

# Why Teach *About* Education?

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IN 1909 Ellwood P. Cubberley stated that "many indications point to education as a future high school subject of study" because "a study of the history, aims, purposes and functions of public education in a democratic society such as our own ought to be useful either as a preparation for participation in active life or for the thinking required of college freshmen." In 1928 Ross L. Finney, in his *Sociological Philosophy of Education*, lamented: "Is it not an anomaly that the school teaches its pupils, formally, almost nothing about itself? . . . No wonder that later, as adults, they confound us with strange, ignorant and obstructive attitudes toward current problems of educational policy. We have not made the school as an institution an objective of education!" Although a few schools in the United States have taught about education for decades, the practice has not been particularly widespread. At long last, however, Cubberley's prediction may be correct.

The writer recently completed a comprehensive national survey which revealed that a planned study of the U.S. system of education is conducted in about 18 percent of all American high schools. The most popular approach is to teach about U.S. education in separate units, usually in twelfth-grade social studies courses. Eighty-five percent of all units taught have been developed within the past ten years; the average unit is six years old. Ninety-one percent of the secondary school principals surveyed felt that we should

definitely be teaching more about the U.S. system of education in the public secondary schools. The professional literature reflects an awakening interest in the topic. The authors of social studies textbooks at all levels are increasingly including units on U.S. education; virtually all so-called "problems of democracy" textbooks include such units.

Perhaps the most vivid demonstration of a renewed interest in teaching about education is Project Public Information, a federally funded project administered through the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction. The directors want to "create an audience that knows enough about its schools to care about them." The Project sponsored four pilot projects in high schools in Oregon, Wisconsin, Delaware, and Florida, each illustrating a different and interesting approach to the task of teaching about education.

## Education in a Democracy

Our nation was developed on a foundation of free public education divorced from sectarian control. An understanding of the role and contributions of education to the development of our nation and our democratic way of life is needed to fully appreciate our heritage as Americans.

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Our representative form of government could not function without our system of education. As Robert A. Marshall has indicated in *The Story of Our Schools*, "How else except through schooling could an entire people become capable of commanding its own destiny through the workings of representative government?" Our public schools have united the American people, nurturing loyalty to the nation. In our short history, the schools played a decisive role in blending wave after wave of immigrants into one nation—an accomplishment unique in Western history. According to Hollis L. Caswell, "The contribution of the common school system to developing national unity . . . cannot be overemphasized."

In this century, responding to a need for a more highly educated citizenry, our system of education raised the nation from a population of eighth-grade graduates to a population of twelfth-grade graduates in just 30 years! The contributions of education to the development of the nation should be understood by every American citizen. Indeed, it is impossible to really understand American history without understanding the development of American education.

Our students should learn that there is a direct relationship between efficient and effective public schools and a successful democracy and that our heritage of democratic traditions, ideals, and institutions is largely transmitted through the schools. They should learn that any threat to our system of education represents a distinct threat to our democratic way of life.

Our future as a nation is directly related to our success in solving a host of almost overwhelming domestic problems. Education, in one way or another, is the key to the solution of most of our national problems.

If education is to contribute to the resolution of our domestic problems, a maximum national commitment to education is required immediately. Clearly a massive national commitment to education cannot be achieved unless the people of the nation understand the relationship between such a commitment and the resolution of present and future domestic problems. They cannot achieve this

understanding if they do not know how our system of education operates.

## Magnitude of American Education

Future historians may well call our time the "age of education." Education is rapidly becoming our biggest "growth" industry. More than 60 million Americans are involved in education as students, teachers, administrators, or board members—almost one out of every three persons in the United States today. This figure exceeds that of any single industry in the United States. One of every two persons in the United States will be engaged in some form of education by 1975 and, by the year 2000, virtually every man, woman, and child in the nation will be involved in some significant way in education.

The scope of education is expanding as never before. The demands of the space age and the future beyond will mean more than ever that education for everyone will be a process of continual "self-renewal." People will begin school earlier, perhaps as early as three years of age, and stay in school longer. Primarily because of our rapidly advancing technology the average individual of the future may well have to learn three or four new occupations or professions in a single lifetime. The most important function of the school will be to teach people how to live with change. The future will demand versatility, flexibility, and creativity. The emphasis will be on "learning how to learn," not the mere acquisition of facts. Moreover, the schools must reach all children, an objective that is not being achieved at present.

Advancing technology will also produce more leisure time for the average individual. If this time is to be spent productively, with our citizens avoiding the "illness of idleness" and lives of "quiet desperation," the role of education must surely be expanded. The arts and the humanities will have a vital role to play in making life worth living in the years ahead. It will be the responsibility of the schools to teach the "art of living." Therefore, not only will education be important for earning a living, but it will also have a direct bearing on the quality of life in the future.

If education is to be equal to the tasks that lie ahead we must develop in our citizens the understanding that the "system" has a major psychological, sociological, and intellectual influence on every American.

The economic magnitude of American education alone makes it a topic of major concern. Education has become big business. Industrial giants have entered the education field. Business and industry can be of tremendous assistance to the nation's schools. There is, of course, the possibility that these industrial giants could dominate American education. Surely our citizens must understand and appreciate all aspects of the new partnership between business and education if the benefits of the partnership are to be obtained and the evils avoided.

