

TRANSCRIPT

Lunchtime Address by the Director of The Campaign for Grade-Level Reading

SPEAKER	Ralph Smith Managing Director The Campaign for Grade-Level Reading
EVENT TITLE	<i>Every Day Counts Policy Forum: Developing Utah Solutions to Increase Attendance and Improve Student Outcomes</i>
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KAREN CROMPTON

But it is my real privilege to introduce our luncheon speaker, Ralph Smith. He is the Senior Vice President of The Annie E. Casey Foundation, which is a private philanthropy dedicated to helping build better futures for disadvantaged children in the United States.

Jim Casey, who was one of the founders of United Parcel Services—better known as UPS—and his siblings, established the foundation named in the honor of their mother in 1948, so they’ve been around for a while. The foundation seeks to foster public policies, human service reforms, and community supports that more effectively meet the needs of today’s vulnerable children and families. And I’m proud to say that Voices for Utah Children is a grantee of The Annie E. Casey Foundation for the Kids Count project, which this year celebrates its 25th anniversary. That’s a real commitment by a foundation to any project, actually, let alone child advocacy.

Ralph Smith joined the Casey Foundation in 1994 as Director of Planning and Development, and has served as Casey’s Executive Vice President and Chief Policy Officer. In 2010, Ralph became Managing Director of The Campaign for Grade-Level Reading, which is a nationwide effort to reverse the unacceptably high rates of low-income children in the United States not reading proficiently at the end of third grade. The Campaign is supported by the Casey Foundation and dozens of other philanthropies, funders, and sector-building nonprofit organizations.

Ralph Smith was a member of the law faculty at the University of Pennsylvania for two decades, teaching corporations and security law, and education law and policy. During those two decades, he also served as Special Counsel, Chief of Staff, Chief Operating Officer, and Transition Director for the Philadelphia School District, and Senior Advisor to Philadelphia’s mayor. Smith led the school district teams that designed and implemented the district’s landmark voluntary desegregation plan, negotiated some of the nation’s first education reforms, driven in terms of teacher contracts, and developed Children Achieving, a districtwide blueprint supporting the Annenberg Challenge. So we are very fortunate that Ralph was able to join us today, and we’ll talk about the chronic absence issue and the connections with third-grade reading level. So, Ralph, it’s yours, and the stairs are over here. **[Applause]**

RALPH SMITH

Good afternoon. I am delighted to be here, and now I know when you say that, you think that's the, you know, that's dictated by courtesy. As a nervous flyer, I am delighted to be any place the plane lands safely. So I am delighted to be here, but I'm delighted to be in Utah for a number of reasons. One, it gives me a chance, in Karen Crompton's home state, to say thank you. Karen is a stalwart for the Casey Foundation. She has been one of the folks upon whom we depend for good judgment and strong leadership. And she's never failed us; she's guided us well, and led us well, especially when it comes to Kids Count. And no matter where we go in the country, Kids Count is our strongest brand; it is our ace, and it is that because of people like Karen Crompton. So, Karen, I wanted, in your home state, to say thank you for your leadership and contribution to the work we do at the Casey Foundation. **[Applause]**

I also wanted to come to Utah because this state, on this issue, is leading the way, and leadership matters. From the governor on down, over the last few years, whenever we want to know whether a particular policy, a strategy, a tactic with attendance would work, we ask whether it's embraced by Utah. And you have done that, and done that so well, that we *all* learn from you. And if you notice, you've got virtually our entire team here today. Now, I must say, I think it's unfair to ask me to speak on attendance when you have Hedy [Chang], Yolie [Flores], Sue [Fothergill], all in the audience. And you've heard from them already, so you know everything you need to know about attendance. And then they stack the deck by importing Garry [McGiboney] from Georgia; that's no fair. So I'm going to say as little about attendance as I possibly can.

But before that, I really want to acknowledge that WestEd, Ann White, the United Way, and a whole lot of folks here in Utah making the Campaign for Grade-Level real, and not just around attendance. I don't hope to match Hedy Chang's ferocious brilliance on this issue, because Hedy is chronic absence and attendance 24/7, 365, and hopes for the leap year. She has moved this issue over the last eight years from a fragment of an idea to a national movement, and has raised up, all across the nation, not only awareness about the issue, but helped to create a sense of urgency around the issue. Hedy is unflappable, unstoppable, and to her we owe an amazing debt of gratitude for giving the Campaign a flagship issue to which people resonate and around which they can rally.

