



WABASH COLLEGE

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To Whom It May Concern:

Back in the mid-1980's, when I was the Acting Chair of the National Endowment for the Humanities, I received a letter from a student at the Lincoln School saying she and her class were coming to Washington, and she asked if they could they visit. She said in the letter that they were learning "everything" about the humanities and hoped that I might talk to them.

Of course, I said yes, since I never knew anyone who claimed to know "everything" about the humanities. Soon there walked into my office about two dozen fourth graders, extraordinarily diverse, and all bright and cheery. I remember this distinctly – they said, "Ask us anything about the humanities, so long as it has to do with ancient Greece or Rome." So I did. Or maybe they were really quizzing me. They told me who Socrates was and why he died. They talked to me about Alexander the Great and what he did; they even told me the name of his horse. Later they told me who Socrates' wife was, with one of them explaining that he thought it was terrible that she would nag him so. I knew they knew things I didn't know. After talking and talking, we finally ended the session by my passing out bags of jelly beans that I had asked President Reagan's office to send over for the event.

They loved the jelly beans. But, in all honesty, they were more excited telling me about Greece and Rome than they were about the candy, even if it did come from the White House. I guess I have no doubt that youngsters can learn facts and names and dates as well as anyone. But that was only the surface – What I really saw was students totally in love with learning, excited about learning, happy about knowing, and eager to learn more. From everything that we all had read about the sad state of public schooling back then, this seemed nothing short of miraculous. (I even talked about Lincoln School and these students when I later testified before the House Education and Labor Committee, under Rep. Sid Yates. We actually talked about this event at some length, with the congressman wondering if there was any school in Illinois that would match this. He was stumped. It was one of the few times I ever saw the unflappable Mr. Yates, well, "flapped.")

I wrangled an invitation up to Mt. Vernon to visit the school. Ordinary buildings, open classrooms, a parochial school across the street which had been draining off the more affluent families – nothing out of the ordinary. Nothing, that is, until, I realized that in this wide open space there was a funny mix of quiet and excitement. Students plugging away; working in small groups; a story being read here, a math problem tackled there...without any real silliness or tomfoolery going on in the halls or anywhere. I remember walking into one of the lower grades and immediately the kids wanted to tell me all about mummies. They had been reading about Africa and Egypt and had just