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Reflections on the State of Public Education

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REFLECTIONS
ON
THE STATE OF PUBLIC EDUCATION

The completion of eight years of service on the State Board of Education, following nearly 11 years on the Richmond School Board, has prompted me to reflect on the current state of public education in Virginia and what may lie ahead. My first temptation, perhaps with a touch of nostalgia, was to review the progress of education in the period of almost two decades in which I have participated. But the record of these years is written. Much of it is heartening, and some of it is unhappy. The overall trend, especially in recent years, has been notably constructive.

But I will not review this record. Rather, as I leave this Board, I will share with you reflections on some of the manifest needs and problem areas of education in our

state. I make no pretense to original thinking, as we often have discussed most of these problems both formally and informally, and every professional educator has pondered them.

The merit, if any, in reiteration and summary may be in reminding the Board and the Department of Education of a truth we all recognize, namely, the need to find the time - in this restless and troublesome age - to think and plan constructively both for tomorrow and for the years to come.

The Technological Revolution

It has been said that the total body of human knowledge now doubles at intervals of less than 15 years. This view assumes, obviously, a heavy weighting in favor of scientific and technological knowledge, as man's insight into the humanities often seems to retrogress.

The most dramatic "revolution" in education lies in the field of communications. This is manifested in many ways, but none so far reaching as television. A recent analysis concluded that children in elementary school watch television

between 25 and 30 hours a week and high school students average 15 hours a week. It is estimated that the average pre-school child has spent between 3,000 and 5,000 hours before a television set by the time he enters the first grade. By the end of high school this same student will have watched television for 15,000 hours as compared with school attendance of 11,000 hours.

Some of this intensive exposure is good. As the result of news programs and documentaries, the young often know as much or more about current history than their parents or even their teachers. Vocabulary and verbal skills are vastly improved by the electronic media. Yet most of the television diet freely available to children and teenagers has little or no educational merit. Much portrayed on television is mindless entertainment, some is slanted commentary, and far too many programs tend to inspire violence and deviant moral conduct. Other by-products of the communications revolution have been the substitution of the television tube for the book, and the subordination of the influence of family, church and school.

There are some who think that television, rather than the school, has become the dominant factor in the learning process of the young. If this is even partially true society

may have a Frankenstein problem the dimensions of which can only be dimly perceived.* The education of the young traditionally has been the responsibility of the home, the church and the state. All of these institutions have been subject, in varying ways, to the ultimate control of the people concerned. To assure this with respect to public education, the autonomy and authority of local school boards always has been recognized.

But the content of network television programs is not subject to any effective control, and by its nature is beyond the reach of the home, the church, and state and local governments. Only the federal government has the power to regulate this media, and the Constitutional guarantee of free speech and press effectively negates this power. Even if there were Federal ownership, there is little reason to believe that a politically oriented Federal bureaucracy would have better taste and greater objectivity than the present producer, artist and commentator dominated television media.

Whatever may be done to regulate this new, omnipresent influence on the minds and mores of the young and to shape it

*Other electronic or visual communications media contribute to this problem, including radio, the movies and even the telephone. The end result is a media environment which pervades and dominates contemporary society.

constructively and responsibly, the public schools must live and compete with it now for the foreseeable future.

New Techniques

Most thoughtful educators are painfully aware that traditional methods have become less effective as a result of the "knowledge explosion" and the pervasiveness of the communications media. The need for new and improved techniques in public education is widely recognized, and a great deal of experimentation is underway. This is commendable as far as it has gone, but the scope and pace of change must be accelerated if the schools are to maintain their necessary role in society.

Some of the newer techniques, now in limited or experimental use, include (i) team teaching; (ii) programmed instruction, including use of machines; (iii) flexible scheduling rather than the customary pattern of equal instruction periods; (iv) greater emphasis on individual instruction; and (v) a vastly increased use of instructional aids, such as television, video tapes, film strips, and

language laboratories. Progress has been made in some communities with experimental schools, and much effort has been devoted to keeping textbooks abreast of current knowledge and in making them relevant and attractive.

There is little that a non-professional can contribute to this process beyond exhorting bolder and more imaginative efforts. I will emphasize two points. The first is my conviction that many teachers still place too great an emphasis on textbooks and traditional teaching, and too little emphasis on what are called "supplementary learning devices". The military services discovered in World War II that visual presentations are more effective than lectures. The schools have been slower to learn this lesson. We must make far more extensive use of television (both organized educational television and video tape playbacks) and of other visual teaching aids, supplemented by coordinated classroom instruction.

