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# The Educational Pendulum

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The schools of America are in crisis—again. In spring, four major commissions declared that the inadequacies of the schools threatened the future of the nation, and this fall several new reports are expected to add to the indictment. Now that the ills of American education are once more a significant public issue, it is a good time to reflect on how we reached this point.

At any given time during most of the past half-century, schools have been the object of well-intended crusades to change or save them. These periodic waves of reform, from one extreme to the other, have led many observers to wonder whether the worst problem of American education is its faddishness. In the 1940s and early 1950s, a "good school" used progressive methods based on student interests and activity projects. After the Soviets put Sputnik into orbit in 1957, a "good school" was defined as one with high academic standards and special programs for gifted students, especially in subjects such as science, foreign languages, and mathematics. By the late 1960s, the once-high standards started to fall, and the "good school" was one where student participation and choice were emphasized. Since the mid-1970s, the educational pendulum has swung back toward "basics," "standards," and a coherent curriculum, and away from the free-wheeling experimentation of the '60s and '70s.

Why so much faddism? Why the constant shift from spontaneity and student interests in one decade to rigor and standards in the next? More than anything else, our educational

faddism stems from the deeply ingrained conviction among many Americans that the best way to reform society is to reform the schools. Awareness of a social problem typically leads to the creation of a new school program: To curb the rate of traffic fatalities, a driver-education curriculum is devised; a rise in the divorce rate is followed by new courses on family life; demands for racial integration are met with school busing. Since the needs of society change depending on the social, political, and economic climate, the educational pendulum is pushed first in one direction, then in another.

Through the years, efforts to make the schools relevant to the needs of society have provoked intense struggles over the curriculum between groups with differing views. One source of this tension has been generated within the education profession itself. As the profession emerged and became self-conscious in the early 20th century, it developed a "new class" of policymakers and theorists who were not primarily classroom teachers. As the profession sought to define itself and find its social role, its leaders sought ways in which the profession could make a significant contribution to solving social problems. Unlike the classroom teacher, who had little time or reason to

wonder whether the study of history or literature would change society, the growing number of professionals in schools of education, city education departments, state education departments, and professional associations interminably debated how to change the schools in order to serve society better.

While their agreement is widespread that schools exert an important influence on the next generation, a sharp divergence characterizes the question of how schools should meet this responsibility. Historically, the debate on this issue within the education establishment has raged between the progressive educators and the traditionalists. The progressives argue that professional educators must determine how to fit the individual to the society and design their course offerings accordingly; traditionalists, on the other hand, contend that the only way to reform society is by making individuals more intelligent. The zigs and zags in educational development during the past 50 years directly mirror this debate.

