THE FORUM

*Robert J. Gerardi and Gary C. Benedict

"A Nation at Risk — Accountable for What?"

Over the past 20 years schools often have been criticized for being too impersonal, forcing information into the heads of children with no regard for the personal elements of growth and maturation. Concurrently, schools have been faulted for promoting a soft, standardless curriculum that permits illiterates to receive a high school diploma, and that emphasized the socialization of youth to the neglect of academic achievement. To see the evidence of this paradox, one need only review the stated intentions of the private alternative schools that have been started in recent years.

In almost equal numbers these form a dichotomy, with the proponents of "back to basics" or "subject-centered" schools in one camp and proponents of "humanistic", "social growth" and "personalized" schools in the other.

The critics holding to these two extreme positions are withdrawing support of the schools for reasons that are virtually opposite. The schools they criticize and condemn are the same schools.

The current position in the cycle following the November 1980 elections seems to favor a "back to basics" philosophy by a 51% margin if the presidential election can serve as any indicator. E. Joseph Schneider states in quoting Lauren Resnick of the University of Pittsburg:

> "Let's be realistic. We know most educators — perhaps all of them by now — support the idea of children learning the basic skills. That's not the problem. What's missing from all the 'back to the basic' rhetoric is an appreciation of the underlying problem.
>
> "And, the problem is bigger than most of your Washington-based policymakers recognize. Numerous teachers have 'returned to the basics' only to find no apparent increase in their student achievement scores. What do they do then?"[1]

I won't disagree with the critics that say public education could improve.

It's an old cliche that the room for improvement is the largest room in the world and not only for education but for other groups as well. However, one must question the major premise made when it is stated, "Our society and its education institutions seem to have lost sight of the basic purposes of schooling, and of the high expectations and disciplined effort needed to attain them."[2] Let's look at the facts:

- A survey conducted by the national Opinion Research Center in 1978 showed the public's degree of confidence in US institutions at that time. The two institutions receiving the largest percentage of Great Confidence ratings were medicine (51.4%) and education (40.5%).
- 53% of the American population aged 3 to 34 are involved in some form of education, most of it public education.
- America has the highest literacy rate in the world, 98.2%, a far cry from the 55% in 1945. Almost all of the increase has been the product of public education.
- Today more than 88% of America's public school graduates performed adequately or higher on skills tests.
- More American college students complete degree programs (50%) than students anywhere else.
- A higher percentage of handicapped students are taught in American public schools than any other nation in the world (1.2 million enrolled in 1981).

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— Until school desegregation fewer than half the entering black high school freshman completed school. Today it's 75%.

— Black college enrollments have increased 250% in the past 10 years. More blacks are now in American colleges than in British and French colleges and universities combined (1,062,000).

— Over 2.3 million public school classroom teaches are required to have more education than those anywhere else in the world.

Further, if public education and teachers are such abject failures:

— Why did the U.S. High School Team win the 22nd International Mathematical Olympiad in July of 1981? This happens to be the most prestigious math competition for High School students in the world.

— How can the critics express themselves so well? Are they all self-taught, parent-taught, or private school graduates?

— Why did almost 50% of America's high school graduates enter higher education this fall? This is more than double any other nation including Japan and the Soviet Union.

— How are we able to graduate about 80% of our youth from high school? No country in the world can match that record.

— How was the U.S. able to produce the first astronauts to set foot on the moon? Twenty-three of the first 25 were public school graduates.

— Why did an Indiana state-wide study by the Rand Corporation find 1976 high school students superior to 1944 high school students in achievement test scores. This, in spite of the fact that we now keep almost everyone in school.

— How does it happen that such a high percentage of Nobel Prize winners are Americans?

A century ago education was largely limited to the sons of the well-to-do. In most countries of the world it is still available to only a small number of elite children. Too bad for late bloomers! I get tired of hearing critics of public education say that other countries do a better job with college prep students and/or the gifted and talented.

In the first place it isn't true and in the second place that's about all they bother with. Our democracy accepts the responsibility to help *all* the children of *all* our citizens. There is ample evidence that the major premise of educational failure is not accurate.

