

PUBLIC EDUCATION: THE SQUEEZE IS ON

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We in education are accustomed to speaking of "the crisis in education," and usually the crisis is a failure to get exactly what we want in state aid to education, some tax referendum or the board of education budget. That is not the crisis in education or the squeeze that I will be talking about today. The situation we face today is not just the periodic ritualistic crisis, but something deeper, something much more serious, namely, whether public education as we have known it over decades and over centuries will continue to exist after this decade is over.

Economic Pressures on the Country

Now we face simultaneously a number of problems, all of which put a tremendous squeeze on public education. The first of these is the economic situation which confronts the country and which is not temporary, an economic situation that goes beyond the particular horrors that have been inflicted upon us by President Reagan and his theories. These are problems which we would have even if the President had not inflicted other problems on us. The country has suffered economically because there have been within the past decade a number of major financial pressures. The first results from the tremendous change in the price of energy. Over the last decade the United States has been shipping out of this country 90 billion dollars each year for fuel. I don't know how much money 90 billion dollars is except to write it down as a number. One of our national

economists had a very good way of expressing it. He said 90 billion dollars a year means that in ten years you send out 900 billion dollars, and if you want to know what that will buy, 900 billion dollars will buy all the stock listed on the stock exchange. So, in a sense, you can say in a ten-year period of time we have sent enough money to OPEC to buy the major productive capacity which has taken this country 200 years to build. Obviously, money that is sent elsewhere can't be used here, whether for domestic purposes, for private purposes or for public purposes.

We have also come to watch our economy reduce its productivity. We go to a store to try to buy something that's made in the United States to give to a foreign visitor, and it's very hard to find anything in the store that's made in the United States. We do not produce. We buy things from other places.

We have also neglected our infrastructure. Major national business magazines have dealt with this in entire issues. The fact that every other day a bridge collapses and more than half the bridges in this country have to be rebuilt within the next decade--or they will not be usable--is going to cost a great deal of money. We don't have much of a railroad system left. Our automobile plants can't compare with Japan's or those in other parts of the world.

More and more it's pretty clear that what we have done as a nation for many years is to live off the productivity without reinvesting any of it. It's something like owning a home or a car. We've lived in the house, and we've driven the car, but we never bothered to take care of a paint job, a leaking faucet, a pipe, transmission or other things. And now it's all collapsing and we've got to put tremendous resources into rebuilding what should have been

repaired all along. Well, this takes a lot of money too. And so some of the money is going to OPEC and some of it is going to have to go into rebuilding the productive capacity and the infrastructure of our society.

At the same time both Democrats and Republicans take a look and say, well, we reduced military spending in '73, '74, '75, '77, '78, and now we're way behind. We've got to spend more on that. So we have all these tremendous pressures. We've got to spend the money on fuel. We've got to reindustrialize. We've got to spend more on military. All that money is money no longer available for other purposes.

So for the first time in the history of this country people go from one year to the next year and instead of saying, gee, I'm better off this year--this year I can save some money, I can have a better vacation, I can buy a second car, I can do something else--for the last two or three years, and probably for the next 9, 10, 11, 12 years, people are going to be looking at each other each year and saying, this year I really have less than I had last year. You can live that way for a while. The first year you have a little less, you don't buy something that you would have bought. The second year you cut out a little bit more. But the time comes when it starts getting painful, and then you've got to start looking around to make decisions. What is it that I'm going to give up? Is it going to be a car? Is it going to be a house? Is it going to be clothing, vacation? Or, is it going to be the education of the child who lives a block away. Of course, I wouldn't give up the education of my own child. That's too important. But if I don't have children in school anymore, one of the things I'm likely to give up is someone else's

education. So we have an economic squeeze.

