

PUBLIC CONFIDENCE IN EDUCATION:
Reflections by the Commissioner*

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When Henry Barnard was named the first U.S. Commissioner of Education 112 years ago, he had just one assignment to fulfill. His job, according to the law, was to report to Congress on the condition of education in America. They say it took him 18 months and 700 pages to prepare his first report.

This morning my goals are much more modest. I'll spare you my own 700-page report and limit my remarks to some personal reflections about the strengths and weaknesses of public education.

First, since coming to Washington two and a half years ago, I've deepened my conviction that Federal programs in support of education can make a difference.

Consider, for example, the impact of vocational education legislation enacted over 60 years ago:

--The Vocational Education Act of 1917 (the Smith Hughes Act) gave money to the States to stimulate vocational education, and that first State educational assistance program has been a phenomenal success (through the years.)

May 17, 1979, Washington, D.C.

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--In 1920 the total spent on vocational education was \$8.5 million: \$2.4 million from the Federal Government and more than \$6 million from State and local governments.

--In 1976 the total spent was \$5.1 billion: \$543 million from the Federal Government and \$4.6 billion from State and local governments.

--Overall, each Federal dollar now generates \$8.48 in State and local funds.

--And today there are more than 16 million secondary, postsecondary, and adult vocational education students -- and more than 335,000 teachers.

In the area of education for the disadvantaged, Title I, our largest program, provides supplementary compensatory services to the children of low-income families. At present, the program reaches about 5.6 million children; 80 percent of those served are in grades 1 to 6.

--Fourteen thousand of the Nation's 16,000 school districts participate in this essential program.

A recent report of the National Institute of Education, the most comprehensive study of Title I to date, showed that:

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- o First-graders made an average gain of 12 months in reading and 11 months in mathematics during a 7-month period between fall and spring testing. They increased percentile ranking in the two subjects by 12 and 15 points, respectively.
- o Third-graders gained 8 months in reading and 12 months in mathematics. Their percentile gains in the two subjects were 7 and 15 points, respectively.

The amount of Title I Federal student aid has more than doubled in the past 6 years. It now totals more than \$³4.4 billion. And it has made a major difference.

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We've also made a difference in higher education.

--Today, some 3 million students, or 27 percent of those enrolled in postsecondary education, receive aid under one or more of our assistance programs. This is more than double the number that received such aid only 6 years ago.

--This Federal assistance has expanded access and had a dramatic impact on minority enrollment. Twenty-five percent of the minority college-age population now is enrolled, compared with only 13 percent a decade ago. Last fall, 1.7 million minority students were enrolled in postsecondary schools, compared with 500,000 ten years ago.

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--I am confident Federal assistance to college students has changed the higher education landscape of this Nation.

Or consider how Federal support has helped make education history on TV.

--Today 9 to 10 million children watch Sesame Street each day, thanks to a Federal investment of \$1.4 million that helped launch the program a decade ago. Overall, approximately \$40 million Federal dollars have been provided.

--And studies have found that children who watched the program show greater learning gains than children who did not, regardless of background, race, and sex.

--The late Margaret Mead noted: "Sesame Street is the most responsible program that has been developed for children as a way of introducing them to some of the basic tools necessary for the attainment of literacy."

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The new Education for All Handicapped Children Act has had a dramatic impact, too.

--Today some 3.72 million handicapped students in the public schools are being served under special programs. That's double the number served in 1963.

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--The percentage of school-age population served has increased from 6.9 percent to 7.6 percent in the last two school years.

--States have responded dramatically to the Federal initiative in behalf of the handicapped. In Illinois, for instance, an intensified statewide public awareness campaign was launched, involving free "hotline" service, and callers were referred to appropriate school officials. In Ohio, as a result of intensive efforts, the State's count of handicapped children served increased by 15,000.

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One other point. Thanks to Federal support, we now have libraries in the schools.

--From 1966-1979, 153 million books were purchased with Federal funds in school districts throughout the Nation.

--The average number of books purchased by each is about 10,000, one out of three of which is purchased with Federal funds.

We are so often preoccupied with short-term problems that we fail to put the impact of Federal support for education in perspective.

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Second, I have increased my confidence in education because of the people I have met.

Since 1977 I've visited dozens of classrooms from coast to coast. I've talked to hundreds of teachers and their students. As a result I've deepened my conviction that teaching is one of the toughest assignments in the world.

Keeping 25 to 35 children attentive and well focused is not easy -- as any parent surely understands.

But to go beyond mere discipline and intellectually stimulate each student is a task which is enormously complex. I'm convinced we should give the classroom teachers of this country much more backing and support.

