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Where Education Has Failed

By DEAN GLENN COUCH

In a timely, straight-to-the-point article, one of the University's best-known educators tells what is drastically and shockingly wrong with America's attitude toward education.

If we are to produce the scientists which we now so badly need, this attitude—and some of our methods—must be changed.

THE SPUTNIKS FLYING over our heads have done something for the general public that no educator, up to now at least, has been able to do. They have brought our attention rather sharply to the much neglected problem of public education.

Krushchev said two years ago he would whip us in the classroom. Only the educators were concerned with that statement until the Russians launched Sputnik I, and now almost everyone is wanting to hook his wagon to a satellite.

"Everybody's business is nobody's business," especially in education. If ever a social force in this country needed a spokesman, education needs one now. The diffi-

culty is that to change our entire school system even enough to keep us in this classroom fight will disrupt our present "easy" way of life so much that few political leaders will have the courage to attempt it.

In my opinion this is probably the business of the rank-and-file voter anyway, but the situation certainly offers an opportunity for a statesman to emerge from amongst us and perhaps therein lies some hope.

I don't believe it is possible to understand fully the predicament we are in without first having some notion of how we got where we are. The first elementary and secondary schools in this country were privately operated. Those who attended had to pay for their education. The curriculum was made up of what we now refer to as "solids": Greek, Latin, mathematics, and English. Those who were not able to succeed in these subjects or simply didn't enjoy them soon dropped out in order to save their money. Those whose abilities and interests led them to a successful completion of such a program were the kind of people who could and did do successful college work. About 80 percent of them went on to universities and colleges, and most of them succeeded there.

The trouble with such a plan was that only the relatively wealthy few were able to get an education. It is not surprising, therefore, that in a democracy we hit upon the idea of tax-supported schools. With the establishment of tax-supported schools, however, the curriculum was not changed materially.

The only difference was that children from less well-to-do families were now able to try their hand at getting an education. Those who didn't enjoy it or weren't capable soon dropped out. The graduates still went to college and, of course, had little real difficulty with college requirements.

It is at this point we introduced something entirely new in the field of education. We decided that we were not going to have free education, we were going to have forced education. Compulsory attendance laws came into existence. Those who formerly dropped out of school were now forced by law to stay in school. Getting an education was no longer a privilege—it was and is a requirement!

Since many couldn't or wouldn't do the courses then available, the schools were forced to "broaden their curriculum." Instead of 4 or 5 subjects being taught, as many as 80 or 90 are now taught in some schools. The enrollment in high schools increased between 1870 and 1940 approximately 90 times, while the population increased a little over 3 times.

All of this required enormous sums of money. At one point only about 20 percent of those who graduated from high school attended college. School officials began to give a great deal of attention to the great majority who were doing "terminal work." Those interested in and capable of doing the kind of abstract thinking required of college graduates were lost in the shuffle.

THE PERCENTAGE GOING ON to college has now increased to nearly 50 percent of those who graduate from high school, but many of those who have gone on to college have not done so by their own choice. There is no law requiring college attendance, but social pressures are just as effective.

The "broadened curriculum" and free elective system permit many high school students to graduate with little experience in courses which would make the step from high school to college a reasonably smooth transition. If all students are required to take a fixed curriculum of solids, the incapable and disinterested only lower the standards and waste the time of the teacher and the capable student. Teachers in high schools who fail such students are often invited to find employment elsewhere since "they can't seem to teach."

It is rather obvious at this point in our development, I believe, that if we are to continue to try to educate every child we must identify the capable and not permit them to make unwise, youthful decisions concerning the courses they take. Two major changes will be required if such a plan is followed.

First, a complete and adequate guidance system staffed with competent counsellors will have to be added to this high school program; only a relatively few high schools in this country can now boast of such a service.

Secondly, the full cooperation of the parents will be essential. Many parents have no idea of the subjects their children are taking in the high school. If this surprises you, do a little research on your own. Ask the parents of high school children among your acquaintances what courses their children are taking and why. Fathers not uncommonly become interested in their children's courses only at the time they start to college. They then suggest a program which is totally unrelated to the previous work taken. They have assumed the child has taken the proper courses leading to a very ambitious college career and are shocked at the dearth of basic courses leading to such a plan.

The problem is far from a simple one. There is no single "correction" that can cure our troubles. I would like to point out some of the obvious and major difficulties, with some possible solutions. No doubt some of my suggestions will draw a good deal of fire from those whose interests are affected the most. I would like to point out, however, that this is a struggle for existence, and most of us will have to change our way of doing things if we are to survive.

