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THE COMMON SCHOOL AND THE STATE¹

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The wisdom of Plato is nowhere more clearly proved than in the introductory passage to his treatise on education in the *Republic*, in which he makes, in a seemingly casual way, this profound remark: "In every work the beginning is the most important part, especially in dealing with anything young and immature." He then proceeds to discuss the system of education for his ideal state. There are two points to note: first, that he begins his discussion with the children; and, second, that he emphasizes the importance of the elementary instruction, and discusses with the greatest care its constituent parts. Nowhere are we permitted to lose sight of the central point of his system, that the children and their education are the fundamental units on which he bases his hopes of righteousness, happiness, and perpetuity for the state.

No educational reformer or theorist has got beyond the position of Plato, and in any system of general or popular education we must, consciously or unconsciously, pay our respects to him. Looking at the matter in a theoretical way, there are probably few here tonight who would venture to gainsay the view of Plato. The majority would accept it as educational gospel. On the other hand, there are few here perhaps who have given themselves concern that it should have practical realization, or

¹ President's address, Iowa State Teachers' Association, December 26, 1906.

who have considered how remote our practice is from our approved ideal.

Of course, this state and others have their public-school systems. Money has been given generously for school purposes, and there is, no doubt, warrant for a good deal of enthusiasm over what we have done for the education of our children. But we may safely leave it to the politician "to point with pride," as he eloquently reviews the benefits of free and universal education. It is the serious business of the earnest student of educational conditions to state as clearly as possible what the facts really are.

The state seems to have given its chief attention to the higher grades of secondary education rather than to the lower ones. The conspicuous building in the village or town is usually the high school, and the special provisions, if any, for the cultivation of the practical interests of the youth, are there and not in the lower grades. It would be anomalous for anyone to call attention to a rural-school building and grounds as evidence of the state's generosity in education. The rural school, or the grade school, rarely shows evidence of personal concern on the part of anybody for the children. The stream of revenue from the funds apportioned for educational purposes is reduced to innumerable small rivulets before it reaches the lower grades in the common schools, whether they be in city, town, or country. In thousands of rural schools, and often in town and village grades, the teacher is an immature and inadequately trained boy or girl without the gift of teaching, in the work for the meager pay, and without love for the children or ambition for the school. Nothing else is to be expected; and we have no right to criticize teachers or pupils because results are unsatisfactory. There never will be any improvement till we criticize ourselves a bit, and assimilate for use that portion of educational gospel which gives the place of chief honor to the children—the little children—and their education.

The chief problems of education are from the high school down, and not from the high school up. Below the high school, and not in it and beyond it, are to be settled finally the scope

and character of the education for the majority of our fellow-citizens. In the grades will be determined in some degree their quality as men and Americans. It is a tremendous problem which as yet we have not done much toward solving. This much is certain: the duty of the hour calls for a development downward rather than upward in the public-school system. There may be something to say for the six-year high school, but it is little as compared with the call of the children in the lower grades. When they are reasonably well provided for, it will be time to talk and plan for added years in the high-school course. Development upward in the public-school system is an interesting question, but is purely academic when considered in relation to the needs in the schools below. I have nothing to say against advanced high-school development as an abstract proposition; but practically we are not ready for it, whatever may be said of the proposition one way or the other. The demand of the hour is for improvement of the schools we now have—high schools, and especially the schools below them.

If the state is to have a chance at its future citizens, it must take it when they are children. Only a small percentage of them reaches the high school; a still smaller percentage reaches the colleges. There are more than 25,000,000 children in this country between the ages of five and fourteen. Set this number over against the number in high schools, and the difference is appalling. Still more appalling is the fact that not one-half of the number is counted as attendant at the schools below high-school grade. Thirty millions or more of the people of this country are bread-winners and work with their hands chiefly. The common school in country and town must provide all the education they can hope for, if indeed they hope for any. But it is the business of society, through the medium of the state, to bring down to them education of such value and quality that they will hope for it, and find in it a way of approach to the practical life they are to live. We are not doing our duty by the children. In view of these simple but astounding platitudes, it seems strange that someone who has insight and vision has not recognized the implicit demands that economic principles and

genuine patriotism are making—leaving out of sight all other motives—that educational legislation, to provide larger opportunities, is needed at the bottom more than at the top. We have many problems to deal with in this country, but none that approaches in importance this one, because this is fundamental to all the great problems. It is the problem of problems. If we deal with it adequately, there is hope that we shall be able to manage the others.

The magnitude of the problem is so great that private benefactions could not deal with it. It is the problem of the state and the nation, and hence your problem and mine. Since it is so, the responsibility that rests upon society in relation to it is not to be shifted, even if it were possible, upon others. Private beneficence, as has been wisely suggested before this association, in individual cases might serve as a spur to the public conscience, but it could never meet the social need or discharge the social obligation. It would indeed be a sorry day for the state if it should have reason to assume that its delinquencies might be made good by the benefactions of private individuals.

