

The Right to Quality Education

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Because an educated citizenry is crucial to our society, quality education should be guaranteed and not left to chance.

A well-educated citizenry is vital to today's advanced, industrial society. Its continued advancement is measured, in fact, by the quality of the education its citizens enjoy, as quality education has become, in turn, the signal means by which a community can hope to realize the full potential of itself as well as its constituent members. In this context, the educational process obviously cannot be left to chance.

As the educational needs of our society become increasingly crucial to our total survival, specific policies must be established to guarantee their satisfaction within the parameters of a modern world. One such policy now emerging at both the national and state levels would make quality education a legal right. New Jersey, for example, has established legislation calling for "thorough and efficient education," and is beginning not only to equate "thorough" and "efficient" with quality education, but also to make it a basic right protected by law.¹

The past several decades have given witness to various movements to establish the human rights of minorities and women. Having inched our way forward to this front with calls for the "right to read," "the right to bilingual education," and "the right to education for the handicapped," we are now at the point of framing an educational rights package from birth to old age. It is now time to bring even more of these efforts into a total package—into an encompassing right to quality education for all. Before this can be accomplished, however, two fundamental questions will have to be answered and resolved: (1) what is quality education, and (2) how can quality education be delivered to each citizen?

What is Quality Education?

The term "quality education" is used by laypersons and professionals alike, and increasingly by our elected officials. Unfortunately, in too many cases, the notion of "quality education" remains undefined. It is a generalization that, like "peace" and "justice," is almost universally accepted, but has meanings as numerous as its advocates.

¹ *Robinson v. Cahill*, 303 A 2d 273 (1973).

The time has come for us to locate specifically those elements properly composing quality education. Our product should be conceived in rational theory and tried in sensible practice. Its elements should inscribe the areas of expertise through which each individual advances that "pursuit of happiness" reserved for us all by our heritage.

Since the individual is central to any open society, quality education naturally originates in the recognition that each person is distinct and unique. Conversely, the privilege accorded individual differences must logically foster the right of every citizen to an education supportive of personal distinction. Yet, this is not to deny what may be a common basis for all human motivation. An examination of the literature of learning discovers one universal variable consistently rising above all others: "fate control" or the capacity to determine and quite literally redefine one's own fate.

A primary characteristic of "quality education," therefore, is its quantitative effect upon each person's increased capacity to control his or her own fate. This is the quality of a life under control, but not predetermined.

Goals of Quality Education

Once having located the composite elements of "quality education" and found their common denominator, we may look toward the set of goals it seeks ultimately to accomplish. What should be education's major focus—its beginnings and aims? An immediate end is, in fact, a set of means: *the basic skills*, elementary vehicles indispensable to all further pursuit of learning. Mastery of the basics is the start to mastering one's self in one's world, insofar as it increases the ability to negotiate in a variety of contexts and voices as well. The crucial tools of today's human living include not only the familiar three "Rs," but also those skills that allow us both to adapt ourselves to our environment—to live with uncertainty and tolerate ambiguity—and to adapt our environment to ourselves—to analyze, synthesize, and hypothesize. These "process-oriented" basics cut across subject matter lines to give the person a capacity for response in a range of situations.

A second set of goals, which should be common to a definition of quality education, includes the identification and cultivation of *talent*. The concept of talent has important psychological components that make it central to "fate control" and, thus, to education. As a person explores organized realms of expression, he or she begins to formulate patterns of psychological gratification, discovering the satisfaction that comes with participation in the arts or human service fields.

It must be understood that talents have a natural connection with the human organism through the inner drives that monitor personal satisfaction. Certain talents may even be developed to form the basis for a person's living. Thus, the difference between the development of talents that can lead to careers and the acquisition of technical skills that can lead to jobs is important. The former has significant educational as well as economic implications; the latter is motivated solely by economic considerations.

This brings us to a third set of goals, a third component of any just definition of quality education: the *major roles* each person must perform in order to function effectively as both economic and political participant in an organized society. The more roles a person can skillfully perform, the more areas of social living he or she can manage, and the more dexterously he or she can participate in today's highly complex, multidimensional political arena.

