



Educational Achievement and Public Satisfaction

Louis Rubin

Educators should take vigorous action to respond to public concerns about adequacy of schools.

A good deal is being said these days about education's tarnished image and the public's lack of satisfaction with schools. Several questions, however, must be asked. First, is there really a lack of confidence? Second, if there is, what accounts for the skepticism and lack of faith? Third, do parents and other interested critics form their attitudes from first-hand experience, or from popular opinion generated by the media? Fourth, if some of the citizenry are dissatisfied with public education, what are the primary causes of concern? Fifth, is there consensus on these concerns, or do different people want different things? Sixth, are the concerns, and the related dissatisfactions, justified? Seventh, if they are justified, what should be done? Eighth, if they are not justified, what should be done?

Sources of Criticism

It scarcely can be denied that negative feelings of various sorts are in the air. How widely these feelings are shared, however, is less certain. Repeated editorials in newspapers, periodic indictments in magazines and journals, and the Cronkite news programs of last August all testify to a sense of malaise.

The cause for criticism varies with critic, locale, and topic. Declining Scholastic Aptitude Test scores are frequently cited; upon occasion, a college professor writes an article decrying students' ineptness in writing; and others lament over the absence of competitive and arbitrary grading standards or the failure of "new math" to teach simple multiplication. Bartle Giamatti,

president of Yale, has said, "The students have come out of schools where personal development was said to be worth more than achievement, where creativity was the highest goal, and they are often completely at a loss about how to cope with their work, with their time, with themselves."

Elsewhere, one hears that teachers do not demand adequate discipline; that students earn A's in high school and then fail college entrance exams; and that American youth are far behind those of other nations in basic knowledge.

What Are the Facts?

All of these charges, perhaps, are—in places—true. To assume that they represent the general case, however, would be misleading. One can easily find, in hundreds of communities, thousands of situations where they are not valid.

Moreover, assessment evidence indicates that the overall literacy rate in the United States is up, that students at the top end of the curve are doing better and better, and that high school graduates are socially more aware than previous generations.¹

While the data relating to student achievement has been widely publicized—and argued—the essence of the evidence is easily summarized. Although many nonschool factors contribute to declining test scores, there is good reason to believe that school policy and instructional organization also play a part. Historically, achievement scores tend to vary as curricular emphasis shifts. For example, scores were relatively low in the early 1940s, rose in the late 1940s, 1950s, and early 1960s, and then began to fall. At present, the sharp decline characteristic of the last half of the 1960s has ended. Since 1970, achievement scores have again been rising, particularly in the lower grades. At the middle and upper grades, there has been a gradual leveling-off, although small declines are continuing in some subject areas.²

More specifically, achievement scores at the elementary level, in writing mechanics, computational skills, and reading comprehension, are about the same—and in instances slightly better—than they were during the last peak, which was in the beginning years of the 1960s. However,

students are somewhat less adept in the application of these basic skills. In other words, performance has fallen progressively in the higher orders of the cognitive taxonomy.³

With respect to specific subject matter, the major problems are apparently in the areas of social studies, science, and citizenship. Compared with their predecessors, today's students have less scientific knowledge, are not as well informed of historical facts, and are less sophisticated regarding the processes of our governmental system.

In the face of these circumstances, several elementary conclusions are obvious: where student achievement is less than it should be, nothing must be overlooked in initiating improvements. And, for that matter, even where the allegations are without substance, a continuous effort to enhance student performance is desirable.

Changing Attitudes

There is, nonetheless, a strange bit of irony at play. Even where parents are satisfied with their children's schooling and recognize its quality, a degree of animosity exists. What accounts for this hostility, and to what extent does it confuse the issues? Is it conceivable, for instance, that some parents think highly of the school their own children attend, but look with dismay upon other schools? John Goodlad's research indicates that this is often the case.⁴ And is it also possible that a conservative mood has caused people to view all their social institutions with suspicion?

¹ For evidence that functional literacy is up 2 percent from 1971-1975 for 17-year-olds, see: *Functional Literacy: Basic Reading Performance, Brief Summary and Highlights*. Denver, Colorado: National Assessment for Educational Progress, 1975. See, also, for improvement in areas of essay writing: *Writing Mechanics 1969-1974*. Denver, Colorado: National Assessment for Educational Progress, October 1975.

² See, for example: *Writing Mechanics, op. cit.*; *Reading in America: The Perspective on Two Assessments*. Denver, Colorado: National Assessment for Educational Progress, October 1976.

³ See, for example: *What Students Know and Can Do: Profiles of Three Age Groups*. Denver, Colorado: National Assessment for Educational Progress, March 1977. p. 115.

⁴ John Goodlad. "A Study of Schooling." Detroit, Michigan: Address presented at the ASCD Annual Conference, March 3, 1979.

There is little question that public education and educators are no longer viewed as they once were. Earlier in this century, teachers were seen as public servants who gave of themselves to advance the common good. Akin almost to missionaries, members of a helping profession, more interested in the nurture of the young than in their own advantages, they were poor in pocket, but rich in community affection, gratitude, and admiration. Today, the profile is strikingly different. Education costs have spiraled, collective bargaining and teacher strikes have eroded the altruistic image, and the substantial self-protective clout exerted by teacher organizations has not gone unnoticed.

