

The Importance of People

Column Editor: Fred T. Wilhelms

A Curriculum for Delinquency

*Interim Report of the Governor's Commission
on Economic Stabilization*

To: His Excellency, the Governor

WHAT YOUR Excellency long since grasped in one intuitive flash, our research has now established beyond doubt: That a steady and reliable supply of youthful delinquents is essential to the prosperity of our state.

Though this case scarcely needs documentation, let us at least mention a capital investment upwards of \$100 million in training schools, prisons, etc.; an annual payroll running into many millions. The prosperity of certain entire communities is dependent upon the corrective industry. And everywhere unemployment and suffering would follow any sudden drop in the demand for probation officers, prison guards, psychiatrists, and policemen—to mention only a few of those directly involved. If their jobs were cut off, the drop in personal income and purchasing power would inevitably decrease demand for goods and services and might easily trigger off a downward spiral of unemployment, ending in depression. If at the same time there should be added a sharp increase in the labor force, from the ranks of those now so successfully held out of production in training schools and prisons, the result might well be sheer economic disaster.

The question, then, is not whether we

need a supply of delinquents but how to produce such a supply in a stabilized fashion. Following are the Commission's recommendations as to the contribution the schools can make.

Recommendations and Proposals

1. Since the greatest obstacle to delinquency is a feeling of happiness, security and success, it follows that by far the most hopeful single measure is to set up a school curriculum so difficult that a sizeable fraction of the scholars simply cannot succeed in it. It is important to begin this program very early, before any weed of self-confidence shall have taken root.

An excellent first device will be to throw beginners into reading six months or a year before they have the maturity for it. Probably no other device can be quite so helpful as this in establishing from the very start the necessary sense of bewilderment, frustration and inferiority. One can then capitalize upon the initial confusion by pushing forward very rapidly in the introduction of new vocabulary. (It need not be thought that such a measure must be carried to great extremes. The objective is only to keep the simple-minded pupil perpetually off-balance by always throwing in a little

more than he can handle—thus confusing him even as to the part he could have mastered.)

Two or three years later a similar advantage can be gained by suddenly shifting from simple numbers work to the complex arithmetic of fractions, decimals, etc. Apparently the trick is to move into manipulation of symbols before the child knows what the symbols mean. The unmatched contribution of this is to establish schoolwork in the childish mind as an unfathomable mystery, beyond his dim powers.

Both these measures will have the advantage not only of eroding away any nascent self-confidence but also of generating that sense of frustration, irritability and rebellion which is so necessary to the delinquent.

A word of caution is in order: It dare not be assumed that these gains will come automatically. An occasional child may remain blissfully oblivious of his situation. The Commission recommends two correctives:

a. Ways must be found to bring each child's failure to his attention—preferably in an emotional setting—at least daily. At greater intervals the failure should be emphasized by some dramatic instrument. The common report card seems excellently adapted to the purpose, but in some schools its potency is threatened by a sentimental movement to discuss the situation directly with parents, all too often in a kindly way.

b. Public opinion must be brought into play. This should prove easy. The more successful children can easily be taught to adopt a supercilious attitude, to snicker at crucial moments, and to pick at the victim outside the classroom. Parents and relatives are not so close to the scene but can still prove invaluable allies, especially for a few days at the end

of each month or six weeks, when they have the reinforcement of the school report.

Needless to say, this program must be followed up assiduously, for children are devilishly resilient organisms, and even the briefest taste of success may begin to restore what years of careful work have torn down. The critical years will come in the high school, when the adolescent's new-found strength and questioning attitude will enable him to search vigorously for a way of escape. Fortunately, in these years many excellent instruments lie at hand. A universal requirement of a foreign language, for instance, will always be good, especially if the approach is highly grammatical.

Until recently it has been hard to secure public approval of this measure, but the situation is now more hopeful. Given a reasonable adroitness, we should be able to start with the clear need for linguists in the diplomatic service and other foreign enterprises and identify it in the common mind with a demand that *all* children be trained as if for foreign work. If there is local protest, this device need not be insisted upon, since there are equally wonderful opportunities in the more archaic English classics. Generally speaking, however, public opinion will back this maintenance of high standards; the occasional dissident can usually be silenced by fear of being thought a man of low tastes.