Education is a moral enterprise. This means that questions answered and decisions made in education are mostly "should" questions and decisions rather than descriptive "is" questions and decisions. Our decisions reflect value commitments and ethical choices. Thus, education is not only not value free, it is the most value laden of human activities. American public schools are faced with a special, inherent problem: our school districts served widely diverse populations.

A sampling of sentiment in any community will find when citizens are asked about taxes that the feeling is that *their* taxes are high. Yet it takes only a minimal knowledge of mathematics to know that 50% of the communities must have taxes below average. Likewise, expectations of communities, regardless of dollars spent or ability of students, is that their community's students *should achieve* "above average". Never mind that mathematically this is not possible for 50% of the communities.

Standardized tests provide tangible results that individuals are not all equal in terms of the characteristics being measured by the tests. Yet the general public (including the press, state legislators, and members of boards of education) in the current push for minimum competency testing at all grade levels seem largely unaware that no amount of testing, no setting of competencies, and no establishment of standards and remedial programs can cause these students to achieve beyond the limits of their intellectual capacity. Students with IQ's of 69 or below are classified as retarded and P.L. 94-142 requires that they be provided appropriate special education programs with individualized educational plans. It is accepted that the intelligence of these students limits their

learning rate and the level of learning that can be expected from them. The general public, however, does not seem to realize that there is no sudden break between IQ 69 and IQ 70 regarding the student's ability to perform in school. Yet the child with IQ 69 is in a special education program where he/she finds realistic expectations for achievement and where special programs and resources are available, while the child with an IQ between 70 and 90 is in general education where he/she must compete with students of all other ability levels and meet standards established for the average child.

E. Joseph Schneider states in quoting Laren Resnick:

"Only the past three generations in this country expected all children, regardless of background, to be able to read a book and understand its contents."

"Sure we always thought some kids should read and write. But they were the elite. It wasn't until after World War I that this country really began to encourage all children to attend school and attain an acceptable literacy level."

"In 1909, for instance, of every 100 children to enroll in the first grade, only 13 remained in school at age 16."

"In other words, the schools early in this country only had to deal with a small number of kids. And they, by and large, were highly motivated and well supported in their academic endeavors at home. If they couldn't make the grade, they dropped out; most did. And even if they stuck it out, the teachers had no qualms in those days about making kids repeat a grade or two."

"Education now is expected to do much more than simply teach bright kids the basic skills. In this country we believe every child, regardless of parental background, race, language, or handicap should be given an opportunity to be educated in a public school. We believe that our country and its citizens will be stronger because of such a position."

"In today's society, liberals and conservatives alike — expect students to have achieved 'functional literacy' when they exit from schools."[2]

And Cavit C. Chesher states:

"There is a general expectation that every youngster, regardless of his/her background, who enters the classroom will emerge as a proficient reader, an accomplished mathematician, and a prolific writer. However, these same students no longer remain in their home communities once graduated from high school. Yet education is repeatedly earmarked as a responsibility of the local community."

"Furthermore, if these high school graduates are unprepared to meet the demands, whatever they might be, as they travel across the four corners of the earth, too often it is the local school system which is blamed for not meeting the needs of society."[3]

Educational Accountability

In the past decade the concept of accountability has been applied to schools and individual teachers in forms that vary from rational to witch hunts and an opportunity to "do to schools what we haven't been able to do under other pretexts" or to other levels of government. Almost all professional educators accept the fact that they are responsible for the wise stewardship of public funds and the careful nurturance of the children who have been entrusted to them. Educators are incensed, as any group should be, by unfair and irrational approaches that equate school productivity to assembly line input/output models, which ignore the inputs, in the name of accountability.

Scores of standardized tests have often been used as weapons by critics of schools and advocates of accountability, who have little knowledge of statistics. The attackers have demonstrated little understanding of test technology and have magnified their errors by assuming that the only achievements worth considering are those measured by standardized tests. These fallacies have been combined with the graceful avoidance of any consideration of community and social factors that may impinge more stringently on school success than any school variables, including teacher effectiveness or curriculum.

