

The State in Education

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TO say that the average citizen avoids with alacrity, and at times, indeed, with considerable agility, anything approaching a study of formal philosophy is merely to put into words an observation which most of us have made many times over. This is not by way of heaving another intellectual brickbat at the handy target made by the average citizen. On the contrary, it is probably a tribute to the innate intelligence of that citizen, for Omar's seventy warring sects have by no means decreased since the Arabian tent-maker sat beneath the desert stars and made his verses, and the average citizen has an understandable dislike of confusion. Most of us, mainly concerned with paying our bills and having a dollar left over, are quite content to leave philosophy and its confusion to the philosophers.

Unfortunately, however, although few average citizens realize it, the average citizen's life—and his pocketbook, too—is touched very closely by these warring philosophies, for one front of their war is in our public schools, in which the average citizen's children are educated, and for which he pays the bills. That situation comes about in this way. Quite properly, every teacher and every executive of our educational system is expected to have a philosophy of education. I say, quite properly, for the teacher whose efforts are not directed by the unifying principle of a clearly thought-out philosophy is most unlikely to teach anything worth while.

Now it would of course be the height of absurdity to expect all teachers and di-

rectors of educative effort to have the same philosophy. Such an end, even if desirable, would be impossible in a democracy. It is more than doubtful whether it would be desirable; for complete stereotyping and standardization would almost certainly destroy all the living qualities of a school system. On the other hand, allowing the seventy warring sects to run riot with our school system can only bring confusion to both teacher and pupil. Let us look at a few examples. There is the group of teachers who would throw formal curricula to the winds, and who would teach children only by having them observe their surroundings, and learn only those things about which they are curious. There is yet another group who seem to think that the experience of the ages avails nothing, and who would teach children only through doing things with their hands, seemingly ignoring the patent circumstance that the power loom is far more efficient than the best hand loom, that machinery is probably here to stay, and a craft that is useless may as well be forgotten. There is yet another group who see in the humanities, and a knowledge of the classics, the only true field of education. The list could be prolonged for pages.

When it comes to minor heresies among the major groups, the list almost merits the category of endless. We have those whose philosophy leads them to believe that ability to earn a living is the sole end of education; those who think that the lessons learned on the playing-field or in

the gymnasium are equally as important as, if not more important than, those learned in the classroom. We have those who think that the school should be a center for community activity, rather than an institution for the education of the young, and so on, and so on.

This variation of opinion is by no means an evil; it is through airing of opinion, through difference, that democratic peoples arrive at their courses of action. Every person has a complete right to his opinion as to what education should be; but—and here is an important factor which we have not been considering for many years—general public school education, supported by public funds, is not the field for experimentation or for confusion of ideas. Rather, since it is supported by taxes, it is the field for the clearest of thinking, and the clearest of goals; for otherwise excursions into this and that kind of school at the behest of those who hold this or that opinion, will quickly make our public schools so expensive that they are an almost intolerable burden for the taxpayer, and so confused in aims that they will serve the ends of nobody—children, educators, or state.

This is the situation rapidly being reached, if it has not already been attained, in most of the provinces of Canada. In those few provinces in which education is not the greatest consumer of public funds, there is general agreement that within a very few years at the most education will move into that place. And the product of our educational system is such that a nationwide commission is presently studying that product with a view to bringing forth ideas on how to better it. Incidentally, it has not yet brought forth any very practical suggestions, despite a two-year study of why children leave school before finishing.

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IT might be illuminating to turn aside here for a moment to consider the beginnings of schools supported by taxes levied upon a whole community. Such schools for the teaching of reading, writing, and the ele-

ments of arithmetic were advocated by Thomas Jefferson rather more than a century and a half ago. His idea was then nothing short of revolutionary, and none the less so because he based his plan of public school education for everybody in the state of Virginia upon the promise that there was no citizen of the state who would not be a better citizen by virtue of possessing these fundamental abilities, so pitifully inadequate to us today, yet so wide-sweeping in his time. The Jeffersonian concept of the public school, supported by public money, was that it should make better citizens of those who attended it. People would have to be educated as individuals, of course, but such education as they received as a gift from the state should be directed toward improving them as citizens. Hence the state itself would be the beneficiary of the education it provided from funds collected from the taxpayer.

Of course, Jefferson's idea of the scope of public education is entirely inadequate today. Reading, writing, and the elements of arithmetic will scarcely equip a person for citizenship in modern society. Yet, if we are to avoid a system of education that at least resembles Vanity Fair, and whose cost to the taxpayer mounts year by year until its burden is intolerable, we must turn back to Jefferson's idea, and work from the basic concept that the first responsibility of public education is the development of good citizens for the state—to use a phrase too often used when it is not understood, education for citizenship.

