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THE QUALITY OF AMERICAN EDUCATION

Remarks of David Selden, Assistant to the President,
American Federation of Teachers, before the
AFL-CIO Education Directors Conference
Detroit, Michigan, March 29, 1966

It is always well to try to talk about the assigned topic, if at all possible. Yet, when one is faced with such a topic as "The Quality of Elementary and Secondary Education" it does become a little presumptions to attempt to toss off a meaningful analysis in a half hour or so. Dr. James B. Conant, the redoubtable ex-president of Harvard, has spent some ¹⁰ years and who knows how many Carnegie Endowment millions at this task, and at least four books have been produced.

At this very moment, Dr. Ralph Tyler, backed by Federal funds and flanked by as sanctified a group of educational high-domes as one could possibly name, is working away at developing a national measuring instrument for assessing educational progress. And, I might add, many of the nation's school superintendents seem to be just as busy trying to wiggle out of range of Tyler's educational microscope.

I came to talk for my allotted time, and I'm going to do it.

In the first place, let us consider the question of "education for what?" What is the purpose of elementary and secondary education? A silly question? Maybe so, but there is not much agreement among the public, or even educators, as to the answer. Obviously, our schools must serve the needs of the individual - the student - and the needs of society. Thus, the answer to the question will be as complex as the tremendous variety of personal needs which students bring to school with them, and the answer will be conditioned, too, by the sort of society one hopes to build. It would not be possible to merely assess the aspirations and the deficiencies of students in terms of our current society, and set about doing our best to bring everybody up to snuff. Instead, one must project, not just for the ¹⁰ ten to ²⁰ twenty years which will ^{expire} transpire ^{pass} before a present kindergardener ⁷ is out on his own in the world, but one must think

considerably beyond, perhaps through the next half century and more when today's five-year-old will be an operating unit of society, making decisions and taking actions which go to shape the form and determine the direction and rate of progress of society.

There is nothing incompatible between the concept of serving the individual's personal needs and serving those of society as well. On the contrary, any viable society must be based on the competence of its members, and no individual can lead a really satisfactory life as a social outlaw. Look what happened to Jesse James.

There is a great difference between a dynamic, socialized education and "education for conformity," and the two should not be confused. Jesse James has achieved a reputation as a Robin Hood, but I somehow distrust Jesse's social philosophy. Robin Hood himself, on the other hand, seems to have had good government - by Good King Richard - as his primary motivation. While both were non-conformists, Jesse James was an implacable and destructive rebel. He was a social dropout, while Robin Hood apparently never lost his interest in society despite a rather uncooperative attitude toward the truant officer, the Sheriff of Nottingham.

"Education for Conformity" can, of course, result from outright indoctrination, as in totalitarian countries, or it can result from the bland, unimaginative, and tranquilizing sort of teaching which ensues when educators consider themselves as observers and interpreters of society rather than participants. The kind of school system we in the AFT stand for is one which constantly challenges and stimulates the student, offering free access to all information and encouraging him to probe for solutions to social problems as well as his own personal problems. While we teachers are staunchly opposed to indoctrination of students because of our opposition to totalitarianism, the greater danger lies in the more subtly ~~the~~ oppressive effect of de-socialized education.

Thus, the first requisite for quality education is that it have a social purpose as well as the purpose of being of direct benefit to the consumer. But projecting the precise social purpose appropriate to our educational endeavors is almost, per se, an impossible task. Perhaps someone will have enough information and insight to crank the proper inputs into a computer some day and come up with the true and inevitable path to the great society, but not I. And I don't know anyone else to whom I would entrust such a task. Instead, we must push ahead as best we can, using the best information available at any given time.

This is why it is so important for teachers to be a part of the labor movement. The labor movement is the only broad-based democratic institution which has social progress as its chief underlying purpose. ^{In spite of} imperfect in its organizational structure and functioning, ~~as it is~~, the labor movement ^{is} still ~~the~~ the best forum for developing social objectives. Today's meeting is all the evidence one needs to produce to support this assertion.

