

ADVENTURE IN AMERICAN EDUCATION VOLUME I



THE STORY  
of the  
EIGHT-YEAR STUDY

*With Conclusions and Recommendations*



WILFORD M. AIKIN

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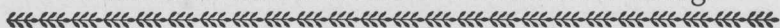
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# Commission on the Relation of School and College



## COMMITTEE ON EVALUATION AND RECORDING

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Frederick H. Bair	Robert D. Leigh
E. Gordon Bill	Max McConn
Burton P. Fowler	Eugene R. Smith, Chairman
Ben D. Wood	

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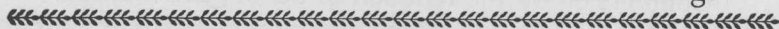
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G. H. V. Melone	John W. M. Rothney

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<sup>1</sup> In addition to those who were continuing committee members, at least 400 others from the schools and other institutions cooperated.

# Commission on the Relation of School and College



## EVALUATION STAFF

Ralph W. Tyler, Research Director

### Associate Director

Oscar K. Buros, 1934-35  
Louis E. Rath, 1935-38  
Maurice L. Hartung, 1938-42

### Associates

Bruno Bettelheim  
Paul B. Diederich  
Wilfred Eberhart  
Louis M. Heil  
George Sheviakov  
Hilda Taba  
Harold Trimble

### Assistants

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Secretaries: Cecelia K. Wasserstrom, Kay D. Watson		

## CURRICULUM ASSOCIATES

H. H. Giles  
S. P. McCutchen  
A. N. Zechiel

The following served as special curriculum consultants at various times:

Harold B. Alberty  
Paul B. Diederich  
Henry Harap  
Walter V. Kaulfers  
John A. Lester

## COLLEGE FOLLOW-UP STAFF

John L. Bergstresser	Neal E. Drought
Dean Chamberlin	William E. Scott
Enid Straw Chamberlin	Harold Threlkeld

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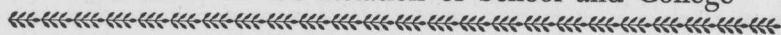
## THE PARTICIPATING SCHOOLS

<i>School</i>	<i>Head<sup>1</sup></i>
Altoona Senior High School, Altoona, Pa.	(Levi Gilbert) Joseph N. Maddocks
Baldwin School, Bryn Mawr, Pa.	(Miss Elizabeth Johnson) Miss Ros- amond Cross
Beaver Country Day School, Chest- nut Hill, Mass.	Eugene R. Smith
Bronxville High School, Bronxville, N. Y.	Miss Edith M. Penney
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Radnor High School, Wayne, Pa.	Sydney V. Rowland, T. Bayard Beatty

<sup>1</sup> Many changes in administration occurred in the schools during the period of the Study. Such cases are indicated by names in parentheses given in chronological order of service.

\* Deceased

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<i>School</i>	<i>Head</i>
Shaker High School, Shaker Heights, Ohio	R. B. Patin
Tower Hill School, Wilmington, Del.	(Burton P. Fowler) James S. Guernsey
Tulsa Senior and Junior High Schools, Tulsa, Okla.	(Will French) (Eli C. Foster) H. W. Gowans
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Winsor School, Boston, Mass.	(Miss Katharine Lord) Miss Frances Dugan
Wisconsin High School, Madison, Wisc.	(H. H. Ryan) (Stephen M. Corey) (Gordon Mackenzie) Glen G. Eye

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## *Chapter I*

### THE EIGHT-YEAR STUDY IS LAUNCHED

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In April, 1930, two hundred men and women were assembled in the nation's capital to consider ways by which the secondary schools of the United States might better serve all our young people. The Progressive Education Association, which had stimulated great change in elementary education, was asking in this annual convention, How can the high school improve its service to American Youth?