Students build my confidence as well. Just three weeks ago I met with junior and senior high school students in my office to talk with them about their education. That day-long session was one of the most rewarding I have had. These students were bright, articulate, and demanding of themselves; and we do an enormous disservice to millions of our children by describing them as ignorant and hedonistic. They are in many ways as strong or stronger than the adults who criticize them.

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Third, I'm also encouraged by the renewed public interest in our schools.

- o Its true that when all adults are polled today, public confidence in the schools continues to go down.
- o But public confidence in the people who run education is still very high (83.4 percent).
 - And even more important is the fact that the more people know about the public schools, the more positive they are.
- o For example, a recent Gallup survey found that parents who have children in the public schools voted more than 3 to 1 that schools are better now than when they were young. Even those who say that their attitudes have become less favorable in recent years still say the schools are better than they were when they were students.

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It's also especially encouraging that so many citizens want to help the public schools. In fact, volunteerism -- in many regions -- has become a landslide movement.

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- o Today approximately 5 million people volunteer in educational activities.
- o And there has been a marked increase in school volunteer activities in many larger cities. In New York City, for example; volunteers grew from about 2,600 in June 1974 to over 5,000 in June 1978.

Last year -- while in Schenectady, N.Y. -- I saw an older man and a young boy in the Martin Luther King school library. When I asked what was going on, the man replied that he had recently retired from General Electric, and rather than vegetate beside TV he had decided to use his brain to help children learn to read. He now tutors 5 hours every day and he's recruited 35 other retirees to help.

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Finally, and most significantly, my confidence in public education has gone up because schools are making solid academic gains.

Today schools are putting renewed emphasis on the fundamentals, especially in languages and mathematics, and I believe the downward drift of test scores has been turned around.

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- o Children now enter first grade with more word knowledge than their counterparts of the mid-1960s.
- o Reading skills among nine-year-olds has significantly increased.
- o And nine-year-olds, 3rd, and 4th graders, also improved in writing ability between 1970 and 1974.
- o There has also been improved student achievement in mathematics for second, third, and fourth grade students.
- o The statewide Iowa testing program demonstrates similar gains in the early years.

--For example, between 1965 and 1975,
scores improved from 34.5 to 35.2
in reading; from 34.5 to 35.5 in
math; and 34.5 to 35.2 in vocabulary.

One other point. When American students are compared with other countries they do very well indeed.

- o American 10-year-olds, for example, rank fourth in science among 14 of the most advanced countries of the world.

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- o American 14-year-olds rank third in reading comprehension among the 13 most advanced countries of the world.
- o An International Education Assessment shows that--

--only the 14-year-olds of New Zealand and Finland outperform American 14-year-olds in reading; England, Sweden, Japan, Australia, Hungary, Scotland and Italy do less well;

--and, at the time of the assessment, the United States was retaining about 3/4 of the age group through the final year of secondary school; many countries around the world retained only about one-third of the students or even less.

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I am confident that students are beginning to master more effectively the education fundamentals because basic skills increasingly have become a top priority in the schools.

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And I support this renewed commitment to the fundamentals, not out of reactionary inclinations, but simply because no student can succeed if he or she cannot read or write or speak effectively -- or accurately compute.

This Nation's commitment to public education is the most advanced and ambitious in the world. Because of this commitment we lead the world, not because of ignorance but because of education.

- o And any talk of deschooling our society, or closing up our schools, or not funding public education is to reject one of the Nation's most essential social institutions.

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I repeat I am confident about public education. But I am concerned as well.

The fundamental problem we now face is how to pay for public education.

- o In 1647 the Massachusetts Bay Colony passed a law requiring every town of 50 or more citizens to have a schoolmaster to teach the children to read and write.
- o From that time on our policy has been local support for local schools.

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Clearly that pattern now has broken down.

The joint push for local tax reduction and social equity has shifted school finance increasingly to the State, with Federal support for compensatory help.

In California, for example, after Proposition 13: Local support for schools dropped from 52 percent to 28 percent. Today in 25 States 50 percent or more of school aid comes from State, not local, taxes.

And the rejection of bond issues suggests another ominous trend.

In 1978, 53 percent of the bond issues passed and 47 percent of the dollars were approved.

In 1977, 57 percent and 61 percent of the dollars were approved.

Most ominous are the moves in several States to withdraw all tax support from schools and give money directly to parents. I believe the stability of the school structure will seriously erode and disadvantaged students will be the victims of such schemes.