My second point relates to research and experimentation. We have a Division of Educational Research organized in 1963. It has a modest appropriation of \$150,000 for the

1968-70 biennium, and is doing excellent work with its program of pilot studies. Yet, here again, there is a genuine need for increased effort. The division should be accorded the highest priority with additional funding and the talented and imaginative leadership to do the thinking, the innovating and the planning that is so essential to the continuing vitality of public education.

Educational Goals

The goals or objectives of education include imparting knowledge, preparation for college, creating vocational skills, developing capacity for cultural appreciation, and preparation for responsible citizenship in the modern society. But perhaps the single most important goal should be the training of the young to think and to pursue knowledge.

In the past it was possible to learn, almost by rote, a substantial portion of all that was known by man. This was true in specific fields, where the advance of human knowledge was slow and tortuous. But it is now impossible for teacher

or pupil to acquire more than a fragmentary grasp of the exploding knowledge of the mid-Twentieth Century. And what one learns today, certainly in the sciences, may well be obsolete tomorrow.

The emphasis in teaching, therefore, should be less on the assimilating or memorizing of existing knowledge than on the inspiring of a desire to learn, and the developing of a capacity to think with logic and rationality. This is not to suggest any de-emphasis of the basic skills of reading, writing and arithmetic, or of the standard high school curriculum of science, mathematics, history and English. It is to suggest, rather, that in the teaching of these and other subjects the principal goal should be intellectual training, discipline and motivation.

Teacher Training

If one accepts as sound the need for new techniques and the redefinition of primary goals, it is self evident that teacher training - especially in-service training - acquires

fresh importance. Since the Spong Commission's fine report, the General Assembly and educational authorities in Virginia have made a commendable effort to expand and improve continuing educational opportunities for teachers. But the effort has not overtaken the need. As knowledge advances to new frontiers, and as the range of needed professional skills expands, the capabilities of teachers require continuous renewal on a carefully planned and organized basis.

The Disadvantaged

After years of relatively little attention, the disadvantaged child is now the object of special concern in all school systems.

Urban Crisis and Minorities

A child may be disadvantaged for various reasons,* but the term is generally used in relation to the urban and minority group crisis which so perplexes our nation. Although Virginia, with its smaller cities, has less of a problem than

*Physically handicapped children, though obviously disadvantaged, are not included within the term as used herein.

many other states, we do have serious imbalances which cause deep concern. In our larger metropolitan areas there are income deficiencies and a racial mix which result in serious educational disadvantages. The injustice, as well as the potentially disastrous social consequences of this situation, have prompted action by government at all levels as well as the private segment of our communities. There is no longer any debate as to the need for vigorous action to right this educational imbalance.

The Drop-Out

The problem is most acute in the pre-school years. The disadvantaged child, often with little home environment, simply never catches up if his formal education is deferred until normal school age. Indeed, his initial handicap is likely to be exacerbated - as he becomes aware of his incapacity to compete. It is predictable that such a child will become a drop out in the early teens. Then, at best, society has another unproductive citizen to support. At worst, and with

increasing frequency, the drop out becomes a juvenile delinquent and then an habitual criminal. The President's Crime Commission found that about half of all crimes are committed by young people 18 years of age and under, a significant percentage of whom are school drop outs.

This vicious cycle must be broken at all costs. In view of the eroding influence of the home and church, the primary responsibility now rests upon the school. This we are beginning to recognize, but the awareness must have a deeper sense of urgency.

In terms of specifics, the state and localities must supplement federal programs (such as Head Start) designed to afford pre-school educational opportunities for the disadvantaged. The kindergarten is not enough, as it applies to all children. There must be appropriate programs for the disadvantaged and these should continue beyond the preschool age - including special work with the drop outs. Summer instructional programs, already notably successful in cities like Richmond, also must be expanded.

Vocational Education

Closely related to the problem of the educationally disadvantaged child, is quality vocational training for the teenager who is not college bound. Virginia has one of the better vocational educational programs, which enjoys support both from government and the private sector. Parents in all walks of life are inclined to think that college training is the desired goal for every child. As natural as this ambition may be, the hard fact is that a significant percentage of the youthful population is not qualified for the conventional four year college. If adequately trained in a chosen vocation, either in the public schools or in a two-year community college, such persons become fine and constructive citizens. These opportunities must be provided and invidious distinctions between college and non-college bound students must be eliminated.