In that group were gray-haired principals and teachers who had worked long years with boys and girls, young teachers recently out of college, eager to learn how to help their students more effectively, parents deeply concerned that their sons and daughters should have experiences in high school that would develop their powers and equip them to assist in the rebuilding of our already profoundly disturbed national life. In the course of the two-day discussion many proposals for improvement of the work of our secondary schools were made and generally approved. But almost every suggestion was met with the statement, "Yes, that should be done in our high schools, but it can't be done without risking students' chances of being admitted to college. If the student doesn't follow the pattern of subjects and units prescribed by the colleges, he probably will not be accepted." Under these conditions not many schools were willing to depart very far from the conventional high school curriculum. They could not take chances on having their candidates rejected by the colleges.

The meeting was about to end in a sense of futility and frustration. However, someone with courage and vision proposed that the Progressive Education Association should be asked to establish a Commission on the Relation of School and College to explore possibilities of better co-ordination of school and college work and to seek an agreement which would provide freedom for secondary schools to attempt fundamental reconstruction.

The Commission was established the following autumn, October, 1930. Mr. Burton Fowler, then president of the Association, asked the writer to become chairman. Everyone invited to serve on the Commission was known to be concerned with the revision of the work of the secondary school and eager to find some way to remove the obstacle of rigid college prescriptions. Of the twenty-six members chosen, some had been active in the Washington meeting of the previous spring. Others were high school and college teachers; high school principals; college deans, presidents, and admission officers; evaluation specialists; educational philosophers; and journalists.<sup>1</sup> This group met from time to time, each member at his own expense, over a period of about two years. Although almost every educational interest and point of view was represented, all members agreed that secondary education in the United States needed experimental study and comprehensive re-examination in the light of fuller knowledge of the learning process and of the needs of young people in our society.

All members of the Commission were conscious of the amazing development of our secondary schools in the first three decades of the century. They realized that the number of boys and girls in high school had grown from less than

<sup>1</sup> For Commission membership, see introductory pages.

one million to almost ten millions; that about 70 per cent of all American youth of high school age are in school; that billions had been invested by states, cities, towns, counties, and townships in imposing buildings and modern equipment; that these communities were gladly taxing themselves to pay the salaries of nearly 300,000 high school teachers; and that the faith of the American people in education remained unshaken.

Many in this group had shared in these thirty exciting years of American education. They had seen the limited curriculum consisting chiefly of history, foreign languages, mathematics, science, and English extended to include the social studies, commercial subjects, the arts, home economics, shop work, and other courses of many kinds. They had participated in changing the content of traditional subjects and methods of teaching them. They had encouraged the development of student activities in speech, dramatics, music, athletics, publications, and a score of other fields. They had helped make the high school an orderly place of good feeling between teachers and pupils—a place to which most pupils went gladly because of pleasant association with others and interest in the general life of the school. They had seen the high school diploma become the magic key to doors of social and economic preferment.

These representative educators were vividly aware of the great achievements of our high schools. They shared the people's pride in them, but they were not satisfied. They were conscious of defects and determined, if possible, to correct them. They knew that of six who enter the high school only three graduate; of the three who graduate, only one goes on to college. For five out of six, then, high school is the end of formal schooling. For these *five* as well as for

the *one*, the secondary school years can become a profoundly significant experience, said these educators.

*Schools and Colleges  
Face the Facts*

After more than a year's study the Commission issued a statement setting forth some of the areas which needed exploration and improvement by our schools. It seemed to the Commission that secondary education was clearly inadequate in certain major aspects of its work.

*Secondary education in the United States did not have clear-cut, definite, central purpose.* It had many goals, not one clear purpose in relation to which all others are of secondary importance. True, the high school diploma led to higher social and economic levels. It was believed that a "high school education" was good for youth but few asked seriously, "Good for what?" Neither society nor education knew certainly what the major purpose of the high school should be. The result was that teachers had no sure sense of direction and that boys and girls had no integrating, deeply satisfying school experience.

*Schools failed to give students a sincere appreciation of their heritage as American citizens.* The study of the history of the United States usually left students without understanding of the way of life for which we have been striving throughout our history; it seldom aroused enthusiasm and devotion. American youth left high school with diplomas but without insight into the great political, social, and economic problems of our nation.

