

Economic Education: A Requisite of Citizenship

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A central problem in our democratic society is that of maintaining a stable and equitable economy. This article examines evidences of need for increased economic understanding on the part of our citizens. It also suggests several means of improving the schools' offerings in this area.

ECONOMIC education is a relatively new responsibility of the public schools in the United States. There were historic reasons for the delay in economic education in the public school curriculum. Up until the turn of the century most of our people lived on farms and in small towns. They were comparatively self-sufficient as family units. When hard times came, they simply consumed less store goods. They managed, however, to live fairly comfortably through the application of man-skill and animal-power to land and to other easily available natural resources. When necessity demanded, most of the food and even clothing were produced and processed on the farm and in the home. Thus, when depressions occurred, the rural families at that time were fairly independent of the market.

The farmer, then, played a direct role as an economic citizen. Generally he was active in the discussion of political issues. As a rule, he knew his con-

gressman personally. In this kind of society, most of the people learned the economic facts of life from experiences outside the classroom. There was, apparently, little public demand for economic education in the schools and the curriculum was pretty much limited to the "three R's."

Obviously, the tremendous economic expansion since 1900 has considerably changed this rather simple way of life. In our complex society in this country today many of the major decisions of our economic life have been transferred from the rural family and the small town merchant to big corporations, big labor unions, big farm organizations, powerful professional associations and to the state. This change in our economic pattern has dangerously confused most citizens. We know we live in a very complicated, interrelated society. Most of us at least admit that the complexities are beyond our present understanding. When we try to follow the generally accepted body of economic facts and ideas, we get lost in our analyses or confused by our prejudices. To this confusion must be added such negative influences as name-calling, poisoned anger, extreme individualism, doubts and fears. Faced with such a

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climate of economic ignorance, and with the necessity of living in a dangerous and hostile world, we cannot fail to recognize that education for economic competence is a requisite of citizenship today. Only through such provision can today's schools enable citizens to deal effectively with the economic problems of our society.

The significance of this new responsibility of the public schools today was aptly stated by Ernest O. Melby, dean of the School of Education, New York University: "Democracy will live if it works and it will die if it does not work. Moreover, regardless of what democracy may do in the cultural and human relations area, if it fails in the economic front it will most certainly go down to defeat. If, then, we are interested in the survival of our way of life, there is no kind of education more important than that which seeks to make the average American intelligent about our economic system and effective as a citizen in relation to it."¹

If we accept Dean Melby's analysis—and it seems to be a reasonable one—we dare not delay education for economic understanding. The public schools need to re-examine their curriculum to discover ways in which effective economic education can be included as a part of their general education program.

Apparently the schools are now facing a terrific increase in propaganda efforts on the part of special interest groups. Many of these organizations and institutions are not primarily concerned with the health of our economic society as a whole. Trade associations,

farm organizations, labor unions, professional associations, governmental agencies and private "educational" organizations that have been created in recent years, alarmed by the trends of social change and aware of the poor quality of economic education in our schools, have provided their own brand of economic leadership. In some instances these special interest groups actually dominated educational policy-making as well as the content of teaching materials and activities. Such influence, when not geared to the generally accepted understanding of the structure, dynamic character, and actual operation of our American economy and of the principles which explain its behavior, have made it difficult and, at times, dangerous for even good teachers of economics to function effectively as teachers.

An Inadequate Job

No one, in his right mind, would deny the right to any individual or organization to take an interest in the program of the public schools. The real danger lies in the possibility of well-intentioned but misguided organizations calling the signals. It goes without saying that the signal-calling must remain in the hands of professionally trained educators. However, if the schools do not accept the new responsibility for improving economic education, new agencies will certainly be created by special interest groups to promote their brand of economics.

Schools have not done a good job of teaching economic understanding, particularly at the secondary and junior college levels. In high schools, curriculum programs have not been set up

¹ From a lecture at the first Workshop on Economic Education in 1948 directed by the Joint Council on Economic Education.

to do this job. Less than five per cent of our high school graduates have had a course in economics.² And the economics taught on this level has on the whole been poorly adapted to the needs of students as individuals and as voting citizens. Furthermore, the economics in high school social science textbooks is a "very poor substitute" for the semester course in economics.³

In colleges and universities, less than twenty-five per cent of the students enroll in economics courses. Of this twenty-five per cent, about twenty-two per cent are majoring in economics and business-related areas. The kind of general economics the three per cent who are non-specialists in economics and business study is admittedly inadequate for their needs as citizens.⁴

There are other reasons why the secondary schools and colleges are doing an inadequate job in improving the economic competencies of their students. The Commission on Economics in Teacher Education in a recent survey of all colleges and universities having a teacher-education program found that very few teacher candidates receive economic education and that comparatively few teachers colleges have adequately trained personnel teaching the general or introductory course in economics. Also evident was a tremendous need for better instructional materials in economics.

² C. W. McKee and H. G. Moulton, "A Survey of Economic Education." Washington, D. C.: The Brookings Institution, 1951.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 57. See also James H. Dodd, "Economics in the Secondary Schools." Cincinnati, Ohio: South-Western Publishing Company, 1953.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 15-23. See also James J. Vance, "Economics Education in the Junior College." Laramie, Wyoming: The Bureau of Educational Research and Service, 1952.

Improving Economic Education

What, then, can we do to improve economic education in our schools and particularly in secondary schools and in colleges having teacher-education programs? The following suggestions are not intended to be a blueprint for solving all of the problems centering around the improvement of economic education for all citizens attending our schools. Rather, these comments and suggestions may serve to point up certain primary essentials and may help to clarify some of the problems. These are some of the ways in which we can improve economic education in our schools:

- Develop an awareness of the joint responsibility of the schools and the community in developing an adequate program of economic education. The goal should be to improve the competence of the individual, as a consumer, producer and citizen, and to deal effectively with the economic problems of our society.
- Re-examine the curriculum to discover ways in which economic education can be included as a part of the general education program. While curriculum-making should be in the hands of professionally trained teachers, the latter should enlist the cooperation of competent economists and community leaders from business, labor, agriculture, consumer organizations and government.
- Interest all teachers in the community in the need for education for economic competencies. One effective way in which to accomplish this goal is through workshops to assist the in-

service training of teachers in economic education.⁵

- Develop suitable teaching materials, audio-visual aids and other tools as guides to the teacher. Competency on the part of those who prepare materials for economic education is of vital importance.

- Colleges and universities having teacher-education programs should explore the possibilities of designing new courses and instructional materials for the economic education of *all future teachers*. The Commission on Economics in Teacher Education, sponsored by seven professional educational organizations, has selected twelve "cooperating colleges," from among those institutions having teacher-education programs. These selected institutions are interested in working with the commission

and in developing experimental programs for the improvement of economic education in the pre-service preparation of all teachers.

- Sponsor regional, state and community programs relating to education for economic understanding.

There is no single formula by which economic illiteracy can be materially reduced. Economic education is very difficult, involving teaching of people at many levels and with varying degrees of understanding and interest. There is much at stake, however, if we fail to meet this educational challenge. The democratic base of our way of life will not long survive if we fail on the economic front. The school must accept its responsibility for providing effective learning experiences that will enable youth to contribute to the preservation and improvement of a high standard of living for all the people within a democratic society.

⁵The Joint Council on Economic Education has sponsored over 150 Economic Education Workshops for teachers-in-service since 1948.

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