



WHAT IS A SCHOOL?

Jacques Barzun

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Perhaps the character of a school has begun to emerge from this inventory of essential parts, and offhand one might think that the only remaining topic to take up is the preparation of good teachers. But there is one other matter to settle first: Who runs the school?

“Run” must be taken in a loose sense. Teachers are not employees in a business; they are professionals, and like the doctor, lawyer, or engineer, they must be largely self-directing. The school administrator, similarly, is neither a corporate executive nor the head of a government bureau. The leadership style that goes with these two types of management—rigid rules much paperwork, frequent staff meetings, and a fear of initiative—will not run a school; it will ruin it. Strictly speaking, those who administer the dose of schooling to

the young are the teachers. To do so at their best, they must feel and be free. For duties beyond teaching, such as guiding extra-curricular activities and establishing good relations with parents, their help must be enlisted, not coerced.

The person to lead them is the principal. He should choose his teachers (and a librarian), know them as individuals so as to guide them well, retrain them if necessary, and praise them in no routine way. He should encourage the teachers to know one another, to exchange information about pupils, and to discuss ideas arising from their subjects. Such is the professional at work.

In that capacity, principal and teachers together should choose the textbooks, with particular care for those in science, history, and grammar. In science, watch for mistakes and unclear wording; in history, for political and social propaganda; in grammar, for linguistic theory, the renaming of familiar terms, and excessive bulk. At a Midwest university, the director of the remedial program in English rescues the high-school failures using a text of thirty typewritten pages.

The principal must also see to it that the school building is kept in proper condition. Neat and clean is a lesson too. The library must be well supplied with books, the classrooms with writing materials, and the science labs with their due requisites. There should also be a "language lab," where the learners of a foreign language match their pronunciation with the correct one on a recorded tape. Years spent in foreign-language classes that leave the students unable to read, write, or speak what they have "learned" is a common American experience.

The children also should feel that the school is a common enterprise of which they are the reason for existence. Their sense of belonging is sustained by regular assemblies of the whole school, where announcements of all kinds create a sort of public opinion that includes a friendly regard toward teachers and respect for the principal. Likewise for the sake of atmosphere, a neighborhood school is best. To the small child, its being nearby makes it an extension of home. At no time should there be, as at present, twenty-four million pupil-commuters. This vehicular attendance is due to the elimination since 1930 of some 150,000 schools; or to put it in official words, "consolidation" has reduced the number of "attendance areas" by not quite half.

To be sure, many of those lost units were rural, one-room, one-teacher schools. They were classed as inefficient. But in many of

the new “mega-schools,” inefficiency has been replaced by ineffectiveness. Huge buildings where hordes of students jostle one another at class-changing time, where discipline hardly exists and teachers fear physical attack, where truancy is rife and dropouts may be thought fortunate—these are no improvement on the schools deemed too small to keep alive.

From the natural conditions of the truly local and modest-sized school, teaching and learning benefit. This is not a guess. In the several surveys of inner-city schools, going as far back as the pioneer study by the Council for Basic Education in 1970, the conclusion is that *success depends on capable teachers with good morale and a principal who leads with authority*. He was a teacher to begin with, not simply an educator; his title is a shortening of the earlier name: “principal teacher.” The word authority makes some people nervous. What is it, actually? Authority is a claim to obedience and deference. It is based on the right to direct according to accepted norms. Authority anywhere is the only alternative to force. In a school ruled by authority, you do not need armed guards roaming the halls and metal detectors at the doors. In class, the authority of the teacher maintains discipline without violent words or violent punishment.

The atmosphere of a school should be studious calm. The visitor should experience hospital quiet. And physical calm should be matched by mental. It is a bad habit of academic people to say that their work is *exciting*. When it goes well it is *absorbing*; excitement would spoil it. True, schoolchildren are human dynamos, and when their interest is aroused, it leads to wild waving of arms and cries of “Teacher, Teacher!” But the excited boy or girl is likely to tumble out words incoherently. The teacher is there to bring order out of eagerness, to encourage the timid and calm down the ebullient.

