

Education for All

In appraising American education, a look at the history and the present status of our schools is relevant.

THE United States has gained worldwide eminence in education for the high level of accomplishment in relation to three fundamental concepts: (a) Major responsibility for education is located in the states, (b) education is available to all children and youth through or beyond high school, and (c) education is cherished as an important foundation for liberty. In addition, we are well-recognized for achievement of the common objectives pointed out in a recent report, providing educational offerings to meet the constantly changing needs of our society, and attempting to adjust the educational program to develop the best potentialities of each individual. It is worthy of note that accomplishment of this high standard of education, although complicated by many factors, has been envisioned by most of our people as a democratic goal and has been achieved through processes characteristically democratic.

Universal, Tax-Supported Education

The idea of making education universally attainable, for poor as well as rich, non-college-bound as well as college-bound, handicapped and ability-blessed, newcomers and established residents alike, did not spring full blown from the

minds and hearts of all our people. To the contrary, progress toward this goal—and indeed, maintenance of it—represents continuous struggle.

From the Massachusetts colonial laws of 1647 to the present, whenever the question of expanding or extending educational opportunities has been introduced, consistently there have been those who opposed it. Views of dissenters could usually be added up in terms of costs to taxpayers; fear of competition on the part of those operating private schools; desire to restrict education to the intellectuals; and inconvenience to the child, his parents, or his employer. Those advocating education have just as persistently put forth such views as the dependence of democratic institutions upon an educated and enlightened citizenry, the need for every citizen to learn to exercise and protect his civil liberties, the desire for an ever-rising standard of living, and the cultural gains for the nation.

With every crisis, leaders have emerged to take up the torch in favor of public schools. Due to their persistence, backed by the will of the people, colonial towns provided grammar schools and levied taxes to support them; the Ordinances of 1785 and 1787 made education a "built-in" privilege in

new territorial extensions; public elementary education eventually spread to every state; and, in order to make sure that even the unwilling attended school, compulsory attendance laws were instituted.

Under courageous leadership, public education was extended to provide secondary education. Private Latin schools for the college-bound, majoring in Latin and religion, were operated in the colonies. During the 18th century these were followed by academies which offered practical and scientific subjects as well as Latin and religion. Later, when the academies became restricted again to Latin and religion, the public high school emerged to fill the gap.

In Boston, in 1821, the first English Classical high school opened for boys who were not going to college. That schools of this sort fulfilled a need in our society is evident in their growth. In forty years, 300 such schools were established. Late in the century, and after several court trials, the right to levy taxes to support secondary education was established. By 1900, there were 6,000 public high schools, enrolling 500,000 students, or 80 percent of all youth attending high schools. Federal aid to stimulate vocational education, enacted in 1917 and following, gave further impetus to the growth of high schools. In 1920, more than 2,000,000 students were attending public high schools; in 1930, almost 4,000,000; in 1950, almost 6,000,000; in 1953-54, more than 6,250,000; and in 1956-57, almost 8,000,000.

The ambitions of our people to provide tax-supported education were not limited to elementary and secondary education. Jefferson had advocated the responsibility of each state to establish and maintain schools comprising free

elementary education for all children, and free secondary and university education for the more intelligent. He was unable to convince his State of Virginia of the need to establish such a system of schools. New York and New Hampshire took steps in this direction, but their gains proved to be temporary. Nevertheless, before the Civil War, 26 states had established universities, and the Morrill Act of 1862, which gave free land for the establishment of agriculture and mechanical colleges, put the state universities into position to achieve their phenomenal growth. In 1900 there were 250,000 students attending colleges; in 1935 there were 1,500,000.¹ During the years, courses have been expanded in both public and private colleges and universities, and many technical and business schools have been opened. In 1957-58, almost 4,000,000 students were enjoying the benefits of education beyond the high school.

Look Back With Pride

Quantitative measures of growth, impressive as they are, in no way tell the complete story of education in this country. To appreciate what this growth meant, one must look at each stage of our development to see who attended the schools and how the curriculum changed in response to the needs of our people.