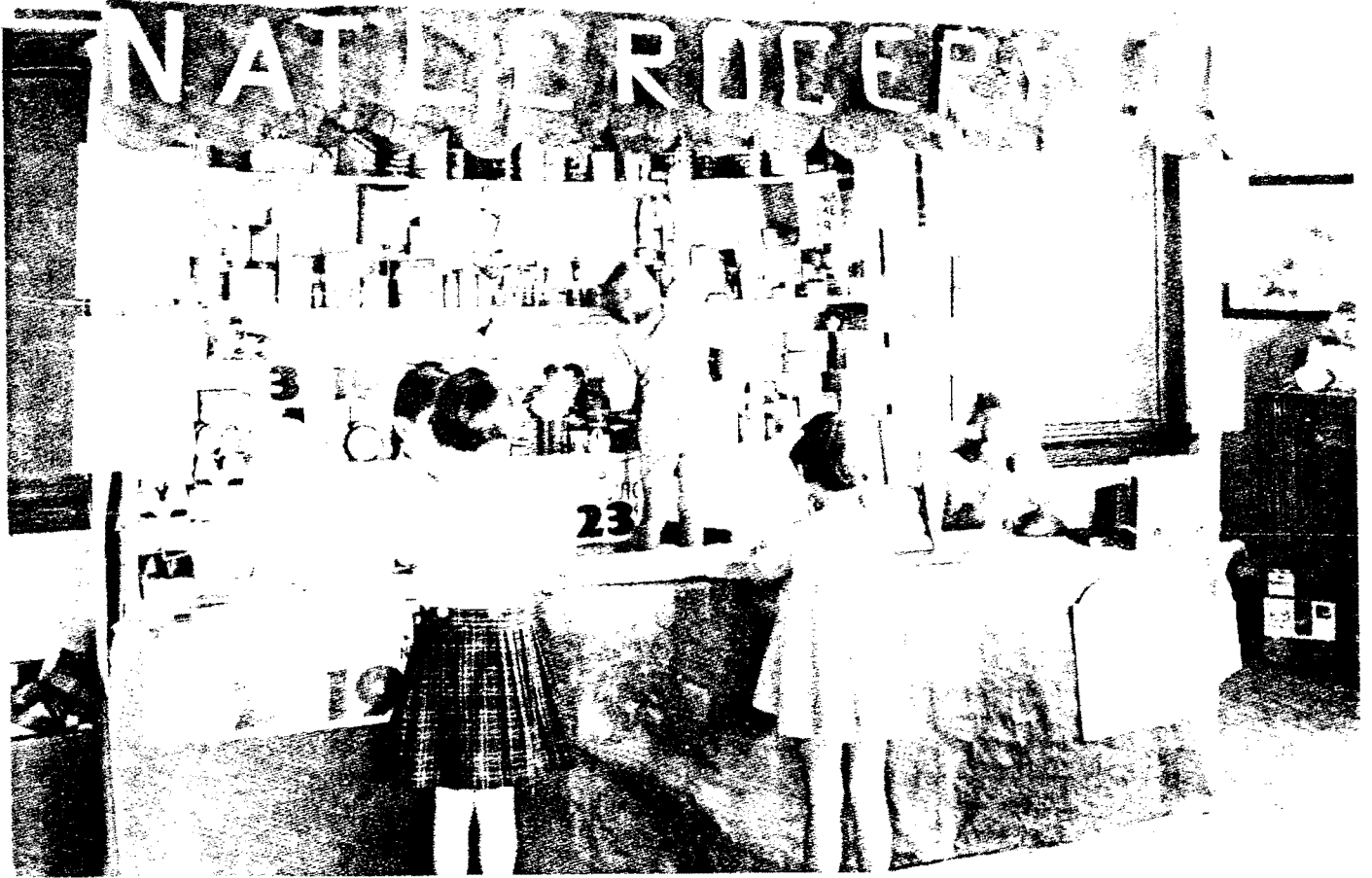
The traditionalist idea—that the central purpose of education is to increase students' intellectual powers—dominated American schools until the 1930s. At that time, however, the beliefs of educational philosopher John

*"The objectives of education are preparation for citizenship; for home and family life; for vocational life; for physical health; for effective personality; for effective use of leisure time; and for development of information, interests, and skills . . . It cannot be expected that the great mass of the populace will spend its leisure time with the classics, the arts, or higher mathematics. Leisure education must then be attuned to the primitive instincts for physical and practical activity, the more familiar pursuits of the masses—the home and its furnishings, nature, sports, games, the radio, and social activities."*

Harl R. Douglass

Secondary Education for Youth in Modern America, 1937

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*Growing up to be a good citizen, however, sometimes meant learning how to be a practical consumer.*

Dewey and his followers made substantial inroads in schools of education, professional associations, and public-school systems. Because of the Depression, which destroyed the job market for adolescents, many young people who would normally have gone to work stayed in high school. The swelling of the high-school enrollment by non-college-bound students made many educators dissatisfied with the traditional academic curriculum. The progressive philosophy—which argued that in school there should be a society that would define what the larger society should be—encouraged broadening the curriculum for this new brand of student. Under the influence of progressivism, many schools introduced vocational and personal-service courses while reducing academic offerings.

After World War II, this kind of progressivism came to be known as “life-adjustment education” and became a major force in American education. Principals boasted that their programs

adjusted students to the demands of real life, freeing them from dry academic studies. The new curriculums centered around vocation, leisure activities, health, personal concerns, and community problems. The schools in Des Moines, Iowa, for example, offered a course called “Developing an Effective Personality,” while junior-high-school students in Tulsa learned what shade of nail polish to wear and how to improve their appearance. Some schools had no curriculum at all,

while others pointed with pride to new courses in which projects or activities such as running a barbershop or decorating the girls’ washroom replaced traditional studies.