*Our secondary schools did not prepare adequately for the responsibilities of community life.* Schools generally were excellent examples of autocratic, rather than democratic,

organization and living. Since little effort was made to lead youth into a clear understanding of the ideals of democracy, most students left school without principles to guide their action as they sought work and a place in adult life. Not many had developed any strong sense of social responsibility or deep concern for the common welfare.

*The high school seldom challenged the student of first-rate ability to work up to the level of his intellectual powers.* It was easy for him to "get his lessons," pass his courses. The result was that many a brilliant mind developed habits of laziness, carelessness, superficiality. These habits, becoming firmly established during adolescence, prevented the full development of powers. Even the conscientious student of superior ability did not often find himself seriously involved in a great intellectual enterprise. Seldom was any student "set on fire" intellectually, eager to explore on his own, ready to conquer difficulties and go through whatever drudgery might be necessary to achieve his purpose. The individual and society were both losers.

*Schools neither knew their students well nor guided them wisely.* Not often did teachers know students as young human beings striving to find their way into adulthood. Personal guidance was futile, usually involving only an occasional friendly chat; vocational guidance was limited to classroom study of occupations; and educational guidance was superficial, consisting chiefly of casual counsel concerning the subjects to be "taken" next semester. Few schools were seriously concerned about those who dropped out before graduation or about what happened to those who did receive diplomas.

*Schools failed to create conditions necessary for effective learning.* In spite of greater understanding of the ways in

which human beings learn, teachers persisted in the discredited practice of assigning tasks meaningless to most pupils and of listening to re-citations. The work was all laid out to be done. The teacher's job was to see that the pupil learned what he was supposed to learn. The student's purposes were not enlisted and his concerns were not taken into account. All this was in violation of what had been discovered about the learning process. The classroom was formal and completely dominated by the teacher. Rarely did students and teacher work together upon problems of genuine significance. Seldom did students drive ahead under their own power at tasks which really meant something to them.

Somehow, eagerness to learn grew less year by year as pupils advanced through school. This was not true of all, but it was characteristic of so many that the members of the Commission were seriously disturbed. They recognized that disintegrating and deadening forces outside school were partially responsible for this deplorable result, but they were quite sure that the content and organization of the curriculum had something to do with it.

*The Commission was conscious, also, of the fact that the creative energies of students were seldom released and developed.* Students were so busy "doing assignments," meeting demands imposed upon them, that they had little time for anything else. When there was time, they were seldom challenged or permitted to carry on independent work involving individual initiative, fresh combination of thought, invention, construction, or special pursuits. Although the creative urge may express itself in any field of endeavor, the arts, which afford unusual opportunity in this respect, were looked upon as "fads and frills," non-existent in many schools, inadequately taught in most others. Art, in its various

forms and uses, permeates everyday life. In its higher manifestations, it expresses the finest aspirations of the human spirit. Yet, only a few schools provided for their students enriching and satisfying experiences commensurate with the importance of the arts in our culture.

*The conventional high school curriculum was far removed from the real concerns of youth.* The subjects studied in the classroom were the curriculum; the *activities* of the students were the extra-curriculum. These activities, initiated and developed by students, were recognized as significant educational experiences, but they were outside the curriculum. There was little realization that much of the work of the classroom was meaningless to students and that they were doing the work assigned chiefly for the "credit" which would add one more toward the total required for a diploma or admission to college. The molds into which education was poured, rather than its essence and spirit, became the goals of pupils and parents alike. This emphasis upon "credits" blinded even the teachers so that they could not see their real task.

Young people wanted to get ready to earn a living, to understand themselves, to learn how to get on with others, to become responsible members of the adult community, to find meaning in living. The curriculum seldom touched upon such genuine problems of living.

