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## THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS— THEIR PROBLEMS AND RESPONSIBILITIES

A FEW years ago many persons were disposed to think that our major problems had been solved and that invention and scientific discovery, the products of the restless mind of man, had provided a fool-proof world. Civilization, on a holiday excursion bent, could afford to let the pleasure boat drift. But drifting ships never reach safe harbors. They always strike the rocks—and we awoke with a crash and a panic. We have seen fit to name this unwelcome child of our own folly "Depression." It is a perfectly natural result of uncontrollable forces, according to fossilized political economists. But that it is man-made and man-directed in every detail is the irresistible verdict of the abler students of history and economic laws. Because of ignorance and the failure of the schools, because of selfishness and greed and the failure of those in control to curb the will to power of anti-social groups, civilization is again battling for its life. Revolutions, both peaceful and violent, grip the world. The direction and results of these revolutions, the contributions to be made to society, and the solution of our problems will depend on the moral earnestness and trained intelligence of those in control, and they will reflect the philosophy and efficiency of our systems of education.

Education is the most important subject in this troubled world today. Even governments themselves are a means to an end. That end is a better civilization, to be reached by intelligent direction; and if America is right in her decision to reach

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that end through a democracy, and if democracy is to live and function, it must be predicated on an adequate system of public education. The ultimate test of democracy is the willingness of the state to establish and maintain the foundations of democracy—an efficient school system from kindergarten through university.

Today Virginia is engaged in a controversy upon the decision of which depends whether or not these foundations shall be perpetuated in their integrity, or whether the youth and future citizens of this state shall be threatened with illiteracy.

What are the facts? Have we been sincere and honest in our stated policy to educate all the children of all the people, or to guarantee equal educational opportunity to the youth of the state, living in one hundred counties and twenty-five cities, and separated by imaginary lines that have absolutely nothing to do with their duties as future citizens, or the demands that society will make upon them?

In 1931-32 the average length of the school term in Virginia was 168 days. It varied from 129 days in Buckingham County to 190 days in Arlington County. This condition was not based on any rule of right, or any consideration of the needs of the individuals affected, but on an ox-cart philosophy, propounded by ox-cart minds, from the top of a nail keg in some wilderness store-room and perpetuated by tradition and sentiment.

During the same year the average annual salary of all white teachers was \$983 (\$766 for the counties, and almost twice as much, or \$1,498 for the cities). The variation for Negro teachers was still greater, the average for the counties being \$400, and for the cities, \$911, with a state average of \$528.

The average cost of instruction, opera-

tion, and maintenance in Virginia was \$34.43 per pupil enrolled, \$27.99 for the counties and \$52.86 for the cities; and at the same time the counties were paying a higher tax rate than the cities, where there is a greater concentration of wealth, while the difficulty of getting children together in the counties is more expensive. In the counties the costs for these items of the school budget range from \$12.49 for Scott County to \$63.78 for James City. The range in the cities was from \$29.00 in Buena Vista to \$61.21 in Williamsburg. It is evident that the citizens of the home town of Thomas Jefferson's Alma Mater still believe in trained brains, and are willing to pay for them.

While such variation between the different counties, and between counties and cities of the same state, is indefensible, the variation in per-pupil cost, as between schools in the same county, is in many instances even greater. It is perfectly obvious that the opportunity for an education in Virginia today depends upon the fortuitous circumstance of what county or city the child happens to live in. If this is democracy, then Thomas Jefferson and Horace Mann were not democrats, but autocrats.

The State Department of Education has rightly said that "the situation demands more state supervision over strictly professional phases of education and more local supervision and control over those phases of school work involving material equipment, business management, and local adaptations." This is true. These inequalities have persisted in Virginia from the beginning and will continue to the day when Virginia shall take over her public school system as she has taken over her roads. The Byrd Road Bill was not only in line with the most advanced philosophy of government, but was the most constructive piece of legislation in Virginia in a hundred years. The Valley Pike is being built from the West Virginia

line north of Winchester to Tennessee, and passes through fifteen counties and forty-five magisterial districts. The local units would not have built it in a thousand years. They never could have secured the rights of way, or agreed on the route, or the width of the road, or the materials to be used in its construction, nor could they have provided the funds. The eastern counties had 325 years and the Valley counties had 200 years in which to build the roads, and they failed, just as they have failed in administering the schools and for precisely the same reasons. Local officials think in terms of their little units. In handling state functions, local units are impotent. Local self-government is the shortest distance between weakness and futility. If it's roads, you flounder in mud; if it's schools, you starve for want of funds, or perish for lack of vision. The fault is not with the local officials, but is inherent in the system.