As a nation we will spend in excess of 52 billion dollars on education this year! This figure is exceeded only by our spending for national defense and space exploration. By the end of the century the American economy will be built on education. We are finally beginning to understand the relationship between education and the basic wealth of the nation. We must, of course, devise new ways for educational institutions to obtain an equitable share of the wealth created by education to sustain and stimulate the relationship between education and national wealth.

Governments at all levels are spending an increased amount on education each year. As the result of recent enactments, federal spending for education has increased 400 percent in ten years! Most local communities have strained their resources to the limit to support their schools and the end is not in sight. The number of high school students will double and the number of college students will triple by 1974. Expenditures for elementary and secondary schools will increase almost 50 percent by 1974. How will we finance such an enterprise?

Although new sources of financial support will have to be found, it is clear that American citizens will be asked to make an even greater financial contribution to American education. As costs rise and citizens fail to understand the new role of education in American society, many schools fail to re-

ceive adequate financial support. Small wonder—why should citizens support an enterprise they do not fully understand? In the long run our public schools will receive adequate financial support only if our citizens understand the need for such support. They can understand this only if they really understand our system of education and, in particular, the various economic aspects of American education.

## **Growth, Turmoil, and Understanding**

Education is responding to the needs of a space age society. Never before have the schools changed so quickly. When the full impact of modern technology is felt they will change at an even more rapid rate.

In part because education has been changing so rapidly, it has been difficult for citizens to understand the many changes taking place in their schools. Critics of the schools have capitalized on this lack of understanding. All too often innovative practices have met with hostility, resistance, or, perhaps even worse, bland neutrality. This is not surprising—we resist or ignore what we do not understand.

Innovation will continue. The schools will change even more dramatically in the future. School problems and issues will proliferate. Our citizens will have increasingly more difficult decisions to make about their schools. If they are going to support the programs and help solve the problems of their schools, obviously they should understand how and why they operate. To make intelligent decisions about their schools, citizens must have a general understanding of the goals, philosophy, methods, and problems of their schools. Unfortunately many do not possess this understanding. As a nation we pay a severe price for this lack.

A genuine and widespread appreciation of the U.S. education system and of the role and contributions of education to the welfare of the nation will prevent, or at least minimize, future misunderstandings and conflict, and give the critics a far less fertile ground for agitation. Such understanding

seems to be essential if the schools are to be equal to the challenges that lie ahead.

### Some Immediate Benefits

Education units or related experiences can be of great immediate value to the students involved. A parent's attitude toward education and public schools and his concept of his own ability to deal with his child's school system is related to a child's cognitive and personal development in school. In essence, if parents have a better understanding of how their schools operate, their children will do better in school. Education units, if properly taught, can contribute to the self-awareness of the students involved. Some education units include work on learning theory and educational psychology. Students who understand the process of learning should improve their attitudes, study habits, and skills. Students who understand how their school operates should be able to make a better adjustment to it and become more interested in becoming involved in the operation of their school. Through understanding the role and importance of education, students may be encouraged to make more intelligent decisions about their post-secondary school activities. Finally, as a result of their experience with well-taught education units, many students may become interested in education as a career.

There are other immediate benefits. Students who gain a better understanding of how the schools operate will surely convey at least a small portion of this understanding to their parents; at the very least they will not be responsible for conveying as many misconceptions to their parents. Parents who develop a better understanding of our system of education may develop more realistic aspirations for their children.

An often overlooked but important result of education units is the "feedback" that occurs. The teachers, administrators and board members who are supposedly "teaching" the unit also learn a great deal about themselves and their school program. Teaching an education unit can be a learning experience for everyone involved!

While there are many reasons for teaching about education, particularly in the secondary school, there is clearly no single best way to approach the task. Some schools teach a well-defined unit on education at a particular grade level. Others integrate teaching about education into the entire social studies program. It is possible to use a wide variety of topics, materials, and teaching techniques to achieve the objectives of U.S. education units. As is true with any other aspect of the curriculum, individual teachers or groups of teachers should build their education units or related experiences upon the resources and needs of their own school and community.

The responsibility of educators is clear. Our system of education is literally the key to our survival as a nation. As the system *must* be built on a foundation of citizen understanding and participation, the urgency to teach about education is greater than ever before. We cannot expect citizens to support their schools on the basis of faith in the integrity and good will of educators. If we do, the schools have failed the American people.

We have done a relatively poor job of explaining the American schools to the American public. Citizens may, of course, increase their understanding of their schools through PTA affiliations, school district newsletters, open house events, and special programs designed to explain the school. However, these means, while valuable, represent at best a fragmentary approach to the problem. As part of a more comprehensive approach to the problem, the citizens of tomorrow should obtain some understanding of the U.S. education system and the role and contribution of education during their secondary school experience. It may be the last time the public schools will have an opportunity to reach many of these students. In essence, teaching about education in the school is a unique "public relations" opportunity which educators have largely squandered. Teaching about U.S. education in the secondary schools will not automatically create enlightened school patrons. However, it should make a significant contribution to this objective. □

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