It will probably prove even easier to attach a similar logic to science and mathematics. It is curiously easy to modulate the fact that we need nuclear physicists into the idea that every boy should study higher math, even if he could scarcely learn to drive a truck to the laboratory door.

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clearly in mind the fundamental objective: to teach the child that he is a failure.

The Commission has considered seriously the obverse of this policy—to keep the work load of the very able student so trivial and easy that he will drift into bad habits. There is evidence that the method produces fairly well. However, the Commission does not advocate pushing beyond the present hit-and-miss application of the practice, because the number who have the requisite ability is so small that the increased yield would be negligible. Furthermore, much as the state needs delinquents, it needs outstanding leadership even more.

2. The recommendation above might almost be sufficient in itself were it not for the fact that it would recruit from the ranks of only the least able—obviously a policy unfair to our excellent corrective institutions. Therefore, means

must be found to assure a reasonable quality as well as quantity.

To this end, the Commission recommends the introduction into the curriculum of a considerable amount of subject matter which is palpably useless and remote from real life. The criterion will be, not that the subject matter cannot be mastered by a reasonably intelligent student, but that it will seem to him so vapid and inane that he will gag at it, refuse to do his tasks, and possibly, by a spread of his strong feelings, begin to reject all school work.

The problem will be, of course, to keep the student convinced that everything is his fault and that the school's requirements are perfectly right, for the whole objective will be lost if he weathers through the years with even a little self-trust. At first glance this problem seems a hard one. In fact, the victim *will* thrash about a good bit, over-loudly proclaim-

ing, "That stuff is bunk," etc. But underneath these assertions there will be great self-doubt. For children trust, with amazing naïveté, those responsible for them. Furthermore, the schools have a superb cadre of officials trained and eager to show that all their subject matter is vitally essential and that those who fail to appreciate it are beneath contempt. Add to their efforts social ostracism by the more successful, which as noted above can easily be organized, and it becomes reasonably easy to convince the unsure adolescent that he is no good.

3. However, one escape route remains open which must be closed. Even though in his classwork the individual has been most satisfactorily conditioned to accepting himself as a perpetual no-account, he may yet blunder upon some success in such irrelevant areas as athletics, music, art or dramatics, or in some piffling role as a leader among his peers. This

can be disastrous, for even the slightest intimation that he is good for something will revive once more the tender roots of his well-being. The effort must be, quite simply, to insure his total failure.

Therefore the Commission recommends a system that will render anyone who has failed in academic work "ineligible" for other activities. To the public this can easily be justified by the plea that he obviously needs all his time for his studies. The prohibition should extend not only to sports but also to other extracurricular activities, and especially to the holding of class offices or anything entailing leadership.

Unfortunately, even this block may still leave open some organized activities in the community, outside the schools, in the churches, the playgrounds, settlement houses, etc. We can only hope that the individual's feelings toward organizations in general will by now be so

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conditioned that he will reject these also, of his own free will. There is considerable evidence that this will work out so well that he will actually deride—and perhaps vandalize—such organizations as the Scouts and the "Y's." We can trust that such group activities as he does join will be of the street gang, antisocial sort.

The Commission recognizes that this three-point program will not in itself be sufficient. The schools cannot be expected to do the whole job anyway, though they have shown that they can make a substantial contribution. Fortunately, the tenor of the times is making it easier to secure the school improvements which we need.

One major threat to the success of the project will be the teachers themselves. Unversed in the realities of economic life, these dogged "do-gooders" will doubtless continue to press for a chance to work with each individual and save him from the very role in society which he is destined to play. However, it is the feeling of the Commission that if the overall structure of the curriculum can be kept sound—that is to say, too hard for some to learn or so irrelevant for others as to prevent the real use of their powers—the efforts of the individual teacher can be rendered largely ineffective except in isolated cases. This will be true especially if class and teacher load can be held large enough to keep a teacher from brooding on any one case.

Such faults as remain in the plan can surely be ironed out. Luckily, even with today's haphazard methods, our corrective institutions are flourishing in a steadily rising curve of prosperity. Payrolls have risen sharply and new capital is being attracted at a rapid rate. There appears to be no imminent threat of even a mild recession.

—FRED T. WILHELMS, *professor of education, San Francisco State College.*

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