The roles of a citizen are manifold, various, and mutually interdependent. Wise consumers are generally efficient producers; ignorant consumers, on the other hand, can hardly be expected to assure the material achievement, physical growth, or emotional maturation of themselves or their families.

Similarly, every parent is a counselor and teacher of sorts—intentionally or not. As we pay increasing attention to early childhood care and find increasing need for infant intervention programs, we must recognize as urgent a need to educate the first teachers of our young, the mother and father of the child.

The responsibility of adults for the development of youth extends beyond the confines of the nuclear family and extended family, too. Just as an organized society strives for unity amid diversity, a humane society values individual freedom within that frame-

work of cooperation by which its total communal structure survives. That each person should control his/her own fate at the expense of all others is simply too high a price for any community to pay and still remain a solvent community. Therefore, while the focus of quality education may be on individual reward, its aim must as steadily be the commonweal. If we educate our parents for their role as natural teachers, not only might they learn to teach well, but also they might teach their children to be teachers of quality after them.

The fundamentally reflexive character of quality education suggests its final objective: the increase of personal *self-worth*. From its inception, our society has valued individual dignity and self-esteem. Now, acknowledging human variability and accepting each person's full totality, we must beware of classification systems meant to facilitate the educational process that actually countertermine its real intent. Labels like "learning disabled," "underachiever," "late bloomer," or simply "slow" are not the objective, neutral terms they may at first appear to be. On the contrary, they have the force to determine not only our perceptions of other human beings, but also their own perceptions of themselves.

It must be underscored again that all these goals define the single end of quality education, the person equipped to control his or her own life responsibly and to work toward a continually improving social order. As a conscious objective, this end cannot be left to chance. Just as the society of the past consciously created policies to enforce compulsory schooling, so the society of the future will conscientiously enforce policies of compulsory education. However, whereas the delivery of compulsory schooling was confined to the schoolhouse, compulsory education will create a range of options for achieving quality education from both inside and outside the schools.

Providing Quality Education

Many problems will need working out. The first: how should the talents and skills we have talked about be developed? How will quality education be provided? Should we be able to legislate the right to quality education, to translate into law the objectives we have outlined, we would still be faced with the monumental problem of delivery. We would still have



to allot responsibility for implementing our theoretical objectives and for determining their actual constitution. How would we go about assessing the effectiveness—the true quality—of our new educational system? These issues require careful analysis and the development of new policies.

Given the diversity of present opinion, future educational systems will have to be structured upon one harmonious combination of equally diverse methods. The range of options for quality education will extend on a continuum from parent to professional, from individual to institution, as the resources necessary to quality education will be available in the community as well as the school. Those resources found within the schools will be somehow coordinated with those resources found in the community outside. Questions of how these educational agencies will be orchestrated—by whom, when, and where—constitute the wide range of choices yet to be made.

The means to the end of quality education would involve fitting appropriate resources to the unique ability and style of each learner. Nevertheless, while appropriate resources will certainly be tapped, the issue of just who is responsible for guiding the learner toward what educational goals remains to be worked out.

Still, the fact remains that now, perhaps more than ever before, the *family and school together* must be held accountable for the right of every learner to be fully educated, a right which together they both guarantee.

As with every other right in a free society, the proof of the right to quality education resides with the enfranchised citizen—in this case with the learner. Young learners, however, beginning in training and in need of advising, cannot by themselves be held liable for the results they achieve. Whereas the older learner is assumed capable of negotiating his or her own educational course, the courts are beginning to monitor with careful—if self-guarded—vigilance the effectiveness of the education children and adolescents receive. And, it is in this area that educational malpractice suits have their roots.

Without precedent to guide them, the courts have been unable to locate the signal cause of default or sole subject of liability. Reluctance to find against the school system as single culprit, however, by no means indicates a more general resistance among legal or political officials to acknowledge the existence of victim as well as culpable act: legislation recently passed to define minimum competency levels and to ensure their attainment is just one sign that education is outgrowing its former status as an exclusive privilege and entering the domain of popular right preserved under law.