> "When we place a child with IQ 70-90 in a general education program, we should be saying — if we are honest with the child, and with ourselves — that this is a program appropriate to his/her needs, that he/she can in fact achieve successfully in this program, and that with diligence he/she can look forward to receiving a high school diploma."[4] Yet the data indicates "that the student with IQ 70, at age 14, cannot be expected to perform above a high fourth-grade level and at age 17 cannot be expected to have reached more than a high sixth-grade level..."[4]

There are compelling reasons to sympathize with beleaguered teachers when critics are upset by results that show 50% of a local class below a national grade level norm, (if one understands the definition of the median): when the critics had been backing a vested interest in health education, consumer education, career education, humanistic education, and other topics added to school responsibilities and now ignore the impact the addition of these curricula has on the time available for the 'traditional' subjects; or when the critics ignore factors such as family mobility, single parent homes, corruption in government, and two-breadwinner families, and the effect these social trends have on student interest in and parental support of schools. Standardized tests do provide a potential weapon for an unreasonably critical local community, particularly when school officials do an ineffective or incomplete job of interpreting the results within the milieu of the community.

A united effort is needed to translate for the public the needs and accomplishments of education. A divided educational community will surely fail in this great effort. In those instances where the public has been told that teachers are to blame for the problems in education by a self serving administration and where the public has been told that the administration is to blame for the problems by frustrated teachers, the result is that the public believes both of them. The public, therefore, supports neither and condemns both.

Teachers who plan together and who unite to carry this effort forward to the public will most likely succeed. Where they can find common ground with administrators, the likelihood of success will be increased.

The cause of education is advanced, of course, through outstanding teaching in every classroom. But the activities of the educator in professional circles, at the negotiating table, in community organizations, and through a personal commitment to promote the teaching profession and educational opportunity for all children, are a vital part of the total movement to gain public support.

NOTES

[1] "Another 'Back to the Basics' Push Isn't Going to Help Today's Schools", E. Joseph Schneider, *Educational R & D Report*, Spring 1981, pp. 2-7.

[2] "A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform", *The National Commission on Excellence in Education*, April 26, 1983, pp. 5-6.

[3] "Another 'Back to Basics' Push Isn't Going to Help Today's Schools".

[4] "Two-by-Four Teacher Days Are Gone", Carit C. Cheshier, *Tennessee Teacher*, February 1981, p. 7.

[5] "Minimum Competency Testing and the Slow Learner", Howard G. Dunlap, Educational Leadership, February 1979, pp. 327-328.

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A Response to "A Nation at Risk — Accountable for What?"

People with a commitment to public education would have difficulty not feeling some sympathy for the frustration expressed by Gerardi and Benedict with the volume and persistence of criticism and scapegoating directed at educators and educational achievement. They identify and imply a number of issues which have caused conflict in public education; they defend the accomplishments of democratically oriented mass education; and finally, suggest some courses of action to change public perceptions of the schools. This response will examine some of the issues raised, the defenses offered, the solutions suggested, and attempt to evaluate the significance of the issues and the efficacy or adequacy of proposed remedies.

About a year ago the United States federal government issued a most devastating appraisal of American public education entitled *A Nation at Risk*. The report cited major deficiencies in student achievement and the quality of teaching. This was followed by other critical studies calling for widespread changes in public education. State legislatures responded with a deluge of legislation:

> At least 15 states are increasing the number of years spent studying subjects in high school. New York has added a year of mathematics and of science to its one year requirements... An Education Department report will show that some states have also approved lengthening the school day or the school year.[1]

The American Secretary of Education, T.H. Bell has characterized these events as a "tidal wave of reform"; however, New York Times education writer, Gene I. Maeroff has suggested that the alleged reform movement may be a 'washout';[2] In his discussion he suggests that symptoms rather than major root problems are being treated. Among the latter he mentions unmotivated students, lack of home support, lack of incentives for able students to enter teaching, malaise in the teaching profession and major social and psychological problems. On the last point he writes:

> What many students need, according to their teachers, are counselors, psychologists, social workers and other support personnel.[3]

