POLICIES
for
EDUCATION *in*
AMERICAN DEMOCRACY

Policies for Education in American Democracy

Educational Policies Commission

National Education Association of the United States and the American Association of School Administrators

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Foreword

In response to many requests, the Educational Policies Commission here republishes in one volume the essentials of three of its previous publications on education's functions in American democracy.

This volume has been prepared from the material contained in: *The Unique Function of Education in American Democracy* (1937), *The Education of Free Men in American Democracy* (1941), and *The Purposes of Education in American Democracy* (1938).

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Book I

The Unique Function of Education in American Democracy

I.

Circumstances Call upon Educational Leadership To Reconsider Its Position and Obligations in Society

The mariner blown out of his course by adverse winds and sailing long under clouded heavens among dangerous reefs seizes the first opportunity to get his bearings and chart his way by fixed marks of sky or land. Likewise in the management of human affairs, although the analogy is not exact, it is often necessary for leaders of state, the professions, and callings, amid great disturbances, to take their reckonings—to recur to first principles. This applies to education as well as to other branches of national interest and activity. None is independent of the others. None occupies a position of impregnable security which permits it to escape the strains in domestic or foreign affairs.

This Adjustment Must Be Made in the Terms of Public Interest

The answer of education to this summons cannot be made merely in the technical language of the profession, although the imperatives of the profession must be respected. It cannot be given simply in camera, in secret committee. It must be made in full public view and in the terms of the society which education serves, as well as in its own terms. Not for the thoughtless and heedless, to be sure, is the statement to be formulated; but for that large and influential body of citizens who can distinguish between the enduring values of life and the distempers of immediate difficulties, political and economic. Yet no citizens of the Republic can be left out of the reckoning, for the welfare of all is involved in both the program of education and its application.

The Center of Observation Is in Society, Not Merely in the Educational Profession

It is not enough, therefore, to fix attention on professional conceptions of education alone. Observations must also be taken from the center of society, for education, government, economy, and culture are parts of the same thing. Hence a paradox. If educators are to make wide and real the reach of their theory and practice, they must step over the boundaries drawn by their profession and consider the unity of things. By concentrating affections on their sphere of special interest, they will separate education from the living body of society. Important as are the methods and procedures of education, they are means, not ends; and the ends themselves are linked with the genius, spirit, and purposes of the society in which education functions, by which it is sustained, vitalized, and protected. Yet in stepping over the boundaries of their profession to find their bearings, educators are at the same time compelled, by the nature of their obligations, to hold fast to those values of education which endure amid the changes and exigencies of society.

Five Guiding Principles Control Our Exploration

With the challenge of affairs, public and private, so urgent, what are the bearings by which to discover our position and chart our course? To what principles must we refer in discovering the task of education in American democracy? Five seem imperative:

1. Public education is anchored in the history of American civilization and at any given moment operates within the accumulated heritage of that civilization.

2. Every system of thought and practice in education is formulated with some reference to the ideas and interests dominant or widely cherished in society at the time of its formulation.

3. Once created and systematized, any program of educational thought and practice takes on professional and institutional stereotypes, and tends to outlast even profound changes in the society in which it assumed its original shape.

4. Any restatement of educational objectives and responsibilities which is rooted in reality takes into account the nature of professional obligations and makes adjustments to cope with the major changes wrought in society since the last general reckoning in education.

5. Any statement of educational objectives and responsibilities that is not merely theoretical involves a quest for the institutional forms and operating practices through which education can best attain its ends.

II.

The Founders of the Republic Exalted Education as a National Interest

It is out of the historical development of American society that have come the ideas, aspirations, knowledge, and working rules which prevail today and set the task of education. There have been borrowings, of course. Beyond the founding of the Republic lies a vast background embracing the culture of antiquity, the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, and modern Europe. From this plenitude of resources American civilization has been enriched. But all that has been drawn from other times and places has been worked into the American heritage. Additional drafts may be made upon other nations in days to come. Research will bring new knowledge. Experiments may confirm new methods. Novel ideas may bid for favor. The spirit of inquiry and invention may be active. The aspirations of the living will be stirred by the eternal surge of the human heart. Even so, the past, distant and near, has given us our society, including all the material, intellectual, and moral manifestations with which education must work.

