

Uniting Forces to Improve Education

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Education Is Everybody's Business

IN HIS *Philosophy and Civilization* John Dewey noted significantly:

The art of education is one in which every person is compelled, whether he will or not, to take an interest . . . Professional education has its results limited and twisted because of the general state of education. Surveying that, it appears that its improvement cannot be made secure merely by better training of teachers. Parents, school officials, taxpayers have the last word, and the character of that word is dependent upon their education. They may and do block or deflect the best laid plans. That is the circle in which education moves.¹

The possibility of escape from this circle is not given us. What is given us is the opportunity to change its character. Education need not spin forever within a fixed orbit.

As long, indeed, as ours is a plural culture, one in which we secure unity by sharing a commitment to maintain and cherish difference, we may be sure that the circle within which education moves will be shaped and re-shaped by many forces. Not the least of these will be the character and state of education itself. It is for this reason that the several thousand *little* White House conferences on education, held in the states and territories as a preliminary to the culminating confer-

ence, the White House Conference on Education, are of such potential value.

It is possible to argue that the call for this Conference succeeded only in putting off the day when the American people must face up to the critical needs now confronting our schools. It may be said, and with truth, that we know enough now to reach intelligent decisions, say, on the matters of securing the buildings and classrooms and teachers to make it possible for all of the children of all of the people to share educational opportunities equitably. Perhaps. But the question is: How widely is this knowledge shared?

The Unmentioned Issue

The little conferences are a matter of public record. So will the big one be. The current needs of public education have become, and will become, known to more and more people. If, finally, as some have feared, the culminating Conference underwrites preconceived views (the Conference will be history by the time this appears) especially on the support of education, this will be a public fact of the first order and in a year which will have larger political import than President Eisenhower could have forecast when he set the Conference wheels in motion.

¹ John Dewey, *Philosophy and Civilization*. New York: Minton, Balch and Company, 1931. p. 315.

The Saturday Review, in its annual Accent on Education number,² presented on September 10, 1955, through articles written by advisers to the subcommittee of the Conference, a preview of the problems which will arise as the topics scheduled for discussion in Washington are considered. The articles were necessarily brief, the discussions somewhat general. Nevertheless, the problems are clearly set forth, problems arising in connection with purposes, efficient and economical organization of schools, school building needs, securing and keeping enough teachers, financing the schools and building a continuing interest in education.

It called attention especially to federal aid, designating it "the unmentioned issue." If the Conference neglects this issue this act will bring it to the forefront in all ensuing political and educational discussion. No issue is settled by ignoring it; in some instances, as in this one, its importance is accentuated. A member of this Commission has recently called attention to a chairman of a state discussion group who "not only made no attempt to let the discussants give their ideas but led off with a lecture against federal aid," when the topic of financing the schools arose. If the issue had seemed unimportant to the group members theretofore, it does not now. Whatever the specific consequences of

²This annual issue is a force affecting American education of which all in education should be aware.

the meetings within the states and territories and however these are reflected in the decisions reached in the White House Conference on Education, the number of citizens who are coming to realize what problems must be solved if education is to be equal to its present task is being steadily increased.

An illustration from another quarter may sustain the point. A special committee of the American Legion, after the thoughtful study of charges made against UNESCO within and without the Legion, denied the validity of the major ones. It also pointed specifically to the sources of the hate campaign against UNESCO and urged that there be no further disparagement of those "whose only crime is that they differ with us," that there be an end to name-calling. The report was immediately opposed by some and may be rejected at the national convention of the Legion. But here again rejection will foster publicized discussion and serve to alert the public further.

The airing of issues is perhaps the one sure way to bring *those whose business is education, the people generally*, to an intelligent grasp of the problems with which they must inescapably deal. Since our problems will not be solved in a single conference, no matter how high the summit, it would be an important educational gain were the *little* conferences to become a lasting characteristic of the social fabric.

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