There are, of course, proper occasions for excitement. Athletic events come to mind first, but others such as the school play, the band concert, the debate team, among other extracurricular activities, foster learning and companionship and give the school community the feeling of a full life. Outdoors, the principal is responsible for decent behavior on the playground. To tolerate bullying to the point where the state legislature considers passing a law is a disgrace. Will state troopers enforce it?

And to do the opposite under the slogan of “Zero Tolerance” is no solution. It leads to harshly punishing very small children for small

mischief and alleged “sexual harassment”; it amounts to a policy of “No matter what happens, we won’t have to think.” The sports coaches and teachers of physical education are there to patrol the playground. As to punishments for the bullies and other miscreants, what better than extra hours of supervised work? Suspending the offender for a few days only extends his freedom to rampage and remain ignorant.

To the law-abiding, the conduct of the school teaches morals by example all day and every day. But where “social promotion”—which lets those who fail and those who do well both go on to the next grade—is the rule, the opposite is taught: it does injustice to the rest of the class and to the teacher of that next grade. The same holds for the Certificate of Achievement given to those who have not graduated from high school but have “done time” there. Again, unfairness is added to temptation when the school board offers payment in money or in kind to regular truants. And, worst of all, when teachers are ordered to inflate grades so that the principal can falsify the school’s test scores and receive more state or federal money, the school becomes a showcase for dishonesty.

If an able principal exerts his due influence, what role is left for the superintendent? He is what is called abroad a School Inspector. He visits the school in order to verify; he stands toward the principals as these do to the teachers. A second duty is to lead the school board to enact his proposals. What is to be taught in each grade? Should classes be limited in size? Shall special provisions be made for gifted students? Shall high school seniors take a comprehensive examination in order to graduate? And again, what length the school year, in how many sessions? The legislature is ill-equipped to settle these matters. Different regions have different needs, for example as to foreign languages. A good superintendent will teach the board certain truths: classes should not number over thirty young minds if the teacher is to square his or hers with theirs and know them as individuals.

The fate of “the gifted,” likewise in the hands of the school board, is not an all-or-nothing question. A system that prevents humiliating comparisons is tracking. It allows the talented to go on ahead at a faster pace in one or two subjects, while sharing in others the average progress of their classmates. As for pupils with disabilities, special classes and teachers are a matter of course.

A school year of eight months is enough, preferably divided in half. The quarter system is boasted of because “it uses the plant” in full. But the choice it gives students to take any three sessions breaks up

class unity, slackens the grasp on a subject, and requires the teacher to backtrack and repair the gap thus caused. A longer stretch of bad schooling is not improvement. Another expedient, classes in summer or after hours, is ineffective. And children need time of their own, in summer especially. Lastly, a comprehensive exit examination for high school seniors is desirable, at least for the college-bound. They receive their admission notice in early spring, and if accepted tend to stop all work. Such an examination incites effort from the first year and sustains it through the fourth.

The superintendent's third task is to oversee the material base of the system—buildings and supplies, clerical force, and budget. He defeats himself if he does not insist on high salaries for his teachers. At present, teachers eke out a living by moonlighting or are subsidized by a working spouse; the able and ambitious seek other employment. A professional's work is impaired when the public denies the respect that money automatically confers. Most often, the money is available, but spent on nonteachers. Just recently the new head of the New York City school system cut 1,200 administrative jobs and saved \$300 million. This comes to a quarter of a million dollars for each job, not of course for one man or woman, but for them, their assistants, and their assistants. Over the years, the contribution to schooling of this bureaucratic mass everywhere has been the manufacture of regulations.

A responsible school board, one willing to think about other things than the prospects of the high school teams, is a product of the local population, which is to say the parents of those in school. The frequent cry: "Involve the parents" is reasonable, but its vagueness conceals dangers. The last thing teachers need is continual demands from concerned parents. "Involvement" belongs in the child's home, and to make it effectual, parents need guidance on a good many topics, including the timing and conditions of homework: a council on telecommunication reported in 2001 that each week, the average American child spends twenty-five hours watching television. Let the good advice be given by the best teachers at meetings of the Parent Teachers Association. There, also, questions and complaints from both sides can be aired and resolved.