Rural School Divisions

In Virginia, we have another category of educationally disadvantaged. These are the children who live in

school divisions, chiefly rural ones, which simply do not have adequate schools. This has been a subject of increasing concern to the General Assembly and the State Board of Education. More recently, it has received the most thoughtful attention of the Commission on Constitutional Revision. This problem merits the highest priority.

The "Advantaged" Child

Before moving to a new subject, I will add a word about the "advantaged" child - one frequently forgotten. In our proper concern for the disadvantaged, let us not overlook the advantaged - not the rich or the privileged - but the intellectually talented child who needs both the opportunity and the stimulation to develop his promising capacities. The future of America - in our political, cultural, scientific and industrial life - depends upon the talent and leadership of gifted people. It is necessary that our educational system be structured to identify, train and inspire the exceptionally talented individual. If educational standards and methods

are geared inflexibly to the lowest common denominator, the quality of our entire society will deteriorate.

Role of the Board under Proposed
Constitution

If the constitutional changes recommended by the Commission are adopted, the State Board will have significantly increased authority and responsibility, especially with respect to school divisions and educational standards.

No single problem has been more vexing to the Board than that relating to the composition of local school divisions. The proposed constitutional change would empower the Board to require consolidation of school divisions under a single school board, with one superintendent and staff, and a single budget. This is a constructive step toward improving state-wide education, particularly in the poorer and less populated countries and communities.

Such consolidated school boards will face the political reality of working in harmony with the boards of supervisors and city councils which appropriate local funds. Where such

authorities differ within a consolidated division as to the needs and priority of education, the school board may be frustrated. But the General Assembly would have considerable authority in devising state aid formulas, to encourage the localities to meet their responsibilities and bear an equitable share of the cost.

The objective of the proposed new article on education, and one of which the Commission is proud, is to embody in our fundamental law a broadened commitment to education. The Constitution would require "a state-wide system of free public, elementary and secondary schools open to all children of school age", and "an educational program of high quality" to be established and maintained. The State Board would be empowered to prescribe the standards of quality. This is a task which the Board already has undertaken within the limits of its present authority. A major part of the work of the Department of Education, under policies established by the Board, relates to the prescribing and raising of educational standards. This is accomplished by the certification of teachers, principals and

superintendents; the accreditation of individual schools; the recently initiated program of evaluating school divisions; the prescribing of curriculum standards; the selecting of textbooks and instructional aids; and generally in overseeing the public school system.

The proposed new constitutional provisions would formalize and strengthen the authority of the State Board.

It may be expected that a more determined effort would be made - as it must - to bring up to minimum standards the marginal school divisions. This could be accomplished by more intensive application of the means already employed, by the proposed new authority to consolidate school divisions, by increased assistance and supervision, and by a gradual elevation of the standards of certification and accreditation.

Special Problem Areas

It is especially regrettable that the discontent and discord so prevalent in this country have begun to infect the public schools. In varying degrees, some teachers and some students in various school systems have been involved. In Virginia, where restraint and rationality are traditional, we have been singularly blessed by an absence of any real

militancy. But in an age of instant communication, and with both ideas and agitators moving freely across state lines, it is unlikely that Virginia will remain entirely immune from difficulties of this kind. It is therefore prudent for school authorities to recognize this possibility, and consider appropriate preventive measures.

Student Disorders

Although vandalism and juvenile crime in schools and with respect to school property have been on the increase for several years, the type of student lawlessness found on many college campuses is still relatively rare at the public school level. The most notable exception has been in New York City where, in the words of a New York Times editorial, a number of schools have become "breeding places for disruption and disorder", with "many of the city's schools (being turned) into jungles."*

*The Times editorial, entitled "Burn, Teacher, Burn", described the barbaric attempt to immolate a teacher at the Franklin K. Lane High School. N.Y. Times, Jan. ____, 1969.

Indeed, the situation in New York City has become so beleaguered that the High School Principal's Association recently reported that mounting student crimes and disorders were threatening "to destroy the city's high schools as educational institutions". The Association strongly condemned the Board of Education for "abdicating its responsibility for the orderly conduct of our schools."*

There are unique conditions in New York City which, it may be hoped, will never exist in Virginia. But contributing causes to the "jungle atmosphere" there, have been the permissiveness of both school and public authorities, the excessive toleration by all concerned of civil disobedience and lawless conduct, and (as the Principal's Association stated) an abdication of responsibility for maintaining orderly conduct.

While no such departure from civilized norms is expected in Virginia, it is well to be forewarned and prepared.

*New York Times, Jan. 21, 1969. There is reason to believe that some of the student disorders are subversive in character, possibly planned by revolutionary organizations such as RAM. Joseph Alsop, Washington Post, Feb. 3, 1969.