The point is this. Many school districts are financially up against the wall, and during the next 10 years there will be turmoil in many districts as traditional tax support continues to erode.

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The financing of public education must be reshaped, but stability is essential, too, and I believe the alternatives proposed must strengthen, not erode, this Nation's commitment to the public schools.

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I have a second deep concern. Frankly, I believe the so-called comprehensive high school in this country is becoming obsolete.

The dropout rate in many high schools is a national disgrace. Even though attrition has decreased, 25 percent of our high school students still leave before they graduate -- in some city schools its 40 to 50 percent -- and many do not return.

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Equally shocking is the climate in many of our urban schools.

- o 20 percent of all senior high schools have 5 or more reported crimes each month. *

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- o 11 percent (2.4 million) secondary school students have something stolen from them every month, and about 1.3 percent (282,800) are physically attacked.
- o 600 million dollars a year is spent on repairing vandalism damage in schools, particularly among junior and senior high schools.

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Unhappily high schools also are impossibly overcrowded.

- o In 1950 we had 24,500 high schools with a student population of 6.1 million. In 1975 there were 13,800 high schools with 14.3 million students. And many high school guidance counselors have an impossible job to do.

And the student counseling picture is pathetic.

- o In Columbus there is one student counselor for every 631 students. In New York City the ratio is 942 to 1. In Detroit it's 627 to 1, Minneapolis 539 to 1, and in Baltimore 856 to 1.

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Many urban high schools of this country are in deep trouble. Student apathy is a serious problem. We must reform these institutions and prepare students academically and also equip them for productive work.

I believe the time has come to do a post Conant study on the American high school and develop a new structure to meet the special needs of students.

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Third, I am most concerned about the gap between what we teach in school and what students need to know.

Much of what is taught in school is relevant -- but much is not.

- o Interdependence of the countries of our world has grown dramatically in recent years and yet our knowledge about other Nations and other cultures remains very, very small.
- o Today less than one percent of the college-age group is enrolled in any course which specifically features contemporary international affairs.

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- o College enrollments in foreign languages are off fully 40 percent in the past seven years.
- o A recent national survey revealed that, even after President Carter gave his speech on energy, only half of the public surveyed -- 52 percent to be precise -- even knew America had to import oil from abroad.
- o And of this 52 percent only one-third, or 17 percent of the total adult population, had any idea that we had to import approximately 42 percent. Incidentally, that percentage has grown from 42 percent to 50 percent in the last two years.
- o Fifty percent of twelfth-graders studied in a recent survey could not choose correctly an Arab country out of four choices they were given, and 40 percent of these twelfth-graders thought that Golda Meir rather than Anwar Sadat was president of Egypt.
- o Last year during TV coverage of the Sadat-Begin discussions, which, incidentally, were interspersed with coverage of the Chicago Bears football game, three out of every four spectators interviewed at half time had never heard of Sadat or Begin, but were well aware of the prowess of their local hero, Walter Payton.

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Because of new technology a whole new vocabulary has emerged, and yet for most of us it's still a foreign language. We are awash in a sea of ignorance about the world of technology we have built.

- o During the Three Mile Island crisis we were told about rems, meltdowns, containment structures, and cold shutdowns, and most of us were completely confused by these terms.
- o In fact, if Three Mile Island told us anything at all, it told us how ignorant we are. And it reminded us, once again, that PR spokesmen are more concerned with "image" than with truth.

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Archibald MacLeish, in his recent book Riders in the Sky, described this world which we seem neither to fully comprehend or fully govern. We have, he said, begun "to see science as beyond our reach, beyond our understanding even, known, if it is known at all, through proxies who, like priests in other centuries, could not tell us what they know."

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Dr. Rene Dubos, one of the world's greatest living scientists, said at an international convention of scientists that:

We must not ask where science and technology are taking us, but rather how we can manage science and technology so that they can help us get where we want to go.

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I believe this Nation will find ways to serve effectively the coming generation. But I also believe we have enormous problems which we must confront.

And leadership is, of course, the central issue.

It's tragic that all too often those who are most concerned about our schools are most preoccupied and it's sad that education issues have been defined not by education's advocates, but by its critics.

Those who run the schools seem so caught up in confrontation that vision and leadership are lost.

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Here I must underscore an essential point. Public confidence in education must be earned. Quality is the key to confidence and if we do not have creative solutions to our problems, then it is inevitable that others will.

In spite of budget cuts I still believe our problem is not the lack of money, but the lack of vision and ideas. And educators must have more confidence in themselves.

This is the challenge which can and must be met.

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