Fewer Voters with Children in School

The second problem that's facing us is demography. Once upon a time, only a few years ago, supporting education was a very, very sexy thing to do for every politician. They just had to do it. Why? Very simple. Fifteen or 20 years ago we lived in communities, cities and states where the majority of people had children attending school, and, therefore, most of the voting populations were actually customers of this institution. It would have been very unpopular for some politician to stand up and come out against the system and substantial assistance to education. But on a national basis, we're now down from 55% and 60%, to about 20% of the voting people of this country who have children in school. The birth rate is down. People are living longer. Parents of school-age children are a smaller percentage of the population.

Now, it ought to be that every person in our society should be concerned about the education of every child. After all, my neighbor's child needs an education not only to earn his own living or her own living, but because if that child is working, it is going to help me. The child will pay taxes. The child will develop or invent something which will help the prosperity of our city, or state or country. If the child drops out, if the child becomes a welfare recipient, that will affect me in my taxes. If the child becomes an addict or criminal, that will affect me too. From a social and citizen's point of view I should look at the education of each child in exactly the same way as my own, but, as a matter of fact, it doesn't work that way. So we have an economic squeeze and we have the fact that we're not as powerful politically because we do not

represent the same percentage of voters in a population who take that kind of direct interest in education.

No Automatic Respect for Teachers

The third problem that we have is that the public no longer looks up to education and supports it in the same way that it did in years gone by. And it's rather strange as to why that is so. It is not true that education today is worse than it was, let's say, in 1935 or 1936. There are more students in school. They're staying longer. They're learning more. Our teachers are better educated. Our buildings are better equipped. More of our children are graduating from high school and going on to college. No nation in the history of the world has been that successful in educating as many and as broad a spectrum. Yes, there are many countries that decide in advance that they will educate a select 5% or 10%, or 15% or 20% of the population. And anybody else who doesn't make it, well, that's too bad. This is the only country that has tried to go far beyond that. We have tried to say, and at times ⁺overemphasized our belief, that everyone should go to college!

Why is it, ^ethen, that the public's attitude toward education today isn't the same as it was, let's say in the 1930s, or the 1940s. Well, the reason's rather simple. In the 1930s, very few people were going to college, maybe 5%. Not too many people were high school graduates within our society. I grew up in a working class area of New York City where if you were an elementary school graduate, you were considered a pretty well educated person. The majority of people in that neighborhood were immigrants. They had not gone to school. Many of them did not speak English. Certainly they didn't speak it well. It was a very common experience to sit out on a summer

night and watch people going to the one person in the area who had been to high school for a few years to ask: Please, help write a letter for me to a friend of mine--I never learned how to write. So, sure, teachers and schools were respected. Why? Because the overwhelming majority of the people in our country were uneducated, and since teachers were part of the handful of educated people, they were looked upon as having this great educational distance from ordinary men and women in the street.

Well, what did we do, teachers in school districts? We did a very silly thing. We went out there and educated everybody. They all go to elementary school. They all go to high school. The majority of them go to college. Now they don't respect us anymore because they're as educated as we are. Some of them are more educated than we are. Millions of people out there believe that they can do a better job of educating their own children than the teachers do, if only they weren't busy making more money. They can't afford to do it. But we no longer have that automatic respect that used to be there.

The Discipline Question

Then as we look at the Gallup polls which were taken of the American people over the last decade or decade and a half, there are a number of issues which those of us who are in education have not quite come to grips with. What are the issues? Well, they come through on each of these annual Gallup polls. Discipline, violence, disruption, and drug abuse--these are the number one issues from every single poll. One of the primary reasons parents want to take their child out of public school and send the child to a private school is not that the private school has a nicer building. Frequently

it doesn't. Not that the private school has better teachers. Often it does not. But frequently what that parent is really saying is: I want to take my child out of this school where there is a handful of kids who can roam the school and disrupt the educational process and endanger the safety of my child.

