

SOCIETAL IMPERATIVES: NEEDS FOR AN EDUCATED DEMOCRACY

by

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Almost everyone it seems is out looking for excellence today. It was just about this time last year that the National Commission on Excellence in Education issued its^s report which ✓ concluded that "the educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people" (1983, p. 5). The extensive reaction of press and public to that report indicated that the Commission had hit the nerve center of discontent with the quality of education in America. Within the year, more than 30 books and reports on educational reform had made their appearance, each concluding that excellence must be found and returned to the schools. The 50 states responded by appointing a total of 175 task forces which have been sent forth to look for excellence. ^{And} But the search for excellence extends beyond education. The business community is eagerly snatching up

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a book entitled, In Search of Excellence, which describes excellence in corporate America. Although I have not heard any presidential candidate so rash as to promise us excellence in government, all of them purport to believe in excellence and are more than willing to lead the search for it.

It is nice to arrive at a conference at last where excellence has not only been found but is being celebrated. Your conference theme, "Celebrating Teaching Excellence" is timely on two fronts. First, it addresses the ^{urgency of the} ~~legitimate~~ goal of excellence in education, but second, and equally important your theme recognizes the existence of excellence in this year of generally gloomy assessments. It would be ironic indeed if in our eagerness to search for excellence, we failed to recognize it in our midst

My assigned topic in this celebration of excellence is to speak to the needs for an educated democracy. Although this topic was assigned by your program committee almost a year ago, it hits right at the heart of what we should be talking about today. There is rising concern about whether current approaches to excellence in education will lead to an educated democracy or to ^{an} ~~educational~~ ^{ed} ~~elitism~~ ²⁻¹. If we want an educated democracy our task ^{it} would appear ^{is} to provide the best possible education for the greatest number of people. Keeping that goal in mind, I would like to spend the next 30 minutes or so evaluating today's educational reform movement against the ultimate goal of an educated democracy.

^{wrote a book in 1961 entitled "Excellence."} In it he said John Gardner ⁽¹⁹⁶¹⁾ ~~says~~ that one of the "absurdly obvious

truths of which we must continue to remind ourselves" is that there are many varieties of excellence.

"In the intellectual field alone," he ^{wrote,} ~~says,~~ "there is the kind of intellectual activity that leads to a new theory, and the kind that leads to a new machine. There is the mind that finds its most effective expression in teaching and the mind that is most at home in research. There is the mind that works best in quantitative terms, and the mind that luxuriates in poetic imagery.

... There is a way of measuring excellence that involves comparison between people ... and there is another that involves comparison between myself at my best and myself at my worst" (p. 152).

~~There are many kinds of excellence, and the schools cannot address them all.~~ ^{Obviously} ~~all forms of excellence.~~ Indeed there is widespread agreement in the educational reform reports that schools have taken on too much and that the path to excellence lies in clarifying and narrowing purposes so that what is done is done well. ^{Emerging now is} ~~It is hard to argue with that.~~ ~~There seems to be some agreement on what it is that~~ ^{there is still} needs to be done well, but ^{plenty of} disagreement on how to do it.

I am not going to discuss the recommendations for reform in detail. One of the more absorbing tasks in education these days is making charts of the various recommendations and then making summaries of summaries. There are so many reports out now and so many commentaries and analyses that practically every wise and foolish thing that can be said about the schools has been said. For that reason I am going to avoid commenting on controversies that have already gained high visibility. Instead, I am going to concentrate on the possible negative side effects of relatively popular recommendations on which there is enough agreement to permit implementation.

Many of the reports attribute the erosion of quality in education to the permissiveness of the 1960's and 70's and reason that the solution is to swing the pendulum in the opposite direction, toward more control, more requirements, and tougher standards. These prescriptions call for simple corrections of perceived excesses of the past. Not enough homework? --assign more. Not enough testing? --require more. Too many electives? --insist on more requirements. These undimensional corrections might be labeled the swinging pendulum solution. A pendulum is in constant motion, but it never goes anywhere. It simply swings from one extreme to the other. Indeed, the momentum gained from a swing to the left provides the energy for the swing to the right. If we are not more thoughtful about the goal of quality and how to attain it, we will spend the 1980's correcting for the permissiveness of the 1960's and 1970's, and we will spend the 1990's correcting for the overregulation of the 1980's. We might, I suppose, recommend more modest corrections, but that would simply slow down the pendulum, eventually stopping all movement.

We know more about the characteristics of effective education than swinging pendulum solutions suggest, and it is a disservice to imply that our options are limited to strategies that seemed to work in different times with different school populations. We know, for example, that effective schools are distinguished by the following characteristics: clear priorities about what must be learned, high expectations for students and teachers, uninterrupted time on task, positive discipline, support for

teachers, and strong local leadership.