And I will tell you that the Campaign is really a response to a call to action issued by the Casey Foundation in May of 2010. And we figured if we would issue the call to action, we should be among the first to respond. And that call to action really came when we look closely at the data, and the data told us that fully 80% of the nation's low-income children were failing to meet the critical milestone represented by reading proficiently by the end of third grade—fully 80%. And for us that was a catastrophe in the making. And for me personally, it reminded me that this is my second career. Now, you heard Karen and my resume; I want to tell those of you who don't know, I'm West Indian, Caribbean, and so we all have three, four jobs. So I'm not 102 years old being able to do all that; did them all at the same time, so there were three, four things happening. But as I made the transition from the corporate—turned my gaze from corporate to social policy—there was a question which arose to become the challenge that I would face during this phase in my career. And the question was this: How could we know as

much as we do, spend as much as we do, care as much as we say we do, and yet accomplish so little, for so many children, over so long a period of time, as permanently to compromise their ability and capacity to grow up to succeed as adults in the economy, as adults as parents, and as adults in life?

And that question haunts me still, but even more so the answer that I deduced. And the answer is that we...for me, is this: We don't know as much as we think we do. And we often lack the personal courage and political will to act on what we know. We don't spend as much as we may need to, but until we do better with what we have, it's going to be difficult to make the case for what we need. We don't care as much as we say we do, because some kids matter more than others, and some kids matter not at all. If that 80% number reflected *all* kids; if that 80% number reflected kids who were not poor and not kids of color, it would be seen as a disaster, as a catastrophe. We would find it unacceptable, and we would mobilize everything we had; it would be the equivalent of a domestic Sputnik. But because we know that the 80% of kids who are missing the mark are mostly low-income kids, and disproportionately, kids of color, it is another statistic, another data point to be managed.

And what we're attempting to do in the Campaign is to change that particular perspective, to create some awareness about the real consequences of that 80% number—not just for these children and their families, but for the communities in which they live, the states in which those communities are located, and our nation. And we are delighted that we have been able to see the formation of a broad consensus—what we call “the big tent”—from all sectors of our society, coming to the table and saying loudly, clearly, and repeatedly, that this is unacceptable, and it is a trend that must be reversed. We were particularly excited to hear from Mission Readiness, and to have the admirals and generals—retired flag officers—stand with us, and point out that this is more than a nation that needs a workforce that can compete in the global economy. This is more than a threat to our need for college-going students who are prepared to lead the world in knowledge and technology and innovation. Mission Readiness tells us this is a threat to our national security, and they urge attention to the issue.

And you know, as we launched the campaign, lots of folks said, “Well, what are you going to do about reading? Do we need another reading program? Do we need to get the publishers together? Do we need better teachers?” And we sort of backed up a bit and said, you know, we don't pretend to have this covered—a magic potion or a silver bullet. The hard work of turning the tide, and changing the curve and the trajectory around third grade reading, will require assurances on three levels. One, we're going to need to assure quality teaching in every setting for every child every day—and notice we didn't just say “quality teaching in every classroom”; we said “in every setting”—quality teaching at home, quality teaching in child care, quality teaching in the early learning programs, quality teaching in afterschool program, as well as quality teaching in the classroom.

We're going to need care services and support—a more seamless system of care services and support for all kids, but especially low-income kids. And when we say that, we all immediately think of the gaps and chasms which essentially characterize much of what we see in public systems that makes us shake our head and wonder how kids and families negotiate these systems, and whether anybody ever gets what they want and what they need in the sequence

they need it. And as we're being self-righteous about the public systems, let's remember that the social sector organizations are not significantly better. And when we speak to social sector organizations, we remind them that in 1988—the Olympics in 1988—neither the men's nor women's 4x100 track team medaled, although there was a consensus that the United States had the fastest sprinters. So how could they not medal? They both messed up the handoff—dropped the baton and muffed the handoff.