The Republic Was Founded in an Age of High Tension

The independence of America was established by revolution and war, accompanied by inevitable concentration, storm, and stress. America had broken with the past in many respects and had founded government on a new base—social purpose as distinguished from the prescriptive rights of class. It was an infant republic in a world of warring monarchies. Its leaders were searching for ways and means of ensuring the perpetuity of government so conceived, developing natural resources, applying the technical arts, and realizing a better life for the free members of society.

Founders of the Republic Laid Stress on the Public Interest

The founders of the American Republic were concerned with more than the material aspects of life—with more than the exploitation of natural resources, the pursuit of private interests, and the enrichment of individuals. They were public personages imbued with a deep sense of social responsibility. They had staked their lives and their fortunes on independence and the security of the Republic. They had devoted time, energies, and talents to the public interest, waging war against a foreign foe and against greed and passions in their own midst. With justice does a biographer of Washington say: "Excluding his boyhood, there were but seven years of his life in which he was not engaged in the public service."

The early leaders did not subscribe to the economic theory that the pursuit of private gain would automatically bring about the establishment of independence, the creation of a constitution, or the security and prosperity of the American nation. In fact, during the Revolution they had seen gambling in goods and securities almost wreck their cause. After victory had been won they saw emphasis on personal and sectional interests threaten the Union with dissolution. They knew from bitter experience that devotion to the public good and self-denial in private matters were necessary to the achievement of great social ends. Having risked their all in the creation of a nation, the ablest among them gave unremitting attention to the study of public affairs and the methods calculated to preserve and improve the independent society which their labors had brought forth.

The Idea of Government by a Fixed Special Interest Was Rejected

It is true that many extremists relied heavily upon the ancient weapon of statecraft—force—for the assurance of social order, and looked upon government as an instrument of private ad-

vantage. They would have entrenched great wealth in politics by the establishment of high property qualifications on voting and office-holding. They would have given life terms to presidents and senators, and restricted popular participation in public affairs to the smallest possible limits. They would have permanently established a class government—government by "the rich and wellborn," and were largely indifferent to popular culture and education. But this faction, though influential, was challenged by events. The verdict of the majority finally ran against it. The verdict of history condemned it. In the course of years the government established by the founders of the Republic came to rest on a wide popular base; and with the passing of time that base was broadened by constitutional enactments and political practices.

The Democratic Idea Was Accepted

In fact there was in the United States no aristocracy buttressed by special privileges in public law to provide support for a monarchy or an oligarchy. In the long run the fate of government and society had to be entrusted to the wisdom and knowledge of a widening mass of people. Some Americans accepted that fate with a wry face, but made the best of it. Others greeted it as a fulfilment of the principles proclaimed in the Declaration of Independence, and as marking a humane departure from the despotisms of Europe. This document had asserted that all men are created equal, and endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, including life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness; that governments derive their just powers from the consent of the governed; and that the people have the right to alter or abolish any form of government which becomes destructive of these ends. Lifted up against the background of European societies founded on force and prescriptive privileges, these were revolutionary doctrines. The future was to decide whether any government so conceived and so dedicated could long endure.

Cultural Responsibilities Were Imposed on Government

Concerning the responsibilities of government in matters of economy and culture, leaders of the Republic had equally positive convictions. They did not conceive government as founded on sheer force and confined to the punishment of criminals. If doubts arise respecting this matter, they can be resolved by reading President Washington's first inaugural address and his first message to Congress. In assuming his duties he declared that the preeminence of free government must be "exemplified by all the attributes which can win the affections of its citizens and command the respect of the world." While recognizing the place of force in national defense and the maintenance of government, he commended to Congress "the advancement of agriculture, commerce, and manufactures by all proper means," and the promotion of science, literature, and education. In taking this broad view of statesmanship, Washington was profoundly moved by the challenge of the occasion, for he said: "The preservation of the sacred fire of liberty and the destiny of the republican model of government are justly considered, perhaps, as *deeply,* as *finally* staked on the experiment entrusted to the hands of the American people."

