

Education in the 1970's:

Consolidation and Reform

STEPHEN J. TONSOR

THE SUCCESS of American education at all levels ought to be a matter of considerable pride for every American. No society, either in the past or the present, has devoted such a high percentage of its total resources to education. No society has made education so widely available, so free of class and political influences and so dedicated both to the needs of the individual and the requirements of society. Were money and effort alone the key to success the future of American education would be unclouded and its ability to fulfill the expectations of society unquestioned.

However, it is the very successes of American education which have made its failures all the more evident. These failures now not only challenge our complacency but they raise real questions as to the viability of the system. It is a matter for self-congratulation that American education has taken the children of poor immigrants and slaves and turned them into a nation possessing the knowledge and skills which enable us to maintain our position as the freest and most technologically advanced society in the contemporary world. It is a

matter which is much less praiseworthy that a recent study made by Louis Harris and Associates for the National Reading Council found that perhaps as high as twenty-four percent of our population are, in fact, functional illiterates lacking the "reading ability necessary for survival." A total of thirty-four percent of the sample studied were unable to complete a Medicaid application. Neither can we congratulate ourselves on the overall quality of American education when we come to realize that the same study reports that up to eight percent of Americans with some college training have serious literacy problems.

These are grave failures but the total record is even more dismal. In the not too distant past our public and private schools were the laboratories of democracy which inculcated and taught by example the civics of the American system. There was a general awareness that participating citizenship required not only a commitment to and knowledge of the American political system but that our system could only function because of the presence of a sustaining ethical system. The great merit of

American education was that it went beyond the intellectual formation of the child and inculcated in him those virtues and deficiencies which are the *sine qua non* of a democratic social order. Today the education of the total child, intellectual and moral, has disappeared or is on the point of disappearing from the public schools. Civic virtues cannot be separated from virtue generally and it is imperative that the schools return to an emphasis upon moral education.

Moreover, it is apparent even in the best schools that the education of the child thwarts, alienates and stereotypes when in fact it should result in increased creativity, the humanization and acculturation of the child and his induction into the world of work and socially approved activity. The rebellion so apparent in every school is not simply a manifestation of the age-old distaste for school days and school ways. It is a response to huge and impersonal school plants, poor and heartless teaching, rapid curricula, and an ossified educational bureaucracy which is not responsive either to the needs of the student or the expectations and demands of society.

Contemporary education does not even produce the skills and training needed by our society and it frequently frustrates the individual by its failure to provide him with a realistic assessment of vocational opportunities and training in marketable skills and disciplines. To a surprising degree we are not preparing our children and young adults for a creative, productive and satisfying life. This is so much the case that a recent student of American education characterized it as "the great training robbery."

What ought we to do if we wish to restore health to our educational system and our society? What is necessary in order to realize and energize the great creative potential in our society—a potential which is

now squandered by an inadequate and inept educational system?

In the first place, competition must be fostered and increased throughout the educational system. We can no more afford a monopoly in education than we can afford it in newspapers, or automobiles, or any other good upon which our society is dependent. The public school must be forced into competition with private schools and privately marketed educational services. The fostering of educational competition and educational diversity rather than the reinforcement of educational monopoly must become the object of federal and state educational expenditures. To this end the federal government should allocate support to elementary and secondary education through a voucher system which will enable the parents to choose the school which their child will attend. It should, moreover, foster experimentation with and expenditures for contract education by private "knowledge" companies and it must provide incentive payments to schools and to teachers who demonstrate an above average capacity to motivate and educate the child.

There should be a uniform system of testing of every elementary and secondary school pupil which will clearly establish teacher and school performance. Teachers and school administrators must be made more fully responsible for the frightening failure to provide basic education. Were thirty-four percent of the finished and marketed products of any American industry radically defective, an aroused society would justly call for investigation of industrial management.

Secondly, we need pluralism in education because the requirements of our society are various and the social, religious and political groups which constitute and strengthen our society through their variety have every right to expect that their special educational conceptions and views be preserved

and transmitted to the next generation. Conformity and uniformity are not characteristics which our society as a whole values. They are absolutely destructive in the field of education.