Well, the work we do is more like a relay than it is a sprint, and we pay virtually no attention to the handoff. And that's part of the answer, if we ask this question: Why is it that so many of our social sector organizations are able to report good outcomes? Why do we have so much in the way of good outcomes and so little in the way of impact? Why is it that we've got good outcomes and a decade—a flat line—in terms of impact? It is because—and I say philanthropy should take full responsibility for this—we have put enormous emphasis on individual organizational outcomes and virtually no emphasis on the handoff. We do not support, we do not invest in, we do not require, and we pay no attention to the handoff, and so philanthropy is as culpable as anything. But, if we're going to change the curve, we have to assure a more seamless system—both public and social—of care, services, and family supports.

And the third assurance. We've got to mobilize the community to help with the barriers that now stop kids from being successful. And when we get there, we move on two assumptions and two propositions of The Campaign for Grade-Level Reading. The first proposition says that we have to be consistent, persistent, insistent to the point of truculence; that schools have to do better with the kids they have and not the kids they'd prefer to have. It's not as if parents are keeping the good kids at home, and sending the others to school. Schools...parents are generally sending schools the kids they have—all the kids they have; they're not holding the good ones back. So schools have to do better with the kids they have, and not the kids they'd prefer to have. Once having said that, the educators in the room now are choosing whether the kung-fu stance or the fetal position, because they're absolutely sure what's going to come next—and they're wrong. I think we've got to stop beating up on schools, beating up on teachers, beating up on educators, beating up on superintendents. We're going to need a very strong generation of folks choosing to go into education, and if we keep up this national drumbeat of criticism, finger-pointing, and blaming, we're going to make this a pretty unattractive profession for the next generation. We have got to say that this is about...as much about the rest of us, as it is about schools. And the rest of us have to stop trying to decide whether we want to be in the box seats or the bleachers. We've got to come out of the stands, get down on the field; get off the sidelines, and get into the game. And what that means is, we've got to realize that there are some kids who are moving farther and farther outside of the zone where schools can be effective with them.

We now have a growing number of kids in many school districts and many communities across the country for whom schools do not matter, and that is a very tough thing to say, because we do not want to say “game over” on any kid. But let me tell you, there are three groups of kids that we've got to reach—and it's we, not just schools. There are some kids who are starting school so far behind that they will not catch up—and we can say *will not* catch up in three years. Now, this is not about the kid, because if any of you have a chance to see a highly

qualified teacher work with three kids who are virtually nonverbal, and you see that work—and Garry from Georgia will tell you, we could take you to the Rollins Center [for Language and Literacy, at the Atlanta Speech School], and you could see it. It is like magic what a highly qualified teacher could do with these kids. By the end of the year, those kids are having conversations; you walk into the room and those kids are escorting you to your seat and asking you about your family. So it's not about the kids. But we're not about, as a society, to allocate enough resources to school for a teacher/student ratio of 1 to 3. So for all intents and purposes, those kids will not catch up. And that starts at home, and we have got to figure out how we work with parents so that they can do a better job for the kids they love more than we do.

Second group of kids—and that's the group of kids around which Utah is mobilizing—that's the group of kids that brings us here today. The kids who miss so much school that they fall behind during the school year. I was in Columbus yesterday, and after a year of the...two years of the Ohio Third Grade Guarantee, and after enormous effort, they've gone from predicting that 1,500 or 1,600 kids would be retained in third grade to 471. The betting is that a third of those 471 kids were chronically absent in first grade, second grade, and third grade. We cannot ask schools to succeed with kids who aren't there, and getting kids to school, especially at that age group, has to be a community-wide responsibility; it's a response where we can take up, and I'm energized to see Utah take it up.

Third, the evidence has been clear...the research has been clear for a long time that kids lose ground over the summer, and low-income kids lose more ground than others. And if there's a debate...the debate—is it two months, or is it three months, or is it four months—there's no debate that it's cumulative, and there's no debate that a large number of low-income kids who are not engaged and stimulated over the summer go back to school in September farther behind than when they left in June. Ask any teacher and the teacher will confirm that.

That's on us. This summer slide is not about quality teaching; this summer slide is about communities that have not organized themselves so that the adults who are involved in children's lives over the summer know that summer is not just about vacation, that summer really is about the opportunity—the opportunity for fitness, the opportunity for good nutrition, the opportunity for learning, the opportunity for literacy. There are programs around the country that demonstrate that we can stop the summer slide, but virtually *no* community has made those programs ubiquitous; virtually *no* community takes care of its kids during the summer; virtually *every* community allows the majority of kids who are eligible for free and reduced lunch—meals—to go wanting over the summer, even though the federal dollars are there. The average community around the country allows—is organized to allow—only 20% of eligible students to receive the meals for which there're funds available. You know, when we say that some kids matter more than others, or we ask if we care—if we have a pot of federal dollars to feed kids, and only 20% of the kids get fed, how could we answer that question otherwise—that some kids matter more than others, and some kids matter not at all.