We must understand that, however integral edu-

cation might be to the Declaration of Independence and basic tenets of the Constitution, quality education is not yet a full-fledged, constitutionally-protected right. States are not constitutionally obliged to maintain a public school system, either.

"Universal" Quality Education

Clearly, we are talking about "universal" quality education, about the right of every individual to instructional excellence. As clearly, then, we are also talking about the need to create a comprehensive system of public education. This will mean transforming our present public and private school system into a public education system. In the past, those who were wealthy enough could purchase quality education. The masses, however, had little choice but to rely on the public institutions that attempted to ensure basic literacy, an orientation to civic responsibility, and some vocational training—levels of schooling felt to make up the barest elements of success in our society.

The demands of the post-industrial society are new and wholly modern demands. In a period of universal schooling for the masses, we created norms that fostered a system of human classification separating winners from losers. Above all, we created one normative path to scholastic success.

Converting our present school systems into one truly contemporary educational system will require us to stop typecasting our citizens and start really reforming the institutions that minister to them. Institutions, not people, must be made to adapt to individual differences, if every individual is to be satisfactorily served. As schools are now organized, trying to pay even adequate attention to each student's needs is not only difficult and frustrating, but patently impossible. Asking the public school, in its present structure, to deliver quality education to all is like asking the scientific community to reach the moon in a DC-10.

NASA did reach the moon, and even made it temporarily habitable. But it did not arrive there in a DC-10 or in a DC-10 equipped with added engines. Yet we have asked the schools to reach all learners,

even to become a nurturing environment for everyone, simply by adding a few new facets to their old, outmoded design.

To hold school personnel accountable for the failures of an obsolete school system is altogether unreasonable. To expect them to assume a leadership role in redesigning our educational program, on the other hand, is reasonable indeed.

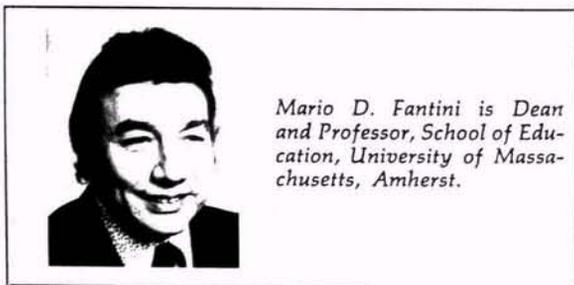
Those inside the schools trying to make an outdated vehicle perform contemporary services are frustrated. They become defensive, and they organize against the attackers they perceive. Similarly, parents, students, and other disgruntled citizens begin to engage in political activities expressive of their discontent both with the services rendered and, mistakenly, with those who render them.

Achieving Quality Education

The time has come for new policies to revive our schools by raising them out of yesterday's school systems and into the educational system of tomorrow. Our first principle in this undertaking must be the fundamental right of quality education for everyone. Our first step must be to unite all talents and resources in the community as full partners, working together toward its achievement. This is to say, the schools cannot attempt unilaterally to provide all services necessary to effecting and promoting quality education as a right. There are other "teachers" whose skills must be channeled into a truly reformed educational system.

The fully effective education system, I would suggest, will tap all available resources in all possible ways. Of a fiscal design allowing for the actual incorporation of present adjunct services, it will bring the medical profession into drug and sex education, the legal community into law and civics courses, business and industry into career preparation, and the cultural community into aesthetic curricula. It will provide professional educators with a supervisory role and responsibility for ensuring that each learner be placed within the educational context most favorable to his or her unique development.

This first step is, without question, a major one. It starts us on a course of increasingly personalized approaches to education. It sets us in pursuit of totally new educational directions within existing private as well as public school systems. Yet, however much we may need to convert school programs of the past, we need not fear controverting our most time-honored ideals. To the contrary, as American society prepares to enter the twenty-first century, our call to make quality education a fundamental civil right answers to our oldest and noblest democratic creed of equality, opportunity, and excellence for all. *ET*



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