Throughout this visit to a school, we have assumed that it is staffed by competent teachers, and that the principal and the superintendent are former teachers and qualified for their work. Where do these able people come from? How and by whom have they been trained? In general, teachers colleges and departments of education in universities award the degree that leads to certification by the

state. The present shortage of teachers and criticism of those in place are attributed to lack of interest or of native ability, enhanced—one might say—by inadequate training. Some 30 percent of the present corps lack a major in the subject they teach, and many are uncertified, as are the substitute teachers who, as temporaries no better trained, bring even less substance to the classroom.

Hence the prior question: What makes teacher training fail? The root cause lies in the outlook that has prevailed since what has been called “the transformation of the school.” In 1918 an influential committee of educators diverted American schooling from its one purpose and substituted “Seven cardinal principles of education: health, command of fundamental processes, worthy home membership, vocation, citizenship, worthy use of leisure, and ethical character.” In practice this meant no longer to instruct but to socialize the child, to cater to its emotional needs, and to help reform society by making the young wise to the evils of the present world. After 80 years of this program, society has not appreciably improved and the public school works less and less to remove ignorance.

By and large, two motives lead men and women to teaching: one is idealism—a desire to serve, often impelled by love of a subject and a fondness for children. The other motive is lack of any marked taste or talent. Thus the top and the bottom of the aptitude scale preside over the classroom. When loaded with nonteaching duties and held to low salaries, good teachers resign soon or retire early; the others stay.

To make teachers out of those who are not born to the craft, it is not necessary that they should love children or burn with zeal to serve humanity. *But it is necessary that they possess a certain temperament, that they master a subject, and that they acquire by practice some special habits.* In action, teachers are public speakers who must know how to arouse and hold the interest of their audience and see to it that its members, young and restless, retain the message. Would-be teachers must therefore learn to speak well; they must exercise their imaginations so that “squaring of the mind” is effortless; and they must be so at home in their subject that they convey it clearly, in small doses, with striking details that the textbook rarely supplies and that show the links to other subjects and to the “real world.”

For example, the teacher can explain how the subject came to be—geometry out of surveying land, algebra out of weighing bales of goods and marking them plus or minus a standard weight. History

and English offer endless opportunities to arouse curiosity about the past and the effects of change and permanence in culture, to say nothing about lessons in morality and its opposite. Teacher training need not make scholars, but it must make practitioners who are fond of their work and still learning about it. Students say about a good teacher that he or she “made the subject come alive.” What they mean is that the teacher did not kill it, by dull delivery and feeble interest in it, which reduce knowledge to a pointless string of facts.

Teachers must know how to maintain ordinary discipline—their words are wasted when their charges distract one another by talking or passing notes or acting rowdy, while at home the parents wonder at their offspring’s hatred of school. The reason behind both of these is that some class hours are so endlessly boring that an adult would rush out and hang himself; some truants and drop-outs are simply showing good judgment. Sustained interest takes care of discipline and hatred of school in one operation.

The teacher should correct mistakes without harsh words, sarcasm, or shows of temper, but will punish disturbance, taking care in so doing not to confuse the children’s sense of fairness, as one teacher did, who boasted of it in print. He was about to call down an eleventh-grade girl who was failing in American literature and was passing notes to her neighbors, when he found the notes to be a poem. His annoyance, he says, “turned to delight”; what she did was “cause for pride and joy.” The lesson given here is: Pass notes in verse and distract your neighbors and it will make up for failing in American literature.

Clearly, the requisites of the capable teacher go with a type of character: strong, definite, impressive—an impress is what is wanted in teaching. A large part of the technique can be learned only from pointers and warnings. There is properly speaking no list of methods, no system of teaching. Nor are there definable problems with solutions to be applied. There is only Difficulty, recurring and permanent. Teachers-in-training should therefore practice teaching early in the course, not in front of an actual class but before a group of their own teachers, who can give pointers and warnings about both the contents of the lesson and the manner of it.