The duty of the state toward higher education is not so inclusive nor so insistent as that toward elementary education. It has discharged its duty better toward higher education, perhaps because it is a simpler duty and one much easier to deal with. The state has worked as the patron of education inversely to the real needs of the people. The state university is its most notable achievement, the high school is next in order, the common schools bring up the rear. The state university in the Middle West has achieved its place of distinction as an institution that meets in a noteworthy way the real needs of the people, because there have been leaders with initiative and ability to press its claims; in some similar degree, though after a long interval, the high school has had the advantage of the same sort of support. For the common schools there has been no organized or definitely continued advocacy of any kind, the result being that the provisions for them, good and generous enough for the time when they were made, have been left to take care of themselves. The state deserves the highest praise for its intelli-

gent treatment of the problem of higher education. There is still much for it to do in that direction, but there should be no delay in taking up, with the same careful and detailed consideration, the common-school problem. The condition now existing illustrates almost a total lack of adjustment between the common school and present-day needs. And this lack of adjustment is chiefly due to the fact that the public-school system is governed by laws that have been practically unchanged for years, while society that needs the schools has been growing with the rapid growth of this age, and deserves, even if it is not conscious of the fact, a response from the schools that they are not able to give. The response to the call of the people has been through the institutions of higher learning—a response which is only for the select few.

The state universities actually do respond to public demands. They have specialists to study and report movements in education and in public life. They hold to the past, but are quick to detect special and local needs. They have a forward look. Their organization is such that with reasonable quickness they can adjust themselves to the constantly growing requirements of the people. These same ideals, which the state university aims to realize in its work, are also the ideals of every standard institution of higher learning. They are the ideals of education a democracy should aim to realize. Educational leaders understand this, and these same ideals are common matters of conversation and discussion in educational conferences and assemblies. But it is a notable fact that these discussions relate themselves to the higher institutions, and very rarely, or never, include the grade school and the rural school. The ideal that has in some measure realized itself in the higher institution is needed—sorely needed—as a revivifying force in the lower school. Are we alive to this fact? Do we know that the ideals of public service at work in the higher must also have a chance in the lower schools? The call of democracy today—the most insistent, the most urgent call—is just this, that the lower grades in our education system be given a chance to realize in their sphere of public service the same ideals that are effective in the higher

institutions. Incidentally, the achievement of such a result, even in a very imperfect way, would be the greatest service that could be conferred upon the higher institutions. It would give them an educational constituency, larger in numbers, more able in material resources, and more intelligent and appreciative of educational and social needs than it is now. What greater benefits are there for an institution of higher learning?

School legislation in the early days (I have in mind particularly the Middle West) was directed almost wholly to the more external and material phases of the question. This is natural, for the first question in organizing a system involving great expense is the question of financial support. In a new state the school fund, the method of its collection and apportionment, provision for its enlargement, teachers' examinations, and questions of like character, consume all the time and interest that can be given to school legislation. Action is based upon the generally accepted belief that the common school is an essential constituent of a democratic society and should be generously provided for. The results secured by legislation, prompted by this noble sentiment, are magnificent in Iowa and in the western states generally, so far as the material basis for the development of an educational system is concerned. The trouble is, we have not in our educational product got on very rapidly. There has been much school legislation, but the equipment for the school is not very different from that which our fathers knew. Nor have the spirit and method changed as much as we should expect from the growth in resources and the larger demands of the people. Reading, writing, and arithmetic, with a little grammar, still form the staple intellectual diet for multitudes of young people in the common schools. They are taught practically as they were a generation ago, as subjects which the pupil must take as he might take medicine, with this difference, that there is no attempt to make a diagnosis of the youth's individual needs.

Measured by the rapid changes and advances in general social movements, the common-school system is in a state of standstill. This is chiefly due to the fact that, having given a

material basis for a system of schools, we have not proceeded seriously and insistently to the more difficult questions of educational policy. We have not provided for adequate co-ordination and integration of all the interests involved; we have not given sufficient care to the personnel of the administrative officers; we have not recognized the importance of adjustability and plasticity in the system to meet enlarging demands as they arise; we have not given to our supervising officers sufficient opportunity for personal initiative in controlling and directing school affairs; we have not felt deeply enough that the chief end of our system is the care of some hundreds of thousands of boys and girls who will never see a high school. It is no easy task to deal with problems such as these, but we must deal with them.