It is the duty of the state to see that its schools teach children to read. This statement is not so simple as it sounds. The mere mouthing of words, the mere recognition of symbols, is not reading. In schools supported by public money, pupils should learn to understand and appreciate what someone else has written, should learn to extract meaning and implications from words, phrases, and sentences. They must learn something of the great heritage of literature that lies behind us, both that of our own tongue and that of other languages.

It is the duty of the state to ensure that

its citizens shall be able to write. This, too means more than appears on the surface. It means that, hand in hand with the understanding what other people have written, there must go the ability to write down one's own thoughts in a form such that others can read and understand them. This surely is a minimum requirement in our social order.

It is the duty of the state to teach its children the elements of the mathematics without which our society could not exist. To the good citizen, our social organization must be intelligible to a large degree; without a knowledge of mathematics it cannot be intelligible to any degree whatever.

It is the duty of the state to teach its children something of the science that has made our lives what they are. The basic facts and principles of science, the achievements of science and how these achievements have been reached, the goals which science has set for itself—these should form part of the education of all citizens of a modern state.

It is the duty of the state to ensure that its citizens know a good deal about our social heritage, about how our social and moral concepts grew up in a world hostile toward them. The citizens of a democratic state should know that men have died that we may live as we do, and should understand that men may have to die again if we are to go on living as we do. The meaning of democracy, the price we have paid for it, and the price we must go on paying for it, must be clear to every citizen of a democratic state. And to those backward-leaners who would cry that this is plain advocacy of indoctrination, the answer is clear; a little indoctrination in democracy would be anything but harmful in a democratic state.

It is the duty of the state to teach its children something about the world in which we live, something of its economic and political organization, something of the interdependence of peoples, something of the laws which we have found to govern economic and political activities in the industrial age.

Above all, it is the duty of the state to see that its public schools foster, albeit

indirectly, habits of honesty, industry, perseverance, and initiative. It is the duty of the state to see that the things to be taught shall never become greater than the child who is learning them. It is the duty of the state to ensure that children in tax-supported schools shall not only know something, and be able to do something, but also shall be something; for living in a democracy consists not only in knowing and doing, but also in being, which is most important of all.

HERE the immediate responsibility of the state in tax-supported schools ends. Whatever more the state may do beyond this—in the field of research, public schools for a specialized purpose, experimentation in new methods—can be predicated only on the existence of available funds after the primary function of the state in education has been carried out.

It is not the responsibility of the state, from money collected by general taxes, to see that a boy or a girl receives the specialized knowledge necessary for entrance into college. That is a path entirely apart from that of free education supplied by public funds. It is not the duty of the state to see that every boy or girl leaving school shall have a specific trade by which he or she may earn a living. If such were the state's duty, by what right would our public vocational schools train stenographers and not hairdressers, seamstresses and not night-club hostesses, plumbers and not linotype operators, plasterers and not locomotive engineers. Or, to take this a step farther, by what right can the state teach a boy a trade, and deny him the training to become a dentist, a doctor or a minister.

This is, of course, not to say that there shall not be schools in which boys and girls may be trained for college entrance, or that there shall not be vocational schools—or, indeed, schools for any end whatever that people want served. But these are not the first responsibility of the state in providing general public education at public expense. Such schools, devoted to specialized aims, are of course necessary in our social order; but not at the expense of every taxpayer in the country. They

should be established and maintained at the municipal level, and assisted by the special groups whom they would serve.

If the universities are interested, as they should be, in the very small fraction of the numbers in our public schools who will attend university, it is their place to co-operate in some degree in seeing that those boys and girls receive the specialized training necessary. This is all the more so since the requirements for university entrance are laid down by the universities themselves; the state's educational system has no voice whatever in these requirements.

Similarly, business and industry, beneficiaries of any system of vocational schools, should be expected to co-operate in these schools in communities or municipalities where it is decided, at the local level, to establish such schools. This of course means that business and industry would have a voice in what should be taught in vocational schools.

Thus it should be with all schools intended to serve the particular ends of any specialized groups, or to work toward any specialized end by specialized methods. The state's function in education is education for citizenship; any other form of education is a matter for municipal authorities, to be decided at the local level, and to be maintained by the interests the school is designed to serve.

It is only by such a return to first principles, and by such a clarification of the state's position in education of youth that order can be brought from the chaos in aims, methods, and administration that presently besets our educational systems all across Canada. It is only by such means as these that the mounting costs of education can be equitably apportioned, and those who seek special treatment can be required to bear their proper share of the cost of such special treatment.

Every function super-added to those already exercised by the government causes its influence over hopes and fears to be more widely diffused, and converts, more and more, the active and ambitious part of the public into hanger-on of the government. . If the railways, the banks, the insurance offices, the great joint stock companies, the universities and the public charities were all of them branches of the government, if the employees of all these different enterprises were appointed and paid by the government, and looked to the government for every rise in life, then not all the freedom of the press and popular constitution of the legislature would make this or any other country free otherwise than in name.

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