

THE GOODLAD OCCASIONAL PAPERS

About Our Schools: No. 1

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[Note: I set aside in the Goodlad Occasional Papers series the academic practice of listing many citations to support conclusions, observations, etc., by providing reference to only one or two scholars whose work is highly respected and frequently cited. I recommend your reading the Introduction paper of this series in order to help answer questions about the literary mechanics of this and subsequent papers.]

When the United States of America was moving from the nineteenth century to the twentieth, philosopher William James was teaching people the importance of keeping in balance two powerful characteristics of the nation. He identified one as “the soft and tender” and the other as “the hard and tough.” The contentiousness of this duality regarding our schools became increasingly palpable over the years.

For the first half of the twentieth century, most mothers were at home, close to their children’s schools; balance favored the soft and tender. But World War II and its aftermath brought women, many of them mothers, across the bridge to what had been almost exclusively the workplace of men. The *function* of schools and their teachers became increasingly child care. Then, in fall 1957, the orbiting of the Soviet Union’s Sputnik around the globe created a new perspective regarding our schools: their role in

sustaining the nation’s scientific and economic leadership world wide.

Two years later, the much-respected James B. Conant, former president of Harvard University, observed in his report *The American High School Today* that it would be necessary to have one hundred graduating seniors each year for a high school to have an adequate mathematics and sciences curriculum. Subsequently, thousands of big yellow buses picked up early in the morning students leaving their communities to attend larger schools elsewhere.

Currently, President Obama cites the Sputnik scare of more than half a century ago as “evidence” of Soviet scientific superiority over America, arguing that we must not allow anything like that to happen again. But here we are, mired in a hard and tough federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act that has commandeered school classrooms in a narrow curriculum assessed by academic tests, the whole of which correlates hardly at all with what an educated, wise populace requires.

In 1909, educational historian Ellwood Cubberley made an ominous observation in his book *Changing Concepts of Education*: “Each year the child is coming to belong more and more to the State and less and less to the parent.” A century later, *both* child and parent are missing from the litany of schooling and

school reform. Also, they appear to be missing from the discourses around the ideological fingerposts pointing to the many different paths supposedly leading to education enlightenment. The products of educational inquiry conducted by behavioral scientists – historians, economists, psychologists, educators, philosophers, theologians, sociologists, and more – may have advanced their careers. But I do not know of any major human enterprise in the United States other than schooling that has so much knowledge relevant to its conduct that is so thoroughly ignored.

Ironies abound and many have been grist for analyses that challenge conventional wisdom. Researcher Gerald Bracey was for years an irritant to pundits, policymakers, and school reformers. In writing his book *Rhetoric vs. Reality*, published in 2009, he realized that the media's blaming of the schools for the emergence of Sputnik and much of the subsequent embellishment of its significance was sheer nonsense. He became aware of President Eisenhower's "coolness" to its existence. The president had conveyed to Soviet premier Khrushchev the requisite congratulations, but he had concluded that the relatively primitive artificial satellite provided evidence that Sputnik was not much of a threat to America's capacity for doing better in outer space. After all, the United States was well along with the science necessary to the far more sophisticated Mercury spacecraft Friendship 7, which later took astronaut John Glenn around planet Earth – hardly the situation President Obama tells us must never happen again. Bracey quoted a 1967 piece by *New York Times* education writer Fred Hechinger:

Almost ten years ago, when the first Soviet Sputnik went into orbit, the schools were blamed for America's lag in space. Last week, in the Senate, the schools were blamed for the ghetto riots. In each case, the politicians' motives were suspect. Their reflex reaction, when faced with a national crisis, is to assign guilt to persons with the least power to hit back. The schools, which are nonpolitical but dependent on political purse strings, fill the bill of emergency whipping boy.

The schools never recovered. In 1972, Robert M. Hutchins, former president of the University of Chicago, wrote an essay titled "The Great Anti-School Campaign" in *The Great Ideas Today*, published by Encyclopaedia Britannica. He noted as both an observation and an implied question that "nobody has a kind word for the institution that was only the other day the foundation of our freedom, the guarantee of our future, the cause of our prosperity and power, the bastion of our security, the bright and shining beacon that was the source of our enlightenment, the public school." In its 1983 report, *A Nation at Risk*, the National Commission on Excellence in Education, shocked the American people with the statement, "If an unfriendly power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might have viewed it as an act of war."

Hutchins was right on target in his glowing statement regarding "the institution that was only the other day. . ." The school years from Sputnik to the late 1960s were so rich in money, new patterns

of curriculum building, and innovation that I wrote in *The Great Ideas Today 1969* that they constituted an education decade. But President Johnson's expectations for the schools in his plans for the Great Society were dashed by an array of circumstances (largely the Vietnam War and racial tension). Since the days of the Johnson Administration, there has scarcely been, as Hutchins noted, a kind word for our public schools from pundits, policymakers, or corporate leaders. The 1960s was indeed an education decade, but it also heralded the intrusion of reality into the American Dream; the people's psyche was maturing into adulthood.



