

PUBLIC EDUCATION UNDER CRITICISM

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lift the minds of students to ever-widening reaches of culture through related activities.

The school's obligation is to carry the cultural and the liberal association to the fullest possible extent for each individual, but for the many it will not be a greatly extended or highly complicated educational process in terms of the academic liberal tradition. Rather, for them, it will be small especially planned units of the cultural heritage in combination, or by interwoven relation, with the powerful appeals of vocational and avocational interests. Whatever the pattern there will need to be applications that

are vital to the surging immediate life of the student.

And there will be many diverse patterns of organized knowledge and methods of learning oriented with the acquirement of necessary skills both general and occupational, the whole inspired by the objective that all may and should learn.

No one pattern of schematic organization of grades or years is likely to be a panacea for all educational problems. The American genius for organization will, no doubt, continue to produce several effective types of school organization.

OUR SCHOOLS—THEIR FOUR GRIEVOUS FAULTS*

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Everything about American education is getting bigger all the time: the number of students, the size of its installations, the amount of dollars it spends—and the vast volume of pedagogical gobbledygook which extols its methods without bothering to define its ends. As it gets bigger and bigger, more and more people are insistently asking: Is it any good?

They are deeply skeptical of what is being produced in the way of a people personally content, socially responsible and politically effective. Thoughtful parents organize, agitate and petition. Leaders of business commonly deplore

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the ignorance and laxness of the products that tumble by the thousands each year from the end of our educational assembly line.

All the disillusioned share a common belief: that those in charge of what is called "education" have little perception of what schooling is supposed to be or to do. Ours should be a "democratic education"—splendid!—but the beauty of the adjective does not conceal the vacuity of the noun. Let whatever we have be "democratic"—but let us be sure it is also *education*.

In what concrete respects is the current product not education? The first is its reluctance to insist on those formative disciplines which alone can promise proficiency in doing and thinking—what Pestalozzi called "the disciplines of word, number and form." Today we cannot claim our education to be successful in instructing in any one of the three.

Another great failing of American schools is a basic irresponsibility which they develop in the students. For society there is grave danger when its youth are unchallenged in the impression that there can be reward without quest, wages without work, a master's prestige without a master's skill, marriage without fidelity, national security without individual sacrifice.

Yet we find public school systems which promote all children at the end of each academic year regardless of whether their work has been good, bad or indifferent. Twenty years ago a high school teacher was expected to fail those who had not mastered 60 percent of the subject matter of a course. So stern a teacher is no longer tolerated. He is subjected first to persuasion, then to pressure, to abandon such outdated ways.

The common excuse for such goings on is that to withhold promotion creates in the incompetent a dangerous sense of inferiority. This argument is as mad as the practice it defends. What could be better calculated to promote an unhealthy psychosis than to prepare a child for a world of struggle by wrapping his mind in the woolly illusion, that achievement and negligence should receive the same reward?

Our school system seems to presuppose that, for education to be democratic, every man's child must be treated as the equal of every other's both in kind of brains and in educability. The effect of this is to herd an increasing number of unfit persons into colleges of liberal arts whose proper business is to help students of exceptional intelligence to understand human affairs and develop sound judgment therein.

As never before, our nation needs leadership in the art of living, and can get it only from those few who are competent to estimate values wisely, to dis-

criminate between truth and specious propaganda, to know, to enlighten and to lead. Why is our need for such leadership so unfulfilled? Because we find it hard to admit that such wisdom can be acquired only by persons equipped by nature with a not too common type of brains. We shy from this fact as "undemocratic." And we continue to offer to the many what is useful only to the few.

Our colleges are neither discovering nor preparing those few—be they from palaces or slums—who potentially are fit to serve their own people as leaders. This is no disparagement of those whose role in society may be to hew wood, draw water and tend machines. There are no more honorable and indispensable pursuits than theirs. But the truth today is that we are plentifully supplied with people who can make things and incredibly short of people who understand things.

The most deep-rooted ailment of our school system is its seeming bafflement by religion. Our public schools and colleges are rarely anti-religious. They simply ignore religion. Obviously if a child is taught in school about a vast number of things—for 25 hours a week, eight or nine months a year, for ten to 16 years or more—and if for all this time matters of religion are never seriously treated, the child can only come to view religion as, at best, an innocuous pastime preferred by a few to golf or canasta.

About all that most Americans possess nowadays in the way of religion is a number of prejudices, chiefly against faiths other than those with which they have traditional affiliations; a few quaint moral taboos; infantile notions about deity; devotional techniques which rarely go beyond "God bless papa and mama." Perhaps half of them—not more—go once in a while to some church which they joined with only a foggy

idea of its tenets or requirements. This does not add up to religion as the race has understood religion.

Religion is man's search—in a world where every human career ends in frustration of ambition and death—for strength and courage to be gained from a spiritual reality greater than matter, greater than an individual man. This search lies beneath creeds and cults, rituals and sacraments. The usual American is apt to be crudely inexpert in his gropings toward a universal source of strength. He thinks that meditation means having an argument with himself. His worship is superficial, sentimental, chock-full of pride. Silence and aloneness are monsters from which he craves escape. He goes from youth to maturity, old age and death, unarmed against his own weakness, vulnerable.

A good education is not so much one which prepares a man to succeed in the world as one which enables him to sustain failure. But we Americans decline to recognize the necessity of a living faith.

Our schools were founded by those who considered religion of primary importance. Those who wrote into the Constitution that in our land there must never be an established church had no idea that anyone would construe this to ban religious instruction in schools, or to deny tax-support of schools conducted under religious auspices. There is no evidence whatever of intention on their part to make such prohibitions. Yet out

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of our public schools come successive generations of young people born of Christian families, of the Christian tradition—and ignorant of the faith of Christianity.

These four, then, are the grievous criticisms being leveled today against American education. It neglects the basic disciplines. It tends to turn out graduates who expect the cheap success of reward without labor. It denies our society the training of leadership by madly mixing technology and liberal learning and trying to feed the indigestible stew to thousands who choke on it. By treating religion as a dispensable diversion, we deprive the young of allegiance to any spiritual compulsion greater than love of country.

This is not enough. One's country is not an adequate end for which to live and die, not indeed an end at all but only a means toward an end. What end? Our schools do not help students to answer this fundamental question. They do not even ask it.

If the question be asked and wrongly answered, much harm may be done, as in Hitler's Germany or Stalin's Russia. But if it be not asked at all, we shall become so morally debilitated that even our vast technological might will not long save us from those nations which put their trust in something greater than themselves.

"Know how" is not enough. It is vain and empty without "know why."