Thus the polished apples, the valentines, and Christmas gifts of yore have become covert, and sometimes overt, resentment. Not only is there, in the public's mind, a different breed of people running the schools, but education seems to be of little help in solving social problems. Many critics blame educators for much of the societal malaise. Flawed though this notion is—no educational system has ever cured the ills of inflation, energy conservation, unemployment, or the poor quality of lettuce—it nonetheless provides, to the unthinking, a convenient culprit.

Extravagant Promises

On yet another count, we have been harmed by our own excesses. In the 1960s, when money was more plentiful and the optimistic spirit flowed freely, we promised to deliver miracles if sufficient funds were made available. But we were unable to make good on many of the promises because—in some cases—they were hopelessly extravagant, if not impossible. As a consequence, legislators in both the state and federal chambers lost faith. Money, they are now convinced, is not the answer. Neither is a return to the basics, but this will become apparent only after a return to things past has been tried and found wanting.

In view of these circumstances, it is hardly surprising that Proposition 13 has materialized, that a taxpayer rebellion is underway, or that voucher-type provisions giving parents the option of private schools are already on three state ballots for November. Parallel efforts are being made to provide tax benefits for money spent on private

school tuition. The dangers inherent in such initiatives are hard to overestimate.

No Consensus

The effort to achieve greater consumer satisfaction with the educational product cannot be approached in absolute terms. There is little agreement among parents as to either the ends or means of schooling. While in instances there is reasonable consensus as to goals, opinions invariably differ as to which methods are best. For example, few quarrel with the desirability of mastering fundamental skills, but there is not clear agreement on how they should be mastered, or to what degree.

Since education is viewed by its consumers as having considerable importance, and since a blatant disregard of any group's expectations would create massive agitation, no particular educational philosophy—however rational—can be pursued to the exclusion of all other demands without courting political disaster. In short, once we get beyond such things as the basics, citizenship, and self-discipline, educational goals are a matter of dissensus rather than consensus.

Contradictory values and disparate interests require that educational systems be pluralistic. The last decade or two offer clear illustrations of the way the curriculum fluctuates in order to avoid alienating any constituency. The central core of traditional WASP preachings has been diluted; room has been made for competing beliefs; ethnic concerns have been accorded a far greater respect; a multicultural emphasis has evolved; and bilingual instruction has become commonplace.

Effects of Pluralism

In the absence of broad agreement regarding the purposes of schooling, the curriculum becomes an easy prey for exploitation. By camouflaging vested interests as something that is good for children, organizations advance their own special causes: employers advocate work skills; labor unions opt for a longer period of compulsory education; liberals promote radical content (while conservatives ban books); religious orders take to the courts seeking to make prayers per-

missible; and manufacturers suggest that desk calculators will help teach computation skills.

Even though public expectations differ, and it is impossible to satisfy all interests, nonetheless an attempt to heed public concern and to be responsive is more beneficent than cavalier disregard. What, then, would constitute a sensible course of action?

Correcting Defects

Where the educational product is defective, it should be improved. This means: a general and systematic effort to increase the achievement of basic educational objectives—those generally valued by both the consumer and the professional.

Where the educational product is defective, consumers also must be made aware of contributory factors beyond the control of the profession. This means: demonstrating the toll taken by insufficient parental reinforcement, television, family instability, student lethargy, and so on.

Correcting Perceptions

Where the educational product is not defective, but is perceived so by critics, steps should be taken to increase public satisfaction. This means, at the moment: emphasizing basics, raising test scores (there is nothing wrong with teaching to tests, providing the tests are well conceived, evaluated properly, and centered on useful educational aims), ensuring that graduates have mastered fundamental skills, focusing central emphasis on the traditional curricular subjects, and catering to whatever other desires are manageable and reasonable.

Where the educational product is not defective, but is perceived as so, consumers must be familiarized with important educational outcomes that are either unrecognized or unappreciated. This means: communicating the critical elements of a good general education, clarifying the true meaning of test scores, identifying the humanistic aspects of school experience, and pointing out the benefits of transferrable intellectual skills such as

decision-making ability, creative insight, and self-direction.

To accomplish these ends, the following would seem desirable:

1. Every school should have a public relations program aimed at identifying and, where feasible, satisfying parent interests.

2. Each state department should establish a lobbying operation that continuously provides legislators with evidence of effective schooling.

3. A national communication program, utilizing the major media networks, should be organized to deal with emerging educational issues, and to promote a general understanding of sound education.

4. A research program should be launched to determine how school systems can best respond to the demands of particular groups and individuals.

Criticism of the educational system, whether valid or not, has a debilitating effect on teachers and administrators. It is therefore important to combat the frustration and discouragement that stem from negative publicity.

While it is conceivable that the credibility gap between the schools and the public could disappear in time without any intervention by educators, common sense suggests that we do all we can to enhance consumer satisfaction. Aside from the fact that many concerns are relatively trivial and easily accommodated, the effort to be responsive will, in itself, generate a degree of good will whereas an arrogant disregard of the consumer's wishes can only result in heightened antagonism.



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