Who Attended Public Schools?

The story of our schools is intricately interwoven with the story of early settlement in an undeveloped land, and the story of immigration and industrialization. Early in our history, settlers on

¹ Office of Education, Department of Health, Education, and Welfare. *Statistical Summary of Education, 1953-54* (Chapter I). Washington, D. C.: Government Printing Office, 1957. 86 p.

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the East coast were from England, Holland, and France; in the South and Southwest, from Spain. Within each of these settlements, religious groups organized schools, usually for their own children. During the 19th century the picture became steadily more complicated by immigrations from other parts of Europe and from Africa. From 1820 to 1860, immigrants came from northern and western Europe, particularly from Germany, Scotland, Ireland, and France. These groups were scarcely amalgamated when, from 1860 on, from eastern and southern Europe immigrants came a million strong each year, bringing culture threads into our seaboard and eastern states significantly different from those already there. Hailing from many countries, Slavs, Czechs, Roumanians, Poles, Greeks, Italians, Hungarians, and others came to America, bearing symbols of their own national backgrounds in terms of ideas and beliefs, language and customs, loyalties and prejudices. In their loneliness, each sought his own kind. Small "islands" of nationalities grew up in every large city, each island perpetuating the ways of the homeland. From 1840 to 1870, the population doubled; from 1870 to 1900 it doubled again. In 1900, out of the 76,000,000 population, 10,000,000 were foreign born, "not counting the generations of children born to earlier immigrants from many lands."²

Into the schools poured the children of these immigrants, each reflecting the ideas, feelings, and problems of his

² R. Freeman Butts. *A Cultural History of Education*. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc., 1947. p. 448.

family and neighborhood. The public schools were seen to be a powerful instrument to accelerate assimilation of these groups. As a result, compulsory attendance laws, beginning in Massachusetts in 1852, spread, until by 1900 compulsory attendance laws were on the statutes in most of our states, although they varied from state to state as to age limits, length of school year, and enforcement procedures.

These laws extended mainly to age 14; even then many children found it necessary to work to augment the family earnings. If the family's need could be established, "working papers" were granted the child. Evening classes—eveling schools in large cities—were established to enable such young people to complete their educational requirements and to assist immigrant adults to achieve citizenship status. Later, these schools were expanded greatly to help adults continue their education even at college level, or to improve their job competencies.

Curriculum Responds to People's Needs

At the beginning of our history, since most schools were church supported, the basic subjects taught were reading and religion, with a smattering of arithmetic and writing. As public schools were organized, "learning the laws of the land was required, as well as . . . reading and religion . . . The aims to develop good moral character and literacy outran all others in the elementary schools of the nineteenth century, although the practical social and individual aims were gathering momentum during the century."³

Many writers have tried to communicate something of the turmoil which ac-

³ *Ibid.*, p. 299-301, 501.

companied (and still accompanies!) the rapid industrial growth of this country. None, however, knows it better than the teachers, clergymen, doctors, and other humanitarian workers who lived through or close to the period, serving in any capacity necessary to make life endurable for adults and children, fully conscious that they were serving humanity and helping to forge out a great America.

During this period the school, elementary or secondary, knew no boundaries for its duties.⁴ A child needed a bath? He got it. Another needed medical care but had no money? He got it. Another needed shoes—or a warm coat—or pants? They were found. Children were hungry? Teachers and mothers (often church groups) combined their efforts, over wood or coal or small gas burners, to provide the children "at least one square meal a day." Generous portions of left-overs often found their way to homes where mothers were ill, or where material goods came hard. When nationality fights occurred on the playground (Italians against Greeks; Germans against Czechs; Armenians against Turks, and so on), the teacher was the mediator. She became the purveyor of English to the various language and nationality groups in her class, and of American culture to parents as well as to children.

The question was rarely asked, "Is this the work of the school?" Teachers and parents *knew* it was, for they knew that if Andy and Rosie were to learn to read and to cultivate the civic virtues of their new homeland, their hunger, cold, illness, or bitterness and concern about their families must first be reduced to manageable proportions.