Teaching calls for such quick responses to what happens from moment to moment that the current demand for a “lesson plan” to be filed with some official two days ahead is sheer oppression. If the plan is rigidly adhered to, it makes for bad teaching; if not, it is

pointless. Some teachers may want to draw up a list of topics for each period, though ready to diverge from it; *but the best guaranty of a good lesson remains mastery of the subject coupled with easy handling of any unexpected difficulty.*

In subjects that depend much on drill, such as writing essays or book reviews, the teacher must know how to do what, as everybody can testify, is almost never done. What is done is to say, “I want at least five pages,” and later the teacher corrects the mistakes. This is not to “teach composition.” The poor child can hardly manage to extract five lines from his suddenly frozen brain. The teacher must show the young writer how to start the flow of ideas—and not by saying “make an outline” when there is nothing in the mind to arrange. How to find the central point and make it lead to others, how to keep on track and then revise—these steps need to be illustrated more than once. As for the book review, since it has a tone and a form of its own, these must be stated and explained from the outset.

Given the requisites of good teaching, a college or department of education should dismiss with regret candidates who after a semester show that their make-up as a whole is unsuited to the profession. No disgrace attaches to this judgment. People who faint at the sight of blood would not make good surgeons.

Freedom for the teacher and use of the imagination should not be a license to think up “special projects” of an entertaining kind. To turn a high school group into shipyard hands who build a sizable replica of one of Columbus’s caravels is fun, compared to a month of classes, but only loose talk can call it “learning about Columbus and the discovery of America.”

As for the devices called teaching aids, they are of dubious use. Too often, films, projections, discs, and field trips are an excuse for evading work. True, these provide for teacher and taught a change of pace, a relief from routine; as shown by the legendary “Hawthorne experiment,” variety in work increases output. But if in class the variation takes up time adjusting equipment and adds little or nothing that fits the current lesson plainly and closely, precious time is wasted. It is rather the teacher who should change the pace and vary the action—going from description to drill to recitation; asking a sudden question in the middle of lecturing; discussing exams past and to come; summing up; and not being afraid to comment like a student or an outsider on the classroom action itself. If a greater break is needed, it would be better to declare a

“holiday under guidance” and go to the museum or the zoo or the canning factory and see and hear about their offerings. After which, the teacher makes the point that the outing was a lesson in the use of leisure time.

The same objection holds for the pretense of “doing research” in team work” fashion in the library or (as I have seen it) with paperback books on the classroom floor. As for the attempt to bypass teaching by using computers, it is but another delusion. Like the now discarded “teaching machines,” they require from the teacher so much intelligent adaptation of the program to the rest of the work that they must be ranked with other time-wasting devices. Teaching is a person-to-person encounter; it is a form of conversation, even though at times silent on one side. Classroom technology consists of a piece of chalk and a blackboard eraser.

It may be asked, what of child psychology? Should teachers learn it? Well, so far as it is science, it states only general truths. For example, the developmental psychologist Jean Piaget tells us that the young child is self-centered and does not think in causal terms, that is, does not understand that if you do that, this will follow. A parent or teacher comes to know this without reading a book. William James, the master psychologist, said long ago that the science had nothing to offer pedagogy. The fruits of his experience as a teacher he set down in a small book, *Talks to Teachers*, which is still in print and worth reading.

What is useful for the teacher to study while training is the history of the main educational reformers since the Roman Quintilian. It shows how again and again schools turn bad as practices get ossified. The proposed remedies repeat: use imagination to see and guide the pupil’s thought, drill early in the main subjects without requiring mindless memorizing; emphasize *things*, not abstract words; relate subjects to each other and to life. Today, one must add: pursue no other goal than to remove ignorance—no *prepositerism* such as Dick-and-Jane and the new math, no attempt at reforming society.

A digression by way of reminder is needed on this last point, because there is still among many people—educators especially—a not unnatural feeling that the young, fresh mind offers a kind of hard-disk-that-is-soft on which to write a program for taking care of current problems. This vision came long before computers, in the Progressive school created by John Dewey and his colleagues at the University of Chicago in the late 1890s. American schooling was to instill democracy and science. The doctrine was not anti-

intellectual, though it turned so when adopted by teachers colleges. Dewey himself advocated the “problem approach” and hard work.