Since the public never fully understood why these innovations were introduced, some communities became embroiled in heated political controversies. In Minneapolis, for example, a progressive superintendent merged English and social studies into a new required course called “Common

*“To what desirable patterns of group behavior does [education] contribute? With any child, the secret for success is being fitted . . . It is vain and wasteful to take a girl who would make a fine homemaker and try to fit her into the patterns of training which make a lawyer, or to take a boy who would be successful in business and try to fit his training to that which produces doctors.”*

Paul R. Mort and William S. Vincent  
A Look at Our Schools: A Book for The Thinking Citizen, 1946

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Learnings" in which pupils studied their own personal and social problems. A parent group, led by university professors including poet and novelist Robert Penn Warren, persuaded the local school board to permit their children to choose traditional academic subjects instead of "Common Learnings."

By the early 1950s, "life-adjustment education" had been introduced in many school districts across the nation, and it became the target of ridicule by scores of critics, most of whom were concerned laymen, such as Mortimer Smith, who later went on to found the Council for Basic Education, and university professors such as Arthur Bestor, who wrote the controversial book, *Educational Wastelands*. Critics charged not only that life-adjustment education was conformist and anti-intellectual, but that it was undemocratic because it provided academic studies only to college-bound students. Among the most outspoken critics was Robert Hutchins, chancellor of the University of Chicago, who complained that schools were failing to equip youngsters with intellectual power, feeding them instead a poor diet of vocational training and miscellaneous dead facts. By trying to meet all the needs of students, Hutchins charged, the schools were disintegrating their program since students have so many needs. "Perhaps the greatest idea that America has given the world," Hutchins wrote, "is the idea of education for all. The world is entitled to know whether this idea means that everybody can be educated, or only that everybody must go to school."

Although progressive educators defended their programs and charged that the critics were reactionaries, out of touch with the modern world, the launch of Sputnik finished the debate, at least for the moment. Almost overnight, the nation became obsessed with the failure of the schools. School boards hastily installed new programs in mathematics, science, and foreign languages. Admiral Hyman Rickover insisted that the schools had damaged the nation's security by neglecting those with talent. And the federal government, which had refused to approve any general federal aid to education for nearly a century, appropriated nearly \$1 billion in the National Defense Education Act,

which spurred the teaching of the hard sciences and foreign languages.

The post-Sputnik effect was almost immediate. For the first time in the century, enrollments in foreign-language classes rose. With federal funds, more teachers of science, mathematics, and foreign languages were trained, and schools had money to modernize their laboratories. Through the encouragement of the National Science Foundation, courses in the physical sciences, mathematics, and social science were substantially rewritten by leading scholars to reflect recent advances in knowledge.

By the time the new curriculums were ready for use in the classroom in the mid-1960s, however, the furor over Sputnik had abated. The calls for academic excellence had faded away, drowned out by the rising tide of social conflict in the cities and the disorders on college campuses.

The contemporary climate of social unrest, racial tension, and anti-war protest produced a new wave of critics and reformers, who—in keeping with the American tradition of saving society by changing the schools—pointed the finger of blame at the schools for all that had gone wrong. According to the typical analysis, society was in deep trouble because the schools were too authoritarian in their insistence on standards of academic performance, dress, and behavior and, in addition, were responsible for perpetuating institutional racism.

The federal government responded to the mood of crisis by enacting a major school-aid program whose primary beneficiaries were poor children. Critics contended that this would not alter the fundamental structure of education or society. What was needed, they said, was more freedom and spontaneity, which would surely produce higher motivation and therefore better learning. In the universities, students

demanded courses that were relevant to political and social issues of the day.

During the late 1960s and early 1970s, schools again swung towards progressivism. Many elementary schools adopted "open education," which varied from place to place but often meant that the walls between classes were knocked down, and that students could exercise considerable choice about what to do each day. At the high-school level, graduation requirements were lowered, enrollment fell in such "hard" subjects as science, mathematics, and foreign languages, and alternative schools were established for students with special interests. Traditional subjects gave way to independent study, student-designed courses, and topical electives.

The subject areas affected most in the new era of student freedom were English and social studies. Typically, these courses gave way to a plethora of electives. In many schools, English was replaced by courses on the mass media, pop culture, and popular fiction. Writing, once a part of every student's daily regime, became a special course. Social studies, or history, was often splintered into mini-courses on black history, women's history, or "rap" sessions about values.

