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Lessons to be Learned From Soviet Education

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Excerpts From Talk to
Alexandria Education Association
on
Lessons to be Learned From Soviet Education

No responsible person, familiar with the differences in the needs and aspirations of our children in America, would advocate adoption of the Soviet system of elementary and secondary education, or indeed any major feature thereof. On the other hand, we must compete -- in the sternest competition of all history -- with the product of Soviet education. I am convinced that we cannot do this successfully unless we attain a materially higher standard of excellence in our educational program.

* * *

In considering specifically what can be done at the local level to improve the quality of American education, I invite your attention to the following:

1. Curriculum. Especially since Sputnik, those of us interested in education have been taking a hard look at the adequacy of the curriculum -- especially in the high schools. A renewed interest has happily developed in assuring greater emphasis on the fundamental subjects. The State Board of Education has recently increased the minimum high school requirements so that these now include five

years of English, two years of mathematics, two years of a laboratory science and one year of world history or geography -- in addition to the two years of Virginia history and government required by law. The State Board permits these units to be earned over a five year period, so that high school work may commence at the eighth grade.

We in Richmond have three types of high school diplomas, namely, (i) General, (ii) Business, and (iii) College Preparatory. For more than two years we have had committees reviewing our curriculum, and at a Board meeting scheduled later this month I hope that our new requirements will be adopted. Without speaking for our Board, I may say personally that in my opinion the minimum required units for the College Preparatory diploma, and assuming inclusion of the eighth grade as a part of what we call "high school", is as follows:

<u>Subject</u>	<u>Years</u>
English-----	5
Mathematics-----	4
Laboratory Science-----	3
Foreign Language-----	Not less than 3 years of the same language.
World History or Geography-----	2

2. Compulsion vs. Guidance. Americans traditionally tend to resent compulsion in any form. This is a virtue under many circumstances, but this attitude of mind often tends to confuse proper and necessary discipline with objectionable compulsion. In our schools we have relied upon specified minimum requirements, plus guidance from counsellors to encourage wise choice of electives. I think we have relied too heavily upon the elective process - both at the secondary level and in the colleges.

Moreover, few schools have sufficient funds to assure an adequate guidance service. In Richmond, for example, we have only one guidance counsellor for every 500/600 high school students. Dr. Conant states that it is necessary to have one for every 250 students.

As we are planning in Richmond, it seems highly desirable to include the eighth grade in the high school program (thereby affording an additional year), and then specify the fundamental subjects which must be taken -- having in mind that there should be differences between the requirements for the various types of diplomas. There would be relatively few electives in the course leading to the College Preparatory diploma. On the other hand, more flexibility is necessary for students taking the

General and Business courses, and much stronger guidance is required to assure a wiser choice of electives.

Not only must there be better guidance in the schools, but this is an area in which parents must assume a responsibility which in many cases has been abdicated.

3. Science and Foreign Languages. The shocking inadequacy in our education in the laboratory sciences has properly received considerable attention now that we have entered the Space Age. Under the pressure of public opinion, some progress is being made to close one gap which exists between the training of scientists in this country and the Soviet Union. But only a beginning has been made, and many educators are still naively complacent about the need and urgency for far-reaching improvement.

Legislators and local governing bodies likewise have been slow to appreciate that science has become America's first line of defense, and they have failed to provide adequate funds to employ the personnel and provide the facilities essential to improve and expand our education in science.

A deficiency of almost equal importance has been in the teaching of foreign languages. We hope to improve this situation in Richmond by (1) commencing

foreign language instruction in the elementary grades, (ii) continuing to offer Russian (which we commenced a year ago), (iii) including a course in Chinese as promptly as practicable, and (iv) requiring at least three years of high school training in the same language as a pre-requisite to the College Preparatory diploma.

4. Incentives to Achieve. Dr. Conant, in his stimulating study of the "American High School" (recently released), thinks that a carefully devised system of incentives will stimulate a better performance by high school students. This idea has a great deal of appeal, as we are all too familiar with the pupil who rarely uses or develops his full capabilities.

