

THE EDUCATION CRISIS IN THE NATION'S LARGE CITIES

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More than 25 percent of the nation's children are educated in the school systems of 52 cities of 300,000 or greater population. An analysis of the special educational problems in the large cities is the purpose of this paper.

Inadequacy of Fiscal Support.

In these cities, the increasing number of children to be educated is met by a steadily diminishing flow of local tax money.

Unlike its suburban counterpart, the city tax dollar is heavily allocated to services supporting human beings in trouble. Health, welfare, and protection services, particularly police, take great slices of the tax dollar pie, reducing still further the amount of money available to build and staff schools, to supply the basic teaching tools, such as books, visual and auditory learning aids, equipment, and to set up the ancillary services desperately needed when children come from deprived homes.

The lack of space for school programs, for instance, puts many children on part-time schedules. From 1948 in the nation's capital nearly 40,000 children attended schools on half-day schedules and during the same period thousands of children were turned away from public school kindergartens for the lack of room. Moreover, every available square foot of space is used for class purposes: auditoriums, libraries, even store rooms and shabby basement rooms.

The new programs now to be available under Federal financing are not going to help much unless school construction is accelerated. Library books, for example, bought with Title II money under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act will not be used well when there is no school library to put them in.

Another result of lack of money in big-city schools is poor building maintenance. City school buildings are too often dismal and dingy, even rat-infested, supplying a depressing environment for children who most need bright and appealing surroundings, and for teachers whose work even under the best of physical conditions is frustrating and disappointing because of the children's learning difficulties.

In our city school system, the shortage of school space requires us to make use of school buildings beyond the traditional school hours.

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Many special projects are scheduled at times when the schools are not in use for regular classes.

1. After school tutorial programs extend the school day for pupils and, in at least three schools, for adults in the community who want to take special courses.

Last spring in one elementary school nearly four hundred parents voluntarily attended a series of lessons in the new math, science, civics, and reading to enhance their own learning and not merely as an interpretation of their children's work in the classroom.

2. Twilight schools for boys who have been suspended for disciplinary reasons operate from 3:30 p.m. to 7:30 p.m. in two elementary schools and two junior high schools. These schools maintain better attendance records than the schools from which the boys were dismissed.

3. A school called STAY has been organized for dropouts in a regular senior high school building that is overcrowded during the day. Now in its second semester of operation, the more than seven hundred students currently enrolled attend school from 3:30 p.m. to 8:30 p.m. The school has its own staff and is entirely independent of the day school operation.

4. Saturday schools are conducted for mothers and their pre-school age children in a number of elementary centers. These are exceptionally successful and will be stepped-up with the advent of new funds.

5. Plans are developed for a Mobile Reading Unit to be housed in a van-like vehicle. In addition to delivering technical service to the schoolhouse door, diagnostic and treatment programs can be supplied without using overcrowded school areas. An expansion of mobile service is under consideration, particularly in health improvement, psychological and psychiatric diagnosis and treatment, speech correction, and library services.

Lack of money impedes school staffing, including not only teachers but personnel in counseling, social work, and library operations. In an ironic twist of fate, the need for these services is the greatest where cultural handicapping is the most extensive and the tax dollar is the most anemic. But progress can be reported for the Washington schools, as I am sure it can be in all major city school systems. The climate for improvement is much better today than it was a few short years ago.

Two anecdotes illustrate how difficult it is to break through budget roadblocks.

For more than thirty years, the Washington, D. C. junior high school buildings included libraries, but the budget provided nothing for professional staff to man them. Repeatedly, the Board of Education had requested funds to hire junior high school librarians, and just as often the requests had been deleted by the budget office even

before reaching Congress which, as our fiscal agency, appropriates money collected from the city's taxpayers for the purpose of sustaining the municipal government.

In due course I finally persuaded the District Government budget director to consent to a plan for funding the cost of librarians from an unexpended balance in the school system's account. The concurrence of the District Commissioners and the chairman of the House Subcommittee on Appropriations for the District of Columbia, who is approached through the Clerk of the Committee, was required. Step by step, interview by interview, report after report—because I had to prove that school librarians were necessary to a good junior high school program—led finally to a memorable Saturday morning when I heard the Clerk call his committee chairman long distance at his home in Michigan to recommend that permission be granted the School Board to hire half the number of requested librarians on temporary funds from savings. The purpose was to find out if the library program was worth funding on a permanent basis. The committee chairman said "yes," and thus began an expansion of the school library staff which, though still incomplete, has jumped from 19 in 1960, to 105 in 1965.

