

EDUCATIONAL POLICY ISSUES

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In a sense we are examining the launching pad of education from which we send boys and girls into a world they have never known or seen. The countdown sounds for our way of life and education have become the focal point of interest for nearly everyone. It has become apparent that the contemporary struggle will be won in the classrooms and laboratories of the world. What, then, are the broad concerns of the educator as he ponders the possible thrust of the educational capsule which now has captured the focus of national attention?

The first of these concerns stems directly from the magnitude of public interest displayed in education. This interest, in and of itself, necessitates some attention to the matter of communication.

Some have stated that we live in a manipulative era—an era when the food for our thoughts and even our doubts has become a mass produced commodity. Some have suggested that the most influential teachers of tomorrow may well be those who speak and write for mass media. The one basic control of this staggering potential is to build defenses and expose methods. We cannot be inarticulate, vacillating, or indecisive in an era when we desperately need able and articulate spokesmen to relate the needs, concerns, values, and problems in an area of such great importance as education.

The American belief in free, public, universal education is rooted in a singularly fundamental concept that if popular government is to succeed, the people must be enlightened. It is for this reason that we must take cognizance of the means and avenues we pursue in sharing with others the good news about American education. It is for this reason that such a conference as this is a meritorious and commendable idea in sharing the concerns and needs in public affairs.

A second area of consequence pertains to school district organization. We are now a nation of some 37,000 school districts. This represents a great advance in the sheer reduction of the number of districts in the last two decades, including a reduction of 16,000 districts in the last five years alone. However, the number of districts still needs to be reduced another 75 percent. Although this is a problem of national concern, it is primarily centered in the midwestern section of the country. We have in the Midwest some states with more than 2,000

school districts. This geographical area has shown the greatest resistance to appropriate school district organization.

What is this thing called school reorganization? To many it means simply the loss of a basketball team or a long wait for the school bus. To some, however, it means that not all of the boys and girls are getting a fair break. Others would say it means that quality education costs money. To the student of school district organization it means simply a method to equate the disparity between wealth and children. The sociologist would contend that it is not a matter of logistics but rather of elevating the aspiration level of people. A great many still contend that it is a creation of the devil designed to take the schools away from the local community. The great effort directed toward this problem appears to me to be simply the manifestation of a nation-wide concern for making schools better. Needed improvements include the establishment of sufficiently large administrative units to provide for fluidity of attendance units; a broader tax base; a greater return for the dollar expended; and more equalized educational opportunity for boys and girls.

In an era when such words as annexation, zoning, urbanization, planning commissions, and long-range governmental planning are meaningful, we can no longer cling to the outmoded "little red school house." We cannot let the iron-clad grip of tradition prevent efforts to change the seemingly sacred organizational pattern for schools. This concept is not worthy of a free people who live in an era of speed and space. One out of seven school districts still enrolls less than 14 pupils; 11,213 districts have fewer than 50 pupils; 40 percent of the districts operate schools for fewer than 150 pupils; 6,031 districts do not operate schools; and only a third of our high schools are of sufficient size by minimal standards.

We cannot produce the "vice presidents in charge of tomorrow" as long as we continue to teach chemistry in a kitchen sink, to house our library resources in a coat closet, to permit incredible disparities of wealth, to freeze attendance units to a small inadequate geographic area, to limit the tax base so it strangles the possibility of a creditable program, or to deny that quality education costs money. The stakes are higher in this country than they have ever been, and we cannot let vested interests and political prejudices stifle economic prudence and equality of educational opportunity.

This is not to deny that much progress has been made, for it has. In the state of Indiana one-third of the boys and girls are attending schools in adequately reorganized units based on action since 1959. In recent years much progress has taken place in the midwestern states of

Iowa, Wisconsin, Illinois, and Colorado. Fifteen states now have less than 125 school districts.

Meeting the need for district reorganization is the only way we can make a frontal attack on some of the other vexing problems related to education. Some of these problems are: appropriate internal staffing and provision of necessary services and activities for pupils; greater utilization of school buildings and community centers; establishment of needed adult education programs or retraining centers; maximal use of professionally trained people; better staff utilization and recruitment methods; and the development of programs to serve the needs of the retarded as well as the gifted.

