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POLICY

A TIME FOR RE-EXAMINATION AND RENEWAL COMMITMENT

The National Commission on Excellence seeks ways to perfect the nation's commitment to universal education

By David Pierpont Gardner

The American educational system has long enjoyed a deserved reputation for both its egalitarian nature and the excellence of its program and product. From the days of Thomas Jefferson's call for an educated citizenry, to Horace Mann's crusade for the common schools, to John Dewey's eloquent advocacy for the public schools, and to our nation's more recent effort dramatically to expand access to our schools and colleges, our country's educational effort stands as an enviable, albeit imperfect, record of solid achievement.

The egalitarian dimension in American life and character, as noted by the young French aristocrat Alexis de Tocqueville and other observers, has been and will continue to be a pervasive and important characteristic of our evolving educational system. An equally important dimension of American life and its educational system has been the seeking of authentic distinction or excellence with an ever-expanding number of students.

Our schools serve a much larger segment of the school-age population than do the schools of most other countries. Nevertheless, we have produced as able individuals as a percentage of the school-going pool as has any nation, irrespective of the pool's size.

For example, Dr. Torsten Husén of the Institute of International Education at the University of Stockholm, Sweden, recently testified before the National Commission on Excellence in Education and reported that the top nine percent of American students perform just as well on standardized achievement tests as the top nine percent in other industrialized countries. Similarly, our colleges and universities, which admit a far larger proportion of 18-year-olds than other countries, produce exceptionally able students and direct graduate and research programs that are the best in the world.

Excellence as an Issue

Why then is excellence in education an issue of intense current interest today?

First, public confidence in education, as measured by opinion polls, shows significant declines which go well beyond normal cyclical patterns. For example, a recent analysis of Gallup Poll findings over the past 12 years reveals that in 1974 approximately two-thirds of parents with public school children felt that their local schools were superior or above average. In 1979, the percentage responding so favorably dropped below 50 percent.

The sources of such dissatisfaction tend to be increasingly associated with issues of educational quality. A recent Washington Post/ABC News Poll indicates that about four parents in ten of high school or

Mr. Gardner is chairman of the National Commission on Excellence in Education.

near high school age students criticize schools for offering "pass through" education, for having unmotivated teachers, and for grade inflation. A similar level of support was accorded the statement: "Too many students are allowed to graduate from high school without learning very much."

Second, the well-publicized declines in test scores of college-bound students, as measured both on ACT and SAT examinations, reinforce perceptions of weakening quality in our schools. Similarly, declines in the proportion of students taking mathematics, science, and other more academically challenging courses or "solids" suggest to many observers that students are being inadequately prepared for the demands that will be made of them in an increasingly complex and technological world, not to speak of what our colleges and universities will be expecting of them as they pursue their studies beyond high school.

Third, the number and kind of remedial offerings now embodied in the lower-division programs of our colleges and universities have grown enormously in recent years. These programs are diluting higher education's resources, deflecting their mission, and weakening the conventional pressures that more exacting college and university standards have historically exerted on secondary school curriculums.

Thus, public and professional concern over the quality dimension of our educational system has become widespread in recent years and is growing. The formation of the National Commission on Excellence in Education by Secretary Bell is but one example of this concern. Similar efforts in several states have been undertaken. Legislators, governors, foundations, scientific and scholarly societies, teacher associations and societies, educators, and parents are discussing the subject with increasing frequency. Television news programs, magazine articles, and newspaper reports just this past year further reflect the high level of interest in the status and quality of education in America. And there are nearly 25 major national research studies on the American high school currently under way.

Role of the Commission

The National Commission on Excellence in Education is, of course, an initiative of the federal government. The federal interest and record in promoting excellence in education is long-standing and ranges from development of science curriculums to peer review and funding of basic research, to support of centers of excellence, and to enrichment programs for teachers. Quality education and educational access have historically been regarded as in the national interest, although the role of the federal government in expressing that interest has ebbed and flowed with the times, politics, and economic conditions.

Education, of course, is now and has historically been a state and local function. Any lasting changes in our schools, colleges, and universities will be a function of decisions made by local school boards,

parents, teachers, professors, principals, superintendents, state school boards, legislative committees, governors, boards of trustees, boards of regents, scholarly and scientific societies, and the general public.

To presume that the federal government or a federal commission can effect comprehensive and sustainable changes in our nation's educational system is to misunderstand the workings of both our system of government and the purposes of this Commission, just as to believe that the federal government and the Commission can have no impact is similarly to misunderstand their respective roles and potential.