Unfortunately for those interested in gaining credibility as people of action, these qualities cannot be legislated as can the currently popular quantifiable reforms such as more time, more pay, more requirements, and more tests. The long-term improvement of education must be achieved by slower, more complex actions built up through community pressure and support, and *through* leadership at the local level. (Anrig, 1984, p. 2).

In addition to more thoughtful analyses and more patience in implementing reforms, we need some fresh perspectives and perhaps some new metaphors. The spiral staircase is a more apt metaphor than the swinging pendulum for school reform. Whereas the swinging pendulum involves retracing old ground, the spiral staircase rises to new levels. We may circle back to look at old problems from new perspectives, but our motion is constantly upward to a higher plane of action. Schools of the 1980s are operating in a different plane from those of the 1960s. Specifically, community colleges raise the plane of action in postsecondary education closer to the goal of an educated democracy than was thought possible in the 1960s. The number of community colleges in the United States has doubled since 1960, and the number of students served has increased 600 percent. The face of postsecondary education has been changed forever by the rise of the community colleges, and we need to find some new perspectives if we are to avoid educational faddism and swinging pendulum solutions.

One such perspective is offered in the best selling book, In

Search of Excellence (Peters & Waterman, 1982), in which the authors describe the most successful corporations in America. Ironically, the conclusions about the environments which stimulate excellence in corporate America are frequently the opposite of what is recommended for excellence in educational institutions.

When Peters and Waterman set out to look for corporate excellence, they found it at both MacDonald's and IBM --in the production of the lowly hamburger as well as in the glamour of high tech. Their criteria for excellence seemed not to reside in the prestige of the thing produced, but rather in the attitude and enthusiasm of the workers. They concluded that one of the main clues to corporate excellence lay in "unusual effort on the part of apparently ordinary employees" (p. xvii). There is a lot to think about in that deceptively simple conclusion. In the final analysis, the task of the excellent teacher is to stimulate "apparently ordinary" people to unusual effort? What do the reports on school reform have to contribute to that goal?

In the first place, there is surprisingly little attention given to "ordinary people" in the school reform reports. There is the clear implication that the rising tide of mediocrity is made up of embarrassing numbers of ordinary people, and if we want to return excellence to education, we better go out and find more excellent people. Teachers colleges are advised to select better candidates; colleges are encouraged to raise admissions standards, and the Federal government is urged to offer scholarships to attract top high school graduates into teaching.

There is not a lot said in the education reports about how to stimulate unusual effort on the part of the ordinary people that we seem to be faced with in the schools and in most colleges.

"Excellent companies," say Peters and Waterman, "require and demand extraordinary performance from the average man" (p. xxii). Since the tips for getting such extraordinary performance are scattered throughout their book, let me select a few of them and measure them against the recommendations of the educational reform reports.

"We observed, time and again," wrote Peters and Waterman, "extraordinary energy exerted above and beyond the call of duty when the worker ... is given even a modicum of apparent control over his or her destiny" (p. xxiii).

With a few notable exceptions, there isn't much inclination to give workers in education more control over their own destinies. In fact, external top-down control is frequently recommended as the proper antidote to the permissiveness of the 1960s and 1970s. Even the language of many of the recommendations implies an external authority who would regulate, control, and see that the proper check points are established and maintained. Ted Sizer, (1984) stands in contrast to many of the recommendations and actions taken today when he advises those who want excellent schools to "trust teachers and principals --and believe that the more trust one places in them, the more the response will justify that trust" (p. 214). Sizer adds the further caution that "Proud people rarely join professions that heavily monitor them" (p. 219).

John Goodlad also bucks the tide of most of the reform movement when he resists the temptation to set forth a set of recommendations applicable to all schools. Peters and Waterman would support Goodlad's decision. They observed that the encouragement of individualistic entrepreneurial spirit was one of the hallmarks of excellent companies which tended, they observed "to create decentralization and autonomy, with its attendant overlap, messiness around the edges, lack of coordination, internal competition, and somewhat chaotic conditions in order to breed the entrepreneurial spirit." Excellent companies they found "had forsworn a measure of tidiness in order to achieve regular innovation" (p. 201).