Gerardi and Benedict are accurate in identifying recurring cycles of criticism which afflict North American education. Two decades is probably too narrow a context for what seems to have been going on for about a century or more. They also are on the right track in identifying the dialectic between critics of humanistic vs. achievement oriented persuasions. The former seem to have been in ascendency in the 1890s, the 1930s, and the 1960s; and those critics emphasizing standards, efficiency, competency and basics in the 1900s (see Raymond Callahan's *Education and the Cult of Efficiency*[4]), the 1920s, the 1950s, and perhaps the 1970s. Gerardi and Benedict also are correct in diagnosing the Reagan era as a "back to basics" period. Upon closer examination the notion of two durable factions seems somewhat misleading. Wealth, technology, and a number of other factors are generating a degree of pluralism, heterogeneity and particularism which our structures seem unable to contain or accommodate.

Perhaps a brief account of recent educational conflicts in my own community, the city of Calgary, would be illustrative or a sort of microcosm of the impact of high energy pluralism on the schools. Unlike the American situation, several Canadian provinces provide for separate public school systems based on religion and language. Generally, with minor exceptions, religious schools have been Roman Catholic. For a brief period the Calgary public school board permitted a number of alternative schools including some for Protestant and Jewish constituencies. The last school board election resulted in a victory for trustees, opposed to fragmentation of the school system along denominational lines, who have decided to terminate these enclaves. There have been campaigns for

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other particularistic schools including most recently one by an Islamic group. Other areas of conflict include a Native school; plans for doing away with special schools for the handicapped; controversy over bilingual (French) schools; and the closing of low enrollment neighborhood schools. Fundamentalist Protestants in one instance are attempting to operate their own school in violation of provincial laws and regulations. Calgary, along with much of the rest of North America, seems to present an educational equivalent of Lebanon with various sub-cultural sectarians engaged in continuous civic conflict.

In both Canada and the United States emphasis has been placed on the positive aspects of pluralism, multiculturalism and the 'Canadian mosaic' with rather little emphasis being given to the difficulties and costs which a high degree of heterogeneity might entail. An important implicit question suggested by Gerardi and Benedict's paper deals with the degree or extent of accommodation which the schools should attempt in meeting particularistic expectations. A correlative set of questions would deal with the capacity of present structures to implement such expectations and the availability of resources to do so. For the most part public education is bureaucratically structured in North America. Bureaucracies are not noted for flexible responsiveness to environmental change. To be blunt, bureaucracies are too simple a mechanism to respond to varied and complex demands. The inability of socialist economies to meet differing consumer expectancies might be an illustrative analogy. If accommodating pluralism to a high degree is viewed as desirable then perhaps an examination of Milton Friedman's[5] market model for education could be a viable option.

The intent of the statistical citations seems to be for the purpose of justifying American education's performance to date and the democratic mass education approach. Some of the items are rather ambiguous and in need of clarification. One is not sure what the 98.2% literacy rate means; or the comparison of American degrees with those of other nations; what is the significance of comparing the number of blacks in post secondary education with the total number of British and French college students? The United States has some two thousand post secondary institutions among which are some very outstanding ones and some dreadful institutions which are labeled colleges or universities only by legal definition. In terms of investment in facilities and resources and the numbers of students educated, the Americans are unsurpassed in comparison with other societies. If the authors are saying that American public education has processed a large number of students many of whom have subsequently gone on to higher education and some have won Nobel prizes and that these factors are indicators of success, it would seem like a not too unreasonable conclusion.

Gerardi and Benedict go on to state that education is a moral enterprise. This statement is plausible as far as it goes but it does not go far enough. Education is also a public enterprise and an important component of public policy. Joseph Stalin said something to the effect that education was a weapon. Plato in the *Republic* includes education as a significant aspect of statecraft. After the launching of sputnik the Americans passed the National Defense Education Act (1958) which implies that a number of policy makers view education as a part of national security. Since at least the middle of the nineteenth century leaders in both the United States and Canada have viewed education as a means of economic and technical development examples of which would be the establishment of agricultural and mechanical colleges, subsidizing agricultural, industrial and vocation programs, and the development of technical institutes. Both societies have also viewed the schools as instruments for integrating racial and linguistic minorities. When addressing the questions *cui bono* or who benefits, the interests of society or the state are well represented.

