

by Lloyd P. Williams

# Taking the High Road in the Educational Debate

**Study after study assails the shortcomings in American education while professionals and politicians alike scramble for solutions.**

**In Oklahoma the controversy centered on the successfully defended reform package known as HB 1017. Unfortunately, says one OU educator, the debate ignored the real issues.**

**E**motion and truthfulness do not always go together, for often passion seems to shortcut reason. The persistent, sometimes intense, and often partisan debate over education during the past year further confirms this principle.

Now that time is cooling our passions, we might find it fruitful to back off from politics and think about what we have been doing. At the beginning of the recent frenzy, improvement of education seemed to be the purpose of the debate. That goal got lost, however, in the improvident mixture of politics, taxation, reform, vested interests, hidden purposes, immature squabbling and bursts of self-righteousness. Little wonder we have floundered in the confusion and that the results are a mixed blessing.

This quarreling reflects little credit on the democratic process and even less on the participants, especially those who are supposed to be the



intellectual leaders of our society. Several things explain the general disorder and sometimes convulsive state of the wrangling: (1) failure to state goals in clear language; (2) disincli-

nation to define basic terms; (3) use of slogans in place of reasoned discourse; (4) confusion of the primary and secondary goals of education; (5) innocently assuming that money guarantees excellence; (6) presuming that "economic growth" is a primary purpose of education; (7) diminution of a sense of service in the teaching corps; (8) the expanding acquisitive instinct spreading from society at large through the teaching profession; (9) the politicizing of teachers; (10) bureaucratization and self-aggrandizement in administration; (11) substitution of public relations, advertising and propaganda for logic; (12) naive public confidence in the efficacy of educational reform; and (13) excessive reliance upon emotion and insufficient reliance upon reason and empirical fact.

Thinking through educational improvement is easier if we have a clear sense of what education is and what it

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is not, a sense of what is primary in education and what is secondary.

Education is *not* entertainment—although many school and university patrons see this as a basic justification. Basketball and football, for example, may be interesting and entertaining, a means of fulfilling emotional needs for power and strength, but they are secondary to the primary purpose of education. They are legitimate extracurricular activities that are now badly out of rational perspective with the mania for winning and increasing gate receipts. Anyone truly interested in this subject will find Robert Hutchins' essay, "Gate Receipts and Glory," engaging as well as instructive.

Education is *not*, in the first instance, a means of providing jobs, attracting industry, or promoting the economy—however valuable these activities may be. In any rational scale of what education is and is not, these goals are secondary, not primary.

Education is *not* vocational training—a worthy activity that has solid intrinsic and pragmatic value. But if we are to think clearly, we need to avoid confusing job training with education. The vocational education system in Oklahoma is admirable. It is well-conceived, widely accessible, valuable in the market place, and its leaders deserve whole-hearted support and appreciation; but we should understand that intellectual education comes before vocational training. The latter teaches valuable skills; the former teaches us to make judgments about their ethical and aesthetic qualities and their place in human affairs.

Education is *not* a baby-sitting enterprise, although American society, often unconsciously, uses the public schools for such a purpose. What to do with millions of swarming teenagers who are not academically motivated is a major problem, not only for our schools but equally for our society and its political leadership. Fearing what we may see, we have not faced the fact that our economic system cannot absorb large masses of unskilled and emotionally

immature adolescents. Our solutions, insofar as we have them, more often are based upon short-term stop-gap accommodations than upon carefully reasoned principles.

Education is *not* a social cure-all, although the disposition of many Americans is to call upon the public schools to attack virtually every social problem confronting us. That the enlightened citizen needs to drive intelligently, avoid venereal disease, understand the physiological consequences of alcohol or drug use, consume prudently, learn to navigate in a multicultural society and master scores of other socially useful skills is undeniable. Yet, however urgent the problems calling for these skills may be, the skills themselves are secondary, not primary, purposes of education.

And education is *not* in a state of crisis. Such a condition implies disintegration or approaching doom. This is an unwarranted ascription to such a durable social institution. That education is in a state of stress is undeniable, and public schools do have identifiable needs, shortages and problems. Desirable reforms should be initiated, but collapse is very unlikely. The use of emotionally charged words in what should be a reasoned analysis contributes little to the understanding of what we should do in the future.

