

**A CHARTER FOR
PROGRESSIVE
EDUCATION**

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By

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FOREWORD

THIS little book is, in a very real sense, the product of a thinking and working school community. While I can hold no one but myself responsible for any statement made or position taken in the essay, the labors, the ideas, and the criticism of many members of the Lincoln School staff have gone into it, directly or indirectly. Some of the staff have made very definite and salient contributions. But partly from modesty and partly from deference to their colleagues, they forbid me to mention them specifically as individuals. To me, their instinct is sound, for in a community of workers as closely knit in their activities as those in Lincoln School, it is almost impossible for anyone to claim distinctive ownership of any of his educational ideas—which statement makes the very claim of authorship on my part somewhat arbitrary and presumptuous.

In this kind of close-knit cooperative educational thought and courageous group practice, Lincoln School seems to one educational optimist to carry a most fruitful germ of that democratic education which is not yet, but destined to be, both the invigoration and the decoration of the great American society which will ultimately emerge on this continent.

L. D.

CONTENTS

CHAPTER		PAGE
<i>One</i>	A PROGRESSIVE SCHOOL COMES OF AGE	i
<i>Two</i>	THE FUNDAMENTAL OUTLOOK	10
<i>Three</i>	A MODERN CONCEPTION OF LEARNING	18
<i>Four</i>	EDUCATION FOR AMERICAN DEMOCRACY	29
<i>Five</i>	PRINCIPLES UNDERLYING AN AMERICAN CURRICULUM	42
<i>Six</i>	CURRENT CURRICULAR TRENDS	51
<i>Seven</i>	A PLAN FOR THE EMERGING CURRICULUM	57
<i>Eight</i>	A PLAN FOR CURRICULUM BUILDING AND TEACHING	66
<i>Nine</i>	RESOURCES FOR CURRICULUM BUILDING AND TEACHING	76
<i>Ten</i>	SCHEDULING A MODERN PROGRAM	84
<i>Eleven</i>	A SCHOOL PROGRAM FOR TEACHERS COLLEGES	96
<i>Twelve</i>	A STRATEGY FOR PROGRESSIVE EDUCATION	102

CHAPTER ONE

A PROGRESSIVE SCHOOL COMES OF AGE

An
Educational
Prophet

In 1916 Dr. Abraham Flexner wrote an eloquent paper¹ criticizing traditional education and describing a school that would better serve the needs of modern America. To one who has followed world history, the changes in American life, and the development of education since that time, the prophetic insight of Flexner was extraordinary. So much of prophecy was in the paper that, with very slight changes of wording here and there, one could use it to describe many successful elementary schools today, and at the same time ask why secondary schools remain as yet so little changed. Such developments in progressive schools as more realistic study of the sciences and of modern social life; firsthand and genuine experience for the learner; expansion in the arts, with emphasis on current art developments; coordination of subject matter

¹ Flexner, Abraham. "A Modern School." Occasional Publications No. 3, General Education Board, 1923. This pamphlet was a revision of Flexner, "A Modern School," *Review of Reviews*, Vol. 53, pp. 465-474, April, 1916.

Note: In correspondence, Dr. Flexner has acknowledged two influences upon his thinking, although one may be forgiven the judgment that much of the sharp cogency of his educational suggestions is the result of his own thoughtful teaching experience, begun in Louisville in 1886. He mentions the influence of John Dewey upon his educational thought, and upon the thinking which went into the founding of the Lincoln School; and he further very specifically gives credit to President Eliot of Harvard, both for encouraging his own work and for strong support of the idea of the Lincoln School. It is, of course, well remembered that President Eliot remained interested in the school after its founding, visited it several times, and frequently conferred with Dr. Otis W. Caldwell, who, as its first director, was responsible for building this school into an organization which very promptly asserted its leadership in American education.

