

Significant Books in Review

Column Editor: Paul M. Halverson

Public Education and the Future of America. By the Educational Policies Commission. Washington, D. C.: National Education Association, 1955.

Public Education Under Criticism. By C. Winfield Scott and Clyde M. Hill. New York: Prentice-Hall, 1954.

The first of the above two volumes continues the tradition of significant publications by the Educational Policies Commission. Within its 100 pages are found the dream of public education in America and the struggle for its fulfilment. A comparison is made between the 1950's and two earlier eras of heightened concern, controversy and creativeness. The concluding section assesses the meaning of public education in America and how its future role must be played.

At a time such as the present, this book should give a sense of justifiable pride in American public education to professional educators and laymen alike; from it should also stem new courage to continue the battle for free public schools.

The first six chapters delineate the principles and ideals which supported the development of public education in America. Chapter 7 takes cognizance of the great concern expressed today over schools and puts the Commission on record as welcoming this concern and any careful reappraisal of education which may grow out of it.

Chapter 8 sets down the problems which the Commission feels are paramount as we face the future.

1. Maintaining the moving equilibrium of a complex, democratic society
2. Maintaining a productive economy
3. Making democratic government work
4. Safeguarding democratic diversity within bonds of unity
5. Realizing the nation's intellectual and aesthetic potential
6. Maintaining moral and spiritual values
7. Discharging world responsibilities
8. Finding democracy's leaders.

This book should be an exciting introduction to American education for the pre-service student. For the experienced educator it will serve as an instrument to chart our course ahead in American public schools. The high level of its thought and style can be seen from the following excerpt:

"Faith in public education rests ultimately on two beliefs: that a particular kind of education must be designed to support a particular way of life, and that public education will best support the American way of life. The Founding Fathers were convinced that a society dedicated to freedom, equality, and self-government demanded special educational commitments and institutions. Those who built America's public schools believed public education to be a special instrument for the maintenance of a

democratic society through the cultivation of worthy and responsible persons.

"The basic qualities in the American concept of public education have enhanced value for today—and for tomorrow. As the American people appraise the role of public education in meeting the needs of the nation, they may reaffirm their loyalty to the qualities of an educational system which has served the country well. As they survey the services which public education may render to the nation in a critical and creative moment of its history—matching those services against apparent national and world needs—they will find in the nation's educational past worthy guides and goals for America's future."

Public Education Under Criticism is chiefly an anthology of (a) recent attacks on modern public education which have appeared in lay periodical literature; (b) some defenses of contemporary public schools which have appeared in both lay and educational magazines; (c) analyses of criticisms and suggestions for meeting criticisms; and (d) generalizations and suggestions for constructive action. This book should be of particular value to educators, both in the field and at professional institutions. It will give readers a ready source for the full range of the nature and style of current diatribes against public education, and for some thoughtful analyses of the pros and cons of the argument.

Included in the attacks are excerpts from the writings of well-known critics such as Arthur Bestor, Bernard Iddings Bell, Mortimer Smith, Robert Hutchins, Frank Chodorov, John T. Flynn, Albert Lynd, and Jacques Barzun; also represented are less well-known, but not less vitriolic polemicists such as

Harry Fuller, Ann Crockett, John Sheerin, and John Dixon.

Taking up the defense of the American public schools are such advocates as Harold Taylor, Dorothy Thompson, James B. Conant, Agnes Meyer, Henry Steele Commager, and Roy Larsen, among people who are not directly connected with public education; in addition a host of professional educators assist in the logical analysis of attacks and in eloquent rebuttals to them.

Out of the comprehensive sampling of current writings on public education, the editors of the book make the following generalizations:

"1. Most of the criticisms, not all of them by any means, are honest and they are made by honest, high-minded, well-intentioned, if often misinformed or uninformed people.

"2. Many of the most impressive but often grossly exaggerated criticisms of public education come from distinguished men whose authority to speak devolves from the positions they occupy rather than from any careful, unbiased study of the problems and practices of public education.

"3. Many professional school men, righteous in the consciousness of their own integrity and painfully aware of the colossal task of public education, a task ever increasing in amount and complexity, are quite likely to consider criticism of schools as personal slander and to respond to it emotionally rather than calmly, wisely and constructively.

"4. There are more people amongst us than we realize who honestly do not believe in the principles of public education.

"5. Many people, frequently patrons of private foundations for the education of their own children, are opposed to public education for the masses beyond the bare essentials.

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"6. The group of opponents of public education greatly to be feared are the vicious people who for baneful reasons oppose public education. Their opposition to schools is part of a subversive movement to discredit all democratic institutions.

"7. The persistent, wholesome debates concerning what the schools ought to be doing, and how well they are doing their assigned tasks constitute a large part of what we refer to as 'contemporary criticism.' To be sure it is contemporary but it is not uniquely a phenomenon of our times. It should not be brushed aside as inconsequential nor should we expect or hope that it will ever cease to exist.

"8. There is much evidence that the 'current wave of criticism of public education' is one expression of a general social unrest.

"9. Collectively, and in the last analysis, there is abundant evidence to warrant the

belief that the contemporary wave of criticism is an expression of a deep-seated, abiding faith in public education."

Whether or not one agrees with these generalizations, the reader leaves this book with the feeling that he has been exposed to a cross-section of American thought on public education. He is satisfied that American public education is being appraised, and rightfully so. The degree of security he feels for the future of free schools in our country will depend in part on how clearly he sees the role of public education in America's future. Lacking that clarity, we urge that he read the first volume reviewed, *Public Education and the Future of America*.

—Reviewed by PAUL M. HALVERSON,
associate professor of education, Syracuse University, Syracuse, New York.

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