We need to re-evaluate our compulsory attendance laws. Many students now in high school could probably profit considerably by taking an apprenticeship in one of the crafts. Those who think everyone should go to high school say that to turn teenagers loose from school will create an enormous social problem. I would like to point out, however, that our rate of juvenile delinquency has increased with our insistence that every child attend school. No doubt labor organizations will be concerned about this problem, too. It seems to me, however, here is an opportunity for labor leaders to bring real leadership to the forefront and help this country solve a serious problem. It is my opinion that if we are to continue insisting that everyone go to high school and at the same time keep them "well adjusted," happy, and passing, we cannot expect the school program to be much different from what it is now. On the other hand, if we are willing to make a distinction between education and training, we can completely revamp the school program based on this new philosophy.

WE NEED TO TAKE a careful look at our teachers' pay. The compulsory attendance law created the need for many more teachers. Revenue in no way kept pace with the increased demand upon the school treasuries. These two facts have led to a rate of pay for teachers that is unbelievably low. If it weren't for the few devoted souls who are willing to teach in spite of all odds, our school system would have collapsed long ago.

If teachers as a group had more business acumen they, no doubt, would have insisted upon a better pay scale. In the long run this would have been very good for the country, because we would have had a constant flow of capable people going into the teaching profession. The tax payer who has been laughing at the stupid teacher who will work for nothing is only now discovering that the joke has been on him. People insist that they have the best they

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can afford of everything for their children, with only one exception. The one permanent thing they provide for their children—an education—they insist must be as cheap as possible.

According to a national magazine, New York City is paying its street sweepers an average weekly wage greater than its public school teachers. We cannot expect the supply of qualified teachers to satisfy the demand as long as this kind of thing prevails. Actually, the teacher shortage would be far worse than it is if we permitted only qualified teachers to teach. Under the guise of an emergency we permit many unqualified teachers to occupy teaching positions in our school rooms by issuing them temporary certificates. Such practice has only delayed the time when the shortage became serious enough to attract the attention of the general public.

Practically no student coming to college these days says he wants to be a teacher. We are graduating a few, however, who changed their minds during their college work. Many of the most capable students are going into other professions where the prospects for higher income are greater. The problem is to increase salaries with as little increase in taxes as possible. I believe considerable progress in this direction could be accomplished by doing the following:

(A) Reduce high school enrollments by permitting those who don't want to go to school or aren't capable of doing school work to do other things. This will also help the teacher shortage.

(B) Reduce the number of non-academic courses offered. These are frequently very expensive, since they often require costly gadgets. The need for them will be much less with the abolishment of the compulsory attendance laws.

(C) Spend less money on school trips of one kind or another. Here the colleges and universities can help considerably by not having so many contests and other devices to lure students to their campuses. If

you are interested, you might find out from your own school board how much of the school budget is spent on teachers' salaries and how much goes for other things.

We need to think about subsidization. For many years we have been subsidizing the agriculture program in the schools. This has resulted in techniques which have produced so many agricultural products that our granaries are bulging at the seams. The subsidized agriculture teacher has been so successful that it is time to emulate this program for other high school teachers. Why not subsidize our teachers of "solids" with the hope of drawing back to the classrooms again the very best minds we produce? A very simple and inexpensive way to subsidize teachers of certain subjects would be to give them income tax

advantages such as is now done with some industries. This would be of little or no extra administrative expense to the government. No additional bureaus or administrators would be needed, not even any regional agencies.

Our colleges and universities can be improved, too. They should stop trying to lure greater and greater numbers to attend their institutions.

The reason this has happened is obvious. Appropriations go where the greatest number of students are enrolled. If the quality of the work done, as well as numbers enrolled were considered before making appropriations, this would no doubt put less emphasis on numbers and tend to stop some of the recruiting for numbers alone.

Most institutions of higher learning could also reduce the number of course offerings with profit. There is a lot of duplication of course work in many, if not all, of our colleges and universities.

Progress could be made by a careful examination and redefinition of the objectives of our several colleges and universities. Perhaps we need to increase the number of technical schools or trade schools and decrease the number of strictly academic ones. Much of the so-called social activity at many colleges and universities should be reduced, at least for the beginners. The glamor of it all is more than many teenagers can resist, with the result that their school work is neglected. Such activities cause many people to lose their sense of values, or at least get them so distorted they cannot tell the grain from the chaff.

The future security of this country depends in a great part on the schools. Every thinking American needs to give his loyal support to the school teachers in this country. He needs to back them up with his money and his respect. Most of all, we need to acquaint ourselves with the problems of education and convey our ideas to those individuals who are responsible for the improvement of our schools.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Glenn C. Couch is dean of the University College at O. U., and a professor of botany. Born in Helena, Oklahoma, in 1909, he studied at Ohio State University and the University of Wyoming, then received two degrees from O. U., a bachelor of science in 1931 and a master of science in 1937. He was director of student affairs during World War II. Through the years Couch has become one of the University's top authorities of university development. As this article indicates, he is particularly interested in the effect which our present educational policies and standards seem to be having on students themselves.