
America 2000: An Author's Dream, An Astronaut's Vision, An Educator's Nightmare

Cindy Gillespie

I don't go to the movie theater very often to watch recently released movies because I know full well they will soon be available on videotape (It doesn't take long, particularly if the movie is a box office flop.). Many of today's movies, both on television and the silver screen, are based in fact, or partially in fact, on current events which appear in the local newspaper or the weekly tabloids. Certainly, if a bizarre incident appears in *People Magazine* you can rest assured that it will probably end up on the silver screen or on the movie of the week. At the 1992 meeting of the American Reading Forum, we had the opportunity to watch what I consider to be a box office flop: *America 2000*.

Now this video had all the makings of a hit: It is based in fact on current events in the newspaper (although I doubt it made the tabloids, and probably did not make the cover of *People Magazine*, I can't remember), and it was released fairly soon after the National Goals were announced by the U.S. Department of Education. The main characters are well-known figures: Former President Bush, Former Secretary of Education Alexander, and Alex Haley. (I would include Astronaut Jernigan, but I don't think she's a household name, yet). However, if the actors do not have a decent script, the movie bombs. In all fairness to the Department of Education, the video is very well done; it's the script, *America 2000*, that makes it a flop. Let's review the contents of the video.

First, *America 2000*, the video, is narrated by Astronaut Tammy Jernigan and Alex Haley, author of *Roots*. They introduce the video by talking about freedom: something which we all enjoy, and sometimes take for granted. They discuss how other countries, particularly Eastern European countries and the Soviet Union, look to the U.S. as they discover the excitement and challenges of their own freedom. The transition from the discussion about freedom to the discussion of *America 2000* goes something like this: "Freedom takes renewal. We're the ones who keep freedom up to date, America up to date, and it doesn't happen in Washington. It happens in our own communities, our neighborhoods, our schools and our homes...To get a job and keep a job, we need new skills that will take a new kind of school and a new kind of community support and that takes all of us: parents, teachers, businesses, and government all helping to build the kind of communities where learning can happen. And we're doing it right now all over America. One community at a time, one *America 2000* community at a time."

After a brief cameo by Former President Bush in which he explains that the *America 2000* movement is spreading like wildfire, we cut to Barbara Bush who gives a compelling performance. She discusses the importance of reading to children and encourages parents to read to their youngsters. Barbara, like Rhett ("Frankly, Scarlett...") and females who play Lady MacBeth ("Out, out..."), utters what could probably be considered the most memorable lines of the video: "You should want to say, 'Our community is my business. Our schools are my business. Our children are my business.'" Then she talks about joining the **crusade**: the *America 2000* crusade.

We then cut away from Barbara and are focused on a "we are ordinary people" discussion by some "down-home folks" who have joined the *America 2000* **crusade**. They explain the **crusade** to the video watchers. *America 2000* is described as the forming of a business-education partnership because "children need to come out that can work" (What's wrong with this sentence? Children are not that.) Children need to be productive members of society." The message is: Parents, teachers, businesses and government should all help to build communities where learning can happen.

Next, flashed on the screen is the question: "What are the 6 National Goals?" What follows is a rather brief (everyone gets a turn to state one of the goals) listing of the goals to be accomplished by the year 2000:

1. All students should enter school ready to learn.
2. 90% of the students across the country will graduate from high school.

3. All students should achieve certain levels within certain core subjects and understand the importance of citizenship.
4. The U.S. and its students should be first in the world in science and math.
5. We should become a nation of learners and we should address the literacy issue for all Americans.
6. We should have drug and violence free classrooms.

Then we cut back to another question. "How does it work?" The viewer is told that America 2000 is a catalyst to get communities to do what they ought to do, and that it will bring people together. The four things that a community must do to become an America 2000 school are:

1. Adopt the six national education goals.
2. Develop a community strategy to meet the goals by the year 2000.
3. Produce a report card to measure results.
4. Prepare, support, and facilitate the development of a new American school.

Once you've taken the aforementioned four steps, you get a presidential proclamation declaring you an official America 2000 community. WOW!

