

Viewpoint: 1, New Schools

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Source: *Change*, Vol. 8, No. 4 (May, 1976), p. 7

Published by: Taylor & Francis, Ltd.

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40162546>

Accessed: 17-02-2022 15:27 UTC

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New Schools

by Eric Hoffer

Some time ago, while writing an essay on the young, I was surprised by the discovery that the young at present do not constitute a higher percentage of the population than they did in the past. The percentage of the young has remained remarkably constant through many decades. What has changed is the percentage of teen-agers.

We used to count as teen-agers those between the ages of 13 and 19. Now the teen-age group includes those between the ages of 10 and 30. Television is giving 10-year-olds the style of life of juveniles, while the post-Sputnik education explosion has been keeping students in their late twenties on the campuses in a state of prolonged adolescence. There are no children any more. Our public schools are packed with mini-men hungering for the prerogatives and probably the responsibilities of adults.

The poet W. H. Auden said that what America needs are puberty rites and a council of elders—which are probably beyond our reach. What this country needs and can have is child labor. The mini-men, bored by meaningless book learning, are hungry for action, hungry to acquire all kinds of skills. There will be no peace in the schools and no effective learning until the curriculum is reformed to meet the needs of the new type of students.

There is evidence that a student in his early twenties, when he is eager to learn, can master in less than a year all the book learning that teachers try to force into unwilling, bored minds through grammar and high school. There is also evidence that forced book learning in public schools, rather than preparing students for a fuller mastery of subjects later in college, often makes them unfit for it. When the great British physicist Sir Joseph Thomson was asked why En-

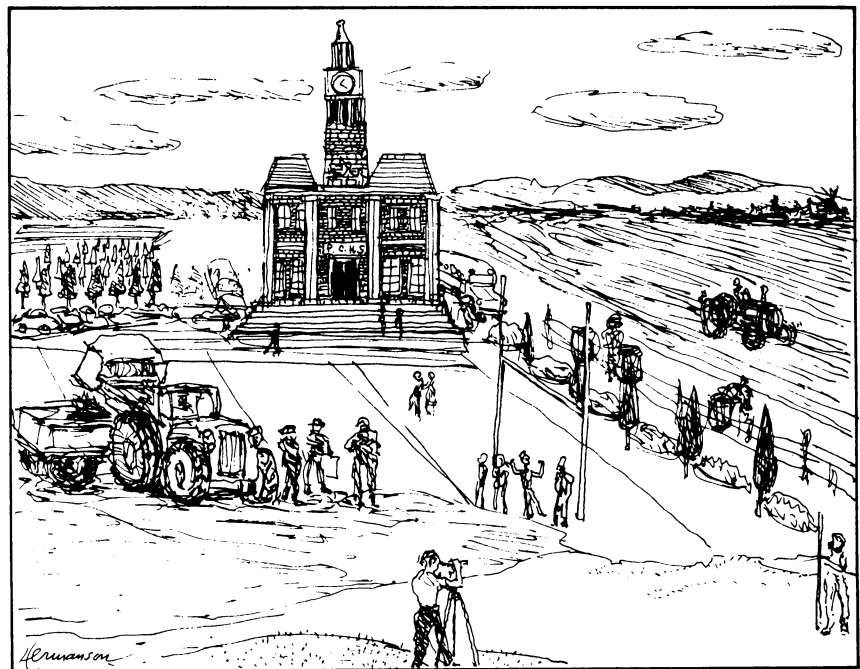
gland produced great scientists, he answered: "Because we hardly teach science at all in schools. Over here the minds that come to physics arrive in the laboratory with a freshness untarnished by routine." Reading and writing are a different matter—if these are not thoroughly mastered early in life, we will continue to have what we have now: college students who can do neither.

I propose, then, that half of the school day be given to book learning—reading and writing, elementary mathematics, a familiarization with the geography of the planet, and a bird's-eye view of history—and the other half to the mastery of skills. Retired skilled carpenters, masons, plumbers, electricians, mechanics, gardeners, architects, city planners, etc., could teach the young how to build houses and roads, how to landscape and garden, how to operate all sorts of machines. Retired bankers, manufacturers, merchants, and politicians could familiarize the young with

finance and management.

In small towns where there is only one school it would be easy to set aside a hundred acres or so on which generations of students could build a model neighborhood, plant gardens, and raise crops. In large cities the work would have to be done on the outskirts or on land made available by slum clearance. By the time they graduated from high school, the young would be equipped to earn a living and to run the world.

There is no reason to believe that adults will soon regain their lost nerve and be able to impose their values on the young. But there is nothing to prevent adults from transmitting their skills. It is also becoming evident that a society that does not know how to cope with juveniles can maintain the measure of stability and continuity requisite for civilized living only by abolishing adolescence—by giving the young the skills, opportunities, responsibilities, and rewards of grown-ups. ■



ERIC HOFFER is a self-taught philosopher who has lived as a gold miner, migrant farm worker, and longshoreman. This essay is adapted from his latest book, *In Our Time*. Copyright © 1976 by Eric Hoffer. The book will be published next month by Harper & Row.