This is the top issue in public education, especially in urban areas within this country. If we do not solve this problem, then we might as well say goodbye to public schools. There is a very small number of children who are disturbed, who need help, but who cannot be helped within public schools as they are now organized. Teachers are not psychologists or psychiatrists. They're not social workers. They are teachers. They're prepared to deal with the ordinary problems. They are not prepared to deal with situations of extreme pathology. Public education cannot deal with that problem. The pressure on government to give parents money to let them take their children out of these schools will become overwhelming. We have to say the schools and teachers, as they are now constituted, are not equipped to handle some of the most extreme problems, and some other institution or some other place within our society has to handle them.

Insisting on Standards

Item two has to do with standards. And by standards, I mean a number of things. Somewhere back in the 1950s and 1960s we got the idea that the purpose of schools was to allow children to take those courses that they enjoyed. And obviously, living and loving is much more enjoyable than trigonometry or advanced algebra. Courses that involve reading teenage romances are much more popular than courses which involve the reading of Shakespeare or Dickens. And so we have

developed many different alternatives to a tough and hard curriculum, and what is there to show? Well, the scores go down year after year. What do we find? We're amazed when we find that students who take fewer courses in mathematics will have their scores go down. When students no longer have to take a course in English which is fairly tough, where they spend a period a day on English, and instead can take some substitute where they watch television, or do something else, their reading and comprehension scores will go down. The public essentially is saying look, we're willing to pay for schools. We understand that education is an important thing, but education means that children must learn the things that adults and society have determined are good for them, which they may not enjoy at the present time.

I don't know of anyone who enjoys spelling. I don't know of anyone who enjoys learning the basics of arithmetic at a very early age. I don't know of anyone who instantly took to any great books. There's a lot of difficulty, difficult words, difficult concepts. There's a certain amount of unpleasant effort and pressure that has to be put on a child to get the child to do things that the child would not do automatically. As a matter of fact, if children loved these things automatically, maybe we wouldn't need schools at all. Just put the books around at home and they'd automatically start doing these things. So, one of the aspects in the toughness of the curriculum is getting rid of choices, although not all choices. It doesn't make very much difference if the child reads biographies, takes a course in drama, takes a course in fiction, or takes a course in criticism, as long as the difficulty, the cultural value, the things learned, are of the same level. Then you can have choices.

But the choice should not be between something of value and something which is junk, something which is difficult and something which doesn't stimulate at all.

Testing Students...and Future Teachers

Now, along with these standards there are certain other current controversies. Many organizations in education in this country, including the other teacher union, the National Education Association, some administrative groups and others, have taken very strong positions against the use of standardized tests. They say that these tests ought to be banned. What are their reasons? Well, tests are inaccurate and don't always measure the ability of a child. Well, any measure that anyone has is inaccurate. That doesn't mean that you don't use it. You use the best tool you have. If you don't have a perfect tool, you use one that's less than perfect. They say that many children fail them when they take them. Doing poorly makes the child feel terrible. Well, I should hope so. I hope the child who fails the test does feel terrible and works much harder to do well the next time. They say the tests are racist because minority groups students on a national basis do not do as well. Well, there's a reason why they don't do as well. After decades of discrimination, you would expect that it would have an effect, and it did have an effect. And, as a matter of fact, since minority students don't do as well on these tests, that has been the major justification for compensatory education programs. What are we trying to do? Make believe that over a century of discrimination has had absolutely no effect on the test scores? It's not the test scores. It's the fact that there are differences in achievement,

and in order to develop public pressure to do something special for those children who need that help you need measurements, tests, and evaluations. Now, you know what the public thinks when it takes a look at educators saying that they want to get rid of tests. The public says, gee, those people are failing and now they want to bury the evidence.

