A Relationship in Transition:

THE idea of "public" as distinguished from "private" education in America has undergone considerable shift in past years. Perhaps an idea as complex as "public education" is continually changing along with the society and its values. But certainly at the present time we are in an era in which the idea is undergoing a fundamental shift with certain important new elements emerging as part of the definition.

For the past one hundred years, or at least since the Progressive Era of the late nineteenth century, "public education" as an idea in America has had several generally agreed upon components: first, it has meant systematic public support, i.e., annual budgets coming from tax monies; second, public control by officials either directly or indirectly responsible to the taxpayers; and third, schooling in the service of the public interest which in large terms meant the building of a united America wherein individuals could advance themselves within the democratic framework. Public schooling under this conception was considered to be enormously successful, its triumph seen as the essence in fact of the triumph of American democracy.

The historian of this burgeoning public school was of course Ellwood P. Cubberley who took it as his calling not only to chronicle the rise of public education but also, as has every good historian since Thucydides, to make his history serve his cause. Cubberley promoted this burgeoning by every historical means and, one must conclude, with considerable effect. Generations of American educators shared the pride of Cubberley's position, such as this one, a summary statement from his monumental textbook, The History of Education:

By 1860, we find the American public school system fully established, in principle at least, in all our Northern States. Much yet remained to be done to carry into full effect what had been established in principle, but everywhere democracy had won its fight, and the American public school, supported by general taxation, freed from the pauper school taint, free and equally open to all, under the direction of representatives of the people, free from sectarian control, and complete from the primary school through the high school, and in the Western States through the university as well, was established permanently in American public policy.1

Cubberley as a historian has in recent years fallen upon evil days, a victim perhaps inevitably of new generations of historians with new causes. His fate, however, need not concern us here, though of course his decline


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and fall within the past decade may indicate a geologic fault below the seemingly firm surface of the conception of public education.

The distinction of "public" and "private" education during this hundred years, however, was plain and unambiguous. The private school meant privilege, the institution of the rich and high-born. Or it meant schools controlled by the churches which were at the least narrow, i.e., parochial, or at the worst no more than a sink of superstition. Insofar as private education posed a threat to the public school it was seen as fundamentally not in accord with democratic institutions and practices.

The contrast was clear: nonpublic education did not and should not have public support, was not under public control, and could not serve the democratic public interest. Schoolmen at all levels, from elementary schools to the university, shared this conception and defended the distinction of public and private. Perhaps the century from 1860 to 1960 could rightfully be called, with Cubberley's blessing, the "Era of Public Education."

A New Era

In our society it seems that change itself is the only certainty. By the 1960's the idea of public education which had stood so long, reflected in the great system of American public schools, appeared to shift in basically important ways. The immediate background of the change, however, was a series of attacks on the public school during the decade of the 'fifties. These attacks, though fearsome enough, were not really fundamental in that they never struck at the idea of public education.

The various special interest groups, such as the Council for Basic Education, were engaged mainly in efforts to gain influence over the public schools. Their attacks may have damaged certain principles of support and control of public education. Yet the more forceful and effective of the critics were those who set out to bend the principle of service to the public interest in pursuit of "cold war" victories. The public school was to pursue excellence which in turn would pursue Russians which, it was understood, was the national interest.

Such cold-warriors as Rickover and Conant may have bent the principle a bit, but in essential ways they concurred with Cubberley's conception of the public school serv-
ing what appeared to be the public interest. The furies of the 'fifties left the public school undeniably shaken, but now it seems clear they were no more than precursors of a reexamination of the basic idea of public education beginning in the 'sixties.

The question being raised today is: Can the conception of public education be reinterpreted to stress the interests of the individual in American society? It is a question in a sense of redefining the idea of the public interest, and with it the ideas of support and control of public education along pluralistic lines, to bring them into accord with current ideas of democracy and individual freedom.

Clearly the old distinction, Cubberley-style, of public vis-à-vis private education has become so confused as to be dangerously misleading: historically it has been the private school which stressed the individual interest in contrast to the approach used in the public school. Yet beyond that confusion is a more basic criticism: the public interest as it was spelled out by Cubberley, or the national interest in the terms of the 'fifties, seemed to coincide with the interests of white, middle-class, Protestant America, with very little room for diversity within the consensus.

The public school seemed to find no place for the values of the nonwhite, non-middle-class, non-Protestant child; in fact, the public school had become the truly parochial school. Hence, under this criticism, the idea of the public school and the public interest needed considerable expanding to meet the demands of this new America of the 'sixties.

