

How Good Are Our Schools?

Our basic commitments concerning education and the advances which we have made in meeting these are examined here.

AT THIS time of serious re-examination of our schools by both professional educators and the general public anyone who could produce or even suggest a simple device for finding the answer to the question posed in the title would almost certainly be awarded an educational Oscar. While I have no great optimism for winning such an award, I should like to attempt to offer some suggestions of ways by which we might approach an answer. Such an answer would be equally acceptable and reassuring to the public which supports and controls our schools and to those of us charged with the important responsibility of translating public policy into educational programs.

In the first place, it might be well to remind ourselves that matters of value and subjective evaluation do not lend themselves to statistical proof. For instance, it is a relatively easy matter to demonstrate statistically that a larger number of children and youth are attending schools and are staying in attendance for a longer period of time. But this proves nothing if their educational program is no better or is even poorer than the one available to learners 50 years ago. We could readily prove that teachers in preparation stay longer

in college and take more academic subjects, but little is gained if the *quality* of the program is no better. Many studies have been undertaken to show that children read better, can handle number concepts more efficiently, and know more historical and geographic facts, but the fundamental question of what *good* this does for the learner remains unanswered.

In the second place, we should be well aware of the fact that any generalization about American education is hazardous and misleading. Anyone who knows the composition of our schools is extremely conscious of the great variations in practice. To use a central point as normative is to ignore with great injustice the wide spread of performance from the mean in both directions.

If we ever hope to come up with some definitive answers to the question of our schools' adequacy, we will need to take quite a different tack on the problem.

Our Commitments

It is here suggested that the nature of our problem is basically philosophical rather than factual. We need first to look carefully at the basic commitments of the American people concerning their schools and to inquire into the

nature of their aspirations and expectations. To do this adequately in the space allotted this paper would be an overly ambitious project; the best I can hope to do is to point up briefly three commitments which seem to run consistently through the history of American education.

It is quite clear that the people of this country look to their schools to provide children and youth with an educational program that is *good* for them. The public may be unclear about what constitutes goodness, and worse yet, individuals will differ greatly about what they think is good, but there should be no confusion concerning the fact that they hold the highest aspirations for their offspring. This deep hope for their children's welfare may not offer us any reassurance or guidance in knowing how to translate such urgings into practical programs, but it does suggest one of our most important and immediate responsibilities—to help the public to clarify its thinking and to come to some common agreements about what constitutes goodness.

Second, the public is pretty clear about its desire to have the schools serve as the means for a proper induction of the young into an organized society, and to help children learn to live more effectively in it. In most parents' minds this usually means that they would want the school to do those things which the individual parent thinks important, which creates a bewildering kaleidoscope of conflicting purposes. Fortunately, a common thread of agreement may be identified. Generally speaking, most parents want their children to have the skills necessary for further intellectual development, they want them to have a common body of important knowledge, they want them to develop some of the

more important social skills necessary for getting along well with other people, and they hope that each learner will develop all of these to his maximum capacity.

Third, it is quite clear that parents want their schools to offer a wide variety of community services, some of which border on the custodial. This is probably their way of saying that they want the schools to be instruments of social policy, however imperfectly they may understand it. They may only dimly perceive that the American way of life requires a systematic instructional program dedicated to its preservation and enhancement, but anyone who has worked closely with parent groups cannot help but be impressed by their almost universal insistence on it.

How does all this help us to arrive at an answer to the question about the adequacy of our schools? Since we cannot depend upon statistical analysis or gross generalizations about practice, we are reduced to the necessity of making some positive hypotheses which logically point to the future. If we can assert that if certain conditions prevail they will logically lead to future improvement or betterment, we can state the case for public education in hopeful and relevant terms. These conditions can be enumerated in great detail, but for the purposes of this article only the main categories can be mentioned.

The main hypothesis on which the assertion of progress is predicated is that, if a body of knowledge about human growth and development and educational psychology exists and is systematically used in guiding the work

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of the classroom teacher, improvement in learning will be forthcoming. A correlative hypothesis is that if the conditions and environment for learning, and the facilities with which teachers have to work are properly provided, learning will be improved. A further hypothesis states that if the preparation and in-service education of teachers are based on all of the above, and in addition the teacher is a truly educated person, all of the conditions necessary for improvement have been provided.

Therefore, in order to answer the question about the goodness of our schools, we need to point with pride to the advances made in the availability of the knowledge about human beings and learning, the state of affairs with regard to material resources, and the directions in which the leading programs of preparation for teaching and for educational leadership in the field are pointing.

This is an ambitious task, one which any individual ought to approach with modesty and a full awareness of his own limitations. Since I could not feel personally adequate for the task, I have drawn on the resources of many of my professional friends in a wide variety of educational positions ranging from classroom teachers, school principals, superintendents, officers in national education associations, college professors, to deans and presidents of teacher preparing institutions. The list below is my own collation but it is constructed from the many suggestions offered by them.