In this connection, the national organization which has caused the greatest disruption on the college campus, Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), has announced its plans to move into the high schools, and to employ the same revolutionary tactics which have made a mockery of education on some campuses - especially where authorities have been weak, vacillating and unperceptive.* SDS should never be permitted to establish a cell or a chapter in any public school in the Commonwealth.

Confrontation Tactics by Teachers

A different kind of militancy has been developing across the country on the part of teachers. It is not to be confused with the criminal conduct of delinquent teenagers or the revolutionary aspirations of the New Left. This teacher militancy may reflect some of the unrest and discontent so prevalent in contemporary society. But it has rarely involved criminal conduct or disorder.

*N.Y. Times, January 5, 1969; Richmond News-Leader, Sept. 11, 1968.

The type of conduct, of which I now speak, is a new insistence that teacher organizations have a more direct voice in education and particularly in determination of the terms and conditions of teacher employment. For the first time in the history of public education, teacher strikes have become a widely used means of coercion. Teacher sanctions of various kinds have also been employed against communities and states. The most dismaying example has been New York City, where a series of strikes deprived the children of that city of months of educational opportunity.

As in the case of student disorders, there have been special problems which may be peculiar to New York City. But there have been strikes in various other states, including some in the South. A contributing cause of this escalating militancy has been the bitter rivalry between the National Education Association and the American Federation of Teachers - each competing for the allegiance of teachers and seeking to demonstrate its ability to represent them collectively.

Again, Virginia has been blessed in experiencing no such disruption of public education. We have a responsible Virginia Education Association, ably led both by its permanent executives and elected officials. The primary concern of the VEA has been with the quality of education and the interest of Virginia pupils. But pressures from the competing national organizations are not likely to diminish, and they will undoubtedly be manifested in some sections of Virginia.

It is prudent, therefore, for responsible authorities to consider this problem as more than a small cloud on a distant horizon. It is well to consider whether teachers do have legitimate grievances, and it is of vital importance to establish and maintain channels of communication - at both the state and local levels - so that views may be exchanged and grievances frankly discussed. A helpful step in this direction was the creation of the subcommittee of the State Board to meet regularly with a committee of the VEA. Similar channels have already been opened at several local levels.

Teachers are the single most essential ingredient in an educational system. The entire quality of education depends on the quality - both personal and professional - of the teachers. They are among our state's most priceless assets, and they deserve the esteem and admiration of their fellow citizens. They certainly are entitled to be fairly treated in terms of compensation and conditions of employment, and surely their advice and assistance are indispensable to local boards and superintendents. There has been progress in Virginia in all of this. Yet, one may doubt whether enough has been done in all of these respects. It is to be hoped that this subject - the status and role of our teachers - will continue to receive the highest priority.

One fundamental question of policy, which some states have faced, is whether existing laws should be amended to permit formalized collective bargaining between school boards and teacher organizations. This can be authorized without sanctioning or legalizing strikes or other forms of coercion. But one may question whether such legislation would serve a

useful purpose in a state like Virginia where the relationships between school boards and administrators, on the one hand, and teachers and their professional organizations, on the other hand, have been so harmonious and constructive. One may also question whether the recognition of formal bargaining agencies would not be the prelude to strikes or other disruptive sanctions.

Teaching always has been a learned profession. There is a conflict in principle and philosophy between the concept of a learned profession and that of organized union bargaining and teacher strikes. We live in a time where each interest group seems bent on establishing and exercising power - often in the name of the public weal but realistically for the purpose of selfish ends. Nor is the achieving of these ends always accomplished by due process. Too often, there is resort to confrontation and coercive tactics. It would be a tragic day for Virginia if our school children should ever become the victims of such tactics.

Concluding Thoughts

Much is said and written about education. Americans have an abiding faith that in education lies the answer to most of mankind's problems. Virginia's commitment to education, although not always uniform or as generous as one might have wished, has been a significant one. If there were doubt as to the depth of this commitment during the troublesome days of the past decade, these have now been resolved. Our state, led by Governor Godwin, has made heartening strides towards placing Virginia in the forefront of all comparable states.

It has been fashionable in some quarters to downgrade education in Virginia because of some unfavorable statistical comparisons. Such comparisons do not reflect the single most important ingredient in education, namely, the quality, character, devotion and dedication of teachers. Nor can statistics measure the spirit and traditions of a state or a community. In all of these enduring qualities, Virginia has few equals.