New Demands

Several situations, urban and suburban, will illustrate this demand for expansion of the idea of public education. In one city with an approximate 50 percent nonwhite public school population, there is a massive system of Roman Catholic schools which enrolls less than five percent of nonwhite children. Several of these Catholic elementary schools, however, are almost entirely nonwhite. And in these latter schools a first-grade teacher expects at least 50 children as the normal class size—50 pupils with no aides and no assistants. The problems of racial integration in this city's public schools are made difficult indeed by the racial makeup of the Catholic system of schools. Yet the interests of the child who is learning to read, or more likely failing to learn to read, under seriously overcrowded conditions would seem to cloud the question of the public interest in any effort to make a clear division of public and private schools.

Uptown in the black ghetto with its black public schools similar questions, too, are being raised regarding what the public school is. The ghetto residents demand direct and complete control of their community schools, an end to the management of their schools by a centralized administration and by a city school board which, they maintain, cannot possibly understand what is needed in the black schools. In New York City these demands have been endorsed of course by the so-called Bundy Report, the prestigious Report of the Mayor's Advisory Panel on Decentralization of the New York City Schools. To dismantle the structure of the city's public schools with all the ramifications to the professionals in regard to hiring practices, "white" certification requirements, contracts with the teacher organization, and the like, as well as the implication of fundamental curriculum revisions, may well mean the opening wedge for the public schools of the city to become "public" in ways quite different from what public schools have been in the past. Local community control in the interests of the health of the black community would seem to be a long way from the "national interest" days of the 'fifties.

Even in white suburbia a new wave of criticism of the public schools is rising. A Bruner-Gardner sort of school system may be beautifully attuned to the suburban majorities, the upwardly-striving, college-oriented, middle class. The excessive burden of school taxes, given the antiquated tax

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structure in most areas, brings forth a predictable economy-based criticism of the local schools. Yet of more fundamental importance is the rise of critics who denounce the public school mediocrity, who find the pursuit of excellence never quite rigorous enough, and who advocate, with William Buckley, that we "take education away from the bureaucrats and the egalitarians and the politicians and return it to the teachers and to the parents." 3 Or on the other hand, there are those who concur with Edgar Friedenberg or Paul Goodman that the suburban child must be freed from the repressive regimentation of the "universal trap," who would reorient the public school toward the style and spirit of a Summerhill. These critics from both the left and the right agree on one point, the traditional idea of the public school, the via media, will not do today.

The hue and cry over educational establishments in recent years is directly related, it seems, to this reinterpretation of the idea of public education. The 'sixties have seen the struggle in almost every state's department of education as well as in Washington, in which the old "educationist" establishment has been ousted only to be replaced by the new "reform" establishment. 4 The similarities, in the contest for power, for control over the public schools, between the old and new establishments seem much stronger than any dissimilarities. 5 The effect of these struggles is the demand for an end of this public school bureaucratizing entirely, and the rise of what might be called an educational disestablishmentarianism. 6

New Formulation of Issues

Given this setting, it seems clear that a new formulation of the issues in American education is needed which abandons the confusions of the traditional, narrow interpretations of public versus private education. Discussion needs directing to the questions of what is the public interest in the pluralistic American society of the 'sixties. In a sense, of course, any educational enterprise is public in that it serves some aspect of the public. How today can the public school (as traditionally defined) become more private (as traditionally defined)? That is, how can the public school serve more adequately the interests of all the varieties of individuals and groups who are America, and thereby truly come to serve the public interest?

New discussion of the support and control of education leads to the tangle of problems of feasible ways and means for providing this broadened, reinterpreted public education. Can America move toward a kind of open market of publicly-supported and privately-supported schools as the extremes, with every conceivable arrangement of support and control in between? For example, should stipends be paid to parents for each child, or to small groups of parents to organize a school as in the Netherlands? Arrangements such as these need to be examined.

A demand for the reinterpretation of public and private education is evident. It is time for American education to clear away the old ideas and the clouds of rhetoric surrounding them. 7


6 The use of this term, of course, suggests historically the movement in Parliament in the mid-nineteenth century to bring about the "disestablishment" of the Anglican Church in Ireland. Eventually it was Gladstone, the staunchest Anglican of them all, who alone could bring about the necessary legislation to alter the status of the Irish Church.
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