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The Challenges to Private Preparatory Schools

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The Challenge to the Private
Preparatory School

The role and future of the private preparatory school are now being challenged - as never before - by the revolution in education which is sweeping our country.

This revolution springs from the federal government's expanding activities at all levels of education. For many years the federal government's interest was confined to financial aid to higher education in providing physical facilities. While the focus of this was primarily on publicly owned institutions, privately endowed colleges and universities increasingly have relied on federal aid for plant and facilities of all kinds. Since the enactment in 1958 of the National Defense Scholarship Program, the government's participation in higher education through scholarship and fellowship grants has expanded in geometric proportions.

But not until recently (commencing basically in 1964) has the federal government assumed a major posture in elementary and secondary education. Substantial financial assistance is now channeled into the public school systems of the entire country under a wide variety of federal programs. Each of these programs has its "strings" - in terms of conditions and detailed

requirements, which must be met by states and localities. Gov. Godwin has recently commented on the extent to which these are employed to accomplish an ever increasing measure of federal control and direction of education itself.

Much of the political motivation for this program derives from two dominant domestic themes of our time, namely, (i) total elimination of all barriers based on racial lines, and (ii) the narrowing of the gap between the "poor" (lowest income groups) and the great middle income levels of our country. However worthy these objectives may be (and in general most Americans commend them as goals), the implementation will inevitably result in a "leveling down" of education - at least for the foreseeable future.

The emphasis - in terms of money, effort and political pressure is to "equalize" educational facilities and opportunities for all. There is a strong movement, for example, against any division of pupils into groups within schools according to their abilities. It is argued that the "slow learners" are discriminated against if they are segregated from the average and fast learners. There is also the drive, gaining momentum, for the elimination of the neighborhood school as the major remaining barrier to maximum integration - socially, racially and economically.

One effect of this - whatever the benefits may be - is to homogenize the educational content and lower the average level of the end product.

This massive movement in education will have a grave impact on the private secondary schools. There are some who think that government, through withholding of tax exemptions or otherwise, in due time will attempt to force abandonment of the private school altogether. But one need not speculate on the likelihood of this (already proposed in England), as less far reaching effects are already evident. The strong infusion of federal funds into the public school system increases the disadvantage of the private school in competing for faculties, providing comparable physical facilities, and possibly in other indirect ways. This can be offset in small part only by increased tuition. If the private schools are to survive on a quality basis, they must rely on private sources for the necessary capital and endowment resources.

The private school is able to provide a unique training for leadership which simply cannot be made available on a mass basis. The hallmarks of this leadership are (i) independence of thought, uninfluenced by government; (ii) capacity to individualize education in an age when the trend is towards

mass production - even of thoughts and ideas; and (iii) perhaps most important of all, emphasis on leadership in character, patriotism, and the ethics and values of western civilization.

There are some, other than those politically motivated, who honestly question whether private schools are in fact needed in this country. Certainly, no one would champion a system designed to compete broadly with or to minimize public schools. The latter are essential to our country's welfare, and we all want - and should join in supporting - the best possible public education. But there is also a vital role for private schools. The two complement each other and indeed strengthen the intellectual resources of our country.

The private preparatory school, because its influence is personal and is effective at the most formative age, has a greater opportunity and responsibility for training leaders than does the college or university. There has never been a time in all history when leaders of vision and character were more urgently needed. Those who wish to help provide this type of leadership for the future of our country have their greatest opportunity through support of the quality private secondary schools.

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