The fact that there are such problems is no criticism of the public system. It has done an incalculable service for the people. But there are duties still to perform which are beyond it, through no fault of the system, but through fault of us who are the citizens of this and other commonwealths. The time has come for a new spirit and a new initiative in common-school education; when some of the personal and creative energy that belongs to present-day society must be put into it. On the splendid material basis, which has been maturing for more than a half-century, we must superadd the elements necessary to make the school system a more vital part of the public life. We are under obligations to do this, and we are under contract to the world to do it. If we do not do it, we are contributing to those elements of confusion and discontent which are likely to prove a menace to the permanency of our free institutions.

We have based our faith in the permanency of our institutions on the capacity of the people to govern themselves and direct aright affairs of state. The task we undertook in the infancy of our government is vastly greater than we anticipated. The difficulties of the task are multiplying with unexpected rapidity. Our appreciation of the difficulties is not growing with equal rapidity. Aliens are coming at the rate of a million a year to become citizens of this republic for good or ill. We have entered into tacit contract with ourselves and with them that

they shall have the rights of free citizenship. The nations of the earth are looking at us and are wondering what is to become of our experiment in democracy; and we may well ask ourselves whether it is possible for us to give the newcomers adjustment to the ideals we cherish and make them one with ourselves. I believe we can do it. Whether we shall do it or not depends chiefly upon our willingness to study the problem of elementary education with a view to making, as far as possible, our education one of adjustment to practical life, and one of participation in it. More directly is it a problem of education because the real problem of the immigrant does not begin with the first, but with the second, generation. Hence the solution of the problem centers in the rural and grade schools. It is not a new problem the immigrant brings us; he simply emphasizes the old problem—the problem we have in connection with our own children.

All that has been said points to the boy and girl. Discuss any educational proposition, and sooner or later it reaches the boy and girl—the school, “only a lot of boys and girls.” There is found the basal ultimate in educational theory and practice. Future school legislation, without question, will give greater emphasis to the boy and girl, and greater stress to enactments that look to their development as a real part of the community and state. We may not expect to legislate adequately till we see in the needs and capacities of the boy and girl the purpose and the end of the whole process of public-school education. If we consider their needs and capacities, and provide ways and means to treat them, we of course improve their value as social, political, and economic units in a free commonwealth. We do it for foreign-born and native-born alike. Education of this sort for all the boys and girls is a political and an economic necessity. It is the first duty of the state to provide it as a means of self-preservation. This would seem to be self-evident, but what legislative body in this country has emphasized with any insistence the patriotic and the economic motives for school legislation? The careful development of the dormant economic value in the millions of school children who will never have the oppor-

tunity for higher education would bring immeasurable spiritual and material returns to society.

We have need to consider the fact that permanent success and stability in our public affairs are not so much—by no means so much—dependent upon tariff legislation, the regulation of inequalities, nor upon any symptomatic treatment of special irregularities, as they are dependent upon the treatment of the fundamental problems of practical life—patriotism, economic value, and the like—which center in the public school. Germany has grasped this fact, and is the first European nation to give it practical illustration in a large way. She is securing industrial and commercial supremacy among the European nations because she has been developing the long unused and neglected economic values belonging to her youth. Her educational reports and her trade reports are complementary documents which show without question the source of her rapidly enlarging sphere of influence. The Kaiser, early in his reign, insisted on this new motive in educational legislation, and nothing better than this illustrates the sagacity and wisdom of the man.

Japan was quick to recognize the same fact, and the results achieved by her have taught a lesson to the whole world. She did not have many men. She understood that her success in war and in peace would depend on developing to the fullest extent the values of those she did have. She won in her struggle with Russia, and in her struggle for recognition among the nations, on this practical but fundamental principle.

The best way to increase the agricultural value of a state, or the commercial value, or any value, is to increase the value of the youth who are to be its citizens, by giving them acquaintance with their own powers and with the life and the materials of the life they are to live. It is easier to give them only reading, writing, and ciphering, and to let them go with the contribution these subjects can make; it is easier and cheaper, but it is not so wise nor profitable. It would cost much money to instruct the child in such a way that he would come into real touch with the life he is going to live; but, however much it might cost, it would not be expensive, because the returns would

be more than commensurate with the expenditure of time and pains and money. If we give the children an interest in things, and give them adjustment to their environment, social and material, large results are sure to follow, both material and spiritual. This is spiritual law. This is economic law. Finally, it is education—education in the only true sense.

A youth is made up of a bundle of sympathies and native powers calling for cultivation. The chief object of elementary education should be to bring the youth to consciousness that these qualities are within him, and that they are there for enlargement and use. There is little to show that our system of elementary education has taken this very simple proposition into account. The educational food we are giving the child is good so far as it goes, but the method of giving it does not aim at the fundamental educative process.