The problem of adequate district organization is accentuated when we look at population trends. The implications of the population explosion need to be enunciated and reviewed. A birth every ten seconds and a life expectancy of 70 years is a situation which calls for serious attention. The population can be characterized by its size, composition, and geographic distribution. Our urban population exceeds the rural population in 39 states, and the psychology of the nation is rapidly being urbanized. In a sense, a national homogeneity is being developed by virtue of the 20 percent who move into a different house each year; the 25 percent living in a different state than the one in which they were born; or by virtue of the 25,000 families who move daily.

The greatest labor surplus in America two years hence will be youth between the ages of 18 and 20 who cannot do anything because they have not had sufficient training or opportunity for training. Estimates are that 7.5 million will drop out of school during the next decade and that 2.5 million of this number will not have completed the eighth grade. The present job structure leaves a narrower band of opportunities in the work world for these people. The unemployment rate for this group is triple the national average for other groups. These boys and girls will drop out, in part, because of an inadequate program and because of lack of knowledge about the work world where emphasis is increasingly on the technically oriented worker.

At present six out of ten of our youths graduate from high school, and three of these continue some kind of post-high school training. This means that the balance go into the labor force or become housewives. It also means that about seven out of ten obtain their vocational preparation only from their high school experience. This dramatically disadvantaged group in American society represents a great wasteland. These people have the least amount of education, inevitably go into the unskilled and semi-skilled areas, and comprise the largest proportion of the unemployed labor force.

The situation seems particularly critical when we contemplate that in the next decade we will need some 18 to 25 percent less in the unskilled and semi-skilled categories with some 40 percent more in the professional, technical, and kindred areas, which represents a rate of increase twice that of the labor force as a whole. Translated into need, this means that by 1970 only two of ten should be entering work directly from high school, and that these two should have the benefit of a program in a comprehensive high school of some consequence which offers a great deal more than the patchwork which characterizes too many of the offerings at the present time.

A number of solutions have been offered to fill the need for retraining, adult education interests, and intensification of the programs currently offered. Needless to say, none of these can meet the criteria of success with inadequate school districts as a base of operation. Neither can we solve this dire national problem unless we are willing to provide proportionate local, state, and federal support for its implementation.

Some people believe that the junior college, as operative in many of our states, is the best means of satisfying the need for training in the areas mentioned. This has some merits. Junior colleges are already established and can make an immediate contribution to the technical manpower shortage. They are already staffed with a basic faculty for general education areas. They have traditionally and are currently maintaining a close liaison with the secondary schools. They have a high degree of public acceptance and a relatively acceptable image of academic offering. Also, the junior college apparently is a part of Americana, for 35 new schools were opened last year.

Some others believe that the regional vocational high school is the best means of satisfying the technical manpower needs. This would place in population centers a vocational school with adequate equipment to provide a diverse and comprehensive program. This type of institution could also provide post-high school training and serve as a community or adult center for purposes appropriate to the population. In a sense, this type of school would be a special school supported by an intermediate school district, state, and/or federal assistance.

Some think that the presently constituted college and university extension centers hold considerable promise for filling the need. This has the built-in benefit of the prestige of a state college or university with a broad base of state support and with a generally desirable geographical location. It also provides fluidity in terms of the students' interest in higher education for technical and/or general education offerings.

The problem is compounded, however, by lack of agreement concerning the solution. The frequency of change in jobs and occupations makes it difficult for business and industry to agree on training programs. Even specialists in vocational education hold widely divergent opinions. This was accentuated in a year-long study just completed in Indiana. The 1961 legislature formed a commission to study the matter of post-high school training. The commission, in view of the varying opinions cited above, concluded that a university system for technical education should be considered as a possible solution.

Obviously, programs will have to be suited to the unique characteristics and features in each state. The point of emphasis, however, has a degree of universality about it. It also is marked at the moment with a degree of urgency. For we can no longer use yesterday's tools today and be in business tomorrow; nor can we as an American nation, go on "doing business as usual." This philosophy contains within it seeds that are both fatal and futile. One of the dimensions of education is to help people cope with the inevitable differences between what they learn and what will be expected of them throughout life. This emphasizes that we cannot have second-class citizens with second-class training in a first-class world.

The third general area of concern pivots around the oft-related dilemma of financing an adequate program of education in this country. Perhaps no domestic question is of greater importance than that of financing public education. The crisis, as it is viewed today, arises primarily from three decades of failure to give the kind of support at the local level which schools must have if they are to fulfill indispensable roles in preparing Americans for self-government and survival in an embattled world.