The authors also bring up the tax question which warrants further examination. The post-war baby boom is over and population trends in the western world (and the developed Communist world) are

declining. For economic, pessimistic world view or life style reasons couples seem to be opting for childlessness, one child families or families rather late in life. The industrial world is also going through its major economic crisis since the great depression. Hard economic times do not seem to bring out the generous side of human nature. Increasingly, one hears arguments favoring the notion that those with children should bear the costs of education — a sort of user fee notion applied to schooling. In many instances, taxpayers without school age children are becoming the majority in several cities. Such taxpayers often exhibit an economy mindedness which parent taxpayers find frustrating. The immediate prospects for both governmental and local public support of education seem to be on the restrained side.

Gerardi and Benedict also touch on the local-cosmopolitan question — a most difficult one of pontificate about. In a highly mobile and rapidly changing society parochialism is difficult to sustain and can be dysfunctional. On the other hand localized decision making produces effects such as motivation, commitment, creativity and problem solving which remote control tends to stifle. Unanswered is the meaning of the unit of localization. Is it the city or town? the district? the neighborhood or the individual school?

There is dissatisfaction with the factory-industrial model being applied to schools. Many question the appropriateness of business production approaches being used to evaluate schools and other public service organizations. This approach does seem to be the dominant or hegemonic model for organizational thinking in the twentieth century. For better or worse, however, culture may be undergoing what Kuhn[6] describes as a paradigmatic shift toward a high tech computer metaphor regarding both organizations and individuals.

The notion of cultural context as a generator of problems for which the school is ill-equipped to deal is also an area capable of elaboration. The decay of families, economic malaise, *anomie* and alienation, the legitimation crisis (i.e., institutions such as government, the church, the family, etc. do not seem to control people's behavior as they did in the past), war fears, etc. are indicators of a profound cultural crisis. Certain trends in society seem to facilitate disintegration and nihilism such as popular culture, pornography, drugs, and even such seemingly benign forces such as technology, science, art and commerce. Cultural historian Ronald Stromberg[7] writes:

> Art moves towards its dissolution. Life and knowledge break apart. The age of books is over. The age of obscenity begins. Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world. The barbarians rise from the catacombs. Ancient authorities dissolve. Science and technology turn sour. Political reason decays. All is absurd.

There does not seem to be any dearth of apocalyptic scenarios.[8] There are also some optimistic forecasts though their number seems fewer. The degree of impact education can have on these trends is problematical. The impact of these forces on the schools is manifest to those studying education or working in the schools.

The course of action suggested by Gerardi and Benedict seems somewhat timid and ineffectual. Essentially they seem to be calling for a public relations campaign by teachers and administrators, outstanding teaching and visible community involvement. After identifying or implying problems of social fragmentation, ideological tenacity, the state's concern with security and the economy, adverse demographic and tax prospects, localism vs. cosmopolitanism, the limited response capacity of bureaucracies, and major socio-cultural shifts (which may or may not be portents of decay and disintegration) the suggested responses are very feeble and inappropriate. Muddling through and tinkering may no longer be options. Something like a royal commission or national task force should be set up to propose the kind of educational system North America will need to function in the 21st century taking account of the computer revolution, economic trends, desired outcomes, and resource availability. As with other institutions in western society, education is in need of renovation and redefinition.

NOTES

[1] Gene I. Maeroff, "The 'Tidal Wave' of Reform in Education May be a Washout", *New York Times*, May 6, 1984, p. 24E.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Raymond E. Callahan, *Education and the Cult of Efficiency*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965).

[5] Milton Friedman, "The Role of Government in Education", in *Capitalism and Freedom* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962).

[6] T.S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolution* (2nd ed.), (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970).

[7] Roland N. Stromberg, *After Everything: Western Intellectual History* Since 1945. (New York: St. Martins Press, 1975) p. 235.

[8] See for example Roberto Vacca, *The Coming Dark Age* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Books, 1974); Roland N. Stromberg, Ibid.; and Scott Sullivan, "The Decline of Europe", *Newsweek*, April 9, 1984, pp. 44-56.