What the child calls for are both subjects and method through which there may take place some constructive development of his latent powers. He can't be educated in any real sense without it. A child's education and a child's reformation, if he happens to be an irresponsible, take place along exactly similar lines. There is no hope that we shall improve a child on the street by telling him he has done something wrong and that he must not do it again. It wouldn't help the matter much if he were arrested and put in jail. The only hope for such a lad is a place where he may have a chance to practice and realize right principles of conduct, a place where the good in him is called into play by sympathy and encouragement. He must have a place where he can work out his own redemption under suitable guidance. The same is true of any boy in the school. The giving of a book and a teacher to explain rules will not insure educational results. The child should have the chance to reproduce, so far as possible, for himself, and to participate in the educating process. The school—rural school or grade school in town—should be a shop, a garden, a laboratory, should be a place where boys and girls come in contact with life and form personal acquaintance with the rules and principles which govern it. In short, there should be a creative atmosphere in the school

from the lowest grades up. Manual training and domestic science are lines of educational activity which afford suggestions for use in all grades of school work.

I know a school in Iowa where the idea I am trying to emphasize has had beautiful illustration. A large number of triangular spaces in the town, due to an unusual manner of platting, have been taken in hand by grade pupils. Shrubbery and flowers have been planted, and places that were at one time very unsightly are now the beauty spots of the town. The children are enthusiastic about it, and have learned much about plants, seeds, and soils. Incidentally they have acquired a sense of beauty and order. This is education of the highest value. It comprehends the whole individual—gives information, excites interest, gives vital contact with the outer world, and develops a sense of social obligation. It epitomizes elementary education as it ought to be.

The value of any subject, or any method whatever, is directly proportional to the use that can be made of it in developing what is within the child and bringing it into a vital relationship with the world without. Looked at from this point of view our educational system, especially as realized in the grades and rural schools, is in its elementary stages. As yet we have merely announced our intention of educating our children, without appreciating the magnitude of the task and its ever insistent demands. A schoolhouse at every "cross roads," and a large school fund, are only suggestions of possibilities. With these provided, we are just ready to ask: What are we to do with the boy and girl in the schoolhouse? They are alive—they require immediate and constant attention. There is a teacher—alive also. Now, the consideration we secure for these living parts of the system will determine wholly whether it was worth our while to build the schoolhouse and vote a tax for its support. The difficulties of our educational problem begin here—and end here—in the living pupil and in the teacher. They are difficulties that will always be with us. They are not to be disposed of by a single act of legislation. The elements of these difficulties are variable and require provision for some continuous process

of legislation, to be followed up by most careful and competent administration.

A forward movement in the interests of our educational system with especial reference to schools below the high school, particularly rural and village schools, should include emphasis on the following points:

1. An improvement of the plant—schoolyard, building, and equipment—with a view to the reasonable comfort and convenience of the pupils. There should be an appeal through an improved plant to the pupil's sense of order and beauty.

2. A determined effort to secure greater permanency and efficiency in the teaching force. The teacher's value will determine the value of every other element in the school. The teacher is a medium of communication between state and pupil, and is to be "philosopher, guide, and friend." A right adjustment between the child and his environment, social and material, is not to be expected unless the teachers have a reasonably good understanding of the obligations resting upon them. Teachers of this type are to be had in larger numbers, if the state will ask for them and provide a reasonable support. The teachers in our common schools sorely need the stimulus of encouragement and appreciation. There would be a quick response to such stimulus. A demand for greater efficiency would quickly secure greater efficiency.

3. Opportunity for practical acquaintance with the material and social environment. The boy and girl that grow up in the country should have an intelligent acquaintance with trees, birds, plants, and soils. There should be some provision for instruction in such subjects, and others of local importance. There should also be provision for elementary instruction in questions of social obligation and relationship. An attempt in each case should be made to prepare the child for the life he is to live as a fellow-citizen with many others, and as an active contributor to the needs of his community and state.

4. At various places in every county, perhaps in every township, there should be a consolidated school. This school should give what no single school could give, should have a richer course

of study, and larger opportunities for establishing connections between school-work and life-work. This arrangement is practical, and is an established success in several states, particularly in Indiana.

5. The status of the county superintendent should be improved. The office is one of immense possibilities, and under adequate legislative protection will have great practical value in the development of an improved school system.

6. A closer supervision by the state of all the schools, including, of course, the high school.

7. The appointment of an educational commission by the legislature to review all school legislation, to unify it, and to propose ways and means of improvement, with a view to placing the schools into close touch with life.

In conclusion, it cannot be overemphasized that the school is not to be the special interest of the teacher alone. It is also the special interest of every citizen who has the welfare of the nation at heart and appreciates the meaning of the common school in our social and national life. In the hope that we who are here may do something to focus attention upon this part of our educational problem, I have made these remarks. Apropos are the words of Walt Whitman :

And you, America,
Cast you the real reckoning of your present?
The lights and shadows of your future, good or evil?
To girlhood, boyhood, look, the teacher and the school.