Not only do we in the American Federation of Teachers favor the idea that students ought to be tested, and tested frequently, but teachers ought to be tested as well. Doctors pass an examination after they graduate from medical school. Lawyers take a bar examination. People have to take examinations to be hairdressers, barbers, insurance salesmen, real estate brokers. About the only occupation in our society that you can get into without taking a test is teaching. Why? Well, people say, they went to college and they got their credits. Don't you trust the college? I do not. Do all colleges have the same standards? Do all colleges insist that there be a high level before a person can get credit for a course to graduate? Of course not. Well, they say, giving teachers an examination when they enter the profession will not tell you if this person is going to be a good teacher. That's right. It will not. It will not tell you if the person has a warm personality, likes children, is willing to work hard, has some imagination, and so forth. But, it will tell you whether the teacher is illiterate. It will tell you if a teacher who's supposed to be a mathematics teacher knows any mathematics or not. And, I'll tell you, the teacher can have a marvelous personality and can be hard working, and can really want to work with children, but if that teacher can't read or write or spell or count, those children will not be helped by that warmth at all, at least not helped

in a way that a school is supposed to help a child.

And so, one of the things that we ought to be demanding is that before we hire a teacher there is tested competence in the field of teaching. Why is this such a controversial matter? Standards, that's what the public is saying. We will spend the money but we want to get something back. We want to know that the teacher who is being paid by us is doing the job that teachers are supposed to do.

Teaching Values

The third thing that the public is very concerned with is that the school teach values. They don't want schools to teach six- and seven- and eight- and nine-year-olds to be moral relativists. They don't want an analysis of this fellow who killed somebody. Let's not say what he did was wrong. Let's just start analyzing whether his father mistreated him. Did his teachers mistreat him? Why did he do this? Do you sympathize with him, and so forth? Yes, there's a time for this when the kids get to be teenagers or they get up there in college. They rebel against what they were taught earlier. They start questioning. They become critical. But parents want schools where younger children are going to be taught that certain things are right and certain things are wrong. Then let them rebel about it later on, or let them think about it later on.. But, at least give them some sort of basis.

These three major problems--the first has to do with violence and discipline, the second with standards and the third with the question of values--are the three most important reasons for the pressure on the part of a lot of parents to take their children out of public schools and put them into private schools. Now, how are

private schools able to control these problems? Very simple. A private school does not accept students who are discipline problems. Or, if it does accept them and can't manage them, it kicks them right out. So, in the Coleman report, Coleman didn't prove private schools were better. What he did show was that schools which have a tough curriculum and get the kids to do a lot of homework, ~~that~~ schools which expect, demand and pressure, do better than schools which don't. By the way, public schools which did the same thing performed just as well. So, these are the areas.

Tuition Tax Credits--the Beginning of the End?

Now we are faced with the President of the United States who came right here to this City of Chicago and made a very unusual speech. Very rarely does a President of the United States go somewhere to make a speech about one single piece of legislation. Yes, Presidents make speeches about foreign policy, about defense policy, about the overall economy. But, when a President of the United States travels one-third of the way across the country to talk about one piece of legislation, that's pretty big stuff. He came here to talk about tuition tax credits.

Now, what would tuition tax credits do? Well, the tax credit proposed was actually half of the tuition paid to a private school to a maximum of \$500, so if you pay \$1,000 or more tuition, you could take \$500 of that, and not pay that amount in taxes for each child. Will some people whose children are now in public schools take advantage of it if you give them \$500. Sure. Some of them will. Will all parents do that? No, not all. Which parents will do it? Is there a certain group? Can you categorize them? Sure, you can. If

people are very, very poor, that \$500 is going to mean they're going to need at least a matching \$500 or more to meet tuition expenses. It's going to be too difficult for them. But if there are people who are not in very bad economic shape, that \$500 could just be the difference. So the people who will move their children from public school to private school in the first instance will certainly be those who are in better shape economically. Let's say 5%, 10%, or 15% of them move out of public schools and move over to private schools.