⁴ This is still true of schools in many parts of the U. S.

A Proud Record

Now, nearly all our children remain in school through the 10th year of school, many through 12th and 14th, and a steadily increasing number complete college. The American elementary and secondary schools are unique in the world in that both attempt not only to inculcate the value precepts America lives by, but also to provide education suited to develop the best potentialities of each child. The elementary school strives, and succeeds immeasurably in so doing, to enable each child to go as far as his ability will let him advance toward civic understanding and mastery of academic skills. The comprehensive high school, where its membership is large enough, offers general education for family and civic living; specialized education in preparation for college entrance, business, and industry; and many single courses designed to meet special needs in our society. At the same time the schools attempt to maintain an atmosphere which is conducive to the well-balanced social and emotional growth of the individual. Not only is basic education free; it is meant to be practical in helping each individual build a "good life." Teachers care about the content they teach; they also care about children. They cannot be satisfied to train the mental processes alone.

Colleges and universities already attract one out of 74 of our total population, and the prediction in a recently published report of the American Council on Education⁵ is that the enrollment in colleges and universities will be doubled by 1970. This report shows

⁵ W. Max Wise, *They Come for the Best of Reasons—College Students Today*. Washington, D. C.: American Council on Education, 1785 Massachusetts Avenue, N.W., 1958. 65 p.

present day students to be serious-minded, wanting the best opportunities colleges can provide, whether in cultural or vocational pursuits. In response, many colleges and universities offer both the humanities and the practical, and increasingly they provide campus life which nurtures a studious and thoughtful outlook.

There Still Is Work To Do

As of now, free education is available to most of America's children. There is legislation in every state requiring attendance for all children up to 15, 16, 17, or 18; in most states free educational opportunity is offered to 21. In October 1957, 99 percent of 9- to 13-year-olds and 89 percent of 14- to 17-year-olds were in school.⁶ Yet we have not entirely achieved our goals. For example:

1. Numberless children of agricultural migrants, who move with their parents from state to state each year, find few if any educational privileges available. Although progress in educating these children has been made in recent years, the main problems of financing the education of these children, making them welcome in local schools, and adapting the curriculum and other school services to meet their needs remain to challenge lawmakers, employers, community leaders, and educators.

2. Strides have been made in educating children and youth who are handicapped. However, recently it was estimated that only one out of five children in need of special education receive it.⁷

⁶ Office of Education, Department of Health, Education, and Welfare. *Progress of Public Education in the United States of America, 1957-1958*. Washington, D. C.: Government Printing Office, 1958. 26 p.

⁷ Office of Education, Department of Health, Education, and Welfare. *Statistical Summary of Education, 1953-54*. Op. cit.

3. Public education has been extended to many children below six years of age. Yet attendance in kindergarten is approximately one-sixth that of first grade.⁸

4. In many school systems, due to overcrowding of facilities, children are receiving a cut-rate education, attending only partial days. It is entirely within reason that, if this condition is long-continued, it will reflect on the achievement of our people.

In most states, particularly in cities, "adult education," established originally for "Americanization" of immigrants, has long been offered to those who wanted to continue their education or to upgrade their vocational skills.

School programs have always adapted to meet the changing social needs of our society. Our adult world is, in 1958, thanks to the easy availability of education in our country, well-educated. Among them are countless numbers of parents who want the best for their children and for our country. Among them, too, are specialists who understand human growth, behavior and learning; the relationships between the educated mind and society; and the impact of environmental influences upon behavior. There are specialists, too, who understand society's needs today and, in part, tomorrow. Fearlessly and frankly, educational leaders should engage all adult resources, specialists as well as parents, in constant consideration of our schools; the goals of the schools, the particular role of schools in the local and national scene, their financial support, their personnel needs. Only so can the public become informed of the contribution our public schools make, and of the vigilance that must be exercised to make *education perpetually available to all our children*.

⁸ *Ibid.*

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