

Public Schooling: Strategy for Survival

S. ALEXANDER RIPPA*

ON A cold March morning in 1972, I left Russia after a month's visit.¹ Checking through Soviet passport security, I gripped my briefcase of notebooks and tape recorder and moved through the airport line with two cameras strapped to my shoulders. The early sun cast a bright glow over the horizon, and dark clouds drifted across the sky. The landing strip was still covered with light snow, and a cold wind whipped through the terminal gates. During the long flight home, I rechecked some factual material and thought about all that I had heard and seen.

In the Soviet Union children begin school at the age of seven and usually attend for eight or ten years. By 1975 Ten Year Schools will be compulsory for all. Some Russians are currently suggesting that children start school earlier. By the time children now enter school, 70 percent can read and over 90 percent know basic arithmetic.

¹ I had been invited to observe classrooms and laboratories in Russia, Estonia, and Bulgaria. Most of my time was spent in schools behind the Iron Curtain inside the Soviet Union. I saw, of course, what the Soviet government wanted me to see. I believe, however, that I saw and heard more. I searched and prodded, and despite surveillance in Moscow I returned to America with a suitcase of loose-leaf notes, 400 color slides, 18 reels of motion pictures, and several cassettes of recorded interviews, in English, with Russian and Estonian students, teachers, administrators, and professors.

Russian resources are geared to the creation and molding of the new Soviet man and woman. The school curriculum is developed by the Ministry of Education in Moscow and is standard throughout the country. There is heavy stress on indoctrination. Public schooling is politically inspired and motivated: an instrument of the State, it is used to mold the citizen to the will and aim of the ruling power. "Our children are our future," Russian leaders said over and over again.

A product of this molding process is Lena Birukova, age 14. Alert and enthusiastic, she is intensely proud of her accomplishments. She is editor of the Komsomol paper in School No. 20 in Moscow, and she says she helps to build school spirit. "There is very little questioning in our classes. Of course, a few students ask questions on matters of literature because that is their habit," she remarked. "Freedom," she said, "is an abstract concept." She looked forward to joining the Communist Party, a distinct honor, in service to the State.

In three years Lena will take competitive examinations for entrance to the university. She will have to study hard, because she will compete against many other boys

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and girls who also seek admission to the institutes and colleges. "The USSR cannot afford to waste time on unworthy candidates," explained Madame Zoya Zarubina of the Institute of Foreign Languages in Moscow.

Lena's generation is the first to experience universal education in the Soviet Union. She is expected to work diligently, and her parents, like others, cooperate with the school in many ways, doing such tasks as painting classrooms and repairing furniture on weekends.

A Training Process

Soviet schooling is a training process with heavy emphasis on memorization. It is assumed that all children are capable of learning at an equal rate and to the same level of achievement. Boys and girls spend long hours on assigned homework: about four hours a night in the secondary schools, and 1½ hours at the primary level. Not every-

one agrees on the need for such homework. Some parents and teachers attribute weak eyesight, poor posture, and other student health problems to overwork in the school.

I witnessed considerable respect for intellectual achievement in the schools and throughout Soviet society. There is strong peer pressure in the classrooms to excel in academic subjects, to improve the "collective spirit" or group image. Mathematics, science, and foreign languages are high priorities in Russian schooling. In addition, boys and girls spend time in music schools and other extracurricular activities. The Soviets claim to strive for a well-balanced education and exhibit pride and interest in music and the performing arts.

In Estonia I sensed feelings of complacency and acceptance of the status quo. "Do we want to be independent?" exclaimed a young Estonian teacher in response to one of my questions. "What difference does it make? History shows us that we can never be free." A part of the Soviet system, Estonian

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By
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education has led to a weary resignation, a passive condoning of authoritarian government.

I often recall Lena Birukova's words: "Freedom is an abstract concept." Abstract indeed: in America we sometimes take for granted what people in other lands so seriously misunderstand. Then a chilling thought: through censorship and state controls, Soviet leaders are blinding students to the anguish and cries of their own past, shielding them from a rich literary heritage, from that "single most precious freedom," in the words of Russian prose writer Alexander Solzhenitsyn, "the freedom to breathe freely."

Since returning from Russia, I have been increasingly alarmed by a pervasive mood of despair and gloom among American educators and laymen whenever the topic of public schooling is mentioned. There are persuasive arguments to abolish the public school systems, without cogent and convincing counterarguments for alternative structures. Ivan Illich, for example, asserts in *Deschooling Society* (1971) that "universal education through schooling is not feasible."

