



A Lesson from American Education¹

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In the eyes of many people of the world, America means opportunity. The United States of America, in particular, is widely known as a land of great opportunity through education. Almost all Americans are able to begin a formal education during childhood. Access to educational institutions continues for sixteen years to be relatively easy for those who show academic ability and interest. Even higher education, colleges and universities, tend to screen out only those who have shown important weaknesses as high school students.

Formal schooling in many states begins in kindergarten, usually when the child is five years old and progresses through six more years (called “grades”) of elementary school, and six years of secondary school. Secondary school is divided into three years of junior high school and three years of senior high school (or two years and four years, depending on the local organization.)

After high school, colleges, universities and many kinds of technical or trade schools are available. The general affluence of the society makes possible a wide basis of support for education, though typically the students or their parents pay a portion of the costs for education beyond high school. It is assumed that these costs are investments that are regained many times over during a lifetime through the increased earning power that higher education brings.

Since the earliest days of independence from Great Britain, universal education has been a cornerstone of the American democracy. The constitutional ideal of stable government “of the people, by the people, and for the people” was seen by Jefferson and other revolutionaries as requiring an educated populace. Thus freely available mass education has been long accepted as a source of strength of the nation.

Formal schooling in the classical Western European tradition has until very recently been accepted as the most satisfactory means of providing the mass education required by a democratic nation. Schooling has one persistent flaw: schools tend to teach the sorts of things that can be reduced to information. No matter what larger purposes the school is expected to serve, it will tend, over time, to reduce its responsibility to teaching information *about* certain traditionally acceptable subjects. Critics of the schools argue that teaching the use of knowledge and skills—and especially the *useful* skills is more important.

A society that depends on schools to provide basic education for its children tends to become dependent and overly trusting of the schools. As new demands emerge the school is assigned more and more tasks and is assumed to be able to fulfill them. Thus many American secondary schools are required to teach automobile driving and the hazards of cigarette smoking. (The visitor to the U.S. might wonder about the success of the schools in these and other matters!)

¹ Ted Ward. A Lesson from American Education. In Shigeo Imamura, Takashi Watanabe, and Tamotsu Fujiwara (eds). *Japan and America: Readings on Education*. Tokyo: Bunri Co., Ltd. 1974

An important trend in American education has been created by the recent emphasis on educational technology. This trend is *accountability*. The new viewpoint expects a school to give account of how well it is accomplishing its objectives. Thus, for the first time in U.S. history there is now a nationwide testing program. The schooling establishment is being required to give account of itself.

The suspicion that schooling isn't an adequate answer to the needs of a democratic society grows slowly. In a society that has so long used an individual's success in school as an evidence of general competency, faith in schooling dies slowly.

Even a truck driver would be expected to have a diploma from a high school. Employers typically ask job applicants for evidence of competency as high school students whether or not the job will demand any of the skills which the high school emphasized. While this may seem absurd, it does function rather well for some purposes. For example, success in school is related to reading ability, ability to conform to imposed structures, rules and regulations while retaining some of one's



creativity, and motivation or determination to succeed. These are generally useful qualities in most jobs so the school serves well by screening people. Perhaps it is more generous to say that the high school's general approach to basic learning is, to some extent, pertinent to everyone. Yet, in fact, the high school tends to emphasize preparation for college, and is an adequate screening procedure for the qualities demanded by most colleges and universities.

Deep in the contemporary American mind is a growing and still vague sense of disappointment and frustration over the value of the schools. Perhaps it is because of steadily rising taxes that everything tax-supported is being challenged, or perhaps because of an awareness of the fallacy of expecting schools to carry out so many different roles. The percentage of college-age youth who are attending school (a steadily increasing proportion since the first days of the nation) has suddenly become now a declining statistic. Higher education is no longer the only socially accepted route for children of the middle-class.

Degrees are being ridiculed and mocked by some critics. They point out that the symbols of schooling are not acceptable as evidences of learning. The nation now tolerates "degree mills" that provide a beautiful diploma for about twenty dollars. One newscaster recently commented that we should hope for the day when all degrees will be sold for five dollars or less so that we can get on with more important aspects of education!

Such a comment is a shock only to those who still cling to the belief that the degrees and titles of authority are equivalent to the competencies which they supposedly represent. But many people are aware that having a high school diploma has become more common than not having one, that more Americans have a doctorate now than had high school diplomas at the time of the first World War. Thus the distinctiveness of diplomas and degrees is reduced, maybe lost.

Perhaps education has become too much a common commodity. Perhaps it is too easy to become educated. Surely it is easy enough to get schooling.

The American society tends to be willing to pay large prices for scarce commodities but to take for granted the more common and easily available commodities and resources. As schooling has become more and more readily accessible—from many sources and in many forms—it has become

less and less well supported. The public reluctance to support increasingly higher levels of public education through additional and renewed taxation has become a serious barrier to the continuation of the very resources of public education that the American people tend to take for granted. How long will it take for the American people to become aware of the shrinking schooling resources? What will happen when they do? Will they simply accept again the financial burden of a larger and larger schooling establishment or will new modes of education arise to fill the need?

If significant changes come, they will arise from the new awareness that education and schooling are two different things. Schools may educate, but other experiences in life also educate. School is a place; schooling is the sort of education that can be done at that place. Life itself is educational and the best possible schooling is that which enables a person to learn effectively from life. In recent years an awareness that education is lifelong has replaced the older view of “completing your education.” Beginning with the advanced professions—medicine, law, dentistry, architecture, and engineering a view has emerged that schooling, at best, is an experience through which one gains skills and knowledge adequate to begin a process of continuing self-education within the profession and throughout life.

Such a view of education is more comprehensive and yet more functional than the blind acceptance of the symbols and traditions of education—diplomas, certificates, degrees, credits, and grades. New forms of education are already emerging, similar only in their rejection of one or more of the symbolic formalisms of the classical school. High schools and colleges are increasing the emphasis on practical applied work experiences as part of the course of study: some high schools and colleges have reduced the emphasis on grades (A, B, C, D, and F) replacing the quality judgments with simple statements of competency (“pass” or “fail”); elementary schools are trying out new instructional activities based more on experiences than on information; “alternative schools” are emerging—with no emphasis on age-based levels, no grading, no superiority claimed by the teacher, no fixed body of informational content and no emphasis on preparing students to succeed in college. At the post-secondary level, the street-corner college and the open university differ mostly in matters of sponsorship, but both acknowledge that it isn’t necessary to have a campus or to “go away to college” (both of these latter concepts are deeply imbedded in the American tradition.)

In the period of nationalism and emergence from colonialism since World War II many of the new nations have looked to the United States for leadership and inspiration in reference to national plans for education. They have seen the schooling establishment and they have attempted to copy it. It must be indeed surprising for nations that have attempted to model their educational policies on those of the United States to observe the dissatisfaction, alteration, and substitution that has become so characteristic of thinking and planning for education within the United States.

If there is a lesson to learn from this turning point of social history it is this: as the demands of social living and national stability become more complex the institutions that serve the society must become more responsive to the real needs of people. In becoming more responsive the formalisms and unchallenged traditions of the past find less and less support until they fall. The challenge of the lesson, for the United States and, indeed, for each nation of the world is to recognize the falling away of support for the traditional forms and formalisms in adequate time to discover and develop appropriate new forms. To do less is to risk the loss of strength and stability of the nation through that dangerous variety of neglect that calls itself “traditionalism.”