In the third place, we need to make our schools smaller and more responsive to the constituency they serve. Buildings must be small and intimate rather than monumental and factory or prison-like. "School parks" which embrace on one campus children from the elementary school through junior college are educational anthheaps. High schools of from 1000-3000 pupils are unmanageable factories in which the student is lost and in which discipline is maintained (if, indeed, it is maintained at all), only through a host of petty and stupid regulations. In such a situation teachers and counselors do not know their students and principals do not know their teachers.

The size of school districts must be reduced so that school administrators are responsive to and school boards reflect the needs and wishes of the constituency which they serve. It is odd that the very people who are entrusted with the transmission of democratic values are so little responsive to the communities which, in theory, they serve. The good school is a small school served by an administration and school board responsive to the community. Such responsiveness can be achieved only when the school district is small enough to enable intelligent parental and citizen participation in the educational affairs of the community.

In the fourth place, we must develop a national program of civic and moral education. No one should underestimate the difficulties in designing such a curriculum just as no one can now underestimate the need. The tacit consensus concerning values and motives which existed up to a generation ago in our society and in our schools has collapsed. The assimilationist ideal has

disappeared and while few of us would wish to see its restoration nearly every parent is aware that elementary and secondary school education ought to go beyond intellectual formation to the civic and the moral education of the child. Sex and drug education which is conducted outside an ethical context is bound to end in failure and cynicism. The skills and knowledge necessary for material success in our society must not be permitted to take precedence over the inculcation of those virtues necessary for the good life.

No doubt there are dangers implicit in any program of civic education, but the dangers rampant in a society devoid of any commonly held sentiments of virtue and decency are even greater. If the control of curriculum and teaching remains at the local level, if parents are enabled to choose from a variety of competing schools, and if school boards are able to choose among alternative text books, curricula and methods of instruction, there should be no fears of mass indoctrination and ideological manipulation. It is of the utmost importance that the aspirations of our people and the mores which are essential to the functioning of society be communicated to our children.

Finally, in the field of elementary and secondary education there must be a recognition that all good education is vocational education. The purpose of education should be to induct the student into the world of work; it should also enable him, to be sure, to play an intelligent role in the political life of his community and it should assimilate him to the ethical adult world of responsible commitment. Any education which is not vocational in the large and extended sense of that word is bound to end in failure.

But to make such a program meaningful we must provide at the elementary school level guidance and counseling, activities

and programs which have as their purpose the early establishment of realistic vocational objectives. Such a program on a national scale should be established and funded by the federal government. Such a program is, at the present moment, one of the most important steps we could take for the general improvement and upgrading of talents in the United States. At the present time the poorest school districts and the smallest schools have, almost universally, the least adequate programs in guidance and counseling. Students make unrealistic assessments not only of their own abilities and aspirations but of the vocations on which they have set their hearts. There are, in our society, very inexact notions on the part of young adults about the adult world of work in all of its fulfilling and creative variety. We must provide a much more imaginative and emphatic program for the early identification of vocational objectives than exists. The poor and disadvantaged suffer most from the lack of such a program, but high school drop-outs, discipline problems, and poor academic performance all attest to the pervasiveness and the importance of the issue to all groups of young people in our society. Much of the restiveness among college and university students is due to their inability to see the AB degree as anything meaningful to their adult lives and activities. Too often the vocational choices of students are determined by parents or are the consequence of totally extraneous considerations. As an optimum, we wish to create an educational system in which the student knows what he wants to do with his life and has the opportunities necessary to achieve his objectives. The only way to make a rational choice of objectives possible is to provide a realistic assessment of the costs and rewards of every kind of vocational endeavor.

So far we have spoken only of the crisis which exists in elementary and secondary

education. No one should underestimate, however, the seriousness of the problems which now beset post-secondary education. It is as a result of post-secondary education that the young adult is equipped to enter the world of work and adult commitment. Elementary and secondary school years are only preparation for the kinds of choices which are made by young adults.