Then, we have another cameo appearance. This time it's Former Secretary of Education Lamar Alexander. His presentation is akin to a commercial in the middle of a movie. He explains that local schools must remain local and that the change in schools must be local. He then provides his viewing audience with a list of things that are available to assist in becoming an America 2000 school: guidebooks on how to be an America 2000 community, checklists, free videos, and a toll free number (1-800-USA-LEARN). You can request "how to" sessions, seminars, a catalog of information, a newsletter, a list of experts and ideas, and a list of the 50 most-asked questions with answers.

Enter the "down-home folks" who tell us what their communities have done to achieve specific goals:

- Goal 1 provide hot meals, intergenerational day care centers, free immunization, and medical screening
- Goal 2 better utilize educational resources at students' fingertips in high school, allow students to advance 2-3 grades in single year, and local radio spots to get students in school thereby increasing school attendance

Goals 3 & 4 The goals discussed here are slightly more detailed than previously mentioned: The students will prove their competence in English, history, and geography and be first in the world in science and math. Some examples of attempts to meet these goals include: summer programs, six weeks of fun with math and science, year round schools, saturn schools, homework hotline (with help in many languages), and voice mail to increase communication between parents and teachers.

Goal 5 Again, we have a variation of what this goal is (guess it's similar to poetic license): Make all adults literate and make them want to continue learning no matter what. Examples include: satellite technology, public tv, companies giving training to employees based on real job requirements, and companies donating money to schools to develop high tech training centers.

Goal 6 Poetic license: Make schools safe: discipline and drug free. Programs have included such things as: 100 hours of community service for every high school student before graduation, boarding schools to provide a safe place to live and learn, mentors, and role models.

The climax to the video is when the audience finds out the answer to the (by now, burning) question: "How do you start?" We are told to gather together business leaders, health organization leaders, educators, politicians, religious leaders, and ethnic leaders. We should also find people from all socio-economic levels and make sure the local parent teacher association is not forgotten. Then we create a task force to decide which selected areas to study such as: subjects, curriculum, drop out rate, state regulations, and school financing. Once again, we are warned that the whole community must be involved. America 2000 is a long term **reforming** system.

As the movie is ending, we are told the federal government is not directing this **movement**. The federal government provides some help, but communities must help themselves. According to the video the advantages of little government involvement are that communities can start where they are; they can add their own local goals; and they can tailor the program to their specific situations. The audience is then treated to a "Why is it important?" discussion. We are told that communities will never survive if we don't meet "the problem" head on. They cite the major causes of "the problem:" disintegration of family, two working parents, stress on children, drugs, and drop outs.

Flashback to our friends Tammy and Alex. Their parting words include such things as: Education is the key to survival and success. All schools should become America 2000 schools. America 2000 will change the country. It's the new American community that gives us freedom. It's a renewal of freedom. It gets us ready for a new century. It means jobs for our young people. America will be able to **compete**. American will still **lead**. America 2000 combines yesterday's values and tomorrow's skills. It won't happen quickly; it's long term, and it's hard work. We are also told that Former President Bush said that when it comes to schools there will be no **renaissance** without **revolution**. Tammy and Alex then tell us that it will take a new American **revolution** in each American community: one community at a time, one America 2000 community at a time. We can change the country and get it ready for a new century if we tap the new American Spirit. The video ends.

Since the acting has been critiqued, it's time to critique the message. To put the critique in journalistic terms, America 2000 contains nothing but "glittering generalities" which keep me from "jumping on the America 2000 bandwagon." Fundamentally, I don't understand why the video refers to school reform in war terms: **crusade** and **revolution** (These have been identified heretofore in bold print).

Secondly, the "glittering generalities" are nice, but they contain no substance. For example, Goal 1 (All students should enter school ready to learn) sounds like social reform and welfare. While this is a lofty (and somewhat idealistic) goal, it can not be accomplished by educators. Sure, we can educate parents as to the kinds of things they should be doing with preschool youngsters, but we cannot be guaranteed that the parents will provide the necessary educational nurturing necessary to ensure that students will enter school ready to learn. From the America 2000 plan, this is where the businessmen and government come in: to pay for the youngsters' food, clothes, baths, books, and medical care. What, then, is the role of the parent? and Who will fund the welfare/early start/head start type of programs?

Goal 6 (We should have drug and violence free classrooms) also falls into the "What can educators do about his?" category. Again, teachers can educate, but parents must also accept the responsibility for teaching children right from wrong. Parents and government (particularly law enforcement) must help tackle this problem, because educators cannot do it alone. What is the role of the judicial system if not to deal with drugs and violence?