A cursory examination of the high degree of mobility of our citizens and the inequity in terms of educational opportunities quickly leads to the conclusion that the strengthening of public schools is in the national interest, and this becomes more dramatically indisputable as time passes. An adequate educational program requires ability to underwrite three elements: teachers, buildings, and quality programs. Former Governor Collins of Florida has cogently related the need in the following statement, "We are not standing on some safety-zone in the thoroughfare of history which will permit us as a nation to linger and haggle over the details of implementing an adequate national educational program."

Typically, we have been supporting public education at the elementary and secondary levels with the property tax. In moving from a primarily agricultural economy to a more industrial economy, with the

resultant change in the general economy, we now recognize quite clearly and universally that the property tax is a poor measure of benefit received or the ability to pay. The inconsistency arises when we attempt to support education by the property tax when the national income depends more upon economic activity than upon fixed property. The pressure on the property tax will inevitably increase. A view of the 1960 census figures shows the alarming fact that the smallest group of the total population in the next decade will be the 24 to 45 age group. From this group we draw most of our teachers and professional and skilled workers. From this age group also we get a broad base of financial support from the property tax in communities across the country. An added implication of the census figures is that the two largest population groups during the next decade will be those under 14 and those over 65 years of age. These groups represent a large segment of our population who contribute little to financial resources and frequently serve as a resistive force for increased local taxation.

The gross national product has increased at a far more rapid rate than has our support for public education. In 1950 the GNP was 285 billion dollars and today it is at the 500 billion mark. Some estimate that by 1970 to 1975 we will exceed the trillion figure and yet until the present time the percentage of GNP spent for elementary and secondary education has been hovering at 3 to 3.5 percent. During the current year the expenditure for public education, minus interest on debt, will approach 16 billion dollars. Estimates are that by 1970 expenditures for public education at the elementary and secondary levels will double, reaching some 32 billion dollars. This does not include increased capital outlay needs. This implies increasing pressure on the property tax and/or a greater percentage of the gross national product channeled to support public education via federal or state participation for purposes of developing quality programs. The population has more than doubled in 50 years, and public expenditures have increased almost 90 times. We have the resources to double our expenditure for education on the basis of increases in total production and income.

The following represent a potpourri of ideas and considerations which might stimulate further thought or serve as bases for subsequent discussions:

1. Federal support should recognize the constitutional responsibilities of the states for education. The respective state departments of public instruction should be given the same jurisdiction over expenditure of federal funds as they exercise over nonfederal funds.
2. We ought not shy away from taxes on income and sales. These

taxes tap the increasing productivity to which education contributes constantly and from which support should not be barred.

3. Financial support, either state or federal, should not be used to perpetuate inadequate school districts.

4. Education must not be viewed as a cost—rather as an investment. We have increasing evidence to support the significant concept of educational output in economic terms. If, for instance, a high school graduate earns some \$72,000 more than an elementary school graduate, the “tax take” would permit a greater investment for support of a quality program.

5. The movement of our population toward urban centers will tend to increase financial demands for education. The better programs are to be found in the metropolitan areas and, if they are to be sustained, will result in increased expenditures.

6. The rapidly increasing school age population will necessitate added expenditures for staffing and physical plant alone—to say nothing of meeting program development needs. The present attrition rate of those starting to prepare for teaching means that every community will have to recruit three students for every teacher needed. In excess of 3 billion dollars was spent for construction last year, and 80 percent of this was carried by the local government. In view of the continued need for buildings, the pressure on the property tax will not be relieved for some time.

7. Historically the federal government has participated in special programs and efforts rather than in a broad finance program. The current National Defense Education Act is typical. It tends to pump vitality into specified areas of concern through financial assistance. The danger is simply that such support does not equalize educational opportunities for boys and girls.

8. We ought not confuse the issues of need and control. A recent article in the *New York Times* contained this rather succinct statement regarding this point of view:

In the final analysis there is, of course, never any iron-clad guarantee that government — federal, state or local — or any other agency or interest group will not try to control, or interfere with, education. This danger calls for constant vigilance, but cannot serve as an argument against aid which is needed and which rightfully should be provided by the federal government.

An equally cogent argument would seem to be that refusal to appropriate can control what the schools can do. Withholding funds

can result in lack of needed quality programs just as much as if this were done by design.

It is somewhat ironic that in an era in which we have too much wheat, too many workers, and too many automobiles the children are not given too many opportunities to develop their full potential. We must recognize that youth are more important than oil reserves, timber reservations, or stockpiles of strategic materials and begin to direct local, state, and federal resources to training programs which will serve as effective launching pads for these boys and girls.