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CHAPTER 1

STUDENTS AT RISK

Times have certainly changed! Just ask the folks in Fresno, California. Increasing attendance at the local public school brings in more money for the school district. State funding is based on average daily attendance. How, therefore, do you get students to class more often? Here's one experiment. Fresno High School bet \$10,000 of tax-payer funds that prizes of cash and merchandise would bring students to class on time and more often. The school started an attendance lottery. Weekly prizes were small—a portable stereo, for instance. But prizes at the end of each quarter were as large as home stereos, video cassette recorders, and \$200 in cash. Fresno High's school site council, administrators, and student council approved the plan. Fifty-four teachers agreed with the idea, and eleven did not. Needless to say, the plan was an educational failure.

Of all of the problems facing the United States today, many thoughtful persons believe the decay in education to be the most important. It is less spectacular than the economy, or the Middle East, or scandals in government and so on, and it receives comparatively less publicity from the media. It is, nonetheless, the most ominous because, by a combination of insidious design and sheer ineptitude, it is turning out young citizens, the nation of tomorrow, who are almost totally unprepared to face life, intellectually and spiritually. To further abuse a much-abused quotation: "A little learning is a dangerous thing."

WHAT ABOUT READING?

Protagonists of modern education will rise immediately and demand by what right can one call education "decaying"? Well, take reading for example. To most of us, the simple ability to read is as natural as breathing. From the Greeks through the early Americans, reading was recognized as a necessity, even if education progressed no fur-

ther. Recently, three major employers in the largest midwestern city, the telephone and electric companies and a giant oil corporation, admitted that they had to set up "schools" within their own organizations so that recently graduated high school students could be taught to read well enough to be able to understand some part of their new jobs! Parenthetically, the school budget for that city is almost half again as large as the total United States budget for any year up to 1918 (and that was a war year)!

Before the draft was discontinued, an officer involved in its planning operations wrote, "[The draftees'] performance in the relatively undemanding Armed Forces Qualification Test revealed that they are too unlettered to read and understand even the simplest Army training manuals." Things have now gone from bad to worse.

A former member of the U.S. Senate, a semanticist and educator before his election, wrote that only one or two members of that world-changing body had sufficient command of the English language to use it correctly. He continued, "A large and growing number of children in this country are being given only a token education, a sham and a fraud."

A Nation At Risk is an unbelievable report on educational life in America. It is an official U.S. government document. As the years have passed since the National Commission on Excellence in Education first published its findings in 1983, the crisis has only worsened. The report noted:

"If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war. As it stands, we have allowed this to happen to ourselves. . . . We have, in effect, been committing an act of unthinking, unilateral educational disarmament.

"Our society and its educational institutions seem to have lost sight of the basic purposes of schooling. . . . 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."

The educational dimensions of the risk were amply documented in testimony received by the Commission. For example:

"International comparisons of student achievement, completed a

decade ago, reveal that on 19 academic tests American students were never first or second and, in comparison with other industrialized nations, were last seven times.

“Tens of millions of American adults are functionally illiterate by the simplest tests of everyday reading, writing, and comprehension.

“About 13 percent of all 17-year-olds in the United States can be considered functionally illiterate. Functional illiteracy among minority youth may run as high as 40 percent.

“Average achievement of high school students on most standardized tests is now lower than 26 years ago when Sputnik was launched.

“Over half the population of gifted students do not match their test-ability with comparable achievement in school.

“The College Board’s Scholastic Aptitude Tests (SAT) demonstrate a virtually unbroken decline. Average verbal scores fell over 50 points and average mathematics scores dropped nearly 40 points.

“College Board achievement tests also reveal consistent declines in recent years in such subjects as physics and English.

“Both the number and proportion of students demonstrating superior achievement on the SATs (i.e., those with scores of 650 or higher) have also dramatically declined.

“Many 17-year-olds do not possess the “higher order” intellectual skills we should expect of them. Nearly 40 percent cannot draw inferences from written material; only one-fifth can write a persuasive essay; and only one-third can solve a mathematics problem requiring several steps.

“There was a steady decline in science achievement scores of U.S. 17-year-olds as measured by national assessments of science.

“Remedial mathematics courses in public 4-year colleges increased by 72 percent and now constitute one-quarter of all mathematics courses taught in those institutions.

“Average tested achievement of students graduating from college is also lower.

“Business and military leaders complain that they are required to spend millions of dollars on costly remedial education and training programs in such basic skills as reading, writing, spelling, and computation. The Department of the Navy, for example, reported to the Commission that one-quarter of its recent recruits cannot read at the ninth grade level, the minimum needed simply to understand written safety instructions. Without remedial work they cannot even begin, much less complete, the sophisticated training essential in much of the modern military.