What does that do to the public schools? Well, there are fewer students. That's all right. But, what happens? Well, these students who transfer, remember, came from homes with advantages. Therefore, these students probably will be your more academically advanced. They will come from homes where parents take a greater interest in the school and their child's education. The public school can lose 10% of the parents and lose 95% of the clout that it had in terms of winning support for public education. So when that group of people, that first group of people, moves out, you've lost an awful lot. You know what happens the next year? The next group says: Hey, things aren't as good as they used to be. I'm going to take my child out this year. And so, year after year, things get worse. More and more students leave. But, I have good news for all of you. We'll always have a public school system because there will always be some students ^{whom} ~~that~~ the private schools will not take or will kick ~~them~~ out. The public schools will remain something like the old poor house or the old potter's field, or the old charity ward. There will be some students who are too expensive or too difficult to educate. The private schools don't particularly want those.

Some of these private schools go around talking about how what they really want to do is educate the poor child because the poor child needs a private school more than anybody else. Well, I've made them an offer. And the offer I've made them is this. Let's forget about tuition tax credits. I'm willing to do this. We'll do it in Chicago, and we'll do it in New York, and we'll do it in Los Angeles and a few other places. We'll try this out. Let's take the 5% of the students in this school system who are furthest behind in reading, furthest behind in mathematics, have the poorest attendance record, and have the greatest record of some violence and disruption. You take those four standards, and you put together the 5% of the most difficult student^y. I'm willing to give them all a full tuition scholarship to private schools. I don't want that parent to have to put out any extra money. And, after all, why should we give public money to send good students who are already making it to private schools? They're doing very well. Why not give the money to students who are failing and aren't making it? After all, we in the public schools haven't been able to reach these difficult students. Why not give the private schools a chance to work their magic?

I did one of my columns in The New York Times on this. It's a year now. I haven't had a single offer yet from a private school. That's how committed they are. Well, look, this tuition tax credit thing is very serious. It passed the House of Representatives in 1977 and today has the President's support. The President of the United States will be twisting arms to get it. I hope that all of you and your organizations and other organizations you're a member of will do a job in the next month or two or three in terms of petitions and letters to the members of Congress to oppose the tuition

tax credit legislation.

How will we meet National Priorities?

~~Why~~ I'd like to spend a few minutes talking about the issues that we're facing as a result of this squeeze and this attack on public education. The President of the United States stands up and says, this country has certain priorities. We've got to invest so that we can be productive and compete with other countries of the world. That's a number one priority. Then he says, we have to be the strongest. We cannot be second best in terms of defense and military. That's another one of the great national priorities. They want investment, so they're reducing taxes and providing tax incentives for corporations, and they're providing incentives if you construct new buildings. They're doing all sorts of things like that. Well, there's something that the President of the United States doesn't seem to understand. You cannot revive an economy, and you cannot develop productivity merely through fiscal policy and new construction, just as you cannot develop an adequate defense and military policy by having a new B1 bomber or MX missile. Because what makes both a defense structure and a productivity structure work is human beings and their talents.

Why is it that the Japanese are doing so well right now? Is it that they have better machines? Well, who designed them? Who built them? They have a tremendous investment in education. They require far more years of mathematics and of science. And they produce far more engineers than we do with half our population. The same intensity is true of the Germans. The same is true of Sweden. Every nation in the world that expects to compete in these areas does not just put money into machinery or into bombers. They've got to put money into

the human beings who are going to operate those things, who are going to design them in the future, who are going to be able to repair them. Look at our famous rescue mission in Iran. When that was over, they found out that there was nobody out there who knew how to repair helicopters. What are we going to have in the future? Ronald Reagan goes in and decides that we are going to get the federal government off our backs. Get the federal government out of education. No more Title I. He wants to cut it by 40%. We have the federal government wanting to get out of education all together. That's what the President of the United States is talking about.

Now, I'm saying here to you that the United States will not succeed in productivity, in reindustrialization or in defense unless it has an adequate number of qualified mathematicians, scientists, engineers and people who speak and understand foreign languages.