On the positive side, education *is* adventure, continual growth, enlargement of the intellect, a struggle for self-identity, a joy as the new unfolds, an amazement as the realities of life come into focus. It is endless paradox: systematic yet chaotic, clear yet vague, firm yet unstable. No matter how sincere the effort, legislative enactment is incapable of defining it, nor is any such action likely to enhance its quality. What enhances the quality of education is the spirit in which it is conducted, the ethos of the school, the temper of the teachers. Where there are teachers with a passion to communicate, education is likely; otherwise, education is school-keeping, tedium, routine, a body-counting ceremonial for assuring appropriations.

Referendum has not settled the issue, as more calls for increased appropriations already are heard. When the dispute resumes, as it probably will, we may hope the verbal exchanges are more informed, restrained and less acrimonious. Much of the interchange between the factions has been partisan and irrelevant to serious educational improvement. Legislative debate and statements by educational professionals were relatively devoid of philosophic understanding. Pronouncements sometimes have been dogmatic, often sophistic, and not infrequently tangential—ever-present dangers of open discussion.

All the parties in the recent controversy want "excellence in education." Not surprisingly, however, virtually none of the participants bothered to define the term, and the consequence was frequent reference to it in vague but emotionally appealing ways. Careful definition is a burden and, when neglected, permits us to generalize with abandon, violate the elementary laws of logic and bludgeon the opposition with spurious argument. The jousting partisans did just that.

Excellence in education means, among other things, a formal schooling that:

- \*leads to mastery of our language—its grammar, syntax, rhetoric and literature;

- \*instructs youth in the wisdom of thinking historically, of putting events into chronological order and viewing all existence—our individual existence and society in general—in the long perspective of time, of seeing things *subspecie aeternitatis*;

- \*teaches mastery of calculation, demonstrates that mathematics is the most precise reasoning instrument the human mind has yet devised and clarifies the aesthetic dimension of mathematics as well;

- \*promotes an understanding of the method, structure and history of science, especially chemistry, physics, biology and astronomy, while at the same time showing its limitations; for although science is the surest knowl-

edge we have, its conclusions range from certain knowledge to probable knowledge to nebulous conjecture;

\*helps students understand the geography of the world in which they live and see major relationships among languages, politics, economics and culture;

\*provides competence in at least one foreign language;

\*elevates our tastes so we may discriminate between the trivial and the important, the shallow and the fundamental, the classic and the transitory;

\*saturates the student mind with the beauty, wisdom and pathos of the world's great literature;

\*returns our attention habitually to what is morally, intellectually and socially good;

\*shows the vacuity and often the vulgarity of life divorced from intellect;

\*illuminates the self-deluding nature of certitude and the conceit of dogma in the face of the infinitude of space and time and our relative inability to comprehend even a small portion of either;

\*civilizes us by inducing a constant sense of wonder, a quiet sense of happiness, an appreciation of our good fortune and a persistent cheerfulness in the face of the absurdities of life and its ultimate tragedy; leaves the student with a keen sense of the meaning of civilization accompanied by an appreciation of the hard struggle to achieve it and the ease with which it can be lost;

\*enlarges the student mind with an appreciation of the primacy of human values when contrasted with material ones;

\*builds an abiding sense of humility, for without this restraint, the egocentric compulsions of humans intensify social disorder and promote chaos;

\*cultivates the habit of suspended judgment, of withholding impulsive inclinations to make decisions without sound reasons and adequate evidence;

\*attunes the human spirit to the religious side of life, keeping us ever aware of our finiteness, our incons-



quence in the vastness of the universe and the inability of reason to explain experience and experience to explain existence;

\*engraves upon the student mind the understanding that:

truth is better than falsity;

love is better than hate;

kindness is better than cruelty;

generosity is better than

penuriousness;

knowledge is better than

ignorance;

cooperation is better than

factiousness;

economy is better than

profligacy;

conservation is better than

waste;

friendliness is better than

hostility;

restraint is better than

aggression;

diligence is better than

slothfulness; and

\*makes the rhetorical counsel of Micah—"What doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, love mercy and

walk humbly with thy God?"—a fundamental principle of life.

In sum, any education deserving the label of "excellence" teaches us to use our rich heritage to demonstrate the futility of egoism, the absurdity of exploitation and the potential greatness in the race. In so doing, education leads us habitually to honor the life of the mind.