The Soviet educational system meets this situation by a skillful blend of compulsion and incentives. Perhaps there is a real lesson for us here -- especially in providing greater incentives and stimulation for the tens of thousands of pupils who are now content merely to coast through high school and, indeed, often through college.

Possible techniques of providing this stimulation include (i) developing more fully the plan of graduating high school students with varying degrees of "honor"; (ii) using a form of diploma which includes on its face the names of courses completed and the grades attained

in each course; (iii) expanding the use of scholarships (with State and Federal funds, if necessary) to be awarded strictly on the basis of competitive achievement; and (iv) according appropriate student privileges and distinctions so that high attainment in scholarship will rank, in terms of student prestige, with success in athletics and extra-curricular activities.

5. The Academically Talented Students. It is now recognized by most thoughtful educators that existing techniques for discovering and affording full opportunity to the academically talented students have proved inadequate. We obviously must make a major effort here, as the future successful leadership of the "Free World" depends upon how well we develop this greatest of all resources.

6. Qualified Faculty. No system of education can rise, in quality, higher than its teachers. This means that the utmost care must be given to standards of teacher recruitment, and especially to "in-service" training. The seminars in mathematics and science, which we conducted so successfully in Richmond last summer, are examples of the kind of organized training which our teachers are eager to receive, and which they must have to stay abreast of rapidly changing techniques of instruction and infinitely expanding fields of knowledge.

There are, of course, many other elements of a high quality educational system which could be discussed. In final analysis, however, this problem of improving education comes back to the parents and taxpayers. Our schools will be no better in quality than the public is willing to support. By "support", I mean of course a willingness to pay the necessary taxes to provide adequate facilities and fairly paid teachers. But even more than this, I have in mind the necessity that our citizens demand a high standard of excellence in education -- they must demand this articulately of their elected representatives, of their school boards, and of the principals and faculties of the individual schools. Parents, in particular, must be willing for their children to take the difficult courses, to do substantial homework, and to shut off the T-V long enough in the evenings to provide at least a favorable atmosphere for study.

In the Soviet Union, edicts from the Kremlin resolve all of these matters in the way deemed most favorable to the aspirations of the ruling politicians. In free America, where we are reluctant even to regulate or discipline our own children, it is infinitely more difficult to attain objectives which require self-sacrifice in terms of money, time and citizen leadership. This contrast between two basically different ways-of-life is a part of the great challenge of our time. The manner in which our local communities -- through fine organizations such as yours -- respond to this challenge, will largely determine which of these two systems eventually dominates the world.

While one can -- indeed, one must -- be optimistic as to the outcome of this contest between "Freedom" and a brutal system of "Force", there is certainly no room for the complacency which is regrettably so prevalent.

IMPROVEMENT OF AMERICAN EDUCATION
(Elementary and Secondary)

I. Lessons From The Soviet System

1. No one, familiar with needs and aspirations of American children, would advocate adoption.
2. But it affords us stern competition.
3. We cannot compete successfully unless we materially increase the emphasis on excellence in our schools.

II. Specific Areas of Improvement

1. Curriculum

(a) Compulsion vs. guidance

- (b) State Board -- (5 - English
(5 year system) (2 - Math
(2 - Lab. Science
(1 - World History or geography

- (c) Richmond -- (College Preparatory
(5 year system) (5 - English
(4- Math
(3 - Lab. Science
(3 - Foreign language
(1 - World History

2. Foreign Languages (Elementary grades
(Russian and Chinese
(3 years

3. Incentives to Achieve
(Dr. Conant)

- (a) Soviet system - skilful blend of compulsion and incentives - an example for us.

(b) Possible techniques:

- (i) Honors

(ii) Form of diploma

(iii) Scholarships

(iv) Create status for those who attain distinction in scholarship

4. Academically Talented

Identification

Special opportunity

5. Qualified Faculty

Selection

In-service training

Math and science seminars

6. Public Support