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The Future of Our Educational Institutions

by

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Part 1 of 3

I. INTRODUCTION

A. I am delighted to have this opportunity to talk with you about the future of our educational institutions—not just in the eighties that lie immediately ahead, but looking toward the end of the century and beyond.

1. I have extended the time beyond the eighties because the radical reforms I would like to lay before you will take longer than the next ten years to accomplish if, in your judgment, they are worth undertaking and are practically feasible.

2. My reference to our educational institutions is intended to include all of them, not just our elementary and high schools, but our colleges and universities as well.

3. Even so, that is not a broad enough scope. We cannot confine our attention to educational institutions if our interest is, as it should be, in the education of the people of the United States.

a. Educational institutions, taking all of them together, play only a part—and, in my judgment, often *a* small part—in the educational process that is a whole lifetime of learning.

b. A lifetime of learning divides into three main periods.

(1) The first main period consists of the learning that precedes schooling—parentally assisted learning, which should begin as early as possible and be progressively augmented up to the age of four.

(2) The second main period consists of the learning that is institutionally assisted. This should begin at four, not six, and continue for at least twelve years for all, and many more years for some.

(a) This period of institutionally assisted learning, which we call schooling, should be divided into two quite distinct phases.

(b) The first phase, running for twelve years, is the phase of compulsory schooling for all.

(c) The second phase, which may run for an indefinite number of years, is the phase of optional schooling for some.

(3) The third main period consists of adult learning, which is or should be largely unassisted learning and which, while optional rather than compulsory, should be conceived as morally obligatory for all.

- (a) Education as a learning process cannot be completed in schools, no matter how excellent.
- (b) Youth—which is the period of life devoted to schooling—is an insuperable obstacle to becoming an educated person.

B. I have presented this large canvas in order to put into proper perspective the one part of the picture about which I wish to talk in some detail.

1. That part is what I have called the first phase of institutionally assisted learning—basic schooling, twelve years of compulsory schooling for all.
2. That first phase may be subdivided into two parts—a primary and a secondary part—but I would like to ask you to think of it as a single integrated whole, without reference to the various subdivisions of basic schooling that now exist in different parts of our country.
3. The proposals for a radical reform of basic schooling that I would like to submit to you will, of course, affect our conception of the role of optional advanced schooling, especially at the level of what we in America call “college” but which abroad is called “university.”
 - a. Like basic, compulsory schooling, optional, advanced schooling can be subdivided into two phases, a first which may be terminal schooling for some, while it is preparatory schooling for those who go on to a subsequent phase that becomes terminal schooling for them. We, in this country, use the words “college” and “university,” or “undergraduate” and “graduate” for these two phases of optional, advanced schooling.

C. The proposals for the reconstitution and reformation of basic schooling that I will describe have emerged from six conferences held in the last two years by persons engaged in what we have called the Paideia Project (the word “Paideia” being the Greek word for general humanistic learning, as opposed to specialized, professional knowledge of any sort).

1. Within the limits of the time allowed, I must perforce speak with maximum brevity, often stating without explanation or defense many matters about which I hope there will be time for discussion.
2. I will not be able to cover all the points involved in the program constructed by the Paideia Project, nor will I be able to indicate all the details we have considered under the main points to which I must restrict myself in this brief presentation.
3. I shall proceed as follows:
 - a. First, I will state a number of basic theses that underlie and control all the thinking we have done about the objectives that schooling,

both basic and advanced, should aim to achieve by the end of the first century of this country's being an industrial democracy.

(Some of these theses, I know, will be propositions that you have long taken for granted, explicitly or implicitly. Some may not be.)

- b. Then, in the light of the theses as stated, I will try, second, to summarize the major proposals we have formulated in the Paideia Project.
- c. Third, I would like to speak briefly about the role of teachers in, and the training of teachers for, basic schooling.
- d. And, finally, I would like to present some sobering and qualifying reflections in conclusion.

II. *THE BASIC THESES*

- A. The educational obligation of an industrial democracy such as ours is to provide equal educational opportunity for all, where the word "all" means "all with only one exception, those who must be cared for in institutions for the pathologically retarded or feeble-minded."
 - 1. While it is not too bold to assume that we all agree to this proposition, and that we all recognize the immense burden it imposes upon our society—a burden no society prior to this century has ever been asked to discharge and one that no society in this century has yet adequately discharged—it would be rash to assume that the task is generally understood or agreed upon.
 - 2. We, in the Paideia Project, interpret the task the democratic obligation imposes upon us to consist in much more than giving all the children twelve years of compulsory basic schooling and in making optional advanced schooling accessible to all who are qualified, regardless of their ability to pay for it.
 - a. We think it means providing all the children who are compelled to attend school for twelve years a basic schooling that is completely undifferentiated in its objectives.
 - b. At the level of basic schooling, equal educational opportunity for all means more than the same quantity of schooling. It means the same quality of schooling, where that uniform quality is defined by a set of objectives that are exactly the same for all.
 - c. I hasten to add that we are not unmindful of the fact that children differ widely in their aptitudes for schooling, either by virtue of differences in innate endowment, by virtue of differences in the nurturing they receive in their pre-school treatment at home, or by virtue of diverse environmental influences concurrent with their attendance at school.