The National Commission on Excellence in Education, by its very existence as well as by its *modus operandi*, can be an effective force for focusing attention on the issue of excellence, for bringing to the fore problems which bear upon it, for teasing out data and testimony of a kind that is known or new and casting it in a fresh perspective, and for offering its recommendations to those whose opinions count at all levels in our country.

The Commission is composed of 18 persons whose experience with the educational system, its purposes, processes, financing, politics, and governance is wide-ranging and personal. It includes teachers, principals, superintendents and school board members at the local and state levels, professors, a Nobel laureate, university presidents, a business leader, and a governor, among others. The Commission, taken as a whole, has a breadth and depth of experience and contacts uncharacteristic of many national commissions.

Secretary Bell regarded the composition of the Commission as critical to its success, both for purposes of preparing a useful and insightful report with the help and assistance of interested parties, societies, associations, and constituent organizations and of having a capacity to reach out and to influence the educational system at district, state, and national levels as well, once the report has been submitted. The Commission's staff, directed by Dr. Milton Goldberg, was chosen with equal care.

Charge and Agenda

The Commission's charter, as detailed by Secretary Bell, charges the Commission with the following responsibilities:

- Assessing the quality of teaching and learning in our nation's schools and colleges;
- Comparing the American educational system with the systems of other advanced countries;
- Studying the reciprocal relationship between college admission requirements and high school curriculum/high school student achievement;
- Assessing the degree to which major social and educational changes in the last quarter century have affected educational achievement;
- Defining problems which must be faced and overcome if we are to pursue successfully and promote excellence in education;
- Holding hearings and receiving testimony on how

to foster high levels of quality in the nation's educational system.

In contrast to most of the national studies currently underway on the American high school, the Commission intends to generate relatively little in new research findings. Rather, it intends to gather, evaluate, and synthesize existing research findings and field experience. This information, together with invited and volunteered testimony and commissioned papers, will enable the Commission to construct its findings, arrive at its conclusions, and formulate its recommendations. Scientific and scholarly societies throughout the country, the national educational laboratories, individual scholars, teachers, school board members, and others have already been of material help and, without exception, willing, indeed eager, to be of assistance. The Commission's final report is to be submitted to the Secretary and the nation in March of 1983.

Completing the tasks outlined above in such a short time will require a major effort on the part of Commission members and staff, as well as the involvement of the educational community, broadly defined.

Public Hearings

The Commission is in the midst of a series of six public hearings scheduled across the United States over a period of several months. These hearings constitute the cornerstone for the Commission's work, since they provide Commission members with access to both factual information and informed opinions about current education problems and how to overcome them, as those facts and opinions bear upon issues of educational quality and excellence.

The first of these hearings was held at Stanford University in Palo Alto, California, during the second week in March. The topic of the hearing was science, mathematics, and technology education. The hearing was chaired by Commission member Glenn T. Seaborg, holder of a Nobel Prize in Chemistry and presently a University Professor of Chemistry at the University of California, Berkeley.

In mid-April, a hearing on the topic of language and literacy was held in the board auditorium of the Houston Independent School District in Texas. The hearing was chaired by Commission member Jay Sommer, 1981-1982 National Teacher of the Year and currently a foreign language instructor at New Rochelle High School in New York State.

A third public hearing was conducted at Georgia State University in Atlanta in May. Teaching and teacher education comprised the scope of this hearing, chaired by Commission member Annette Y. Kirk, parent, civic leader, and former high school teacher.

The Commission's remaining three scheduled public hearings this year will cover college admission standards (Chicago, June 23), education and work (Denver, September 16), and education for the gifted and talented (Boston, October 15).

Each hearing follows a similar format. In the morning, Commission members hear invited testimony from national experts on the topic under consideration. Following the presentation of testimony, the invited experts discuss issues and respond to questions from Commission members. Following lunch, local and regional experts present testimony about their experiences and perspectives on the topic. The last portion of each hearing day is open to members of the public wishing to express their viewpoints individually or collectively. These presentations are expected to address the day's topic and, thus far, such opinions have been well prepared, succinctly presented, and very helpful to the Commission.

In addition to the personal testimony the Commission receives on the day of each hearing, individuals and organizations across the country are invited to submit two to five pages of written testimony on each hearing topic. All testimony pertaining to a particular hearing will be placed on the official record, if received no later than one month following the hearing date.