I'll go a step further. Sixteen thousand impoverished school districts in this country are not going to be sitting there to find money which really fulfills national purposes. If the United States of America as a country has need for those skills, then the United States of America as a country has to put that sort of money and that sort of commitment into education. Otherwise it's not going to happen. When the history of this particular period is written, Ronald Reagan is going to go down ^{just} as a President who was very, very mean to the poor, very mean to minorities. That's already established. President Reagan ^{also} is going to go down as the President who most weakened the domestic economy of the United States, because not educating a generation of youngsters is like taking your seed corn and eating it up, and then you have nothing to plant to produce anymore food. He will go down as the President who destroyed a period of productivity in the United States.

And, I'll tell you, in a few years from now, when we have worse than Iran, it will not be because we didn't have a few guns. It'll be because we didn't have the talent. We didn't do the research. We didn't invest in the field that we had to invest in.

Of all the things that the President wants to be proud of in history, he wants to go down as the President who restored America's power to number one. And he will go down in history as the very opposite, as the President who most weakened the country, most weakened it in international affairs in two ways. One, is by not providing us with people of the requisite talents and skills that are needed, and second, it's because you can't really have a strong foreign policy if you have internal divisions of one group of people fighting another group of people who are unprepared for the society's needs. And by putting poor minorities against wealthy people and bringing that struggle to the floor with the nature of his tax program, he will have weakened us tremendously.

America's Future Linked to Public Schools

Now, I would like to conclude by saying that I may have surprised you by not coming here to talk about teachers' union, or collective bargaining, or negotiations, teachers' problems in Chicago or nationally. It's not that I'm unconcerned. It's just that I think that the squeeze is on, and public education and its future are in danger. Well, some people might say, so what? So we won't have many public schools. So the children will go to private schools, and probably the private schools will buy the same buildings we now have as public schools, and when the teachers get dismissed from a public school, they'll get jobs in these private schools, and the private schools will buy our textbooks, and before you know it you'll have the same children going to the same school, with the same books, and the same teachers, but it won't be

owned by the City of Chicago or the Board of Education. It'll be owned by a lot of private outfits out there. What's wrong with that?

Well, it's exactly what's wrong with that that brings me here today to talk about the problem. You know, the United States of America is a country which is different from any other country in the world. Germany is made up of Germans. And France is made up completely of French. And Japan is Japanese. And England is English. These countries are essentially single tribes. There are now hundreds of thousands of Turks and others who came to some of these countries as guest workers. They're not expected to become citizens of those countries. They don't have rights. The United States is the only country where we all came at different times and came from different places with different languages, different religions. This country is not a single tribe with inherent togetherness. The togetherness of this country, insofar as it exists, was created, largely because of the institution of the public school. With all of it's problems, the public school is the place where students -- Protestants, Catholics, Jews, agnostics and athiests, black, white, Hispanic, different languages, different groups -- come together, where as young children they get to know each other. It is a place which to use a word that's not too popular today but ought to be brought back, serves the function of Americanizing us. And if we aren't Americanized, we don't have an America. If we have school systems which are private, and one set of schools is only for blacks, and one only for Catholics, and one only for Fundamentalists, and one for Jews, and one for Communists, and one for Moral Majority characters, or the Ku-Klux Klan, and if every child's thoughts are moving off in a different direction to a different school, that doesn't just affect the future of education. It affects the future of this country.

If you don't think that's a possibility just look north of our borders at the effect of the structure of education in Quebec, and the effect that it has on the future Canada, which is now unknown largely because it did not accept the kind of philosophy of education that we have.

Well, the fight is not determined. It could go either way. And so I'm here to urge you not to concentrate your energies only on your local problems, which I know are very substantial and very serious, but to take part of those energies and efforts and join together with the labor movement, with all the civil rights groups, with teachers' unions, with administrators, with parents, and develop a coalition, beat the Reagan budget cuts, beat tuition tax credits, and at the same time turn to people in education and demand the quality in schools that the public wants.

Thank you.