By the mid-1970s, academic indicators began to reveal a steady, nationwide downturn. For example, the number and proportion of students who received high scores on the SAT dropped dramatically. Not only college entrance examination scores but other tests taken by students in junior and senior high school showed a marked drop. In 1977, a blue-ribbon panel appointed by the College Board identified such in-school phenomena as grade inflation, absenteeism, frivolous courses, the absence of homework, and a striking diminution in reading and writing assignments as reasons for falling test scores. Other studies

*"Parents are slow in realizing how unimportant the learning side of school is. Children, like adults, learn what they want to learn. All prize-giving and marks and exams sidetrack proper personality development. . . . All that any child needs is the three Rs; the rest should be tools and clay and sports and theater and paint and freedom."*

A.S. Neill  
Summerhill: A Radical Approach to Child Rearing, 1960

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*"There is no inherently indispensable body of knowledge that every single child should know. . . . What children carry in their heads as 'chair' or 'aunt' or 'black' will never be absolutely identical. . . . In open education the teacher is mainly assistant to, not director of, the child's activity."*

Charles Rathbone

Open Education: The Informal Classroom, 1971

consistently found that during the 1970s high-school students took more nonacademic courses and fewer of the advanced courses necessary for college preparation.

As evidence accumulated that the schools were slipping as academic institutions, public confidence plummeted. Parents called for a "back-to-basics" curriculum, demanding the restoration of academic standards and discipline. In every year but one since 1969, the Gallup Poll has reported that the public's greatest educational concern has been the lack of discipline in the schools.

As usual, the schools followed society's shifting mood. One of the first things to go was the "new math," a prominent post-Sputnik curriculum reform, which most students and many teachers and parents found incomprehensible. Many schools that had torn their walls down for open education now replaced them. While alternative schools survived, their numbers shrank and their purpose became more clearly defined. By 1978, nearly 40 states adopted minimum competency tests to ascertain whether students had learned enough to be promoted or to graduate.

The latest swing of the educational pendulum has now taken us back, at least rhetorically, to the post-Sputnik era, when educators, policymakers, and parents feared that America's schools were producing (as one book was titled) "second-rate brains." The fear expressed in the most recent batch of commission reports is that the United States, through the failings of its schools, is losing the international competition for jobs and markets. When Sputnik was first launched by the Soviets, critics worried that the United States was falling behind in the race for space, technological prowess, and military superiority. Today, they worry less about falling behind in the

space race, but just as much about the lags in our technological innovation and our place in the world economy.

While it is likely that American education will continue to be responsive to social change, certain facts will moderate future swings of the pendulum. For one thing, the use of polls in sounding school issues will restrain faddism to some extent, because the public has consistently expressed fairly traditional ideas about curriculum and student behavior. For another, the continuing spread of interdependence in the global economy will make it difficult for American schools to neglect the basic subjects.

What has been the effect of this history of educational fads? It is impossible to say how society has been changed as a result. For one thing, no single educational innovation has ever been universally adopted; even when a fad was at its height, many teachers and schools simply ignored the fashion. For another, there is no simple barometer with which to measure social change or with which to tie together causes and effects. What is clearly discernible, however, is the effect of these trends in the schools. When high school graduation requirements fell, enrollment in courses such as science, mathematics, and foreign languages

dropped; in some high schools, foreign languages were eliminated, as were advanced courses in numerous hard disciplines.

If the past is any guide, we can expect that the current interest in excellence will last as long as there is a general perception that society's welfare depends on our ability to compete successfully in the international marketplace of goods and ideas. If we experience an internal crisis of confidence comparable to the Depression or to the late 1960s, then we may expect a return to the kind of educational progressivism that stresses self and community rather than competition and achievement.

Whatever the state of politics and society, America's schools need an anchor, an informed constituency of citizens and professional educators who will continue to press for the kind of liberal education that all children should have. Even back in the 1930s, when progressives and traditionalists first began to battle, they all agreed on the importance of literacy. The appeal of educational progressivism to parents lies in its promise to improve children's learning by increasing intrinsic motivation. Traditionalists have insisted that some kinds of extrinsic motivation, some external discipline such as grades and course requirements, are necessary. In either case, it is clear that parents and the public want children to become literate in school.

That is why, today, educators speak not just of reading and writing but of scientific literacy, cultural literacy, and historical literacy. Fads may come and go, but American schools now appear to be aiming at this broadened definition of literacy.

*"Excellence in education means several related things. At the level of the individual learner, it means performing on the boundary of individual ability in ways that test and push back personal limits, in school and in the workplace. Excellence characterizes a school or college that sets high expectations and goals for all learners, then tries in every possible way to help students reach them. Excellence characterizes a society that has adopted these policies, for it will then be prepared through the education and skill of its people to respond to the challenges of a rapidly changing world."*

A Nation at Risk

The National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983