Overlooking real problems for reasons of expediency, gain or fear is a major failure of American educational reform as well as an obstacle to the serious pursuit of excellence. One critical point in which American emotional involvement especially seems to immobilize the reform movement is athletics. If the educational debate is to be comprehensive and fruitful, it must distinguish between physical education and commercialized athletics.

Physical education is of first-rate importance grounded on the solid sciences of anatomy and physiology and the need to master modes of play conducive to good health and prudent use

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of leisure. Serious physical education meets this standard and is one of the cornerstones of sound education—with the moral and the intellectual being the others, but commercialized athletics has no place in this triad. Its prominence today is a result of immature patrons reinforced by flaccid or craven executives.

Achieving excellence is hard. It makes us honor truth in a world of expediency; it makes us take the high road of ethics; it requires discipline, drill, work—a steady and sometimes onerous application of mind to books. These are absolute requirements, and they are not congenial to the temper of our times, nor are they necessarily supported by the current child-rearing and learning psychologies. In the recent debate, philosophy was ignored (which explains the relative fruitlessness of that debate); so was the connection between excellence and psychology (which explains the paucity of practical academic proposals to achieve excellence). Yet it is a foolish self-deception that leads us to believe wisdom, knowledge and intellectual and technical skill are gained easily.

Nature sets the conditions for accomplishment, and she is indifferent to our predilections. We cherish relative standards in pedagogy because they free us from the burdensome task of persistent study; excellence requires otherwise. Just as Detrick Bonhoeffer warned us against “easy grace,” so we need to be warned against “easy pedagogy.” More than 300 years ago, Benedict Spinoza gave us the key. Cautioned that quiet, Dutch-Jewish philosopher, “All things excellent are as difficult as they are rare.” This perceptive guide we ignore at our own risk.


To lead students to excellence, teachers must have the genius to inspire them beyond egocentric preoccupations and to suffer readily the burden of labor. That they will accomplish this with their minds on politics and emoluments is unlikely. Teaching and the ministry are much alike: both demand service, and both

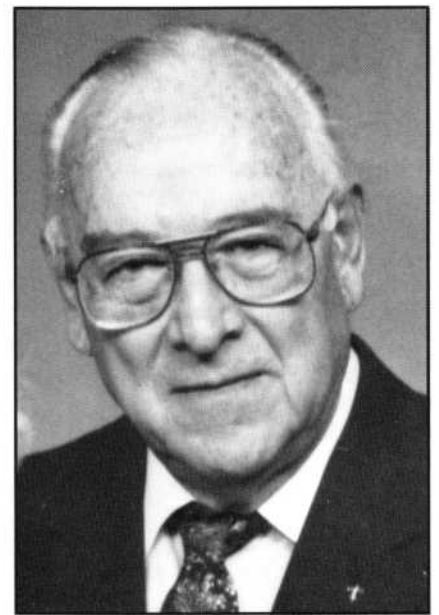


yield rewards in proportion to sacrifice.

Impediments to excellence are many. Political shenanigans, comfort-induced lethargy and imperception are among the greatest, but mostly they are rooted in false values—love of money, possessions, drugs, alcohol, clothes, cars, investments, elegant display. These blur judgment, dissipate intelligence

and contribute to the ill-informed debate; in turn, this impedes educational improvement.

If the disputants focus on the substantive issues in education rather than bogging down in the purious ones—and the thoughtful sources for understanding them are many, e.g., Matthew Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy*, Cardinal Newman's *Idea of a University*, Krishnamurti's *Education and the Significance of Life*, Robert Hutchins' *Conflict in Education* or Herbert Spencer's *Education: Intellectual, Moral and Physical*, to cite a few—then the dialogue on excellence can be fruitful. As it stands today, the debate rests largely on avarice or illusion. Remembering such masters, we might avoid the loss of wisdom as the past fades, and unless we are cautious, the insights that can save us may be lost with it. 



**ABOUT THE AUTHOR:** Lloyd P. Williams taught history and philosophy of education to aspiring teachers at the University of Oklahoma for nearly three decades, retiring in 1983 as a David Ross Boyd professor emeritus. He has, by his own statement, “escaped the chaos by living in Washington, Oklahoma, a village of quiet and civilized individuals.”