*The traditional subjects of the curriculum had lost much of their vitality and significance.* The purposes they should serve were seldom realized even in the lives of students of distinguished native ability. The study of a foreign language did not often lead to extensive or searching reading of the great literature in that language; history usually was quickly forgotten, leaving no great concepts of human society, no deep understanding of the forces which mold man's des-

tiny; science raised few fundamental questions of the nature of man or the universe; mathematics seldom became an effective tool, and even less frequently did it become a challenge to insight and understanding; the study of literature generally failed to heighten appreciation, deepen comprehension, or aid in the interpretation of experience.

*Most high school graduates were not competent in the use of the English language.* They seldom read books voluntarily and they were unable to express themselves effectively either in speech or writing.

*The Commission found little evidence of unity in the work of the typical high school.* Subjects and courses had been added until the program, especially of large schools, resembled a picture puzzle, without consistent plan or purpose. It was customary for a pupil to patch together all sorts of pieces—two units here, one there, a half unit elsewhere. His chief purpose was to collect enough pieces to graduate. If there was basic unity underlying subjects, few students discovered it; subjects of study were isolated, planned and taught without reference to the student's other studies or to any unifying purpose.

Teachers worked alone or in subject departments. The teacher of English limited his vision and concern to his own field; the teacher of science labored only to teach a certain body of scientific fact and skill. Seldom did they confer, and when they did, the results were usually unsatisfactory because neither understood the other's interests or problems. The division of labor, even in the intellectual field, had been carried so far that common language and community of purpose were in danger of being lost. Specialization in teaching in the secondary school had made it almost impossible for any teacher to become himself a person of broad culture.

Teachers' lives were needlessly and unfortunately narrowed and impoverished.

*The absence of unity in the work of the secondary school was almost matched by the lack of continuity.* The student jumped from semester to semester, from year to year, seldom going anywhere in particular. His work of one year had little relation to that of the preceding or following year. Because neither he nor his teachers had definite, long-time purposes for his work, he had no clear road to follow or compass to guide him in finding his way through the tangled underbrush of the curriculum.

*Complacency characterized high schools generally ten years ago.* Elementary education had been revolutionized since the beginning of the century, but the high school was still holding to tradition. It was rather well satisfied with itself. Minor curriculum changes were frequently made, but there was little serious questioning of purposes, practices, or results. Lavish financial support and blind faith on the part of the people encouraged schoolmen to conclude that all was right with their world.

*Teachers were not well equipped for their responsibilities.* They lacked full knowledge of the nature of youth—of physical, intellectual, and emotional drives and growth. They understood little of the conditions essential to effective learning. Relation of the school to the society it should serve was only dimly perceived. Democracy was taken for granted, but teachers seldom had any clear conception of democracy as a way of living which should characterize the whole life of the school. Very few were capable of leading youth into an understanding of democracy and its problems, for they themselves did not understand.

*Only here and there did the Commission find principals who conceived of their work in terms of democratic leader-*

*ship of the community, teachers, and students.* Usually the principal was a benevolent autocrat or a "good fellow," letting each teacher do as he pleased as long as neither parents nor pupils complained. Most principals were constantly busy just "running the machine"; they seldom stopped long enough to ask themselves, Why are we doing this or that? What are we driving at? Where are we going?

*Principals and teachers labored earnestly, often sacrificially, but usually without any comprehensive evaluation of the results of their work.* They knew what grades students made on tests of knowledge and skill, but few knew or seemed really to care whether other objectives such as understandings, appreciations, clear thinking, social sensitivity, genuine interests were being achieved.

*The high school diploma meant only that the student had done whatever was necessary to accumulate the required number of units.* Graduation from high school found most boys and girls without long-range purpose, without vocational preparation, without that discipline which comes through self-direction, and without having discovered for themselves something which gives meaning to living. Youth knew its rights and privileges, but often missed the rich significance of duty done and responsibilities fully met. Unselfish devotion to great causes was not a characteristic result of secondary education.

*Finally, the relation of school and college was unsatisfactory to both institutions.* In spite of the fact that formal education for five out of six of our youth ends at or before graduation from high school, secondary schools were still dominated by the idea of preparation for college. The curriculum was still chiefly "college preparatory." What the college prescribed for admission determined, to a large