

The Strength of American Public Education

Facts concerning academic achievement indicate the success of America's experiment in extending educational opportunity to all children and young people.

ONE OF THE ironies of our present era is the fact that American public education has been subjected to its most severe criticism during a period in which the schools have been making some of their most important and effective contributions to the intellectual development of children and youth.

With the schools' becoming better centers of learning with each succeeding year one might conclude that educators should keep on doing the job they *are* doing and, in time, might expect that the excellence of elementary, secondary, and higher education would become self-evident. Unfortunately, such has not happened and is not likely to happen. If anything, unfounded criticisms of education have become more frequent and, in some cases, more irresponsible since the present outburst of "school-baiting" began around 1949 or 1950.

At present the situation is a serious one. The need for continued improvement of education is greater than ever in the dangerous war of conflicting ideas we are waging with nations opposed to democratic values. This is especially true because education is a prime instrument

of survival. Also, with elementary, secondary, and higher education expanding tremendously, there is a need for sustained financial sacrifices on the part of the public in order to support at more adequate levels universalized educational opportunities. If unfounded distrust of education is fostered day by day by writers who contend that we are less well educated than we were a generation ago (1) or who claim paradoxically that we should spend less money on education (4), it may become increasingly difficult to operate the schools in terms of sound teaching-learning principles and also to obtain the increased proportion of the national income which larger and larger enrollments require.

For these reasons it is of greatest importance for educational leaders to take pains to familiarize themselves *specifically* with the data which document the present strength of public education. These data clearly show that the fundamentals are not being neglected in the elementary school, nor is content dissipated in the high school, nor is higher education in the U. S. inferior to the European variety as implied by the more vocal critics (1), (13).

Education's Academic Strength

Two tremendously important facts have generally been overlooked in recent and current discussions of the alleged "failure" of our schools to insure that children learn the three R's. First, the test scores made by children in such fields as reading, writing, and arithmetic *have consistently improved for generations*. Second, the children making increasingly better scores on the same or comparable tests have grown younger until the average child today, by the time he is in grade four or five, is approximately *one year younger* than children of 35 years ago. Let us look more closely at these points.

A few years ago, Rock (11) located more than a dozen research inquiries dealing with children's academic achievement. This body of research clearly demonstrated that pupil performance in the U. S. had tended to improve with each generation. Data from other sources tend to be similar. Statistical information compiled by one of the larger companies producing nationally used standardized tests, for instance, indicates that children today are performing better in reading and in arithmetic than they did even a few years ago. When tests taken by 230,000 pupils were examined it was learned that children's scores on the same national tests had improved by 12 percent during a recent 10-year interval (2), (14).

A research division worker in a mid-western city made another of the recent analyses which have substantiated the growing academic strength of public education. He administered arithmetic and

spelling tests originally used in 1934 at the third and fifth grade levels. He concluded that children in the same community, 20 years after the first tests were given, were making significantly better scores than their predecessors had made (7).

The consistent increase in pupils' academic achievement is even more impressive in view of the point made earlier, namely, that children in a given grade today average about 12 months younger than did children in the early 1920's. This shift in age, noted by J. Wayne Wrightstone (15), apparently may be attributed to changes in promotion policies; to a decrease in the practice of arbitrarily "failing" children who do not complete minimum requirements for a given grade. A generation or two ago, 50 percent, and sometimes more, of the children who began grade one were retarded one year or more by the time they completed grade 8. Despite the fact that more children are staying in school longer, and despite the fact that they average as much as a year younger by the time they reach the middle grades, the current educational practices so often bitterly criticized have resulted in appreciably superior academic achievement by today's children!

Alarums with respect to the decline of academic standards at the secondary level are as unfounded as the purported "deterioration" of the elementary school. An example or two should serve to establish this point.

Some critics, such as Arthur Bestor (1) or Roger A. Freeman (4), identify nonacademic or "life adjustment" courses with soft pedagogy. It is well to note, in this connection, that there are many more secondary school children enrolled in science, mathematics and foreign language classes, *in proportion to the high*

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school age population of the U. S., than were enrolled in such classes in 1900. Statistical data from the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (3) indicate that 400,000 high school youth, in round numbers, were taking one or more science and mathematics courses at the century's turn. At this time there were 75,603,000 people in our country. In 50 years, while the total U. S. population grew by slightly over 100 percent, our secondary science and mathematics enrollments increased by 600 percent and 900 percent respectively.

Even the purported decline in foreign language study has sometimes been inaccurately presented. Actually the number of pupils working in this field has grown, rather than declined, in proportion to the number of children of both elementary and secondary school age. According to the Modern Language Association, there were 5000 children learning a second language in grade 6 or below in 1941. Approximately 400,000 were enrolled below grade 6 by 1957. As reported by Mildenerger in an Office of Education pamphlet, in one three year period alone (1951-54) there was a 400 percent increase in the number of children in elementary (grades 1-6) foreign language programs (8). Insofar as the high school is concerned, the total number of youth studying a second language increased threefold while the national population merely doubled from 1900 to 1950.

