

Can the Public School Survive Another Ten Years?

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NOT least among the changes that Americans may soon face are the fragmentation of public schools and the establishment of independent schools financed by taxpayers. At a time when the flag is being burned, perhaps the demise of the public school system (another symbol of our unity) should come as no great shock. Schools are not, however, being dramatically burned. They are being whittled away by "freedom fighters" of various persuasions.

Such attacks are not new. For years the Roman Catholic Church has been the champion of tax support for parochial schools and, inadvertently, for private schools. Since 1954, segregationists have concocted several schemes for diverting public funds to private schools. Recently popular writers, claiming that public schools have failed miserably in educating young people, have advocated the establishment of independent schools; and militant minority group leaders "demand" special-interest schools paid for with tax dollars. The power to divert tax dollars from public institutions, like the power to tax, is the power to destroy. This kind of power wielded by special-interest groups is increasing.

Although prior to 1965, real dents had been made in the financial foundations of public schools, the first resounding and perhaps irreparable crack in the structure came with the passage of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965. At that time parochial and private schools were per-

mitted to share in federal funds expended for television equipment, mobile educational services, textbooks, library materials, and fees of visiting artists, musicians, and lecturers. Moreover, "shared time" programs that allow pupils from parochial schools to take courses, such as science and foreign languages, in public schools were encouraged. Such expenditures were presumably justified under the theory of child welfare.

State legislators also began to allot funds to nonpublic schools. In 1967 Ohio's School Foundation Law provided about 15 million dollars a year for parochial school students. In 1968 Pennsylvania's lawmakers allocated 4.3 million dollars for teachers' salaries and costs of textbooks and instructional materials used in teaching "secular" subjects in nonpublic schools. In 1967 the Massachusetts legislature passed a bill permitting state funding of a private, experimental, nonsectarian school system. The first school in this system opened in September 1969 in Boston. In 1968 the New York Board of Regents approved state aid to private colleges and universities. The same year the Oregon legislature approved tuition grants for its residents attending private colleges. Undoubtedly other states will follow the lead of states using tax funds to support "secular" studies and other programs for parochial school students and

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to subsidize independent schools. Undoubtedly a number of appeals protesting these allocations will be made to courts.

Permissiveness in Vogue

None can predict the likely decisions in such cases, but he can speculate on the basis of the 1968 ruling in *Allen v. Board of Education*. In this case the Supreme Court upheld New York legislation that provides textbooks to parochial school pupils. The subjectivity of the test applied in the *Allen* case, e.g., that the primary effect of legislation "neither advances nor inhibits religion," does not clearly indicate the direction, but it suggests that similar rulings in the future may be permissive.

Such permissiveness in the use of tax dollars would be approved by many Americans. Evidence here and there suggests that more and more people are critical of public schools, indifferent rather than hostile toward religion and parochial schools, and favorably disposed toward private schools.

Fred Hechinger reports, "An indication of current dissatisfaction with public schools may be gauged from the fact that 59 percent of respondents [on a Gallup poll] favored nonpublic over public schools."¹ The results of the poll showed that "if tuition were free, 30 percent of those questioned would send their children to private schools; 29 percent would send them to parochial schools, and 41 percent would send them to public schools." Also 32 percent of them "rated the quality of public school education above that of parochial and private education; 24 percent rated private schools highest; 21 percent rated parochial schools highest, and 20 percent rated all three equal in quality. Despite such confidence in nonpublic schools, 59 percent opposed a direct public subsidy to students for nonpublic education, whereas 38 percent favored a subsidy."² Public reaction to indirect aid of the kind already approved in many places would likely be more highly favored than direct aid. Thus the Court's

decision in *Allen v. Board of Education* is probably in line with current public opinion.