In the Sisyphean exercise which after thirty years got the stone over the top of a very small hill, the most punishing aspect of the experience was the repeated demand for proof that schools need librarians. What usually one would take for granted as to the importance of library services in schools had to be debated, supported with objective data, and in other ways repeatedly justified.

In a somewhat similar move to improve school services, the Board of Education programmed elementary school counseling positions in its budget estimates, which as you know must be approved by the District budget office on its way to legislative action.

On one occasion, I spent a most agonizing conference with District budget officials explaining the importance of counselors in the elementary schools. A young lady member of the budget staff declared that she considered elementary school counselors unnecessary and, therefore, opposed the program. Somewhat ungallantly, I asked how she could interpose her non-professional judgment against that of the school staff. "I read a pamphlet on the subject," she declared. And because the lady could read, progress in counselor staffing was for a long period impossible. Now, however, I am glad to report that the number of counselors at all levels has increased nearly six times in recent years.

All too few citizens understand that funding school operations in city schools is a complex and intricate operation. Whatever advances are made must be accomplished against a natural inertia and a penny-wise pound-foolish attitude toward spending.

But money for better school services is not the complete answer to the question: How can you improve the education of city-school children? I want now to examine the special problems of big-city education. To do this I will analyze what I will call here the educability factor.

The Educability Factor Among Big-city School Children.

The kind of response children make to instruction depends as much upon what they bring to the classroom as upon what they encounter there. Even the most rapid review of factors that condition children's behavior shows that traditional school methods will not suffice in the nation's big cities.

1. Mobility. In a nation that is literally on the move, mobility particularly affects city populations. In the Washington schools, the great influx of new pupils, mostly Negroes, is almost matched by the exodus of white pupils.

The movement of people into and out of the city has a counterpart in the extensive mobility of families within the city. To illustrate, a special experimental project in a number of downtown elementary schools at the outset involved 660 pupils. In a very short time only 220 of the original 660 pupils remained in the original schools. More than 400 had transferred to other schools in the city.

2. Poverty. Nearly one-fourth of Washington's public school children come from families with poverty-level incomes. Many others live on the edge of deprivation, that is, are inadequately cared for in housing, health, food and clothing, and are deprived of the cultural amenities such as books, art, theater, music, and travel.

I know of children who, although ill, have come to school because of the free noon-time lunch; of boys who come to an elementary school in our city at 7:30 in the morning for a program of physical education followed by a shower and a breakfast.

I know of many teachers and principals in our school system who feed and clothe destitute children; who are providing breakfasts for children; who on occasion have gotten furniture for desperate families, where in one instance five children were sleeping in one bed. A school principal only recently literally probed the lonely city streets to find a lost child who had been pushed out of his home by a mother who was overwhelmed by adverse circumstances. Each year thousands of boys and girls come into our classrooms clean and loved, and happy in the early grades, only later to be victimized by oppressive conditions in their own homes, and who join the ranks of drop-outs, of delinquents, of the sad, inarticulate boys and girls of the streets.

Let me talk about other things which reflect at least in part the poverty of home and school services. Think if you will of the boys who form extortion rings to take nickels and dimes from children,

and who later commit crimes of violence with deadly weapons. Think if you will of the fact that many girls become pregnant out of wedlock, mainly because of poverty and improvidence and of the failure of the home and the school to remedy these deficiencies.

I talk as a man who knows of a fourth-grade girl who engaged in sexual activities with a perverted man, from which she was able to bring home small amounts of money to alcoholic parents.

I speak as a schoolman whose conscience cannot be rid of the story of a fifteen-year-old junior high school girl who disappeared into the quicksands of disordered living even though a school social worker made an effort to discover the cause of the girl's dissatisfaction with school. Much too late was the discovery that the girl was living in a home where the mother at the time of the visit of the social worker was in jail for the illicit sale of whiskey and where two older sisters were each the mother of four illegitimate children.