What is my purpose in writing this paper? A large portion of the American people have referred to public schooling as if it were ubiquitous like the air we breathe. This describes education but not schooling. The statement of education commissioner Horace Mann in the nineteenth century — “the public school is the greatest discovery made by man” — is about as far as we can go in giving it a place in the American Dream. *But it is long past time for us to wake up. That is why I am writing this document.*

There is a strange but fascinating irony in the wide gap between the bad news the public has been getting about our schools for half a century and the public's attitudes toward them. For more than forty years, the Phi Delta Kappa (PDK)/Gallup Poll has assessed these attitudes. Parents and their neighbors give surprisingly high marks to the schools they know and especially those their children attend. But they believe there are a good many bad schools “out

there somewhere.” They have been taught this belief. And, of course, we all know there are good, mediocre, and bad schools just as there are such distributions in most social situations.

Educator and historian TheodoreSizer provided an interesting slant on this gap between rhetoric and reality in his essay “Back to *A Place Called School*,” analyzing *A Nation at Risk*. He noted that the National Commission on Excellence in Education left intact in its critique and recommendations the longstanding symbols, deep structure, and grammar of schooling: that is, the detailed ways and means of providing deliberate education remained unchanged. Yet the Commission frightened the public in its rhetoric of school failure just as Sputnik had done twenty-six years before. The recommendations made in *A Nation at Risk* were very similar to Conant's in his 1959 report on the American secondary school. Citizens across the nation were asked to hold educators and elected officials responsible for providing leadership necessary to achieving them — tinkering redux (to borrow from the title of David Tyack and Larry Cuban's book, *Tinkering toward Utopia*, 1995).

The call was for an educational crusade. Conferences were held, and state leaders declared themselves education governors. As with the education decade following Sputnik, there was a surge of innovation (see Carl Glickman's little book *Those Who Dared*), much of it funded by philanthropic foundations, mostly embracing single or small groups of schools, many foundering on seeking larger scale. Nearly all terminated with the coming of the new millennium and the stunningly

misguided substance and implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act that came with it.

As the PDK/Gallup Polls revealed, the public's attitudes remained surprisingly positive, especially at the elementary level. Belief in there being bad schools "out there" increased. But there was scarcely a sign of the parental and societal outrage one would expect of a wise people. Clearly, our democracy is at risk, not from the stewards of our schools but from those in high places who frame those stewards' daily work.

We will never have the schools necessary to the well-being of a democratic people until the State, educators, and our communities come together in common purpose and balance. Parents are scarcely apparent in this triad, educators have little agency, and the State is significantly joined with the god of economic utility, whose purpose of schooling is to prepare the young for entry into the economic life of the community and beyond (see Neil Postman, *The End of Education*, 1995). Training is replacing educating in higher education at an accelerating pace (see Harry R. Lewis, *Excellence Without a Soul*, 2006).

Reformers think that replacing weak teachers, chartering schools, and turning teacher education over to Teach for America will give the nation world-class schools. And although policymakers, business roundtables, commission reports, journalists, and pundits tell us that our public schooling continues to spiral downward from mediocre to embarrassing, most parents rate the schools they know from satisfactory to good, as I wrote above.

Clearly, what we have here is much more than a failure to communicate. Sociologist James Coleman's 1966 report on classrooms' impact on learning shattered President Johnson's inflated expectations for the role of schools in the Great Society by demonstrating that the home and family were at least as important as the schools in creating educational success.

Subsequently, England's Michael Rutter and his team reviewed a dozen years of research on children's learning in school and then released the report of their own study of schools in London (*Five Thousand Hours*, 1979). They found high performance correlation between students' academic performance and school characteristics such as rules, internal organization, teachers' distribution of praise, pupils' punishment, principals' characteristics and visibility, teachers' relationships, and intellectual, moral, and cultural climate.

Social psychologist Seymour Sarason had described in 1971 the educational power and importance of this climate (*The Culture of the School and the Problem of Change*). Subsequent research was so compelling that he revisited and strengthened his parallel beliefs in a sequel a quarter of a century later (*Revisiting "The Culture of the School and the Problem of Change,"* 1996).

The evidence available today tells us that the domain of the place called school embraces three sources of each child's learning, whether it be education or training: the culture of the school-parent-community relationship, the school as a social situation, and the classroom as a teacher-student relationship. The influence of each varies with the chronological and social situation aging of

the young. The nation's attention is almost entirely to the third school source of student learning, and it is not consistently the best and most powerful educator.

