

The report this fall from National Assessment that students lack problem-solving skills in mathematics was only the latest in a string of similar reports. In the recent assessment 56 percent of 17-year-olds gave the right answer to "A car traveled eight kilometers in five minutes. At this speed, how many kilometers could it travel in one hour?" Five years earlier, 65 percent answered correctly.¹

If that were an isolated instance, it wouldn't be worth telling about. But educators who studied all the results, including James Wilson of the University of Georgia and Thomas Carpenter of the University of Wisconsin-Madison, concluded that many students didn't use their heads the way adults thought they should.

A couple of years ago, staff members of National Assessment reviewed the data they had collected from eight years of assessments in ten subject areas. They concluded that most American students acquire a reasonably adequate stock of knowledge and skills, but that quite a few have difficulty organizing and applying what they have learned.²

People don't agree on what to make of these findings, or even whether they are valid. Some say test questions bear scant resemblance to real life, so students have no reason to care much about solving them. They may have a point, but I wouldn't dismiss the situation so lightly. In all subject areas except reading, the decline among high school students is strongly apparent.³

All this is prelude to an article in which John Henry Martin (page



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278) makes a case for *intellectual developments* and *citizenship* as the goals of secondary schooling. Martin claims educators were led down the primrose path by the makers of the Seven Cardinal Principles.

He says schools cannot and should not be directly responsible for every aspect of life; that such goals as "worthy home membership" and "worthy use of leisure time" are more appropriate for other institutions. They might be considered aims of education if it were clearly understood that *education* and *schooling* are not synonymous.

Most of us would be only too glad to see other agencies take more responsibility for the development of children and youth. Schools do a lot of things because it seems there is no one else to do them. That doesn't mean we do not get help from others, or that we might not get more if we asked for it. Martin proposes that we ask.

To call for a sharper definition of educational purposes of schools is not to deny their function as community centers. In fact, the more school buildings are used for

a variety of services—such as meals for senior citizens, health care for children, and recreational programs for the whole family—the more necessary it becomes to distinguish between activities for which the school is directly responsible and those that it only hosts, encourages, or coordinates.

Martin offers a dramatic solution to what he considers a serious problem. At first blush it may appear unrealistic, because established institutions don't often change so radically; but the proposal for a voucher system in California shows that major changes in the operation of public education are not unthinkable. The public may be readier to reconsider the role of schools than we might think.

Of course, we shouldn't expect too much. In our society each person has a right to a distinctive point of view, and opinions differ. We can't agree on an energy plan or on economic policy; we won't have consensus on education either.

Nevertheless, if schools are to discharge their responsibilities effectively, they must know what those responsibilities are. Let the debate begin. *EB*

¹ *Changes in Mathematical Achievement, 1973-78, Results from the Second Assessment of Mathematics, Report No. 09-MA-01* (Denver, Colorado: National Assessment of Educational Progress, Education Commission of the States, 1979), p. 14.

² *What Students Know and Can Do: Profiles of Three Age Groups* (Denver, Colorado: National Assessment of Educational Progress, Education Commission of the States, 1977).

³ George Neill, "NAEP at Age 10 Says: Schools Are in Trouble," *Phi Delta Kappan*, November 1979, p. 157.

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