate enrollment in education at the University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana, which is by all standards one of the top five colleges of education in the United States, decreased by 36 per cent. A study released by the Rand Corporation confirms what many of us had already suspected: that the decrease in numbers has gone hand in hand with a decrease in quality of those entering the teaching profession. This must change. This must stop.

We have to develop a realistic program of financial incentives to persuade able college students to enter teaching, focusing special attention on high-demand, high priority subject areas. If education can ever hope to compete with the private sector for talented young people, we must raise the minimum salary for beginning teachers and we must improve their working conditions.

Second, we must make clear, not just to the teachers, the parents and the students, and the educational establishment, but to the people of Illinois who will be expected to pay the bill and who therefore are entitled to know what are the results...what is it we will achieve. We must make clear the central purposes of our schools, and the knowledge and skills we expect students to master.

Our schools must focus more attention on the "common core" of knowledge and skills our young people will need to function effectively in the 21st century. And therefore, our schools must change. They must expect more and demand more and teach more.

The education that I received in the Chicago public schools in the 1940s was apparently adequate to prepare me for the tasks I carry out today, though obviously in this job I learn much every day. But the education that I received in the 1940s is by no means adequate for my daughter and your daughters and sons in the 1980s as we prepare them for the employment of the next century. That should not have to be said, but I fear that for many, particularly of my generation, it must be said.

Too many times we assume that that which we received and from which we benefited, is adequate for our children and our grandchildren. And it is not. It is a much changed world now. And it will be an even more greatly changed world in the next several decades. And we must not be guilty of short changing our children and grandchildren when it comes to the most important thing in their lives...their ability to provide for themselves when we're gone and to be, if I can invoke the American dream, better than we are, and better than we can be.

Third, strong educational leadership in our schools is critical. Strong leadership is essential to providing direction and support for the teaching staff, and for helping the community to understand the needs of our schools. Without strong leadership from school administrators and boards of education, we cannot hope to establish the coalition of public support which should be the foundation of our schools. And so our leaders in education, at every level, must reach out and forge new alliances of parents, teachers and students with communities, businesses, labor, industry.

Fourth, our schools need to improve organizational and administrative efficiency. We have over a thousand separate school districts in Illinois, ranging in size from 17 students to 400,000 students. Illinois clearly has too many school districts.

Recently a group came in from one part of central Illinois to see me about perhaps getting some assistance from the State in replacing a school building that had been declared to be dangerous and out of which teachers and students had been forced to move. And I inquired about the support from the local community for a new facility and whether attempts at local referenda had been attempted. And they said yes, but they were defeated. And I said, why is that? And they said, well, a lot of these folks went to that old school, and they just can't help but believe that their kids should go there too. You know, a nostalgia for what was in America and in Illinois has its value. We ought to preserve the best of the past, but we ought not to chain our children to what was appropriate in the past, but is inappropriate for the future. And sometimes in our desire to go back to earlier, happier, simpler times, we do that. And we ought to recognize that as a fault and cure ourselves.

Yes, it's nice if Tom or Joe can go to the same school, sit at the same desk, and maybe have the same teacher as mother and father. It makes us feel good. But it may not be educating our children. We ought to have our priorities straight. There are plenty of other occasions for nostalgia about life past and plenty of opportunities to preserve the best of our past without chaining our children to inadequacy and yet, having very high expectations of them.

Consolidation of districts would provide basic operating efficiencies now impossible and help control costs for operating local schools, allowing more of the educational dollar to be spent on improving the breadth and quality of academic offerings. And I'll tell you frankly, the people of Illinois, the taxpayers of this State will not be impressed by the simple argument that to improve education in Illinois all we have to do is give it more money. They will not only not be impressed, they will reject that argument. And then we will lose opportunity to advance ourselves as we point toward the next century.

The people of Illinois, I believe, are willing to make a substantial commitment to the improvement of education in this State from K through post-doctorate, but they want to be pretty darn sure of what they're getting in return. And they don't want platitudes, and they don't want unrealistic goals, and they don't want the inefficiencies of the past and present. They want the educational establishment of this State to clearly understand that they understand who's paying the bill.

Finally, I think we must improve the funding mechanisms for elementary and secondary education, easing our dependence on that most regressive of taxes, the property tax.

Let me now turn to the question of quality in our colleges and universities across Illinois.

It goes without saying that they are vital to the future of this State. I say it goes without saying, though I've said it at least ten times this morning alone. And I said it in meetings which preceded this appearance. The University of Illinois, along with our other public and private institutions of higher learning, I think, may represent our single most significant asset in this State as we respond to the economic opportunities and social challenges of the years ahead.

And so what should we expect of our universities and colleges?

First, institutions of higher education must state candidly and realistically the standards of quality they expect in the students they admit. A recent study by the Board of Higher Education shows that few universities and colleges in this State specify specific high school course requirements as a condition of admission, and that must change. Whether the specific requirements of the Board or some modification are adopted, I urge that each Illinois university, public and private, place the review of its admission requirements high on the agenda.

Failure to do so will send a confusing signal to Illinois elementary and secondary schools and fails to make explicit the standards of quality that we intend to enforce.

Second, I think Illinois' universities and colleges must devote increasing attention to strengthening the basic disciplines.

In recent years, we have addressed, and rather well, the special problems of the professional schools, engineering, commerce and business administration, law and other areas. And while we must keep those areas strong and preeminent, we cannot lose sight of the need to strengthen the common core of educational experiences which all undergraduates ought to share. Even more important than specific career skills is the ability of students to think logically and precisely, to use language in both its written and oral form effectively, and to understand and to apply concepts in science and mathematics in an increasingly complicated world.

Just as the time has come to direct attention to basic fundamentals in our elementary and secondary schools, it is also time to focus attention in our universities and colleges on the basic disciplines and on the quality of education received by all undergraduate students.

Third, if we are to achieve academic excellence in our universities and colleges, we must be able to attract and retain the superior faculty and staff members from whom excellence must ultimately come.

And while there is no single answer to this challenge, it is clear that it cannot be met in the absence of salaries which are competitive with those offered by peer institutions in the public and private sectors. Competition for first rate faculties is increasingly stiff and we have to respond.

The other most pressing problem faced by public universities and colleges in Illinois today is the need to renovate and modernize aging and outmoded academic facilities. No one wants to overbuild a campus, as elementary and secondary education was overbuilt decades ago. The result has been the abandonment of many schools throughout the State of Illinois today, something which does not endear taxpayers to educational finance.

But, if we expect to attract and retain top quality faculty and staff members, they have to have adequate facilities in which to work. If we expect students to have access to high quality programs, we have to recognize that these are at least in part dependent on modern equipment housed in functional facilities.

The bottom line is that in tougher economic times a few years ago, repairs and renovations and modernization were deferred because they were thought not to be the highest priority.

But now the time has come for the State of Illinois to address the problem of aging facilities in its universities and colleges by developing a program of modernization and renovation. I will, starting with next year's budget, urge the Illinois Board of Higher Education to work with our universities and colleges to develop and recommend to me and to the General Assembly a multi-year, multi-million dollar program that will halt facility deterioration and begin to rehabilitate research and teaching laboratories in our universities and colleges.

All of these things, not just for themselves, but to recognize the importance of the linkage between education and economic development, between learning and job opportunity, between the present and the future. But education, whether elementary and secondary, or higher education in one form or another, cannot be a strong partner in economic development unless education is itself strong.

To that end, and for our future, we must all of us now dedicate ourselves.

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