It doesn't take much reading of the commission reports to conclude that schools, if they follow the recommendations, will do the reverse and forswear innovation in favor of tidiness. The curriculum, which we are told is in a shambles, will be tidied up, goals will be articulated, standardized tests will control transitions, teachers burdens will be lightened, but their hours will be scheduled, prospective teachers will pursue a core of common learning, and their curriculum will be tidied up to include certain courses and certain experiences in specified sequences. It is hard to believe that our current mania for tidiness and bureaucratic regulation will result in ~~orderly~~ schools and colleges filled with students and teachers pursuing learning with the contagious enthusiasm so essential to excellence.

Another suggestion from the corporate world for stimulating

unusual effort on the part of ordinary people is to make people members of winning teams while also recognizing each individual as a star in his or her own right. Excellent companies, say Peters and Waterman, "turn the average Joe and the average Jane into winners" (p. 239 emphasis added). That is a bit more difficult, it seems, than recognizing winners. The tough problem is not in identifying winners; it is in making winners out of ordinary people. That, after all, is the overwhelming purpose of education. Yet historically, in most of the periods emphasizing excellence, education has reverted to selecting winners rather than creating them.

In any era, colleges that are able to select winners among both students and faculty, are most likely to be perceived as quality institutions. Although "value added" is a sound educational concept and the ultimate educational challenge, it has not often been pursued with any vigor in education. Community colleges are frequently considered lower quality educational institutions than research universities, not on the basis of comparing the "value added" to their graduating classes, but by comparing the selectivity exercised in admitting their entering classes.

Peters and Waterman insist that there is no reason why organizations cannot design systems to support and create winners. Most excellent companies, they say, build systems "to reinforce degrees of winning rather than degrees of losing" (p. 57).

At IBM, for example, sales quotas are set so that 70-80

percent of its sales people meet their quotas. At a less successful company, only 40 percent of the sales force meets its quota during a typical year. "With this approach," say the researchers, "at least 60 percent of the salespeople think of themselves as losers. They resent it and that leads to dysfunctional, unpredictable, frenetic behavior. Label a man a loser and he'll start acting like one" (p. 57).

There is much in the present educational reform movement that should frighten us if, in fact, winning is important for ordinary people. The investigators on corporate excellence observed that less-than-excellent organizations take a negative view of their workers. "They verbally berate participants for poor performance ... They want innovation but kill the spirit of the champion ... They design systems that seem calculated to tear down their workers' self-image" (p. 57).

That sounds a lot like what we are doing in the educational reform movement of the 1980's. We are telling teachers that they are a sorry lot, scoring lower on the SAT than their fellow students in college. We are proclaiming that the deplorable state of the schools is an embarrassment to us internationally and a risk to our nation. We are telling students that they are losers and threatening them with loss of further educational opportunity if they don't shape up. It is very hard to feel like a winner anywhere in the educational system today. But, the critics will object, how can you improve the educational system if you don't face the facts? Fair question.

The "facts" seem to be that there are some excellent schools

out there, that there are some exceptional teachers, that we do know something about making teaching and learning more effective, that high expectations are important to performance, and that financial support is absolutely essential. We also know that test scores have been falling, that expectations for students are not high enough to demand their best performance, and that until students experience success as a result of their own efforts, it will be hard for them to feel like winners. Even very young children know when they are learning and when they are not. It does no good to tell students of any age that they are doing fine if they are not. Thus, learning tasks must be realistic, and every student must have an opportunity to succeed at a learning task that is important. At the same time, we must provide the challenges that push good students to do their best. It is not an easy task, and throughout history it has been made ever more difficult by the growing diversity of our student populations.

In some two decades of trying to find answers to the question of how to provide education for all the people, I have reached the conclusion *of* that it is our commitment to the lock-step time-defined structures of education that stand in the way of lasting progress (Cross, 1976). It is simply unrealistic to think that all students can learn the same material, to the same standards of performance, in the same amount of time, taught by the same method. We continue to talk about individual differences. We know they exist; we have reliable measures of them. We even cherish them, but we fail to provide for them in

our educational systems. Most experiments in individualization are soon abandoned because they require too much work on the part of teachers who are faced with individualizing instruction in addition to their obligation to handle all of their traditional tasks.

Strangely enough our solution has never been to change the system to accommodate individual talents. Rather it has been to try in some way to reduce the diversity --through selection, through narrowing curricular choices, and through proclaiming that we expect too much of our schools and that they must be allowed to get back to basis.

Those are the familiar planks in the platforms of the school reform movement of the 1980s. We want to find some reasonably humane way to lop off the problem learners, to reduce the obligations of schools and colleges, and to restrict the curricular options.

There are serious proposals to deny the losers in the educational race a high school diploma or entrance to a community college. There is not much doubt that the easiest way for an educational institution to raise its own quality is to get rid of problem learners. Don't accept them and don't certify them. Test scores will rise, faculty morale will improve, and the institution will be perceived as a quality place for serious learning.