The social objectives of the labor movement and of education are inextricably intertwined. Most labor leaders are inclined to place labor's interest in teacher organization on much more pragmatic terms. Organizing has long been the chief problem of the labor movement. Some leaders simply accept the American Federation of Teachers as another union trying to do an organizing job, and they ^{prefer} assistance in much the same way that they would help the Hotel and Restaurant Employees or the Firefighters or anyone else. Others go a step further. They know that our schools do not do an adequate job of preparing students to become functioning union members, and they are aware of the vast ignorance of the labor movement on the part of many teachers. They look upon the teacher union movement as a teacher education project which can, if successful, result in more knowledgeable teaching about the labor movement, from which other unions will benefit.

There is nothing wrong with pragmatic acceptance of teacher unionism, but we hope that, more and more, the labor movement and teachers can come to realize the identity of social objectives of organized labor and our schools. The labor movement should recognize, more than it now does, the necessity for a dynamic and socially progressive system of education.

Organized labor must also come to realize, more than it now does, that the sort of progressive leadership our schools need can only rarely come from the official leaders in education - the superintendents and school boards. The managers of our school systems react to managerial problems, and some of them react very effectively, but they seldom "create" problems - or discover any which are not borne in upon them with considerable force. There are very few Robin Hoods in the American Association of School Administrators, although we think there might be a few Jesse James!

No superintendent or school board recognized that there was a de facto segregation problem in their school district until the civil rights movement called it inescapably to their attention. Even then, the initial reaction of most of them was to deny its existence, and some, even though forced to admit that a problem exist^s, still take a "leave-everything-to-me," or a "we-can't-do-anything-about-that" attitude.

Of course, the records of some teachers union locals leave a great deal to be desired as evidence of their zeal in searching for solutions to educational and social problems. But, by the same token, many AFT locals have provided outstanding leadership in this phase of our program, and, compared with the stand-pat, head-in-the-sand attitude of non-union teacher organizations, the AFT, national, state, and local, has done an outstanding job. And we hope to do an increasing^{ly} better job in this field.

So far, I have been talking mainly about the importance of intensifying the commitment of our schools to social progress, and before I leave this

topic I should like to point out another way in which the purposes of the labor movement and those of the school system coincide. I have been harping on this theme for some time. Let me quote from an article of mine published in the February, 1966, Phi Delta Kappan magazine.

"Neither the AFL-CIO nor the AFT has any blueprint for creating a new social order, but both are very much concerned with cleaning up the dirty corners of American society. Such endeavors ought to be particularly important to teachers, not only from the standpoint of their own personal economic and social welfare, but also from the standpoint of being able to do an effective job of teaching.

"Every teacher knows that children learn more outside of school than they do inside, although we may not often be humble enough to admit it. Children who inhabit the golden rings of suburbs around our larger cities learn that the world is a kindly and orderly place governed by rules of fair play and democracy, where a college education is taken for granted. They don't have to go to school to learn this. Children who inhabit our big city slums and ghettos and our poverty-stricken rural areas see the world as a much bleaker establishment, where the main concern is learning the practical art of survival, outwitting society rather than participating in it; a place where the odds in favor of success may be better in playing the numbers than in indulging in hard work, thrift, and self-improvement through education.

"Martin Deutsch, whose highly successful pre-school school did so much to point the way to our most acclaimed new nationwide educational program, Project Head Start, has pointed out that the advantage of the head start is often destroyed within a few years after children leave the program because the regular schools cannot combat the adverse influence of deteriorating society."

"There are specific reforms about which almost all concerned teachers can agree, however: legislative reapportionment, school desegregation and

civil rights, improvement of social security, tax reform, urban renewal, eliminating unemployment, conservation of natural resources and wildlife, Medicare, minimum wage legislation--yes, and educational renewal and expansion at all levels from preschool through college postgraduate. Each of these in itself may not bring the millenium, but each brings it a little nearer. Put them all together and they make a pretty good package."

But how about readin', 'ritin', and 'rithmetic? How about vocational education? How about slum schools? How about dropouts?

I don't know how we can come up with an accurate assessment of our schools on these points. Various testing programs and studies have been carried on over the years, and while most show that we are doing no worse than we ever did, shocking deficiencies are shown.

^{In} On the basic 3R's, we teach the rudiments well enough, but we fail miserably in motivating children to want to read, write, and figure better than they do. Test norms in these skills have remained constant for the past ³⁰ thirty to ⁴⁰ forty years.