Another illuminating bit of information is the following: Last year 58 percent of our secondary school teachers were giving more than half of their teaching time to instructing in such academic fields as English, science, mathematics, history or social studies, and foreign language (9). Many other teachers taught in these fields, too, but for less

than half of their time. Not one secondary teacher in 300 gave as much as half of his time to so-called "core" courses (9); the cores which some critics would have us believe are so poorly conceived and so prevalent as to be undermining the curriculum.

In view of the facts, the strength of American education does not merely reside in mass education but also in increased levels of achievement in the three R's and solid subjects. These attainments are being made by young people who are distinctly younger than their parents were a generation ago.

Strength in Numbers

At the same time, these striking and reassuring data must be viewed as even more significant because of the concomitant strength of our schools in dealing with mass education. Fifty or more years ago American secondary education in particular was the privilege of a small group of youth—a mere 250,000 youngsters in 1890 in contrast with 8,000,000 youth in our high schools during 1958-59. Phrased in another way, approximately 32 children are in U. S. high schools today as compared with every one enrolled 68 years ago!

The public schools have made their excellent academic gains in the past 50 years while absorbing and educating *all* the people's children—many of whom, for intellectual, sociological, or financial reasons, probably would not even have finished grade school in 1890 or 1900 when nearly one child in five in the 10 to 15 age group was already gainfully employed (12).

Here is strength, indeed! *Mass* education in the 1950's is eventuating in higher levels of academic achievement—as repeatedly shown by test scores—than the level of scholastic competence

attained by much more highly selected groups of pupils before and at the turn of the century.

Here, too, is an answer to those who say that American education suffers by comparison with the strength of education overseas. European education remains highly selective at the university preparatory level as in the British university preparatory grammar school or in the Swiss *école cantonale*. As a result of this European selectivity, it must be borne in mind that only those American high school pupils eligible for the National Honor Society can be compared with the *total* student body in European university preparatory high schools. We educate the mass of our youth including the most able; European systems educate only a small minority and weed out 60 to 80 percent of the children who are less academically inclined. This elimination takes place at the equivalent to our upper elementary-junior high school level (6). About one European youth in twenty can complete secondary school and attend a university.

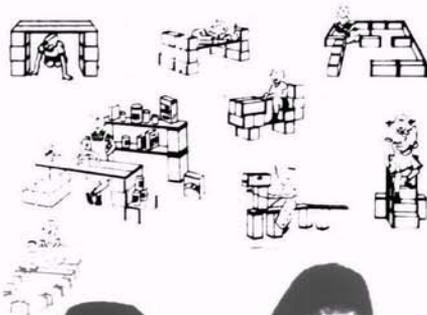
Because of the mass of students who enter higher education in the U. S.—some five times as many as enter European universities—*only* those American students eligible for Phi Beta Kappa can be compared with *all* European students at this level. Even so, our relatively unselected students in higher education appear, for example, to compare well with those in Britain (5). Surely the “Phi Beta Kappas” in our universities—our top 20 percent—compare well with the total European university student body which, as a result of selection, is the academic equivalent to our upper 20 percent. And many youth who would be barred from higher education in Europe do have open to them in the U. S. this channel to self-realization.

Friedrich Nietzsche, writing in the last century, said, “Simply by being compelled to keep constantly on his guard a man may grow so weak as to be unable any longer to defend himself” (10). Let us hope that we need not weaken our schools by being forever on the defensive. Let us also be proud and secure in the conviction that sound *data* document the strength and vigor with which our schools have stimulated intellectual development in children and youth. Public education has not only the *demonstrable* strength of quality—it also makes the vitalizing contribution that only mass education can make to the maintenance and improvement of a vigorous culture.

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Liberal arts inclined teachers' colleges and universities into which modern theories of "life adjustment" type education had not yet invaded—I owe not only my thirst for knowledge but also my desire to be a teacher. . . . It has been my high school instructors who have shown me that I can be of most benefit to my students, my profession, and my country, not as a psychiatric adviser, but as an instructor whose enthusiasm for learning is contagious. And it is in these dedicated people that my own hopes for the future of American education lie, for I shudder to think of the inevitable degeneration of the minds of millions of American school children who are doomed to be subjected to the teaching methods which my generation has been instructed are the proper ones.

Upon this hopeful note we come to the end of our comments on our education. Ours, we think, is a good school providing adequate education for all who wish to benefit from it. We go even further in providing enrichment for the future leaders in every profession.

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