The Vital Relation of Education to the Social Order Was Recognized

Having committed themselves to government by popular verdict, to a government with high social responsibilities, many founders of the American Republic turned to education as a guarantee that a government of this type would endure—not merely to political education narrowly adapted to the genius of American institutions, but to education in the arts, sciences, and letters, assuring a deeper foundation in civilization itself. If a contemporary, Samuel Blodget, is to be believed, the idea of establishing a national institution of learning was taken up with General Washington in 1775, while Revolu-

tionary soldiers were quartered in buildings on the campus of Harvard College, and Washington then and there approved the idea.[1]

American Leaders Turned to Educational Planning

However that may be, it is certain that shortly after independence was gained, many of the best minds in America began to draft comprehensive plans for systems of universal education, crowned by a national university. Among them was Dr. Benjamin Rush, physician, surgeon-general during the Revolutionary War, member of the Continental Congress, signer of the Declaration of Independence, and member of the Pennsylvania convention that ratified the Constitution. In 1786 he published an educational project, with the arresting title "Thoughts Upon the Mode of Education Proper in a Republic." A few years later the American Philosophical Society offered a prize for "the best system of liberal education and literary instruction, adapted to the genius of the Government of the United States; comprehending also a plan for instituting and conducting public schools in this country, on principles of the most extensive utility." The prize was divided between Samuel Knox and Samuel H. Smith. Other thinkers of the age, including Noah Webster, presented to the public large projects for the education of youth in a manner appropriate to American society and government.

Early Educational Plans Were Wide and Deep in Compass

This is no place to describe these plans or to smooth away their inconsistencies, but a summary of them shows that American ideas on education are the treasures of high statesmanship—not merely the theories of school administrators and

[1] Wesley, Edgar B. *Proposed: The University of the United States.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1936. 83 p.

teachers.[1] Taking numerous plans of the early Republic collectively, we may say that they were amazingly broad and comprehensive. They projected institutions of learning extending from the primary schools to a national university in charge of research, general instruction, and training for the public service. They dealt with education in its widest terms, as adapted to the nature of American society and government, and as serving the progressive development of individuals and society—not the one or the other exclusively—but both as inseparable. These schemes were not confined to the practical arts and subjects of utility in the conduct of government. They did emphasize, it is true, the practical and political arts; but they went beyond any narrow utilitarianism. They included pure science, letters, and all the arts deemed necessary for a rich, secure, and enlightened civilization; and they recognized the truth that both government and economy rest upon wisdom, knowledge, and aspirations wider and deeper than the interests of immediate marketability.

The Role of Women in Civilization Was Recognized

In seeking to enrich the moral and intellectual resources of society, some of the early educational planners gave attention to the role of women as makers and bearers of culture. They knew from impressive personal experience the part that women had taken in the war for independence—for instance, in keeping economy running, in furnishing war supplies, in sustaining and feeding the spirit of independence in newspapers, pamphlets, and plays, and in private councils. Leaders from General Washington down the line had recognized their services and paid open tribute to their part in the great drama.

It was no accident, then, that Noah Webster, perhaps the most indefatigable among the educational leaders, gave special consideration to the education of women. He believed that

[1] Hansen, Allen O. *Liberalism and American Education in the Eighteenth Century*. New York: Macmillan Co., 1926. 317 p.

their influence in shaping the underlying ideals and policies of the nation was in many ways greater than that of men. Mothers gave to youth firm impressions of life's values and should be educated so that they would set youth in the republican way of life. Taking this cultural influence into full account, Webster insisted that the education of women "should therefore enable them to implant in the tender mind such sentiments of virtue, propriety, and dignity as are suited to the freedom of our government." For this reason he insisted that their education should not be confined to subjects usually taught in schools for girls, but should include science, history, geography, contemporary affairs, and all that then passed for the social studies. "In a system of education that should embrace every part of the community," he urged, "the female sex claims no inconsiderable part of our attention."

Freedom of Inquiry Was Emphasized

As befitted the temper of the age, early educational planners insisted upon unlimited freedom of inquiry and exposition in institutions of learning. They cast off a priori notions of tradition and brought to the bar of critical examination "all things under the sun"—the works of nature, institutions of church and state, the forms and distribution of property, the relations of property to government, the processes of government, the driving forces of social life, the family and its historic role, the maxims of industry and commerce, and international affairs. And they did this with insight, a wealth of learning, and a firm grasp upon realities. For them, liberty of inquiry and exposition was not merely necessary to the working of popular institutions. It was indispensable to progress in every branch of human affairs. It was one of the noblest expressions of life among a free people. "What are the means of improving and establishing the Union of the States?" This was the question which Noah Webster encountered everywhere in his travels throughout the country in 1785. "Cus-