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South Jersey

THE PHILADELPHIA

School leaders listen to Keillor

"Be useful," the humorist tells the N.J. School Boards Association's annual conference.

By John Curran
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ATLANTIC CITY — Garrison Keillor knows a thing or two about teaching children. He has a 31-year-old son and a 2-year-old daughter.

Who better to talk about classroom bullies, teenage girls who dress like harlots, and mothers who believe schoolteachers are the problem, not the solution?

Sonorous, sleep-deprived and uproariously funny, the radio raconteur regaled the New Jersey School Boards Association's annual conference yesterday with a 45-minute speech that was part encouragement, part advice and all relevant.

"Nothing you do for children is ever wasted. So keep on doing it. Be useful," he said at the finish, eliciting a standing ovation from several hundred administrators and school board members.

Keillor, 58, star of the long-running *A Prairie Home Companion* public-radio show, has earned a reputation as a masterful storyteller whose droll humor and semiautobiographical musings bring to life a mythical place called Lake Wobe-

gon, "where all the children are above average."

"Wouldn't we all love to have that?" said School Boards Association president Patti Pawling, introducing Keillor for his address at the closing session of the three-day conference in the Atlantic City Convention Center.

The group paid about \$15,000 for Keillor's appearance.

If Keillor's address had a theme, it was that there's nothing as honorable as serving children — as a parent, teacher or otherwise. "As far as nature is concerned, if we're not involved with children, we might as well take the long walk onto the tundra," he said.

He recalled a childhood in which his mother's cure for any ailment was to send him outside.

If he had a problem in school, it was his fault, not the school's. And certainly not that of his flabby-armed first-grade teacher: "Under her arms, she had these auxiliary arms that jumped as she wrote. They seemed to be living creatures. We gave them names: Happy and Bob."

One of his problems was a schoolyard bully who beat up anyone he could catch, except young Keillor,

who would make him laugh. "I once made tapioca pudding come out of Daryl Durbin's nostrils by telling him a very simple booger joke," he said. "It was all in the timing."

The joke: "Why do gorillas have big fingers? Because they have big nostrils."

But self-reliance may not develop as easily in today's children because of paranoid parents, prearranged "play dates" and extracurricular scheduling that leaves no room for imaginary play, he suggested.

"Experiences that are arranged by adults are not as good. You need to make mistakes to get real judgment," he said.

Among his other pearls of wisdom:

- "It's my experience that the main reason people

get involved in community service is personal guilt. If that's true, you people must have had a wild, wonderful time when you were young, to do what you do."

- On children's soccer: "Watching children scuffle around a soccer field is my idea of living in hell."

- On "Mozart mothers" like his sister-in-law: "She believes school is the only thing standing between her children and composing *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik*."



Garrison Keillor visited Atlantic City at the end of the three-day conference.