One of the major reasons that young adults find post-secondary education so unattractive is that they come to it too late. To reach man's estate physically and psychologically and yet to be confined to a world of economic dependency and child-like school work is one of the reasons for the boredom and irresponsibility of many secondary school students. The years the American child spends in elementary and secondary school are far too long, the courses redundant and tiresome and their effects stultifying. We must strengthen and intensify instruction at the elementary level and reduce by two years the customary eight years of elementary school which the average child must attend. Secondary school education can, with a strengthening of content and curriculum, be reduced by one year and the normal school leaving age be brought into some more healthy congruence with the years of middle adolescence. At fifteen or sixteen the student should be in a position to think concretely about a vocation and should be prepared to seek those kinds of training necessary to achieve his vocational objectives. Those who desire on-the-job training at age sixteen should not find their way barred by anachronistic child-labor legislation. We cannot really discuss the consolidation and reform of American education until we are ready to abandon the arbitrary and meaningless current arrangement of elementary and secondary education.

Until recently the argument has been that only government should or could fi-

nance post-secondary education. In an era of competing and rising claims on the resources the state can raise through taxation, this assumption is increasingly dubious. In an era when the allocation of scarce resources has become the focus of an intense national debate, it would seem that the young adults are best prepared to shift for themselves and to make their own way if they can be given opportunities and access to adequate loan funds.

In order to open the gates of opportunity to all post-secondary students and trainees, an independent corporation, to be called the National Youth Endowment, should be established. It should possess the authority to issue bonds and borrow money and in turn to lend money to students and trainees studying in accredited institutions. The credit of the National Youth Endowment would be guaranteed by the United States government. Students might borrow money to pursue any course of studies or training at any time during their adult lives so long as that course of study was approved by the Endowment and so long as certain standards of performance were met by the trainee.

The costs of education and training under such a program should be met through full cost tuitions paid by the student or trainee to be repaid as a tax or in installments assessed against future earnings once the take-home pay of the recipient of the loan has reached a certain agreed level. The tax form of repayment has the great merit of ease of collection and might be tied to either the income tax or social security systems.

Such a system would give every interested student or trainee access to the opportunities he or she seeks. It would open up the field of post-secondary education to effective educational competition. It would help to alleviate the plight of private higher education. It would make post-secondary

education both relevant and realistic and it would provide the enormous sums which will become necessary in the next decade for post-secondary education. No group in our society is so well fitted to bear the costs of their maintenance and training as the young adult. Finally, such a program would at last offer genuine autonomy to the educational or the training institution by making it financially independent of the state.

In order to offer genuine opportunities through such a program to the disadvantaged, private and federal funds should be employed to create a system of compensatory payments in lieu of deferred income to assist hardship cases as defined by a means test.

American education, while it has not failed, has been so unsuccessful in recent times that it is now necessary to call into question many of its basic assumptions and many of its methods of operation. Until we are willing to revamp totally the educational process from the kindergarten through the graduate, professional and technical schools we will not secure the kinds of education we all desire. This calls for a radicalism and openness which has not recently been characteristic of the educational establishment. It also calls for co-operation between all the interested parties: private and public schools, federal, state and local governments and agencies. Ours is a pluralistic society which has benefited enormously from that pluralism. There is and can be no one single solution to this immense problem, but there are ways of bringing the total resources of the community, both private and public, to bear on its solution.

We must make education responsive once again to the public need and the public wish. We can do this only by reducing the size of the school district and introducing effective competition into the system. We must make the schools small enough to ac-

commodate individuals rather than masses, and we must ensure the total education of the child, both intellectual and moral. We must demand a higher record of performance from teachers and school systems in providing basic skills and intellectual content. Performance contracts, merit pay, and a rigorous system of testing are necessary to achieve these results. We must attempt to loosen up the pattern of school life and instruction so that it is an introduction into community rather than an induction into the sterilities of bureaucracy. We must shorten, significantly, the school years, removing from the curriculum the redundant and the superfluous, and permitting the sixteen year old to think concretely about the circumstances and activities of an adult life. We must make post-secondary education for all a reality, conditioned only by the ability and drive of the student. Fi-

nally, we must provide the best sort of counseling and guidance available so that every student has some reasonable idea of the opportunities available and some realistic insight into his own capacities and commitments.

In America we have always believed that the chief avenue for moving up in society in both a spiritual and a material sense was the avenue of education. In education more than anywhere else publicly provided opportunity and private initiative are mixed to achieve both a public end and a host of private objectives. Our educational system has served us well until the present decade. It needs now, as all institutional arrangements need from time to time, reform, re-vamping and consolidation. Our society is absolutely dependent upon the success of these efforts. If our schools fail then America fails, and fails absolutely.