Aside from the hearings, two full Commission meetings have been scheduled in the upcoming months. These have been scheduled in addition to four earlier ones, the most recent of which was given over to a discussion of the nature of schooling and transitions between levels. The agenda of each of these remaining meetings has not yet been fully determined. However, a substantial part of the full Commission meetings is devoted to examining specific issues raised in the charter. In addition, several panels and symposiums have been scheduled in various topics, such as student performance expectations.

Importance of Excellence

I wish to stress two points in connection with the work of the Commission and the notion of excellence.

The first is that the Commission is genuinely open to informed and responsible advice from interested groups and individuals. These opinions are invited and will be welcomed, read, and considered. The Commission is wholly uninstructed, except for its charter, and is in no respect whatsoever bound to the opinions and views of Secretary Bell, the White House, Congress or any part of government, or to any other interested public or private party or organization.

The Commission, therefore, actively solicits advice from individuals and groups, particularly from those who observe educational successes and failures on a daily basis. Please send us any information which you believe might help us understand the problems inhibiting excellence in our schools and the solutions that might allow us to improve the quality of schooling. Examples of exemplary programs and successes are, obviously, of equal interest. We also are attempting to seek out examples of schools that are unexpectedly succeeding as well as those that are inexplicably failing.

cably failing. We believe there is much to be learned from these examples, whether they are encouraging or not.

The second point is that, while diversity of background and experience characterizes membership of the Commission, we are unanimous in our concern for, and commitment to, excellence in education. While our views of what constitutes excellence will not always coincide, there is unanimity in our belief that excellence and quality will be the overriding educational issue of this decade. This statement is not intended in any way to slight the egalitarian dimension of American education. This nation has attempted, and rightly so, to pursue both equal educational opportunity and excellence in education. I feel confident that Commission members, along with educational, business, and political leaders, remain committed to pursuit of that ideal.

A Concluding Note

There is a tendency on the part of some to view a recommitment to excellence in education as elitist and as hostile to the need for expanded educational opportunity. My own view, and I cannot speak here for anyone else, is that the egalitarian dimension, as expressed for example in the educational philosophy of John Dewey, is compatible with, and reinforcing of, the quality dimension in education. For Dewey, the aim of education is to allow individuals to live their lives to the fullest, to enable them to expand their horizons, to provide for both individual and societal growth. This philosophy is at base egalitarian and democratic in that everyone, irrespective of race or background, is considered capable of, and is afforded an opportunity for, personal growth and an educational experience worthy of each person's potential.

This view is in no respect inconsistent with excellence if one is willing, as I am, to accept the notion of excellence as John Gardner so many years ago and with such understanding and insight put it:

A conception (of excellence) which embraces many kinds of excellence at many levels is the only one which fully accords with the richly varied potentialities of mankind. . . . Our society cannot achieve

greatness unless individuals at many levels of ability accept the need for high standards of performance and strive to achieve those standards within the limits possible to them. . . . The tone and fiber of our society depend upon a pervasive and almost universal striving for good performance. And we are not going to get that kind of striving . . . unless we can instruct the whole society in a conception of excellence that leaves room for everybody who is willing to strive. . . .*

The time is ripe for schools, colleges, and universities to work more closely and cooperatively than they are inherently wont to do, to answer the public's cry for educational programs that will truly prepare young people to function in our society with success and happiness, and to draw from them what they are capable of giving, students of limited academic promise as well as those possessing such promise in greater measure. We should be clear in our own minds about the kinds of schools and institutions we have—what they can do well and what they should not be asked to do because they would do it either poorly or because in doing it, they dilute schooling's central purpose. By assessing the strengths and weaknesses of American education and identifying ways in which levels of excellence can be raised, the Commission hopes to set forth viable and enduring strategies for rebuilding confidence in the educational system.

The French novelist Marcel Proust once observed, "The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new lands but in seeking with new eyes." A fresh perspective and re-examination will, we earnestly hope, recommit our nation to the belief that the improvement of education in our country will expand individual choice, tap unrealized promise and potential, enliven sensibilities and understanding both at home and abroad, inform our civic discourse, enrich our lives, invigorate our economy, improve our security, assure our future as a free people, and restore confidence in and support of our schools, colleges, and universities.

For comments or information, write to: National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1200 19th Street, N.W., Washington, DC 20208. *

*John W. Gardner, *Excellence* (New York: Harper & Row, 1961), pp. 131-132.