

Early Schooling and the Nation's Future

To address the social implications of the reform agenda, educators must develop programs that confront issues of poverty, health, and families.

For almost four years education has been high on the nation's agenda. Thirty governors have named school reform commissions, and legislators have enacted programs. The corporate sector has adopted schools. College presidents have spoken out for public education, and colleges and universities have raised graduation requirements. Districts have raised teacher salaries at twice the inflation rate. And public attitude toward teachers has turned around dramatically.

During these years, we've had more constructive action on behalf of public education than during any comparable period in recent memory. Still, I see a dark lining to the silver cloud. "Advantaged" schools are getting better, but many others—especially those in our major cities—remain deeply troubled institutions. These schools differ not just in degree, but in *kind*. The social pathologies that surround them are so great and the problems so complex

that current efforts are inadequate to their needs.

Education and Poverty

Twenty years ago, this nation launched a crusade to improve urban education. The centerpiece of the plan was desegregation. Elaborate "remedies" were designed, and agonizing battles were fought out in the courts and sometimes in the streets. The crusade of the 1960s, which today is but a faded memory, has not been followed with new ideas, but with disillusionment and neglect.

In some city high schools on any given day, at least four out of ten students are absent. In Philadelphia the dropout rate is 38 percent; and in Boston it's 43 percent. Almost half of the Mexican-American and Puerto Rican students who enroll in our public high schools drop out before they receive a diploma. How are we to achieve excellence when students aren't even in the building?

In Chicago over half of the students failed to graduate in 1984, and only a third of those who did were reading at the twelfth-grade level. Last year, in the Cleveland Public Schools, there was not a single semifinalist in the National Merit Scholarship competition. Boston and Detroit each had only one high school with semifinalists.

What's disturbing about these statistics is that they show how little the school reform movement is confronting the core of our educational dilemma. An enormous gap separates rhetoric and results. The breakup of the home, communities wrenched by crime, poverty, and loss of good teachers threaten to overwhelm our most troubled schools. To require a failing student in an urban ghetto to take another unit in math or foreign language without offering a better environment or better teaching is like raising a hurdle for someone who has already stumbled without providing more coaching. And the problems are increasing.

By the year 2000 in America, one of every three public school pupils will be nonwhite. Approaching the educational system is a group of children who will be poorer and more ethnically and linguistically diverse, children who will have more handicaps that surely will affect their schooling. Unless we deepen our commitment, the crisis in urban education will increase. The gap will widen between the haves and the have-nots. Within our major cities we will be left with an educational Third World. In these schools, the battle of American education will be won or lost. If urban schools do not become a national priority, the promise of excellence will remain sadly unfulfilled.

There are no panaceas. If there were obvious answers to the problems of urban education, we would have found them long ago. If failure is not to become a way of life for many urban youths, we must recognize that poverty and schooling are connected. What we see as poor academic performance may be related to events that precede schooling and even birth itself.

Hunger and Brain Development

The growing fetus requires a diet rich in protein, vitamins, and minerals, and yet most poor mothers do not have adequate nutrition. Furthermore, the human brain grows most rapidly during the first year of life, and yet 40 percent of all persons in America today classified as poor are children. Malnutrition affects almost a half-million children in this nation.

The implications for schooling are dramatic. A major report by the Physicians Task Force on Hunger in America revealed that children who are deprived of adequate nutrition during the critical years of brain growth risk "cognitive deficits," which obviously restrict later learning. A recent Louisiana study compared poor children who had received food supplements during the first year of life and whose mothers had received nutritional support during pregnancy with children who were denied good nutrition. Those in the first group showed higher IQ, longer attention span, and better grades in school.

It is ironic that at the very time when better schools are being pushed, funds for federal child nutrition programs are restricted. Babies and poor health may appear to be disconnected from the school reform agenda, but the evidence to the contrary is overwhelming. Our educational problems cannot be divorced from the problems of the poor. If good schooling is our goal, all mothers and young children must have good nutrition.

Language and the Basic School

We must give top priority to early education, especially to language. I propose that every school district, certainly those with high dropout rates, organize what might be called the Basic School, a unit that would include kindergarten through grade three.

The Basic School would make language—the sending and receiving of messages that makes us truly human—central. Language is imprinted in the genes, and by the time children march off to school, they are already linguistically empowered with a vocabulary of several thousand words. Any child who can speak and listen, I believe, can also be taught to read and write.

The goal of the Basic School would be to assure that every child reads with understanding, writes with clarity, and speaks and listens effectively. In a school saturated with rich language, children, from their first entry, would be speaking, writing, talking about words, listening to stories, and building a vocabulary. If a child is not linguistically empowered in the early years, it is almost impossible to compensate for the failure later on. It's like playing tennis with a broken racquet.

Further, the Basic School would blur rigid grade levels in these early years. It's foolish for teachers to fret over the curious question of whether to "fail" a student in grade one or two. Some children develop more slowly than others, and whether a student is in first grade or second grade is inconsequential. What is important is not the age, but each child's linguistic progress. The school would ensure that students would read and write with confidence and handle math accurately before they move to the next level, at which the focus would be on the core of common learning. This is

the only way to assure that students in the upper grades will succeed academically.