The problem is that the society that supports this superficially excellent educational institution now has on its hands the educational rejects. Whose responsibility is it to

convert them from a drag on society to productive members of that society? The chances are high that an illiterate mother or father in this generation will produce three or four more problem learners in the next generation. Clearly, we cannot afford to "improve" educational institutions at the expense of society. But it is distressing to see how many well-meaning but short-sighted legislators and educators are taking advantage of the current mandates for excellence by supporting proposals that can have the effect of eliminating from local high schools and colleges the very students who need their services most. Some years ago, one wag devised this motto for Admiral Rickovers' elitist recommendations, "Save the best; shoot the rest".

Selection is the easy route to quality -- but it is a swinging pendulum solution that fails to address the underlying problems with curriculum, instruction, and teacher training. For better or for worse, our schools have to be concerned with maximizing the performance of "ordinary people."

One of the perennial problems with universal education is the diversity in achievement that it brings into the average classroom. Many of the reports call for a core curriculum, frequently on the grounds that it will abolish the evils of tracking. I think I can assure you, however, that a common core curriculum, without provisions for individual diagnosis and attention, will simply replace parallel tracks with vertical tracks. Instead of lower achieving students being shunted into vocational or general education curricula, they will occupy the lowest ranks of the academic core curriculum. There is ample

research evidence to show that students who start school in the bottom third of the class will remain there throughout their dreary journey through the American school system (Cross, 1971).

Although I am convinced along with Ben Bloom, Jerome Bruner, and others that almost any child can learn the basic school curriculum, given enough time and appropriate help, I am not convinced that the core curriculum imposed on existing time-bound structures will abolish the evils of tracking. Why do we think that a D student in the academic curriculum has more life choices than an A student in the vocational curriculum?

As to the recommendations that schools should get back to defining their educational mission, there is always the assumption that the mission is to provide for the cognitive development of students. No one can quarrel with that. What some people are wondering is what organizations in our society should assume responsibility for moral development, common courtesy, civility, and yes, even driver training. The choice seems to be between adding these so-called frills to the schools or ignoring them in the hope that churches, families, and community agencies, will reorganize and reassert themselves to deal with them. The inevitable result, I should think, is the swinging pendulum. Schools restrict their responsibilities to intellectual and cognitive tasks until society feels that citizenship and morality need attention, and then there is no place to turn except to the schools.

I believe that we must begin to question whether the ancient structures of education can cope with the diversity that is

inherent in universal education. We need structures that are built, not only on the acceptance of individual differences, but on explicit recognition of their value to our society. To use Alvin Toffler's phrase, it is time to de-massify education.

A significant aspect of Alvin Toffler's Third Wave (1980), you will remember, is the customization of products and services. Whereas the industrial revolution of the Second Wave emphasized mass production, the arrival of the Third Wave makes possible customized production. In the manufacture of clothing, for example, Second Wave production methods required the worker to place one layer of cloth on top of another, lay the pattern on top, and then with an electric cutting knife cut out the pattern and produce multiple identical cutouts of the cloth. These were then subjected to common processing and came out identical in size, shape, and color to be purchased by the masses at reasonable prices "off the rack".

The Third Wave laser machine operates on a radically different principle. Laser machines can be programmed to fill an order for one garment economically, and soon ^{, according to Toffler,} it may be possible "to read one's measurements into a telephone, or point a video camera at oneself, thus feeding data directly into a computer, which in turn will instruct the machine to produce a single garment, cut exactly to one's personal, individualized dimensions". ~~(Toffler 1980,~~ (p. 184).

De-massification is also occurring in the mass media. The mass messages that were a product of Second Wave communications are giving way now to highly specialized media audiences. There

are, for example, magazines which cater to populations as diverse as antique collectors, joggers, car buffs, and people in the million dollar housing market. Radio stations specialize, not just in music, but in hard rock, soft rock, punkrock, country rock or folk rock. In the Boston area, a new cable TV station announced its intention last week to specialize in "neighborhood news," and newspapers are doing the same thing. A tabloid newspaper is customized to provide news and advertisements targeted to each separate suburb of the metropolitan Boston area. The Cambridge Tab has some items in common with the Newton Tab, but apparently the publisher thinks it makes good economic sense to publish customized versions for each community.