Significant Advances in Education

1. *Advances in our knowledge about children and youth.* The literature on human growth and development is of very recent origin. Beginning with the experimental studies of J. B. Watson and

the early research of the behaviorists, the field has expanded to the point where it is becoming well-nigh impossible for one to keep abreast of the evidence. The work of Thorndike has been enriched by subsequent educational psychologists to a degree which makes a study of this field a lifetime project. There is no question in the mind of the serious student of education but that there is an oversupply of rich resources on which to draw for implications for classroom practice. This great fund of knowledge has prompted many suggestions for classroom practice, such as providing for individual differences in learning, emphasizing the importance of interest and motivation, developing studies of the basic needs of children, organizing guidance and counseling programs in the schools, and introducing a great variety of measuring devices calculated to provide us with more objective evidence about the growth and development of learners. While it probably cannot be claimed that the majority of this knowledge and information has been effectively used in the classroom, it remains as a rich resource on which to draw as we strive more vigorously to put it to work. Surely, it can be claimed that this material represents a real advance in the field of education.

2. *Advances in provision of better learning facilities.* While beautiful school buildings guarantee nothing in terms of a better educational program, it cannot be denied that proper facilities in the hands of an expert teacher will surely improve the quality of the product. No one can successfully deny that giant strides have been made in giving teachers the kind of physical environment and the materials which they can use with profit in the school program. Better, more functional school buildings

with provision for a great variety of auxiliary and non-classroom services are in abundant evidence. Within these buildings teachers have been provided with many new and helpful instructional facilities. These include more attractive and better organized textbooks, audio-visual materials; special facilities for art, music, physical education; special provision for the mentally and physically handicapped; and special services for health and welfare.

In addition to the physical plant and facilities, organizational changes have made it possible for teachers better to serve the needs of learners and of the community. The junior high school, as a unique organization for adolescents, is coming back into its own. The comprehensive high school, attempting to serve the community in a wide variety of ways, is rapidly replacing the college preparatory academy. With the advent of state educational equalization programs, a better and fairer financing of our schools has been achieved. Consolidation and reorganization of school districts have been attempted for the purpose of providing communities with more economical and better equipped and administered school systems. The secondary school has expanded its offerings upward into the thirteenth and fourteenth years in order to provide a local community junior college for both terminal education and a more economical first two years of senior college work. In every direction we look we find the schools moving forward to better organization and provision of the physical facilities indispensable to improved educational opportunity.

3. *Advances in provision of educational leadership.* Leadership as used here means the techniques by which

persons in status positions make it possible for teachers to do a maximally effective job in the classroom. Our advances in the area are on two broad fronts: the pre-service preparation of future teachers, and in-service activities.

Regardless of what might be said to the contrary, the development of substantial programs in teacher education has been remarkable, if one but realizes that the teacher education institution as it is known today is barely 35 years old. Prior to this time our preparatory program was borrowed directly from the European normal school—a technical institute dedicated to the teaching of specific skills. Today, all over the country we find the teachers college growing into a four-year collegiate program of broad scope and of substantial academic content.

Paralleling the maturing of the teacher education institution one finds the increase in certification standards, with a strong tendency to dispense with the requirement of a specific number of “education” courses for certification, and an emphasis upon a broad cultural background as the indispensable foundation for teacher education. Education associations are beginning to think seriously of limiting membership in their organizations to those who qualify on the basis of professional standards, and all agencies concerned with the preparation of teachers are beginning to talk with pride about a “profession of teaching.”

On the in-service front, the school administrator, particularly the building principal, conceives of his responsibility as one of educational leadership for the classroom teacher. This service concept of administration is playing an increasingly important role. Instead of petty tyrants ruling a dynasty, principals are

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working with teachers on the improvement of classroom programs, and teachers are increasingly being involved in developing policy and program. Superintendents are clearer about their responsibilities to boards of education, and boards of education are clarifying their roles as the formulators of policy and are leaving the execution of this policy to their trusted superintendents. This latter move has been materially aided by the rapid development at state and national levels of the National School Boards Association.

Schools are learning to live more comfortably with their communities, and administrators are learning to provide the community with a kind of leadership which will help the people to gain a clear insight into the appropriate directions for educational endeavor.

These, then, represent the conditions necessary for educational progress. While it must be frankly admitted that many of the above advances remain to be widely adopted, the growing edge of practice clearly indicates that much has already been done. If the studies of "educational lag" may be believed—that it takes from 50 to 75 years for a pregnant idea or theory to be generally accepted in practice—the next 25 years should represent giant strides forward in the improvement in our schools.

As one reviews the impressive evidence of promising movements in the total field of education, one cannot help but be proud of the progress made. But this feeling will be dwarfed by the greater pride in achievement if we can adapt all of these promising movements to the practical level. Only then will we be able to answer the question, "How good are our schools?"

How We Work

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units the group has studied and make a short joint appraisal of them. Suggestions are listed and are weighed for values against cooperatively developed criteria. Teachers who work with the group in other related areas are often called in for consultation. Throughout the development of the unit there are many choice-making and evaluating experiences. Every area in the curriculum offers some opportunity for choice-making. Dances, parties, assemblies and, in the secondary grades, money-making experiences are considered a part of the school's curriculum and are given time in the program.

One of the beliefs which run through the life of the school is that work is dignified and respectable. Responsibilities in the classrooms begin in the kindergarten and continue through the school. Students are able as they mature to accept with increasing understanding and good grace the hard or monotonous phases which are involved in any large project. These phases are accepted, not because the difficulty and monotony in and of themselves build character, but because the long-range objective is desirable and the hard work is a necessary stage.

One of the practical problems of a value-oriented program is continuous and unavoidable—the fact referred to above that values occur in clusters. Teachers must constantly examine their handling of situations to see that some important values are not being sacrificed in their eagerness to develop others. We continuously evaluate our program by observing the process of valuing which our students develop in their attempts to solve the problems of their daily living.

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