Ninety percent of the students across the country will graduate from high school is Goal 2. Now, teachers can help to make this goal a reality,

but they need to have help from parents, businessmen and government. Students must value education. It has been well-documented that children's values come from their parents. If parents do not value education, then it is unlikely that their children will value education. Businesses can also help by insisting that their employees graduate from high school or that student workers attend school on a regular basis and maintain a decent grade point average. They must look at these high school workers as students, not as cheap labor. The almighty dollar comes into play here. How do you explain to students and businessmen that an education is more important than money? How do you change the values of a family between the hours of 8:00 a.m. and 3:00 p.m. Mondays through Fridays?

Goals 3 (All students should achieve certain levels within certain core subjects and understand the importance of citizenship) and 4 (The U.S. and its students should be first in the world in science and math) lie within the realm of educators. However, these goals are intertwined with the values issue. Educators can "lead the horses to water, but they cannot make them drink." They can teach their students to value education, but if those values are not reinforced in the home, then these goals will not be met. Additionally, who decides what the "certain levels" should be and what the "certain core subjects" should be and what does "understand the importance of citizenship" mean? Doesn't this sound like mastery learning?

Goal 5 (We should become a nation of learners and we should address the literacy issue for all Americans) is my favorite, particularly the "we should address the literacy issue" part. It seems like we have been "addressing" the literacy issue for years but have done very little about it. Educators work very hard on this issue, particularly adult literacy, but businesses and government provide little support. Even the definition of literacy is up for grabs. How many adult illiterates are there in the United States? It depends on which report you read and how "literate" was defined in that report. The value society places on being literate is also questionable. How else can the fact that many adult illiterates start programs and then drop out after a few weeks or months be explained?

The America 2000 plan is not *all* bad. It is a start. However, much needs to be done to make the plan realistic and workable. Now that there is a basic plan in place, it is time for politicians to ask for help--not from other politicians or from special interest groups, but from educators. As it stands, if a community were to adopt the America 2000 goals, theoretically educators, parents, businessmen, and politicians would be involved. Whenever an educational issue arises and is put to a vote, educators would not have much of a say, particularly if they disagreed

with the other three groups. Logic tells us that educators would lose every time by a 3-1 margin. So who is determining the educational policies for the America 2000 schools? Or more broadly, who is determining the educational policies for all schools across the country?

Secondly, the America 2000 plan does not directly address the issues of curriculum and instruction. This should not be surprising considering that the America 2000 plan was developed by Former President Bush and governors. It hints around by saying "certain levels within certain core subjects." I suppose educators should be pleased that curriculum and instruction was not addressed, since most of the governors and the President do not have degrees in education. However, this emphasis on "core subjects" conflicts with past incentives (government funding) to develop driver education, sex education, drug education, and AIDS education programs. Who is in charge of curriculum? Who makes the decisions? What role do educators play in this decision-making process?

The International Reading Association offers a plan for reform which includes the following: (1) professional development, (2) focus on curriculum and instruction, (3) provide alternative assessment that informs teaching and learning and benefits the learner, and (4) link school, family, and community. While the IRA has a more concrete plan for meeting the needs of the twenty-first century, it is a very costly plan. Whether the costs associated with IRA's plan are warranted and justifiable will undoubtedly be decided by lawmakers and politicians. So we are back where we started: Who's running the "education show?" The answer is obvious--the politicians and lawmakers. What's wrong with this picture?

Educators have been dependent on parents to help prepare their youngsters for learning. Parents have been dependent on educators to teach their children. It seems that, in addition to educating the children, the schools have now taken on the additional role of providing for students whose parents have not, would not, or could not, prepare their children for learning or provide them with a literate environment. Schools also provide food for children free of charge and, in some cases, bath water and soap. Where does it end? What will the schools be expected to do next?

While I may not have the answers to these questions, I have plenty of questions that need answered. I do know that we are only curing the symptoms. We have not cured the disease. The America 2000 and IRA plans treat the symptoms; they do not treat the disease. Dan Quayle (although he didn't say it the right way) and I agree on the disease: a disintegration of the family unit, and the devaluing of education. Now, if I could only find the cure....