In vocational education, we continue to attempt to give students useless skills, meanwhile segregating them from the influence of more academically-oriented teenage society.

Slum schools are still slum schools in most instances; institutions to which both teachers and pupils must be sentenced in order to get them to go there at all.

And, despite all the promotional and public relations effort to induce students to finish high school, the dropout rate has remained almost constant. Approximately 40% of the children who enter the first grade fail to graduate from high school.

The saddest comment of all is the fact that every superintendent of schools, and almost every teacher, has been aware of these shocking deficiencies

for a long time, and still the conditions exist. Why?

The two missing ingredients in our national educational enterprise are leadership and money. We have depended on the professional leaders - the school superintendents - to be our guides, and they have failed miserably. One needs only to attend a ~~con~~vention of the American Association of School Administrators, always held amid the Prince Albertian splendor of Atlantic City, to see how useless it is to expect educational leadership from this source.

Instead, we must foster and cultivate leadership from the classroom. Elementary and secondary teachers, in conjunction with their college-level colleagues, must learn to accept their responsibility for improving the quality of American education. This will not be an easy task, but, as teachers gain new status ^{and} freedom, the public will have a right to demand such leadership.

As for the other missing ingredient, money, it is a cliché among educational speech-makers that a nation which can afford to send men into outer space can afford to give children the education they need to make a success here on earth. It is a cliché, but like many clichés, it is true, nevertheless.

Let me quote a favorite story of mine to show why money is needed and what it should be used for.

I once worked on an auto assembly line. One day there was a big snow-storm, and only half the men showed up. "They" decided to run the line anyway. Cars began to roll down the line with nuts and bolts and wheels missing, but the system had provided for such oversights. At the end of the line was a place called "salvage", where a crew of men added the missing parts.

As the day progressed, more and more cars required the attention of the salvage department, and the men in salvage couldn't keep up. The assembly ^(hyphe) line bureaucracy, however, had a solution. The foremen ranged up and down

the line, pulling men off the various stations and sending them into the salvage department. Yet, for some reason or other, the more men sent to "salvage", the farther behind the line dropped. Finally, the plant was closed.

the "salvage" concept underlies much of big-city, assembly-line education, perhaps because it is cheaper to provide a hundred guidance counselors than to reduce average class size by one pupil. Furthermore, you can see a guidance counselor, but the effect of cutting class size is not so immediately visible.

Now, we know that, with money and leadership, children can be properly educated. Under the leadership of the United Federation of Teachers - AFT Local 2, New York City - the Board of Education was induced in 1963 to embark on what is now called The More Effective Schools Plan. Twenty slum elementary schools were selected for "total" education. The plan is based on three principles:

1. Small classes; none is larger than 22 pupils, most are smaller.
2. Free time during the day for teachers to consult, tutor, prepare lessons, or just rest.
3. Saturation supportive services - guidance, ^{psychological} ~~physiological~~, and remedial help, and plenty of clerical and sub-professional help.

These schools have little teacher turnover and pupil attendance is high. In some fringe areas, middle-class parents have withdrawn their children from private schools and enrolled them in the More Effective Schools. Although there are still some improvements we would like to make, we have demonstrated that we can give successful education.

But the More Effective Schools cost money. The per pupil costs are nearly double such costs in the regular schools. Where does the extra money come from? From the new Federal Aid funds, although we have thus far been unable to get an outright endorsement of the plan as such from the United States Office of Education. Perhaps this is because there is nothing really "new" in the plan. It isn't considered an innovation - a word which is coming to mean a scheme for providing quality education without really paying for it.

We are now trying to extend the effective schools plan nationwide, and we have some hope of success, although superintendents and boards of education still tend to favor gimmicky approaches to the problem of providing quality education.

We in the American Federation of Teachers have been saying over and over again that the United States must double its manpower and financial commitment to education before we can really claim to be providing educational quality. There is no substitute for a good teacher with a small enough class and time enough to teach it. To reduce teaching hours and class sizes would require double our present educational work force - and something would have to be done to attract the additional ^{two} ~~2~~ million people into teaching.

An impossible task? We do not think so, and it is a task we must undertake. Let us accept the truly great society as our goal. And let us build a truly great school system dedicated to achieving this goal.

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