At the present time it seems fashionable to criticize the public schools, pointing to the "misguided" aims and dreams of the 19th century reformers and castigating a kind of "mindlessness" in our classrooms. I am disturbed by such a spate of articles and books downgrading America's public schools and by the wide publicity engendered from such attacks. The tenor of these criticisms reflects deep misunderstandings of the central purpose of public schooling in a free nation.

A Crisis in Values

Today America is threatened from within, not by Soviet achievement and excellence (so impressive to all). Our survival as a republic is jeopardized instead from a crisis in values which diminishes the importance of public schooling in a free society. Before it is too late, we must review our own educational goals and reorder our scale of national priorities.

Public schooling in a free society is



The study of mathematics has a high priority in Russian education.

essential for national survival. It adds vital dimensions to national purpose.

Like the Russians, we, too, must strive for a balanced, well-rounded education for our children. But we aim for excellence in a context of concern for all. We must also instill a necessary respect for academic excellence; at the same time we must allow latitude and choice for individual self-determination, for the dreams and aspirations of people with widely varying abilities and talents. We can afford no less: universal schooling that opens avenues for human self-fulfillment and challenges young people through creative teaching and academic discovery.

Some educators and laymen erroneously assume that American children are not primarily interested in intellectual achievement; are, in short, quickly bored by serious work in such disciplines as mathematics, science, and foreign languages. I wonder if this stems from an apparent value preference in American culture which de-emphasizes the importance and excitement of academic study and discovery. Healthy children are basically curious and eager to learn. The initial spark and enthusiasm for learning which I witness in young American children too often disappear and die out too soon.

In a free nation public schooling should, above all, encourage citizens to explore and



Although school uniforms are not required, students are urged to wear them.

discuss all ideas openly. Let me elaborate on this Jeffersonian dictum, for there is enormous confusion in the public mind on this point regarding means and ends.

A public school in a free nation, like any other social institution, rests upon certain assumptions as to what is supremely worthwhile. It assumes that it is wiser to be governed by persuasion than by compulsion. It assumes the worth and dignity and creative potential of the human personality. It assumes, moreover, that young people are rational beings.

In the history of civilization, the humane and rational values have often been denied in theory and deliberately betrayed in fact. Almost half the world is now controlled by autocratic leaders who subordinate reason to whim; who accept the principle that justice is the prerogative of the stronger; who value the search for knowledge only insofar as it promotes personal and political ends. Under Adolph Hitler the German schools were subjected to the Nazi political philosophy by terror and brute force, and dissenting teachers were expelled or imprisoned. There are always those leaders or groups who become alarmed by what they deem questionable or dangerous teachings and who try to exert arbitrary power through political and financial controls. Under Joseph Stalin, such controls in the Soviet Union applied to all teaching, even biological theories, requiring strict conformity with Lenin's political doctrine.

Soviet political leaders today are forging the Russian social order along the lines of a coherent system of thought, are integrating one point of view into a whole way of life.

In the United States there are some who also urge the unqualified acceptance of one system of thought, who believe that a single cluster of ideas is so exclusively adequate, so universally true that one need not understand or be exposed to other schools of thought. Such leadership on the part of writers and professors has been persuasive among educators and laymen who are not adequately informed. B. F. Skinner's wide influence is an example. In *Beyond Freedom and Dignity* (1971), Skinner repeatedly insists that a "technology of behavior" is "the only way to solve our problems." Such indirection is unwise. It is leadership along a perilous path to social and political conformity in ideology and life style.

Education in a free society should seek to develop divergent thinking. A teacher's commitment is to a never-ending search enlightened by all ideas, not directed by any single system of thought. "No one can bar the road to truth," declares Solzhenitsyn, "and to advance its cause I am prepared to accept even death." A teacher should know more than the student about mankind's past commitments and more regarding the contemporary arguments for and against them. About one thing, however, a free teacher does not know: the best ultimate commitment for society.

In other words, a teacher in a free nation should have more knowledge than the student, but knowledge should lead to wisdom, not to ultimate dogma. With wisdom one discovers that, despite all knowledge, one does not finally know. The students' awareness of this fact should spark the joy of discovery in a distinctive way as they join with the teacher in a ceaseless quest. And in a deep sense, this quest is a continuing manifestation of our national purpose. It is the liberal spirit of this never-ending search for knowledge that safeguards freedom and allows the creative thinking in which a democracy must place its ultimate faith. □

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