The report therefore went on to say, “*The average graduate* of our schools and colleges today is not as well-educated as the average graduate of 25 or 35 years ago, when a much smaller proportion of our population completed high school and college. The negative impact of this fact likewise cannot be overstated.”

HELPLESS AND HOPELESS

The results of the most comprehensive literacy study ever undertaken by the U.S. Department of Education were released in 1993. The 14 million dollar project revealed that nearly half of all adult Americans cannot read and write sufficiently to get and keep a decent job. More than half of all high school graduates were found to have restricted abilities in math and reading. This, and even more unbelievable educational information, was widely disseminated by the news media in September, 1993 (*Boston Globe*, 9/19/93; *USA Today*, 9/19/93; *Chicago Sun Times*, 9/27/93).

An article in one of our local newspapers is entitled “The Real Horror of Being Illiterate.” It begins, “It is virtually impossible for those Americans who have beaten the system to comprehend the full horror of not being able to read. Non-readers flounder and fall back, they become the drop-outs, the pushed-outs, the unemployed and the unemployable—frustrated and bitter, helpless and hopeless. Not for them the pleasure of reading great American and English literature. Not for them the relaxation of the sports pages, or the humor of the comics. Their lives are void inside a vacuum. All too tragically they are often considered mentally retarded.” The author continues, “The evidence is overwhelming that millions of junior high and high school

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students today cannot read their textbooks. Millions more stumble and struggle their way through." Yes, it certainly must be said that the government educational system is a sick, multi-billion dollar social institution in the midst of a crisis.

PARENTS ON THE WARPATH

I have in front of me two issues of the *Readers Digest Magazine*. In one there is an article by the title, "Are We Becoming A Nation Of Illiterates?" The other issue begins with the story, "Why Johnny Can't Write." These are most interesting articles. They point out that parents all over the United States are disturbed. They are disturbed because children are not being taught to read, write, spell, and do math as they should be taught. Millions of parents throughout the United States are upset not only with their children's academic deficiencies, but with all of the amoral sex education, socialism, sensitivity training, value's clarification, behavior modification, drugs, violence, outcome-based education, the lack of discipline and many other things within the government schools. Parents are disturbed that in the government schools Christian ideals and principles are simply not being taught. Old fashioned morality has been thrown right out the school window. No wonder parents are upset. No wonder they are removing their children from the government schools.

General Nathan F. Twining, on his retirement as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, stated, "I can't help but wish that our educational processes had inspired a stronger faith in American values, and the resolution and the guts and fortitude to maintain them." Statistics and comments abound. Perhaps they are summed up by the cynical remark of one critic, "Johnny may not read; but, he can be so well-adjusted that he won't know the difference."

However, to John Dewey, one of the modern founders of progressive education, and his cohorts, the purpose of education was to adjust the individual to life. In other words, education for education's sake was worthless. Its value lay in reducing the individual to the common level of his "peer group." No educational competitiveness, no grading, and no discipline would be the ideal. This era saw the begin-

ning of such terms as "orientation," "group dynamics," "social living," "peer groups," et al.

A LOOK AT THE PAST

Historians (merely chronicling the development of education without delving into the reasons for its transitions) have almost uniformly ascribed the immense rise of the concepts of progressive education to the increasing dissatisfaction with nineteenth-century classicism. The foundation was actually laid many years earlier, however. Progressive education was the result of a carefully managed, very long-term program.

Education was regarded as of primary importance by the American colonists. "Prior to the introduction of compulsory public education," one historian has noted, "Americans were probably the most literate people in the world." Almost all of this literacy resulted from private schooling—either home schooling or in traditional schools. There was no government interference. To quote the same author again, "There were no accrediting agencies, no regulatory boards, no teacher certification requirements. Parents had the freedom to choose whatever kind of school or education they wanted for their children." Traditional private schooling did not preclude the poor. Almost every school had provisions for charity pupils. Pennsylvania actually paid the tuition to a private school for parents who could not afford to do so.

Thus, the "common school" (as the first public schools were called) did not come into existence because education was offered only to the wealthy, as some progressive educators would like us to believe. Common schools were created in response to a need. They appeared first in Massachusetts to insure the transfer of Christianity to succeeding generations. The Reformation had established the authority of the Bible, and its proper interpretation required a high degree of specific literacy. Hence, communities of a certain size required elementary schools, and larger communities grammar schools, so that Latin, Greek, and Hebrew could be taught for the proper appreciation of Biblical literature. These common schools were purely local. There was no state or central authority. The consolidating link was