2 A CHARTER FOR PROGRESSIVE EDUCATION

into individually integrated experience; attention to the needs of the family; the use of the community as a laboratory; increase in the attention given to health; an experimental attitude toward content and subject matter; the creation of new teaching materials; and the solution of the problem of discipline by helping children to find real tasks—are all to be found among the list of some forty specific proposals in this amazing article, written twenty-two years ago. Few if any schools have tried to do all the things Dr. Flexner suggested.

Making a Prophecy Work

The Flexner statement attracted so much attention that as a result the Lincoln School was founded in 1917. Since its beginning, the development of the work of the school has been surprisingly responsive to the suggestions made by the man chiefly responsible for its founding. In the broad units of study in the elementary school, with an extensive utilization of firsthand observation; in the use of the community; in the wide use of reference materials and a rich library rather than standardized textbooks; and in the creation of new teaching materials, the school was very definitely experimenting with, and putting into practice, Flexner's ideas. Somewhat later the high school was following Flexner's proposals in attempts to integrate subject matter on the secondary level, beginning with mathematics and science and with English, social studies, and the arts; in the expansion of realistic methods in the social sciences; in the study of the natural sciences in their applications to industry and to human welfare; and in a broad expansion of the arts. Again, his influence was felt in the emphasis placed upon firsthand experience, and upon the necessity for maintaining an experimental and flexible attitude toward the curriculum, thus inviting the constant revision in the light of cultural change, which has become an accepted tenet of curricular theory.

Claiming a Place in a Great Movement Curricular reconstruction, and much related experimentation, such as the study of teacher relationships and the elaboration of individual records of growth, were all a part of a widespread exploratory movement in progressive education. This movement proceeded with great drive and with brilliant imagination throughout the range of educational activities, once the shackles of traditionalism were loosed. Purposeful and able young teachers ranged the field of education, in schools where the new impetus had been felt, discovering new ideas and trying them out, and reveling in the quickened response of children to the new practices. Lincoln School was at all times in the forefront of this movement. Recruiting its staff in the main from public education, it was never among the most radical of the new schools, but it was always among the most creative and the most influential.

Reform Begins at Four In the revision of school practice, it is not surprising that the immediate effect of reforms was greater at the elementary level. The elementary school was far freer to vary its program than was the high school, with its commitments to preparation for colleges jealously guarding their rigid control over the secondary curriculum. Moreover, the obsolescence of traditional educational practice was clearest to teachers of young children, who saw at firsthand the effects of rigid physical inactivity, of subject matter largely meaningless to children, and of the constant sense of failure induced by schools so ill adapted to natural child life. Furthermore, the organized study of child development came in this period, and threw a bright spotlight upon curricular deficiencies. In the changes introduced at the elementary level, Lincoln School early took a leading part. Its recasting of elementary education into projects and units of study became widely influential, particularly after the re-

4 A CHARTER FOR PROGRESSIVE EDUCATION

port of the staff on *Curriculum Making in an Elementary School*, published in 1927. Dr. Flexner had recognized the fact that the new secondary school could not be based upon the traditional elementary school, and had expressed the belief that the elementary school must change its program and organization first.

High Schools Begin to Stir

It was inevitable that once the elementary school had achieved a more humane and effective adjustment to child growth, the secondary school could not long remain unaffected. Moreover, great changes in cultural life after the World War increasingly called attention to the obsolescence of the high school courses. When the children of all the population began their march into the high school, it became impossible longer to defend a curricular regime which by its very nature condemned from one-half to two-thirds of young people to failure. In the early 1930's certain thoughtful leaders who had already pioneered in reconstructive movements proposed a well-organized study looking at the outset toward the revision of the mode of college entrance. This was a significant step in freeing the high school for new practices and a thoroughgoing reconstruction of its curriculum. Prior to the initiation of this study, however, Lincoln School was already experimenting with new organization of high school courses, and its experimentation in this field has gone steadily forward. Its experimentation with the integration of social studies, English, and art has been widely influential. During the past ten years, there is almost no activity or relationship in the secondary school which has not been called into question by the staff, and about which new suggestions have not been made and new practices experimentally inaugurated. As had been true earlier on the elementary level, this has been a period in which gifted teachers were encouraged to try out their individual

ideas, while at the same time constant conferences in small and large groups provided a means of keeping the child's experience within a reasonably coherent pattern. But it is now felt by many of the staff that the time has come for some considered general reorganization of the secondary program which will make full use of the experience of these exploratory years.