Class Size and Results

In the Basic School, class size is also crucial. Primary school teachers sometimes have 30 or more students in a single class. Even under the best conditions these teachers can give only a minute or two to each child per hour. This is simply not enough. The State of Indiana recently compared the achievements of first-graders in large classes with those in classes with fewer than 20 students. The evidence was overwhelming: small classes bring more academic gains. Thus, this nation should move quickly to implement the recommendation of the recent report of the National Governors' Association, *Time for Results*, which advises one teacher for every 15 students in kindergarten through grade three.

Smaller classes mean more money, and recent polls show that Americans are willing to spend more for education if they feel the investment will pay off. Further, it's my conviction that a good Basic School would reduce the cost of high school special and remedial education, which is expanding at an alarming rate. On the other hand, the recent High Scope study of the long-term impact of quality early education concluded that for every dollar invested, the payoff is more than four to one.

Work and the School Calendar

If we are to reorder national education priorities, we also must adjust the school schedule to changing family and work patterns. This national challenge goes far beyond the crisis of the poor. When today's school calendar was set almost a century ago, with nine months of study and three months off, over 90 percent of all school-age children were living on a farm with two parents, working hard, and staying home in the summer to tend the crops. The school calendar mirrored national work and family patterns.

Today, the world has turned upside down. Less than 3 percent of today's families are on farms. In most households both parents work away from home. Moreover, nearly one in five families is headed by a woman, two-thirds of whom work outside the

home. About half the children now in first grade will have lived in one-parent homes by the time they graduate from high school.

I'm convinced that the school schedule needs to match both family and work patterns as it did 100 years ago. Already, because of the number of working parents, over 40 percent of the nation's children are in prekindergarten programs.

Increasingly schools will be called upon to provide prekindergarten sessions to serve young children who need care outside the home. In fact, the nation's governors, in their new report, urge states to provide quality early education for at-risk four-year-olds and "where possible" for three-year-olds as well. This recommendation touches real life.

Today, one out of ten children comes home to an empty house or apartment. And as this "latchkey" problem grows, schools should operate on a longer day, offering after-hour programs such as special studies in science, computers, music, or athletics, for example. I'm also convinced that we should lengthen the school calendar. A three-month summer recess is anachronistic now, especially at a time when most parents work outside the home year-round. Rather, we need an optional summer term for children, not for babysitting but for learning. We cannot magically turn off children's needs when school is out.

The Extended School

I see emerging prekindergarten programs, after-hour workshops, and summer sessions to fit what families and children need today. The danger is that affluent families will find their own summer camps, private lessons, and youth clubs, for example, while poor children will be allowed to drift.

In 1983, 53 percent of upper- and middle-income families had their preschool children in special programs, but only 29 percent of at-risk three- and four-year-olds were enrolled. If we are to narrow this gap, new enrichment programs—which I will call an Extended School—should be an option for all students, not just the privileged few. Families who can pay for these extra services should pay for them—at fees that will make the activities self-supporting.

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For those who cannot afford the cost, I urge a state-financed plan that would give poor families a certificate of eligibility, linked to the federal Chapter 1 guidelines, to be redeemed at the preschool, after-school, or summer program of their choice. Several states provide a precedent for this procedure. New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and South Carolina have state-financed enrichment programs, in which the eligibility is based on Chapter 1. While these projects focus on remediation, the procedures could be applied to the Extended School as well.

Furthermore, financing this enrichment program jointly, through parent payment and through the state, would relieve local budgets and assure equity in public school financing. For the core school program, however, current funding patterns would be kept in place.

A school district that chose not to conduct enrichment programs internally could contract with a college, a youth club, local artists, or computer centers, for example. Most important, the enrichment programs would provide the option for children from all social and economic backgrounds, and perhaps from both public and private schools, to participate together.

Learning About Intelligence

In the days ahead it is urgently important that we find out more about how children learn. The attention we are giving to education has done little to teach us about learning, and we are still ignorant about how to measure

the results. We have good schools and good teachers; but my optimism about the future of schooling is based on the conviction that, in the days ahead, we will become more knowledgeable about learning and about how we can assess the potential of all children.

The most exciting work, in my opinion, is being done by Howard Gardner at Harvard. Gardner, in his provocative and insightful book, *Frames of Mind*, reminds us that children not only have verbal intelligence, but they also have logical, mathematical, spatial, bodily, and personal intelligence. I suspect they have intuitive and social intelligence as well.

Gardner suggests that we should find ways to understand the many dimensions of intelligence in our children. Regrettably, paper-and-pencil tests focus on a limited range of verbal and computational skills, representing a meager sampling of selected words and numbers.

We need yardsticks to assure that our \$140 billion annual investment in public schools is paying off. Tests are useful in providing a barometer of how well schools are doing, but our tests do not come close enough to individual children or provide teachers with sufficient information. By reducing students to numbers we may be telling children that they are failures before they've had a chance to discover what they might become.

If our goal is to educate all children, we must broaden our definition of "potential." We also must honor the full range of talent that contributes to our civility and, perhaps, to our survival, too. To achieve excellence in education we must confront the problems of poor children, give priority to early education, affirm the centrality of language, provide enrichment programs that reflect the changing work and family patterns of the nation, and learn more about how children learn.

As we move toward a new century, we must answer an urgent question: Will America continue to believe in education for all children, or will it separate winners from losers, educate them accordingly, and in so doing become a more divided nation? □

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