School reformers, policymakers, and corporate leaders are not only unaware of the rich body of relevant knowledge available and the history of our public schools, but are also short on the knowledge and intellectual discourse necessary to making wise decisions about what education is and our schools are for. What Secretary of Education Arne Duncan has in mind for making and implementing those decisions is a quite different source of the necessary wisdom. On March 8, 2011, the *Seattle Times* published his piece, "Reform Education So Schools Succeed in the 21st Century's Global Economy." The third paragraph reads as follows:

Over the past two years, governors and other elected leaders have provided unprecedented leadership for school reform that will accelerate student achievement. They understand that education is the cornerstone of a strong economy, and they are taking courageous steps to challenge the status quo in education. . . . This will end the practice of lying to children and adults that dummed down standards will prepare students for success.

What a piece of cognitive garbage this is! Readers, are you aware of what, according to our secretary of education, these governors and other elected leaders have been up to these past two years? My *Webster's Dictionary* defines *reform*

"amendment of what is defective, vicious, corrupt, or depraved." Wow! Given a little more time, these leaders might have gotten rid of the deprecatory situations, hounded out the people lying to our children, and put our schools on the yellow brick road to America's leadership in the global economy. And cows might fly.

Mr. Duncan, I think you ought to do a little homework, such as checking whether there are other states besides Washington where our elected leaders are having to deal with lawsuits charging inadequate support of our schools. And you are more than a little casual in the title and substance of your paper regarding the correlation of school reform with school achievement! School reformers have made little progress with this problem over the past half-century, failing to get beyond conventional wisdom in their oft-repeated recommendations, ignoring the inquiries of social psychologists studying human cognition and economists studying people as the wealth of nations.



This occasional paper and the papers to come address all three of the educative domains of the school described earlier. School reformers rarely recognize learning situations other than the teacher-student relationship and the grammar of schooling that supports it. The school-parent-community relationship is a major component of America's culture, within which each school is a moral learning community (see Goodlad, Soder, and Sirotnik, eds., *The*

Moral Dimensions of Teaching, 1990, especially chapters 9 and 10).

But many of our schools are no longer part of their communities, and there is growing evidence of decline in an array of adult cognitive domains regarding how we interact with one another, including our ability to carry on constructive, enlightened discourse (see Benjamin R. Barber, *Consumed*, 2007).

We are not only dumbing down, we are leading the world in the percentage of people in prison, and our democracy is in danger. I encounter people who believe that “democracy” is one of our two major political parties. And, increasingly, school assessment correlates hardly at all with the qualities most of us expect our schools to develop in the young – and think they do. Why else would parents and their neighbors rate the schools they know to be good or at least satisfactory?

No doubt many readers of Duncan’s article are still trying to find out who the liars were and how the governors and other elected leaders are ending those dumbed-down standards in the bad schools we have been hearing about.

As Secretary Duncan partially but unwittingly revealed, there is and has been for years a disconnect between most people and school reformers like those he praises regarding what our schools are for. Cubberley’s observation of a century ago regarding what was happening to children was both incredibly prescient and ominous.

It often takes a good storyteller to draw out the significance of what might appear to be of passing importance. Farmer, teacher, and writer Wendell

Berry is one of these. His novel, *Jayber Crow*, fictitiously Jayber’s autobiography, published in 2000, describes a happening in 1964, a half-century after Cubberley’s statement of concern. It had enormous impact on both Jayber and me. I often wonder if reading Jayber’s story would have led the late James B. Conant to reject his statement that an adequate curriculum of mathematics and science requires a school large enough to produce 100 graduating seniors per year.

Jayber is looking out the window of his barber shop, waiting as usual for his first client and for friends to stop by for coffee and conversation. A yellow bus loaded with children he knows rolls by, heading out of his and their town and away from its school. He wrote:

In 1964, acting on the certified best advice, the official forces of education closed the Port William School. It was a good, sound building, with swings and see-saws and other playthings on the grounds around it, and they just locked the doors and sent the children in buses down to Hargrave. It was the school board’s version of efficiency, economy of scale, and volume. If you can milk forty cows just as efficiently as twenty, why can’t you teach forty children just as efficiently as twenty? Or, for that matter, a hundred or two hundred?

Having no children of my own, I may have no right to an opinion, but I know that closing the school just knocked the breath out of the community. It did worse than that. It gave the community a never-healing wound.

Wendell Berry sees what most of us do not. Jayber was cut deeply by both the loss to the community and the loss to its young people. The culture of their maturing in Hargrave gave little more than academic learning and Friday night football. Had Berry continued the fictitious autobiography into the twenty-first century and its accompanying school reform daze, Jayber would have become a very unhappy old man. Is why I am writing this paper becoming increasingly clear? I leave you to your thoughts.

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