America Thinks about Schools In 1922 the school was removed to a new building close to Teachers College, and thus became enabled to associate itself more integrally with the College program. By this action it both widened its own influence and opened its practices more directly to the influence of advanced theorists in education. It became more consciously aware of its function in the training of teachers for the new education—a responsibility specifically suggested by Dr. Flexner in his first statement. It gained an added influence upon public education, as had also been suggested by Dr. Flexner. In widespread public schools, wherever an imaginative administrator or teacher was at work, the tendency to experiment with new ideas already tried out in a center such as Lincoln School became increasingly evident. Visitors to the school multiplied to the extent of becoming by their very numbers an embarrassment to the child life in the school; and these visitors carried the stimulation of new ideas back to their places in the field, not only in America, but throughout the world.

Lincoln School Grows Up In general, the twenty-one years of its educational minority have been utilized by Lincoln School very much as a healthy, intelligent, and creative young person uses his growing-up period—in expanding its energies, freely exploring the world, experimenting, generating new ideas, questioning established practice, and savor-

6 A CHARTER FOR PROGRESSIVE EDUCATION

ing to the full an urgent and richly rewarding creative period. Having come of age, the school feels the need of taking stock of itself, evaluating the net worth of its growth period, sizing up the world it faces, and making plans for the part it is to play.

**Can Progressive
Education Be
Planned?**

As one looks out on education and society, he finds lacking a unified and coherent design about which modern education can organize its efforts. All progressive schools are experiencing the need for a new synthesis, and education in general is asking for a comprehensive scheme which will resolve its present confusions. It is no depreciation of educators to say that they experience the lack of an acceptable pattern for the immediate future. They share the life of a culture full of confusions at the end of almost a century of critical thought stimulated by the theory of evolution and by great changes in life induced by enormous technological advances. The critical evaluation of traditionally accepted ideas has so fully occupied intellectual leaders that little energy has been free for the evolution of a new philosophical and social synthesis around which men may organize their faith and activities. It is to the credit of educators that in this welter of confusion they realize the need for such a synthesis and are turning their efforts to the task of a reformulation of the aims of their profession. For ten years intensive thought has been given by the Lincoln School staff to the study of their own activities and to the attempt to formulate a new outlook and design for American education. Day-by-day experience has gone into this thinking at all points, and it should now be possible to draw out of that experience its net fruits for their contribution to a definite proposal for general education and for the next phase of progressive school activities. Such a proposal will naturally discard those experimental results which yielded

and promised least, and will tend to conserve for the future all past successes. In short, such a plan might well represent a general evaluation of the entire experience of the school up to date. Throughout the process of development, the thinking and the work of the school have had a strong element of creative and prophetic reconstruction. It is natural not only that the plan should embody next steps, but equally that it should look a little ahead. Having the courage of their convictions, progressive teachers are willing to venture some predictions of future educational trends as natural and proper extensions of their experience up to the present.

**Some
Progressive
Teachers Propose
to Plan**

Any plan influenced by Lincoln School experience would conform to certain fundamental characteristics appropriate to modern ideas and abundantly confirmed in that experience. Such a plan must be flexible, retaining freedom for wide variation among individual teachers and schools and for experimentation and continuous reconstruction. Lincoln School has no faith in fixed and final answers to any important questions of living or education. Its constant effort is to maintain the capacity and the disposition for continuous growth. Such a plan must be capable of wide adaptation in other schools, without restricting any creative energies that might be at work, now or in the future, anywhere in those schools. No contributor to this proposal is interested in the mere operation of a particular school in a non-contributing segregation from other American educational effort.