Although instructional programs appear generally oblivious to the potential power of custom-designed education, we are already beginning to customize testing. Second Wave testing called for identical machine-scorable answer sheets, batched by the thousands, and scored by the overlay of common patterns of right answers. Third Wave testing calls for branching, customization, and diagnosis of individual learning problems. Student personnel work too has become more customized and more individualized. There are more special interest clubs and groups custom-designed to serve special needs populations, such as reentry women, parents without partners, bilingual students and the like. At the same time, computerized guidance systems are providing individualized career-guidance services that would be impossible without interactive computer programs. Despite such changes before our very eyes, most of the school reform recommendations

of the 1980s propose Second Wave solutions in a Third Wave world. They suggest re-massifying rather than de-massifying education.

It is surprising how little attention is given to both the promises and the demands of the future. Although no one, I think, fails to mention that computer literacy will be a demand of the future, not much is said about preparing people to live in a world in which the pace of change is escalating with each generation. Indeed, arguments about what constitutes the common core of knowledge that everyone should know seem almost quaint in the face of the knowledge explosion. Between 6000 and 7000 scientific articles are produced each day, and information doubles every 5 1/2 years. By the time the average physician completes his or her training, half of all the knowledge and skills acquired in medical school are obsolete.

Yet it appears that educators have not thought much about how to handle the information explosion. Mike O'Keefe (1984) presented a compelling picture recently at professional AC meetings in Chicago of the impact of the information explosion on high school physics. The standard text book used in most high schools today is 610 pages long and contains sections on 42 separate subspecialties of physics including optics, mechanics, nuclear physics, thermodynamics, and all the rest, plus some sections on the social responsibilities of scientists and the contributions of women and ethnic minorities to science. Whenever a new subspecialty appears ^{or} a new social concern ^s arise they are added to the textbooks. The result is a very superficial exposure to innumerable definitions and specialized

vocabulary which are usually forgotten within a week. There is no time left for learning what young people growing up in the information society are going to have to know -- how to locate information when they need it, how to analyze, synthesize, interpret~~e~~, and apply information. In short, today's students are going to have to learn how to learn. We need to help students develop^{the} higher-level cognitive skills of putting words together to express idea^s, of selecting from mountain^s of information that which is relevant^{of} of analyzing arguments, and of synthesizing information from different sources. Until we can find room in the overcrowded curriculum for teaching people to live in our information-saturated society, education will be outdated almost as fast as it is learned.

How do we educate people to live in a world in which entire industries are created and wiped out in a single decade? The most important lessons that we can teach our children are the skills and the attitudes that will be required of lifelong learners. No education, no matter how brilliantly designed and delivered, will last a lifetime. The greatest handicap any adult can have in the 21st Century is a dislike of formal learning.

It is already clear that there is a growing gap between adults who have learned to enjoy learning and who use it to make their lives richer in every sense of that word, and those who dislike learning and are stuck in dead end and even disappearing jobs. A college graduate today is seven times as likely to be engaged in some form of adult learning as a high school drop-out, and the gap between the educational "haves" and "have-nots" is

widening as the learning opportunities for adults increase. One thing that we know for sure from all of the research on adult learning is that it is the already well-educated who rush to take advantage of the new opportunities that are appearing; the poorly educated stay away in droves (Cross, 1981).

In conclusion, the most serious challenge to community colleges is to prepare students for their futures as lifelong learners. The requirements will be fourfold: 1) to demonstrate to students that they are capable of learning and that it is a useful, satisfying skill that will serve them well throughout their lives, 2) to provide the cognitive skills that serve as the basic tools for lifelong learning, 3) to instill positive attitudes toward learning, and 4) to gradually put students in charge of their own learning so that they can make choices from among the multiple learning options that will face them as adults in the learning society.

On these requirements, the 1980s reformers are strong on only one of the three. They do want each student to master the basic learning skills. There is not, however, much attention given to creating atmospheres that stimulate enthusiasm for learning. We are approaching our task with grim determination, and there is little patience or interest in the slow learners who will almost certainly constitute one of our greatest social problems in the learning society that lies ahead.

Ted Sizer speaks most directly to the fourth requirement when he says, "A self-propelled learner is the goal of a school, and teachers should insist that students habitually learn on their

own" (p. 216). That is a goal we have not seen mentioned in most of the reports. In fact, the general direction is quite the opposite. We are gradually creating more dependence on authorities to specify the learning tasks, control the options available, determine standards, and evaluate outcomes. If we are creating a generation of young learners who become increasingly dependent on others to define standards of acceptable learning, are we also thinking of the demands that will be created on the learning society with millions of adults unprepared to assume responsibility for their own self-directed learning? ~~#~~ We should, I suggest, start now to develop lifelong learners who are willing and eager to assume responsibility for their own continuous learning. That is the route to an educated democracy, and it is the social imperative of the 1980s.

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