

Can you have your cake?

Private Schools—Public Money

ROBERT C. O'REILLY

Assistant Dean, College of Graduate Studies
Municipal University of Omaha, Omaha, Nebraska

SOME hard problems are bearing upon American schools, K-12. One such problem has to do with the distribution of public funds (tax money) to non-public schools. This problem has the obvious surface concern of economics. It has sociological, political and religious ramifications. However, digging deeply, it appears to be philosophical in its nature.

If our society decides to offer to private schools complete access to tax money, an assumption must support such a decision. It is that "a school is a school is a school." That is, differences in schools are not great. Or, if great, such differences are mutually beneficial to the supporting society. Surely, society would not decide to expend tax funds which might produce an extraordinary benefit—an over-and-above benefit—for one class of that society.

Many people would be willing to grant that such a philosophic principle is now actually operating in the public and private schools which enroll pupils, K-12. They make the assumption that "a school is a school is a school," and some would go beyond to declare that a private school will do all that a public school can do, and then add its particular specialty. This latter group would take the stand that there is at least the potential for superiority of private over public schools because of the structure of the schools, lessened restrictions of a particular kind and increased privileges.

Arguments could be advanced against such an assumption: private schools are outside "The American Tradition"; private schools are accountable to only a segment of society; private schools are contributing to extended social segregation, at least on the basis of religion.

These positions are not illogical nor unreal. However, they do not bear heavily upon the operational politics of the nation. The fact is that tax money is available to private schools. Most private schools are church-sponsored. Most church-sponsored schools are under the auspices of the Roman Catholic Church. Many Catholics vote. Politically, then, it is realistic to assume that "a school is a school is a school." Philosophically and educationally, it is an assumption; politically, it is reality.

Once the direction is set—that all schools, public or private, will share (equally?) in tax funds—other problems arise. Just now, federal and state statutes indicate that American schools are at a point where some anticipation of those

problems may be appropriate. To look at only three such tax-related problems in schools might be helpful: (a) accounting for public funds; (b) compulsory attendance laws; and (c) policy making for schools.

The demand for accountability for expenditures of non-private money is a tradition of long standing in many societies. It is an obvious necessity. Now, if tax funds are to be received by a private school, where does fiscal accountability enter? Should purchases of materials be made by a public agency, and these materials given to private schools? What would be the structure of such an agency? Should the accounts of a private school be available for public audit? Could a private school's receipts be divided, and that portion from tax funds kept open for audit?

Compulsory attendance laws vary only slightly from state to state. We have compulsory attendance. For such a statute to be operative, there must be a receiving educational institution. This is the public school. "The people pay the bill; the people may (or must) use the service." If the people are to pay (part of) the bills of a private school, what about attendance? Should the private school be as open as a public school? Is selectivity of students a noteworthy distinction between the two school types? Should it be mandatory upon a private school to accept any student desiring to attend, and within the compulsory attendance age? Should selectivity become a characteristic of the public schools? Should both schools share equally in the obligation to educate "least desirable" students?

Public schools are operated by boards of education—citizens chosen by their peers to discharge a social obligation. Every board member faces censure or endorsement by those peers. To some extent, each board sets policy for the public schools in its statutorily designated area. Should citizens, through board members, have this power over schools? Is equal power available to citizens relative to private schools? If not, where is the "seat of power" for private schools? Could it be changed to include citizens from "outside" of the sponsoring group, thus becoming representative of its financial resources?

Several suggested solutions, phrased as questions, have been set forward in response to the designated problem areas: fiscal accountability, compulsory attendance and policy determination. Doubtless, many educators will object to part or all of the suggestions. Yet, the choice is forced, and to flee from the making of a decision is not to produce a solution. To hope that a problem will solve itself is unrealistic.

The problem is: Should we, as a nation, decide to support private education K-12 with public funds? The problem is philosophical, with many ramifications. Just now, it is being handled politically. Not solved—only handled. Unwillingness to make decisions on troublesome problems has not been an American characteristic. This problem needs careful consideration. Most especially, where will we go educationally and as a society with public funds supporting private education?

Long ago, a pertinent comment was made: "You can't have your cake and eat it, too." ☞

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