The legality of diverting public funds to private schools is only one aspect of the problem. A number of prominent writers and educators, such as Theodore R.Sizer, dean of Harvard's School of Education, take stands on other issues. Dean Sizer writes:

Many who gasp at the prospect of publicly financed black private schools fail to see the extent of the precedent set by Catholics in many large cities. Between a quarter and a third of all school-age children in New York City are educated in Catholic schools, saving the taxpayer (if not the Catholic parents) a very large sum indeed. Their schools were created in the early part of the century to keep Catholic traditions strong and to counteract the implicitly but unmistakably Protestant teaching found in the public schools. They are *segregated* schools—segregated by religion, though open to all.

Catholic schools are facing a financial crisis that can only be solved by some form of public aid to their system. Public aid to their schools may be cheaper in the long run than the costs of absorbing their youngsters into an expanded public system and, if this is true, the pragmatic American will willy-nilly get over his church-state hang-up. Taxes now seem to be a more telling issue than theology.³

Later Dean Sizer, while admitting that problems exist, builds a case for such private schools:

In a society made increasingly homogeneous by the mass media, education carries a new responsibility for diversity and for nurturing cultural identities of great variety. The school should no longer be the melting pot, if it ever was. It should be the vehicle for individual and group identity within a broad American system, but not a slave to it. While it is obvious that the state must prevent obvious extremists of any persuasion from dominating any school, it must recognize and honor responsible diversity. The need for the common school has largely passed; television has seen to that. We need more critical, culturally dissenting, and intellectually vigorous people.⁴

³ Theodore R. Sizer. "The Case for a Free Market." *Saturday Review* 52 (2): 38; January 11, 1969.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

¹ *New York Times*, June 29, 1969, Sect. 1, p. 25. © 1969 New York Times Co. By permission.

² *Ibid.*

Meanwhile many Americans view "community control" of ghetto schools as a rising form of black separatism. Blacks disagree among themselves as to its merits. "The black community," says Kenneth W. Haskins, "has decided that it has to make the decisions about what can and cannot be tolerated for its children because society as a whole has largely failed the black community in this respect."⁵ In contradiction, Bayard Rustin warns,

There is a real danger of community school boards being taken over by radical groups—black and white, on the right hand and on the left—who are less interested in education than in racial and community politics. . . . After all the years of our struggle, we are now being asked to accept the idea that segregated education is in fact a perfectly respectable, perfectly desirable and perfectly viable way of life in a democratic society. . . .⁶

In an article harshly critical of public schools, the editor of *Barron's National Business and Financial Weekly* commented briefly (presumably favorably) on the disadvantaged who have sought "to take over effective control of the schools." He then endorses Milton Friedman's proposal which would give pupils vouchers so that they and their parents can choose their own schools. One version of the plan gives poor children a more valuable voucher than other children so that the school they attend can provide expensive services that they need.

Alternative Forms of Schooling

The main thrust of *Barron's* editorial is not that segregated schools are good or bad, but that public education is very poor and that parents in general do not have freedom of choice. The editor says money is not the answer. Since 1950, annual expenditures per pupil have jumped, he says, from \$209 to \$569 (in New York State to \$912, "not

much less than private schools charge for superior training"). The reason that such heavy expenditures have not produced better education is that "public schools have become a privileged sanctuary of mediocrity, where seniority, not ability, governs pay and advancement." He charges that "Huge education establishments in cities like New York have spawned mass unions less concerned with instruction of the young than with their own aggrandizement." And "Well documented horror stories on the quality of education today . . . have proliferated."⁷

Job Corps, "storefront schools," and similar ventures are doing a better educational job than public schools, we are told. Harlem Prep and CAM Academy in Chicago, storefront schools supported by foundation funds, are designed for "academic misfits" who have given up on public schools. According to the Fall 1968 issue of the *Carnegie Quarterly*, these two schools are proving that public school rejects can learn and go to college.

