

NOT A CHANCE

NATHANIEL OBER

As a reviewer, I am in the somewhat uncomfortable position of agreeing with most of the recommendations in a book I cannot recommend with any great enthusiasm. I respect the Carnegie Foundation because of my past association with it; however, I find the report issued by its Council on Policy Studies in Higher Education, *Giving Youth a Better Chance*, hard to read and lacking in focus.

It seems that no one has determined to whom the book is addressed. I find myself unfairly contrasting it with the Carnegie-supported study, *The American High School Today*, in which James B. Conant spoke with authority about American society and American education and directed his recommendations to a specific audience—school board members and high school principals.

I would have been happier with *Giving Youth a Better Chance* if it had concentrated on the barriers that prevent young people from joining our society as full members. If the message had been addressed to federal and state legislators, its impact would have been greater. The case would have been more forceful had the authors specifically identified the laws that discriminate against youth and argued eloquently in behalf of their repeal.

I agree with the book's most controversial recommendation—that 16 be the age of free choice for leaving school throughout the nation. After ten years, schools should have developed in youth the essential basic skills for survival in our complex society. Compulsory education for students older than 16 may protect society from competition with youth, but it tends to inhibit learning. I hope

the report will be read by state legislators and will discourage them from extending the school-leaving age.

The report has an unfortunate tendency to deal with youth as a statistic. Nowhere are we told how young people look at themselves today, nor is there recognition of the need to study the adolescent in the last quarter of this century. Surely the Carnegie Foundation is in an ideal position to ask significant questions, draw conclusions, and publish needed research. Since the adult world in recent years has effectively barred adolescents from membership in our society, we must now recognize the need to develop their sense of community. I hope the Council will in the near future address ways in which high schools—which now serve as youth communities—can better fulfill their community function so that youth can live, learn, and develop into productive citizens as well as productive workers.

The book's limited view of the school as a mechanism for either keeping people out of or putting them into the labor market is disappointing. I looked in vain for some recognition of the high school's role in making our democracy work, in creating and maintaining an open society, in providing social mobility for all our people, in giving the disadvantaged a chance to compete with the advantaged, in creating a common base for solidarity in our diverse society. Youth need a better chance for more than just jobs.

I think Thomas Jefferson, Horace Mann, and James B. Conant would all have found this report lacking in perspective, philosophy, and ideology. Perhaps they would have reacted against the report as strongly as I, sharing my disappointment in finding basic truths argued without conviction, without authority, and—I am afraid—without a chance of being heard. ■



"Youth need a better chance for more than just jobs."

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