Nor can I put out of my mind the thirty-year-old mother of three illegitimate children, the oldest of whom, a boy, was in deep trouble in school. The young mother told me that she had left school at the age of fifteen because of pregnancy. Her home was disordered and unclean, and at the time I visited it, a two-year-old girl attired only in a short cotton shirt was standing on a chair at the table eating pork and beans from a can.

Whenever I recount problems that many of our children have when they come to school, my love and respect for them increases because so many do well, and are earnest, and are responsive, and my respect for the teachers increases because of their unremitting efforts to teach children who are in some cases almost unteachable.

No one can be satisfied with school services that fail to reduce educational retardation among many pupils who do not learn because of hunger, sickness, and mental disorders caused by poverty and neglect; who do not learn because of overcrowded classrooms, or the absence of counseling, or the poverty in books, or the neglect of library services or the failure to meet the simplest physical needs of the child through an adequate school lunch service; who do not learn because classrooms are in some cases staffed by poorly prepared teachers or where even the best teachers are mediocre because of the inadequacy of space and materials and special services.

3. Unemployment. Joblessness runs highest among youth 16-21 years of age, with Negro unemployment being more than twice that of white youth unemployment. In the city, poverty is further stimulated by the matriarchal structure that characterizes many Negro families, a generally uncontrolled birthrate among low-income groups, and a high rate of illegitimacy and venereal disease.

4. Family income and school achievement. The relationship between income and school achievement is very high.

A study made for us shows a high correlation between income and school achievement. Dr. John T. Daily, Education Research Director at George Washington University, found that when he related our elementary achievement test scores with median income by schools, income level correlated closely with achievement level.

But test scores for schools varied widely within the same income bracket. For example, schools serving census tracts where the median income was below \$3,000 showed a twenty-point difference in percent of retardation. This means that one school produced 20 percent higher achievement than another school in the same low income bracket.

In the \$3,000 to \$4,000 median income bracket, the differences in the percent of achievement scores below the national median run as high as 27 percent. It is interesting to observe also that at least two schools in the \$6,000 to \$7,000 bracket produced achievement scores that averaged below those in some of the schools in the \$2,000 to \$3,000 income levels.

Clearly, school performance, while likely to be low in low income areas, is affected by other conditions. Why one school can do so much better than another under the same economic condition needs an explanation. Moreover, the effective practices of the higher-achieving schools in the same or even lower income categories should serve as guidelines for less successful schools. With it all, we must avoid the mistake of apathy, we must reject the attitude that nothing much can be done in low income brackets, and we must find ways to improve what is currently being achieved.

5. Aspiration threshold. Many city children must work against family tradition if they seek to obtain as much as a high school education. In Washington, D. C., 80 percent of the pupils live in census tracts where the median years of schooling were less than 12. More than 32 percent of the adults have completed no more than 8 years of schooling. How to elevate the aspirations of pupils beyond the threshold of family accomplishment is a problem of motivation of serious concern.

6. De facto segregation. In the District of Columbia schools, Negroes comprise close to 90 percent of the school enrollment.

A few elementary schools are all white, a few all Negro in enrollment. Quite unexpectedly, most schools have small percentages of white or Negro pupils.

Big-city schools are expected to find miracle ways to establish racial balance. Schemes proposed and in some cases tested out in various cities include bussing, gerrymandering of boundaries, and pairing. None of the schemes thus far devised for school management has proved workable because de facto segregation results from social and economic conditions outside the control of the schools. The one plausible solution to the isolationism of de facto segregation whether

by race or income class is the creation of excellence in neighborhood schools.

After an admittedly incomplete analysis of urban conditions in relation to education, consideration of the school's changing responsibilities and structure is in order.

Change and Stability in City Education.

The caption for this section is deliberately contradictory, because I take the position that school responsibilities are fundamentally the same as in the past but their scope and conditions for achievement are vastly more complex.

The schools have primary responsibility for teaching the basic skills, for in the broad sense if these are not taught in school they are not taught anywhere. In the changing scope of educational responsibility, I am absolutist enough to believe that certain duties have remained constant throughout the history of education, and I predict that they will continue to be regarded as fundamental.

The change occurs in the fact that today education is universal, not selective as it was a half century ago. As a result, society now approaches the view that organized education must find out how to teach everyone no matter what his learning difficulties are. Education, it is argued, is central to the elimination of crime, juvenile delinquency, and poverty.