The important feature of the Minimum Education Program is that it is a step in the right direction. It will establish the principle of an eight month's school term, to be financed by the state. It will set up a more equitable scheme for the apportionment of state funds, based on average attendance instead of school population, taking into account density of population, with a fixed sum for each group of 40 pupils in average daily attendance in cities, and 25 in the sparsely settled counties. The Minimum Education Program, if carried out, should insure general and more careful supervision; no single dollar of the school budget secures greater returns in efficiency of instruction and economy of administration than expert supervision. In industry, this has been a guiding business principle. Every informed state department of education has stressed supervision as an imperative prerequisite of an ordered school system. This sane advice, based on irrefutable documentary evidence, has been ignored by local units. The Minimum Education Pro-

gram, with its reasonable demands for a heavier teaching load, and a higher average attendance, will speed up county-wide consolidation. Any system of consolidation, to be economical, must be based on good roads, and for that reason as well as others, the school people of the state have been and are strong supporters of an efficient and well-financed highway department. But while the roads have been placed in an impregnable position on account of ample funds segregated to this department, and on account of central control, the schools have suffered from inadequate financial support, and have dropped from 39th place in 1922, to 45th position among the school systems of the 48 states. This is due to an outgrown and archaic tax system, which has placed an undue burden on real estate, which is breaking down under the stress of present economic conditions, wherever such systems exist. There is not the slightest reason why such a system should be tolerated. In per capita wealth, Virginia exceeds any other Southern state, and is not far below the average for the United States. Only two Southern states have a higher per capita income than Virginia. In the matter of per capita debt Virginia's position is not only favorable, but her bonds are selling at a premium, and only three of the Southern states have a lower per capita indebtedness.

If the prosperity of a state and the ability of the state to finance the essential functions of government can be indicated from the amount of Federal taxes paid, then Virginia is in an enviable position. The total amount of revenue paid into the Federal Treasury in 1932 was \$99,971,505.81. Only four states in the Union paid larger amounts. This vast sum is more than double the amount of the entire state budget, and represents \$41 per capita of the total population. These figures would seem to show that Virginia is amply able to finance an efficient school system, and guarantee to every child an education equal to the average for the nation. But while Vir-

ginia's per capita income and wealth compare favorably with the other states of the Union, there are only two Southern states, Kentucky and Georgia, that spend a smaller per cent of their income on their public schools, and when we compare the total school costs with the total taxes collected, Virginia stands one from the bottom of all the Southern states. In 1929-30, before the days of the depression and salary cuts, which have ranged from ten per cent to 37 per cent, Virginia teachers received much lower salaries than any of her neighbors. While the average in Maryland was \$1,518 and in West Virginia \$1,023, the average annual salary of teachers in Virginia was \$816. A state that can spend in a single year \$44,054,083 for life insurance, \$50,460,760 for building construction, \$164,260,000 for passenger automobiles, \$22,202,880 for soft drinks, ice cream, chewing gum, and candy, \$9,932,880 for jewelry, perfumes and cosmetics, \$19,664,077 for roads, and pay into the Federal Treasury \$99,971,505 in a single year, is certainly not FINANCIALLY bankrupt. This in the state of Jefferson, whom we continually delight to honor! A hero-worshipping age, that fails to emulate the leaders whom it extols, is already *morally and intellectually* bankrupt.

The schools of the nation have not received the benefits of the new deal, but a raw deal. Shops and factories are opening, but schools continue to close. Ten million children, or 38 per cent of the Nation's school population, will suffer this year from shortened school terms or closed schools. Up until January 1, 1,800 public schools had been closed. In addition to this many private and parochial schools, including colleges and institutions of higher learning, have found it impossible to keep their doors open. Public schools have suffered most. In many cases vocational courses, including home economics, have been curtailed or abandoned. Music and physical education have been dropped, and cultural courses, de-

16

signed to give training for leisure when the demand for such courses is greatest have been too heavy for the local units to bear. Arkansas with 400 closed schools, Louisiana with 168, Kansas with 700, Michigan with 205, and Alabama's announcement that 169,042 school children would be turned out of school by February 1st—here are evidences of the tragedies of the present year. Not only have schools been closed, but in many sections of the state and nation tuition fees ranging as high as \$24 for elementary pupils and \$80 for high schools, have been charged, and at a time when many parents are unable to furnish adequate clothing and food for their children.