**A Good Plan
Will Help
Progressive
Schools**

While a good plan must retain wide range for freedom, nevertheless it must be coherent and definite enough to be useful in the guidance of the process of curricular reconstruction which is so actively going forward in Ameri-

8 A CHARTER FOR PROGRESSIVE EDUCATION

can education today. Under the impetus of social demand and of accomplishment in a number of creative centers, many schools scattered over the nation are today evincing a strong desire for help in re-formulating their aims and reorganizing their practices. The plan would not be worth presentation if it did not offer some help to these earnestly seeking schools. Part of the service of such a plan would rest upon its suggestions for coordination of activities among teachers in a given school or system, to the end that every child's development may be as continuous and as generous as his individual capacities will allow. One of the major contributions of Lincoln School has been its work in bringing together curricular experience into broader and more meaningful units for the student. Although the curriculum has maintained developmental continuity, many teachers believe that the thinking out of a definite pattern would improve that continuity and breadth at every point. Gains in broader organization of subject matter which have been so apparent at the elementary level can be realized in somewhat similar fashion at the secondary school level if systematic thought is directed toward that end. Experience in Lincoln School and in other frontier schools has shown that such coordination and integration is possible, and that it does produce a student far abler not only to serve his intellectual curiosity independently, but equally to integrate and generalize his experience into a mature and effective personal culture.

A Good Plan Will Rest on Good Principles

If the plan is to be suggestive to other schools, it must embody definite organizing principles by means of which any school may serve the same general purpose, wherever such purpose is found appropriate to its own situation, but by the selection of specific subject matter and activities in terms of its own resources, membership, and needs. In the

degree that such general principles achieve validity, they will be worthy to be included in a framework of utility to schools in general. Good principles are more likely to stimulate than to hinder creative activity on the part of any progressive-minded school.

**The Plan
Must Fit
American Life
Today**

In proposing a general plan for American education, consideration must be given to the nature of American culture, and the traditions which form the basic outlook of the American people. In the three succeeding chapters, the attempt will be made, first, to state a basic philosophical outlook that has been confirmed by study of the work of Lincoln School, and second, to look at American life and education in order to discuss with some definiteness the social and psychological ideas that must underlie the program of any school playing an effective part in the American scene.

CHAPTER TWO

THE FUNDAMENTAL OUTLOOK

**The Educator
Needs
a Philosophy**

The educator must help each individual: (1) to develop his capacities to the fullest; (2) to fit himself into the natural world about him and the particular society in which he lives. The process by which the educator gives this help will go astray unless he himself has reasonably sound ideas (1) as to the human nature of the people he is dealing with; (2) as to the real world in which men live; (3) as to the life of the society in which the school operates; and (4) as to such information, skills, and ways of doing things as may be required by any individual who is to get along successfully in that world and that society. The effort to gain sound conceptions of such basic essentials of living has always been the business of philosophy. Thus it is that the school, undertaking to help young people attain mature citizenship in their world, must begin by finding for itself a fundamental philosophy.

**The Service of
Philosophy**

Originally, man became a philosopher in the effort to know himself, his world, and the meaning of his world for his own living purposes. Science increasingly takes over the knowing function, and tends to leave to philosophy the task of deciding how man is to use this knowledge to carry out his purposes. But in judging how to use knowledge, the philosopher has to estimate how dependable that knowledge is, for judgments based upon inaccurate knowledge will not work. The philosopher must still

judge the work of science as well as the potential service of science to man. Man must philosophize if he is to know his own nature and the nature of his world in order to choose how he will live. He cannot escape the drives of his own necessities, and in trying to satisfy them he faces the limitations of the natural and social environment in which he lives. He must know what he wants, and the conditions of the world in which these wants must be satisfied. Philosophy is essentially man's effort to adjust himself to reality.