In addition to their charges that public school teachers are not helping Johnnie to learn to read, critics are now blaming administrators and teachers for student disorders. They also accuse militant teachers of being bad examples for young people. (A recent Harris survey reveals, however, that 51 percent of those polled agree that "striking is sometimes the only way teachers can get a raise.") Such complaints about teachers coupled with parental claims that teachers are unapproachable bureaucrats and taxpayers' desires for tax reform have led to a taxpayers' revolt. In New York City suburbs, 34 out of 55 school budgets were rejected in the first four months of 1969. During 1969, nearly 55 percent of 117 local school tax issues were rejected in Ohio in one week; San Diego lost its first school bond election in 30 years; Los Angeles rejected three school propositions.

School leaders persistently attribute budget defeats to desires for tax reform rather than to discontent with school practices. They

⁵ Kenneth W. Haskins. "The Case for Local Control." *Saturday Review* 52 (2): 52; January 11, 1969.

⁶ Will Lissner. "Rustin Warns on School Separatists." *New York Times*, April 7, 1968, Sect. 1, p. 60. © 1968 New York Times Co. By permission.

⁷ Editorial. "Harmful Monopoly, The Public School System Should Be Broken Up." *Barron's National Business and Financial Weekly*, September 11, 1967, p. 1.

point out that in many places the tax bite at the local level has increased because state legislatures are appropriating less money for schools at a time when more money is needed. In 1951-52, for example, Oregon paid 40.48 percent of ADA costs. In 1968-69, according to NEA figures, the state of Oregon paid only 17 percent.

If public education is indeed in real peril, as the publicity given to recent attacks upon it suggests, what kind of questions should supporters of public schools be asking? We need answers to questions like these:

● *Do the people really want to abolish public schools?*

Edgar Fuller points out, "Should private schools be tax-financed, the elementary and secondary public schools would be left to educate children from denominations too small to operate their own schools, the unchurched, the culturally deprived, and the rejects and problem students from the private schools which can choose their own pupils."⁸

● *Would financing private schools fragment American society?*

Some scholars believe that it would. A. Stafford Clayton⁹ reports that the number of primary pupils in the Netherlands public schools dropped from 70-80 percent in the late 19th century to 28 percent in 1958. This drop is attributed to the Primary Education Act of 1920, which diverted tax money to nonpublic schools. Clayton comments upon marked cleavages among Roman Catholics, Protestants, and general or neutral associations.

Clayton says "an individual may spend

⁸ Edgar Fuller. "Government Financing of Public and Private Education." *Phi Delta Kappan* 47 (7): 371; March 1966.

⁹ A. Stafford Clayton. "Lessons for Us from Europe: The Effects of Public Support of Church-Related Schools." *Phi Delta Kappan* 47 (1): 19-24; September 1965.

practically his whole life in contacts with members of his own religious group." In this country, public schools have been credited with promoting freedom of religion by cultivating in pupils the attitude that one's religion is his own business. Will Protestant and Catholic parochial school systems be equally tolerant?

● *Are we willing, as Sizer suggests, to entrust the task of unifying the nation to television?*

Gallup pollsters have found that two reasons given by people who preferred private to public schools were the "social prestige" and "escape from racial difficulties" that private schools promised. Can class schools and schools dominated by racists (black and white) serve as unifying agents in a free society?

● *Is it true, as Gallup pollsters were told, that private schools give children more individual attention and get better teachers?*

Although public education is not as bad as critics claim nor as good as many supporters maintain, its record, according to several researchers, is as good as or better than that of private schools. These researchers compared the records of college performance of public school graduates with those of private school graduates. Such comparisons of "average performance" are not, however, convincing to Johnnie's parents who perceive their son's teachers as poor.

Whether or not the public school system survives depends upon how Americans judge the total system rather than a particular school. Do they believe that the nation is better served by a common school system for children of diverse backgrounds or by a variety of independent school systems? At this time the shrill voices of dissidents and of critics, together with the indifference of most Americans, make the dissolution of the public school system seem to be likely. □



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