With tens of thousands of young people unable to find work, one-half of the cities of America have abandoned courses and activities in their schools, while other nations with National departments of education—nations more severely hurt by the depression than America—have been able to carry on their educational programs in a normal way. If you have any doubts about the wisdom of a planned economy, or the philosophy of the new deal, a study of present conditions in Denmark should be illuminating. With co-operation in agriculture and industry under government direction, with the disgrace of illiteracy unknown, Denmark has defied the depression with a school term of 246 days.

In many communities the teacher load has been increased beyond the point where teaching efficiency is possible, or personal help can be expected. In spite of reduced revenues there are now 1,000,000 more children enrolled in the public schools than in 1930, with 52,000 fewer teachers, and 2,500,000 children are still without schools, while 200,000 trained teachers are awaiting the magic of the new deal to point the way to a meal ticket. School budgets have been cut on an average of from 19 per cent to 21 per cent, while teachers' salaries have been cut all the way up to 42 per cent. In one Southern state alone 27,000 teachers receive

less than unskilled labor is paid under the NRA blanket code. In many states a tax system, similar to the system in Virginia, has broken down under the weight of the depression and of the reaction and stagnation incident to a multiplicity of small units of administration.

It is apparent to all students of government that real estate can no longer carry the burdens placed upon it. With reduced valuations and revenues, increased delinquencies and mounting costs from mortgages and foreclosures, many states are turning to an income tax or sales tax as the most certain and equitable means of financing their schools. It is obvious that such taxes should be collected by the state and apportioned to the school divisions on the basis of needs. In those favored sections where there is great concentration of wealth, there is no serious financial problem. In agricultural communities the problem is beyond the resources of the local districts and counties.

Many informed persons go so far as to believe that the time has now come for a Federal Department of Education, and there is much force to their arguments. Our most difficult domestic problems are national problems. We are moving rapidly toward centralization, both in our state and Federal governments. The logic of events forces us to this action. The rapid development of communication and transportation, the consolidation of business units, the problems of public health, marriage and divorce, the control of industry and great aggregations of wealth, the adjustment and co-ordination of six million agricultural units, and the administration of criminal law are rapidly making America one governmental, social, and cultural whole. Its graver problems can no longer be dealt with on a checkerboard of innumerable units, or solved by the rules of the crossword puzzle. We must get the idea across that there is nothing final about the ordinances of town councils, or resolutions of boards of super-

visors, or acts of legislatures, or constitutions. We must realize that they are all designed and employed to meet the exigencies of the day. A changing world demands flexible constitutions and trained men to plan and adjust them. A workable political and social philosophy must be as dynamic as the world in which we live. We are interested today, not only in the education of the children of Virginia, but equally in the education of the children of Maine and Texas. We are not only interested in communication and transportation in the Shenandoah Valley, but in Florida and California; and the conservation and control of our natural resources throughout the length and breadth of America concerns every individual in the nation intimately and vitally. There is not only a growing sentiment for a state controlled and financed school system in the interests of economy and social justice, but the time has come when the Nation must assume its responsibility in dealing with education as a national problem, under the supervision and direction of the several states.

A sales tax to be collected by the Federal Government and turned back to the states to supplement state funds would not only secure adequate support of the schools, but would prevent bootlegging of goods, and avoid the upsetting of business along state lines that is always incident to different rates of taxation, in the several states, on movable goods.

Two million children are out of school and deprived of educational advantages in the United States today. An equal opportunity for an education for every American child may be a dream, just as democracy and christianity are dreams. Neither has ever been tried by any state or community, but there are those who believe that these dreams must come true.