But when the theory transformed the public school, it became a militant prejudice against subject matter and a concentration on helpfulness, cooperation, the good will society. The scientific bent took the form of endless “educational research,” while the problem approach (which is belied by the history of science) generated the courses of the loose-bundle type. To this day, the impulse to switch the curriculum over instantly so as to deal with a crisis is exemplified by the call following the terrorist attack on New York City in 2001: the schools must “teach Muslim civilization.” A teacher competent in history (the subject relevant here) would at once see in the absurd phrase “teach Muslim civilization” the sign of an ignorance in need of removal.

And such a teacher would also be free of a besetting fault that is another legacy of the debased Progressive doctrine: the habit of thinking and talking in woolly words: “creative learning,” “the right to read,” “value clarification,” “the concept of lesson study.” With these goes the impulse to “innovate” by merely changing familiar terms: “facilitator” for teacher, “module” for class period, “language arts” for grammar, composition, and literature. Jargon begets mental fog. It was an evil day when the phrase “public instruction” was replaced by “public education.” The change let in the seven devils of verbal inflation. *Education cannot be given; it is something indefinable made by oneself out of experience and reflection.*

To bring out in each candidate teacher the talents surveyed here obviously requires a teachers college faculty itself made up of experienced teachers. Some will be theorists besides, but all must be able to say, “Watch how I do it.” This is the rule in all professional schools; teacher-training is a clinical profession.


A point or two more in conclusion: We are told that disappointed parents who have taken on the task of homeschooling turn out a good many boys and girls who are much better prepared for college than the best high school graduates. This is to the credit of parental care and intelligence, but it does not mean that private tutoring is inherently better than public schooling. It is true that whoever has charge of only one or two children can do a more continuous squaring of the mind than is possible with twenty or thirty, and thus teach more in the same span of time. But the larger group as such teaches lessons that the tutor never can—lessons in

social behavior and in self-control. Being in a class fosters emulation and a knowledge of human character, including one's own—to say nothing of the chance of lifelong friendships and the benefit of mingling with equals of different ethnic and economic backgrounds. All this, coupled with the influence during early life of several dozen adults who are not parents, makes young citizens, as tutoring at home cannot.

Other parents and concerned persons have followed other paths to reform. The number of councils, centers, and associations busied about the public schools is staggering. They hold forums, raise money, and keep publicizing their work. The amount of energy and goodwill expended is praiseworthy, but on the evidence the results at best are puny and local. One cause is the national mania for “studies” and “reports” and the passion for debating lists of “goals” and “guidelines.” Education is a topic that encourages verbalism, when what is needed is material help dedicated to action—to teaching and its optimum environment.

Such are the elements that, properly combined and kept in order, make up a school. Strictly speaking, there is no such thing as a good school, any more than there is good government—good in the sense that everything works right, as in a machine. No school or government can entirely fulfill its promise to its constituents, but some perform far better than others. Why is complete goodness beyond reach? In a school, the reason is that its operation is in the hands of a large number of grown-ups and of children, who are, all of them, less than perfect. Mistaken decisions, accidental neglect, fatigue, laziness, and other failings are bound to occasion flaws in spite of earnest effort and sensible arrangements.

It is therefore wise for teachers, parents, and administrators to make firm demands but entertain reasonable expectations; to refrain from routine pieties and enthusiasms, from promises and slogans of the kind we hear from advertisers and candidates for office, such as “The Right to Read,” “Teach for America,” and “Goals 2000.” Educators and parents should seek satisfaction in each day's conscientious work, rather than chase after empty abstractions such as Excellence and Innovation. The day's work is manageable, and its results are cumulative. In schooling, it must be repeated, there are no organic problems to solve, no breakthroughs to look for that will revolutionize teaching and learning. There is only a steady, unchanging set of difficulties to meet head-on and overcome so as to remove ignorance. When that is done with fair

success, then teacher and student deserve reward and respect: the school *is* A SCHOOL. 

EDITOR'S NOTE:

For more about Jacques Barzun, go here:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jacques_Barzun

<http://barzuncentennial.murphywong.net/>

For a video presentation of this essay, go here:

<http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/166892-1>

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