So as a campaign, we're focused on this set of issues, because we believe that if communities organize and mobilize, we can get more kids within the zone of accountability for schools. And then it is fair for us to say, "We've done our part; will you do yours?" That means having a

different kind of conversation about how we support parents. And it means taking seriously our obligation, and the opportunity, to provide parents the information they need to develop the knowledge, the tools they need to develop the skills, and the supports they need to deploy those skills and that knowledge to support their kids. *That* is our obligation. And as we take on this obligation about parents, all of us could make a point to help parents envision a future for their children—not our vision of success, but develop their own vision of success for their children. And then we can organize ourselves to support the achievement of that vision, and we can figure out how to help parents celebrate.

As communities, we could commit to making sure that every child has the experience of healthy, on-track development. We can do more than we do to make sure that kids are born healthy, that they are thriving at 3, that they are ready at 5, and they are healthy and attending school. We can do more to make sure that kids aren't missing school because of manageable and preventable diseases, such as asthma. And we could do more to make sure that kids aren't missing school because of cavities and other challenges in their oral health. You know, if we care about kids, we would say that our collective responsibility—those of us who are practitioners, those of us who are administrators, those of us who are policymakers, and those of us who are advocates—our collective responsibility is to find ways to level the playing field between those parents and families that are thriving, and those parents and families that are struggling and still striving; that we can choose to care enough about all kids to do better. And that it is, in fact, a choice.

You know, when...every September 11th for the last decade, we find ourselves reflecting on 2001, and I have two images. First, I see the twin lights reaching for the sky and reminding us that among the most horrible things, that there is still the possibility of hope, and hope is a powerful, powerful stimulus. The second thing I recall is Governor Kean, who co-led the 911 Commission, and he said, “You know, we had a failure of policy, a failure of strategy, a failure of management, a failure of execution; but most of all, we had a failure of imagination—that we could not imagine that such a thing could happen—and since we couldn't imagine it, we didn't prepare for it.”

I'm wondering whether we can imagine what it would look like if we really cared for all kids. I'm wondering what it would look like if we could imagine that we didn't have to have an argument about retention and social promotion, because as Karen says, we would have solved that issue simply by having the kids reading. You know, I'm wondering if we can imagine what it would be like to be that kid who we've put into fourth grade, and who looks around and realizes that he or she can't read. Now, we didn't say this kid is not smart; we said this kid can't read. And this kid looks around at what's happening around him or her. If you were that kid, how optimistic would you be about your prospects? How much of a future would you assume you had? How well would you conclude you had been served by the adults in your life? How much of an investment would you be willing to make in school, in the community, and in this nation? We have to imagine that fourth grader, who...as someone said, that's the moment when that kid drops out. That kid simply *leaves* school four years later, but the kid drops out the moment he or she realizes that they have been failed by us.

So if we can imagine being that kid, what would we expect? What would we do differently? You know, when we teach a kid to read, we enable and unleash the most powerful ally we have in helping young people to succeed—and that is, the child himself or herself. Simply the most powerful ally we have. And we are willing to allow them to sit on the sidelines while we have adult conversations about what we should do better and what went wrong. You know, teaching a kid to read may be the best and most concrete example we have of the intergenerational compact. This may be the best evidence a kid would have that there's such a thing as an intergenerational compact. That if we can teach a kid to read, that maybe there's a reason for that child to believe that our generation...our generation will leave them a nation that is not only...have a smaller debt or a balanced budget, but a nation of value. That we could leave them a nation on a planet with clean air to breathe, water to drink, arable land in which to grow food. That we could leave them a country with an infrastructure that is not characterized by bridges collapsing, water mains imploding, schools in awful shape. That we could build a society where these kids—every kid—can have the opportunity to fulfill their potential. That we could leave them a nation that's safe, secure, and at peace. And for the next generation to be able to imagine that they can count on us for *any* of that, the first thing we need to do is to teach them to read.

Thank you very much.