I am sure this is true. But it must never be forgotten that the most important education in the child's life takes place outside the school classroom—in the home particularly, in the days from birth on, even during the prenatal period—most of it before he comes to school.

In a recent Congressional hearing I was asked why so many pupils gave disinterest in school as a reason for leaving school. By inference, the schools were to blame for the drop-out problem. I pointed out to the committee that in the same classroom with the same teacher and curriculum and seated side-by-side, one pupil may be highly successful and another may be wholly unsuccessful. "Is it the teacher, then, who is at fault?" I asked. The differential is the factor of educability, that is, the personality condition which governs the individual's response to instruction. To blame the teacher for non-educability factors that may be traced to the pupil's cradle days is like blaming a doctor whose patient has contracted muscular dystrophy. But at the same time the schools must take the lead in improving pupil educability.

In my school district more than one hundred special projects, innovative and experimental in design, are now in process. I am sure that every school district can report many such projects. We have so much going on in the District of Columbia schools that we are in a greater-than-ordinary state of confusion. We need a breathing spell

for consolidation and reassessment, though we must be aware of the fact that the school system is only at the early stages of a greatly expanding social and educational role. In fact, the next phase of the educational revolution is at hand with more than six millions to be available to the Washington schools under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act.

A brief look at the plans for the use of money under Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act will give insight into ways in which public education will be developing in the next few years.

Subject to Office of Education approval, the more than five million dollars available to us under this Act will be spent on no more than 30,000 pupils in not more than, and possibly less than, fifty per cent of our schools. Roughly, this is an additional outlay of \$160 per pupil for the 30,000 selected to receive the benefits.

The pupils to be selected for extra attention are to be identified as drop-out prone. The factors which predict the destiny of such pupils will be carefully chosen by the Department of Pupil Personnel Services and will be applied beginning at the kindergarten level and extending through the secondary schools.

After prognostic identification, the new or additional services for these pupils will be indicated by the conditions which have led to their selection in the first place. These services may range from attention to the need for glasses to correct a vision impairment to supplying a totally new environment in a neighborhood home.

The special programs will include possibly the serving of complete breakfasts, the supplying of health services, tutorial instruction in reading, psychological and psychiatric services, both diagnostic and treatment, enrichment activities including visits to college campuses, to sports competitions, to business and industry, to other cities, all experiences of the kind that might be called "Operation Eye Opener." Most essential is parental involvement through counseling services, Saturday sessions, and summer programs. A special service program is to be so set up that someone in each school will have primary responsibility for every pupil identified as a potential drop-out, not on a 9 to 3 schedule for 180 days but on a 24 hour schedule for 365 days, a relationship comparable to that of a physician to his patient. Most important to all this will be an empirical approach to curriculum content and instructional methodology that will elicit a learning response from the pupils selected.

We need to face this experimental extension of school functions with well-defined reservations.

1. It is doubtful that all the needed special services can be bought for the amount of money to be made available.

2. The neglect of the more promising student in the new education act will eventually stimulate strong political criticism of the program.

3. The expectation that miracles will be performed may be far too high and thus eventually result in a reversal of Congressional interest in funding education.

4. School authorities, from the Board of Education down, are already being told that they now had better get results with the new programs—or turn the work over to other agencies.

5. Local schools must be on guard to protect their independence against the imposition of controls by over-zealous Federal officials, including Congressmen.

Today's popular political position is to hold the public schools responsible for everything that goes wrong in society. The relatively small amount of extra money coming to the schools will increase public clamor for a total cure of all the ills of society. We must be prepared to accept much vacuous criticism for the social problems that originate in the failures of home, church, and community.

We have long ago accepted the challenge of redeeming the least promising of our children. Deliberately, with full realization that the school cannot fully conquer hunger, unemployment, anger, hostility, self-indulgence, irresponsibility, emotional and physical disability, education must make a concentrated attack upon these demons of our time.

Our mission is so simple we should never lose sight of it. Our mission is that every pupil shall be given such loving attention, such careful and kindly teaching, that he will leave school proud to be himself. He will be set by his teachers on his way to divine self-fulfillment. It is to this end that public education must dedicate itself to the service of all the children.