

Why Safeguard Our Schools?

By John Lawrence Waldman

Searching scrutiny and criticism have recently been directed at all phases of social activity. The public schools have not escaped. Especially in the post-depression years since 1929 they have been under heavy fire. Up to that time education appeared to hold the confidence of the American people; those who denied its effectiveness, those who doubted its ideals, and those who cynically opposed it had grown fewer.

Now the enemies of public education have become increasingly and insistently clamorous. There has been a cry against waste of public funds, extravagant school buildings, fads and frills in the curriculum. Schools have been closed, school terms shortened, teachers' salaries lowered, services reduced or eliminated. The tremendous progress since 1900 in all forms of public education has been checked. Educational service is in danger of deteriorating in spite of enormously increased demands for new services.

There has perhaps never been a time in its history when the public school did not need reformation and improvement. Constructive criticism is wholesome and welcome, but there is now a real danger that the hard-earned gains of the past may be lost. There is imperative need for socially-minded citizens to review the necessity of a public school system in a democracy. If our country is to continue steadfast to its ideals, each generation must re-educate itself concerning the purposes of the public school.

The founders of our republic foresaw the necessity for public education in a democracy. Many quotations could be cited as examples of their belief in universal education as the cornerstone of democracy—the basic fact of our civilization. Much time was to elapse and many battles

Henry George said:

"Public schools . . . are . . . prerevolutionary agencies."

"The great work of the present for every man, and every organization of men, who would improve social conditions, is the work of education—the propagation of ideas. It is only as it aids this that anything else can avail."

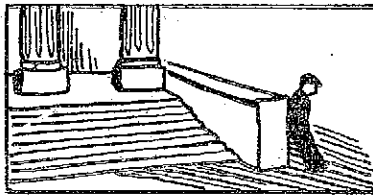
"Protection or Free Trade," p. 269.

"Social Problems," p. 243.

had to be fought to reach an approximate realization of this ideal.

Many forces have been arrayed against it. Certain classes have always regarded the education of the masses as dangerous. The stigma of pauperism and charity hindered the progress of the public school. Certain sectarian and religious interests feared its influence. Many people resented it as an invasion of family rights. The institution of slavery and other class distinctions resisted its growth. With the rise of democratic consciousness among the people, however, gradually and reluctantly was won a recognition that a general and equal system of education was the right of every child, and that encouragement of education was the first duty of government.

Universal and free education, supported and controlled by the people, compulsory, and non-sectarian, has become the foundation of the American social order. Until the lean years following 1929 these ideals were rapidly becoming realities. The public school was abolishing illiteracy; it



was awakening lively interest for personal development and public welfare; it was enlightening public opinion and directing energy toward human service and toward the preservation and improvement of free government. Many forms of collective action were fostered such as police, fire, and health protection, hospitals, improved roads, libraries and museums, and agencies for the care of delinquent, dependent, and defective members of society.

Meanwhile our country has developed tremendously in territory, population and wealth. It has changed from an agrarian to a machine economy. We have seen a shift from a rural to a predominantly urban population. We have absorbed millions of immigrants. A vast continent with its immense natural resources has been developed and settled. We have fought a civil war and have participated in a world war. Industrial processes have changed enormously together with the rise of huge corporations and their counterparts, the labor unions.

Scientific knowledge has far outsped our ability to keep pace. Family life and recreation have been revolutionized. The standard of living has risen and leisure time has increased. Crime, corruption, and rackets have multiplied scandalously. Economic dislocation and political propaganda have seriously threatened our social stability.

Yet, in spite of these rapid and bewildering developments, while not all the promises of the public school have been fulfilled, our social structure has remained fundamentally and basically sound as the result of the dissemination of universal education.

A democracy, however, requires more than stability. A democracy is more than a form of government—it is a mode of associated living. Thus education in a democracy becomes something more than the transmission of the cultural achievements

of the race by reconstructing during each successive generation a new present out of the living past; it must also transcend that indoctrination fostered by the totalitarian state by means of which the ruling group perpetuates itself. Sanctified doctrines as such are not the business of education in a democracy; indoctrination is often the fertile seed of hypocrisy, the breeder of revolution, and the refuge of the privileged classes.

Democracy is a living, growing, developing process, in which the shared concerns of all the people become ever broader with the development of modes of manufacture, commerce, travel, and intercommunication flowing from the increasing command of science over natural energy. Democratic education must direct such progress; it must harmonize the individual and the group; it must prevent stratification into social classes with emphasis on preservation of the ruling elements; it must foster as much spirit of free inquiry and of individual growth as is compatible with the social welfare.

True education involves the development of doubt, inquiry, and experimentation. Consensus is only valuable when it is a synthesis of tested doctrines. Progress is a creature of doubt. Once the mind refuses to take things for granted, once it doubts and challenges and questions, it makes place for growth and progress. Unquestioning repetition of doctrines produce a static, repeated civilization. Many of the faults of our educational system can be attributed to overemphasis on indoctrination; it is not wise merely to teach a democracy to read unless we also teach it how to think. Without this universal spirit of free inquiry, our democracy is doomed; it will become a regimented fascist state.

The scope and function, therefore, of democratic education must include open-mindedness, critical-mindedness rather than complacency, group-mindedness, active group participation, and responsible personality. The phenomena of life have little finality: they are dynamic and changeable. The closed adult mind with its bias and prejudice must yield to the inquisitive alert mind of the youth. We must appeal to the critical powers of the mind; complacency is a defeatist

philosophy which is out of place in modern times.

On the other hand, individualism is outmoded with the vanishing frontier. To live successfully with people rather than with nature is the present desideratum. The responsible individual with standards of personal honor, able to think calmly and to avoid domination by mass psychology, ready to adapt to group needs and able to participate in group activity is the ideal of democratic education. Such socially-conscious individuals demand just systems of distribution of wealth, economic security, health care, decent housing, wholesome recreation, universal cultural opportunity, political integrity, and vital religion. The development of this type of citizenship represents the great American ideal of education which we must strive to preserve.

Not only as a spiritual force but as an economic necessity must we safeguard our schools. Education creates wealth; the educated mind is the greatest producing agency, more important than natural resources or racial traits. Education creates a body of potential customers able to appreciate and use new advantages in technology and culture. Schools

conserve human resources through health and safety; they prepare for research; they create demands for goods and services. Education conditions earning power; it creates intangible values by freeing the mind from ignorance and superstition, by training social leaders, by establishing decent community life, by citizenship training, by increased vocational efficiency, by promoting worthy home membership, by training for leisure, and by developing character. Education is a kind of social insurance against ignorance, poverty, crime and disease.

The history of the public schools is a long story of struggle with selfishness and vested rights. This creation of democracy, the free public school system, faces its most serious challenge today. In the bewilderment and confusion of the times the scope of the schools has been limited by the very conditions which increase the need for schools. The answer of modern civilized peoples to social problems has always been more education. Our own history abounds in faith in the regenerative and restoring power of education; we must adhere to it today if we would avoid a national debacle and the loss of American ideals.