Basic**Assumptions**

In this chapter, the attempt will be made to state the nature of man's most important desires, and the kinds of attitudes on his part that will promise most in his effort to satisfy those desires. Chapter Three will attempt to describe what manner of creature man is, and to show how he fits into his natural world, in order to indicate the kinds of effort on his part that will harmonize rather than conflict with the processes of the natural world. In Chapter Four the basic realities of the social world man has created for himself, particularly in America today, will be explored in order to show with all possible clarity how the individual may gain his own desires by using the group arrangements which he has developed to serve his living needs.

**What Does
Man Want?**

For what does man strive? What desires does he constantly find in himself which must be satisfied? What are the minimal essentials of a life which man will call good? What basic needs will he unceasingly struggle to satisfy regardless of the particular conditions he faces, the slogans he hears and repeats, or the social arrangements he approves or tolerates? It is difficult to state with assurance the most important human needs. Here is one list.

12 A CHARTER FOR PROGRESSIVE EDUCATION

Every Man Needs:

1. To Be Secure in His World

Man must feel that his unique self can and will persist. This statement is not an intimation of immortality—it refers only to his life here and now. We like to say “Here today and gone tomorrow,” but emotionally no person could stand the actual acceptance of such insecurity. Man has learned to depend upon a fair chance that his individual life will be supported naturally and socially, and will continue for a sufficient time to justify his making plans for the future. So powerful is this need that no person can predict beforehand how he will act in the face of any fundamental threat to it. All experience indicates that, in a state of insecurity, he will certainly not act as rationally, effectively, or courageously as he would in a state of security; and that he will act with no sense of satisfaction whatever.

2. To Exercise His Capacities

All nature is in action, and man with it. Life is a process, and every individual must spend his energies and play his part in that process. To do something about things is basic to man’s nature; and, equally, to experiment with his capacities, to learn to do new things, and constantly to learn to do things that better satisfy him.

3. To Be Accepted by His Fellows

In primitive societies, isolation from the tribe was regarded as the severest punishment, as was banishment in classical societies; and the modern version of this severity is solitary confinement. Man is a social animal, and can remain human only in human association. Isolation inevitably brutalizes him.

4. To Have Some Personal Distinction

Every man needs to be recognized by his fellows for some unique personal contribution, to feel himself valued by the group. Only by such recognition is he able to feel himself to be a Self. Not only by isolation, but by regimentation also is man

brutalized, for such regimentation denies his individuality and robs him of selfhood.

**5. To Have
a Faith**

Man must believe in some means for making his life constantly better. Life necessarily goes on by virtue of satisfaction and dissatisfaction; lacking these, there will be no impetus to act, and no guide to the evaluation of one's acts. A reduction of dissatisfaction and an increase in satisfaction must become the emotional pattern of everyone's efforts; and having achieved consciousness, man uses it constantly to contrive ways of enhancing the net satisfaction of his life. Limitations enforced upon him by life's realities incite his imagination to reach beyond his present possibilities of attainment. The result may be a blind propitiation of animalistic gods; a rationalized religious system; an allegiance to the profit system; a faith in the good will of the common man; or merely an unusual degree of self-confidence. Always at the center of such acts of faith is the belief that "Things can and will be better." Deprived of this belief, man suffers from *tedium vitae*, loses his sense of purpose, and drifts into degeneration or short cuts to suicide.

It may be possible to pare this list of five great needs down to three that are basic: (1) to be secure; (2) to act; and (3) to be recognized as a self. It is also possible that a longer list stemming out of these basic types of need might be more useful. In setting up any organization of men's activities, however, those patterns will be most enduring which recognize and give opportunity for the satisfaction of such needs.

**What Are
Institutions
For?**

In the degree that we can get these fundamental needs straight, we shall find them underlying any institutional pattern, and they will furnish criteria by which we can critically evaluate our conceptions of democracy, as well as of democratic ways