The average cost of educating a child in America is just one-fourth the cost of maintaining a man in prison, and this takes no account of the mounting costs of appre-

hending the criminal and the administration of the criminal courts. Juvenile delinquency increases in inverse ratio to the length of school term and the facilities for adolescent supervision and readjustments.

The latest reports show that the total of unpaid teachers' salaries exceeds \$40,000,000, that the NRA in abolishing inhuman child labor has returned 100,000 children to school, many of them without additional desks or teachers, that there are 130,000 school districts, and 423,000 school board members in America represented by this crazy quilt that we operate under the affectionate fiction of public education.

In Alabama 275,000 children have had their school term shortened, many of them receiving only three and one-fourth months of schooling, while across an invisible line in Mississippi the children have the advantage of a full term. The difference is due to an antiquated and impossible tax system in Alabama and a sales tax in Mississippi, a tax system which distributes the burdens of government more equitably, has relieved the tax load on real estate, reduced foreclosure sales appreciably and saved to their owners many homes. Living in the same country, under the same general system of law, and with the same duties of citizenship, it is neither right nor fair that the opportunity for an education should rest upon the mere chance of residence, or the system of taxation, dictated by ignorance and reaction, or by an intelligent will to progress.

The city child goes to school one and one-fourth months longer each year than the rural child, and while three-fourths of the city children are enrolled in high school, only one-fourth of the country children have this privilege.

Generally, schools have suffered in direct proportion to the extent to which they have been supported by property and local taxes, and have been dominated by local initiative and control. There can never be equal opportunity for the children of America while

New York spends \$78 per pupil per year in her poorer schools, and Arkansas spends \$12. Such idiocies as I have related could not exist in any other civilized country today. Such a system is not planned for reconstruction, but represents a planless social and governmental philosophy of destruction.

There is no excuse, either in the state or nation, for the condition of our schools. We have the resources and the wealth. We have money for everything else. Walter Hines Page said it was "a misfortune for us that the quarrel with King George happened to turn on a question of taxation—so great was the dread of taxation that was instilled into us." Our ability to finance our schools does not depend so much on wealth as upon the value that we place on education. It depends on our mental attitude and not on our purse. We pay for our schools out of the admiration that we have for trained manhood and womanhood, for higher culture and higher living.

Our attempt at democracy is on trial today in the state and nation. No one can foretell what the results shall be. Three leading captains of industry, a little more than a year ago, at three widely separated points stated in public addresses that but for the public schools of America we would already be in red revolution. These were fine compliments, but children cannot be educated on compliments. In Virginia we have had three official cuts in state funds, administered as "knockout drops." The patient has only been saved temporarily through first-aid treatment by the Emergency Relief Administration. We are hoping that the pressure on the oxygen tank will hold out till May first.

The Legislature of Virginia is now in session. The Governor and forward-looking men in the General Assembly are fighting on the side of the schools. But there are reactionary forces in Virginia who challenge them at every step. These men, in public, boast of their democracy, but they

are enemies of democracy. Democracy cannot be restricted to class or section. It transcends state lines and guarantees equal rights and opportunities to every man, woman, and child. The uneducated must not regard themselves as neglected, and there must be no special or favored class. We want neither snobbery nor the dangerous seed of discontent. There is, therefore, no way but to train every child at the public expense. There are many surprises in democracy. Society continually demands reinforcements from the rear, and the neglected child is frequently the exceptional child of his community. Until a man can see this, and until he becomes interested in the education of every child of every race and state, he cannot know the deep meaning of democracy nor feel either its heavy obligations or the spiritual power of its lift.

There are 800,000 school children in Virginia who themselves are voiceless in the councils of the state. Their friends have fought persistently and bravely that they and their teachers might participate in the new deal. They and their instructors have borne the brunt of the depression, in shortened school terms and drastic salary cuts. Some departments of government have prospered and waxed fat, while sixty-two of the one hundred counties are faced with school terms of five to seven months.

This college where we meet today is dedicated to the ideals of democracy, through public education. This building bears the name of a man who not only devoted his life to education, but whose mind conceived a world parliament, the success of which must mean universal education and world democracy. You have selected this environment, and you have chosen, not only to be the instructors, but the advocates of the children of your native state, and children everywhere. Today childhood cries out for justice. A changing world awaits them with its burdens and responsibilities, and justice demands that they have the right to learn, that they may rightly live.

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