- d. I beg of you to let me postpone until much later the solution of the problem of how to give an undifferentiated basic schooling to a school population that includes children who are differentiated in the various ways just indicated.
 - (1) I will say now, and try to explain more fully later, that the solution of that problem consists in employing differentiated materials, methods, and means to give an undifferentiated schooling to differentiated children.
 - (2) The differentiation of the materials, methods, and means of instruction need in no way alter the undifferentiated objectives at which basic schooling should aim for all the children, if we are going to treat them all equally, as we should because, in spite of all their individual differences, they are all human beings, destined to be citizens in our democracy, and entitled by their unalienable human rights to all the conditions that any human being needs to lead a decent human life.

B. The first thesis is followed by a second, with which I hope you also agree.

1. It is that all the children are educable, and educable humanistically as generalists as well as educable vocationally as specialists of one sort or another.
2. This thesis flatly negates the elitist view that only some of the children are truly educable and that the rest are merely trainable as, in earlier societies, slaves and menials of one sort or another were trained.
 - a. That elitist view is based on the false conception of the human population as involving differences in kind or type among human beings, rather than only differences in degree.
 - b. The elitist holds to a multi-modal distribution of human beings, whereas the democrat insists that the normal distribution curve is unimodal, involving only differences in degree from the lowest segment of the curve to the highest.
 - c. The democrat further believes that differences in nurture (which make it appear that some children are uneducable in spite of their sameness in nature) can be overcome.
 - d. Hence the democratic mandate, calling for equal educational opportunity at the level of basic schooling, cannot be discharged by a two-track or multi-track system with different objectives for each track, but only by a one-track system with the same objectives for all.

- C. The third thesis is that reforms at upper levels of schooling cannot be accomplished except by starting at the bottom and working up from there.
1. We cannot reform the secondary phase of basic schooling without first reforming the elementary phase.
 2. We cannot reconceive what our colleges and universities should be able to do at the level of optional, advanced schooling without first reconceiving what must be done at the level of compulsory, basic schooling.
- D. A fourth thesis follows on the third. In order to state it I must first explain how I am using two terms that have become vague, ambiguous, and even questionable in their current employment.
1. The two terms are “general” and “liberal.” To give them the precise meaning with which I shall use them, I will define them in a purely negative way.
 - a. By “general schooling,” I mean schooling that is completely non-specialized as well as undifferentiated in its objectives. It calls for a curriculum that, with one exception, allows for no electives. That one exception, as I will point out later, concerns the study of languages other than English.
 - b. By “liberal schooling,” I mean schooling that is completely non-vocational and non-pre-professional in its objectives.
 2. With these critical terms thus defined negatively, I can state the fourth thesis as follows.
 - a. General, liberal schooling must be accomplished at the level of compulsory, basic schooling, and must be given to all, not postponed for some until they reach optional, advanced schooling.
 - (1) The age at which some of the young now reach the level of advanced schooling (eighteen to twenty-two) is much too late for general, liberal schooling.
 - (2) At that age, they are too strongly affected by the urgencies of their occupational futures to devote four years to general, liberal schooling. Neither they nor their parents can be reasonably expected to postpone preparation for earning a living.
 - (3) That is why, in my judgment, all the best-intentioned efforts to institute programs of general, liberal education in our colleges have progressively failed in this country during the last sixty years, and are now in many of our institutions being entirely abandoned. They should be.

(4) The Paideia proposal recognizes the inescapable need, at the college level, of specialized study preparatory for specialized careers. But it also insists that this must be accompanied by a common core of general, liberal learning for all who specialize in various ways.

(5) Using the traditional terminology of majors and minors, the proposal calls for a wide variety of elective, highly specialized majors, each accompanied by the same required minor, which should be constructed as a continuation of general, liberal learning begun in basic schooling, but now carried on at an advanced level, and achieving wider scope and greater depth.

- b. It should be clear, therefore, that in saying that optional, advanced schooling at the college level should be mainly devoted to specialized courses of study, differentiated in their objectives, and largely vocational or pre-professional in character, I am not saying that there should be no leaven of general, liberal learning in our colleges.
- c. However, it still remains the case that the main burden of general, liberal education must be discharged for all at the level of compulsory basic schooling, not later.
- d. In our judgment, this calls for a radical reordering of the formal certifications that signify the completion of different types of 'schooling.

(1) The Bachelor of Arts degree, which ought to signify the completion of general, liberal schooling, should be awarded at the end of the twelve years of compulsory, basic schooling.

[Anyone shocked by this proposal should be reminded that the signers of the Declaration and the drafters of the Constitution completed their basic schooling and received their baccalaureates at age 14.]

- (a) All children who are being prepared to become citizens in our democracy and all who are being offered by our society the opportunity of lead-fruitful human lives should be bachelors of arts.
 - (b) This means that they have been initiated into the life of learning and prepared to continue learning, in advanced schools and beyond all schooling.
 - (c) It also means that they have become competent as learners, not that they are learned men and women, which no one can possibly be in youth and at the time of completing school.
- (2) The M.A., M.S., or similar degrees, signifying a mastery of some speciality, should be awarded at the terminus of undergraduate advanced schooling, which in our judgment can be completed in three years, not four, thus leaving the higher, graduate or pro-

fessional degrees to signify the completion of even more specialized scholarly and professional schooling at the graduate level.

- E. Against the background of these four theses, I am now in a position to summarize for you the major proposals of the Paideia program for the reconstitution and reformation of basic compulsory schooling.



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