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WHO'S IN CHARGE HERE?

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In this speech it is pointed out that New Jersey assumes only 21 percent of the cost of education and, thus, has relatively little control over educational quality at the local level. To compensate for the wide discrepancies which, as a result, occur in schools, the state must set minimum standards of educational quality and must tax sufficiently o insure that they are met. However, such action should not imply state control of school curriculums, and local schools should retain the option of determining how high their academic ceilings will be. The state must also take a leading role in comprehensive planning for higher education. It must decide what range of academic programs and other types of continuing education are to be offered and who is to have administrative authority for guiding the development of education at this level. It is especially important, however, to guard the academic freedom of faculties in higher education. (NH)

WHO'S IN CHARGE HERE?*

An Address by Harold Howe II
U.S. Commissioner of Education
Department of Health, Education, and Welfare

As one of the out-of-stater's invited by Governor Hughes to address this conference, I have a protected position. I am somewhat like a consulting chef, called in to advise on the preparation of an exotic soup. I can pace the kitchen, delivering weighty and perhaps lyrical pronouncements about haute cuisine; I can peer into the cauldron from time to time, frowning in a knowing manner and suggesting the addition of a pinch of salt; and then, just as the final result is ready to be carried in to the diners, I can smile pleasantly, shake hands all around, and get out of town fast.

I do not, in short, bear any responsibility for what happens as a consequence of the wisdom I dispense. Owing to the guarantees of courtesy usually accorded prophets from another country, I know I can expect some applause at the conclusion of my remarks, no matter how outrageous or irrelevant they may sound.

Well, I intend to take full advantage of my position by venturing a few hard comments. We have had too much politeness in American education for decades, and we are paying for our reluctance to talk about plain matters in a plain way.

The plain matter I want to discuss is responsibility for education... education at the elementary and secondary level; education at the college and university level; and finally, education period. Who's in charge here?

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*Before the Governor's Conference in Education, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, New Jersey, 9:30 a.m., April 2, 1966.

In parcelling out chores for the republic which they outlined in our Constitution, the Founding Fathers left education in the hands of the States. They felt that a decentralized system of education would not only protect, but would positively encourage, a useful diversity of thought.

That idea succeeded. We have 50 different systems of public education in the United States, and though they resemble each other to a surprising degree in some respects, they vary sharply in others. In the degree to which they have delegated their responsibility for education to local communities, for example.

Almost every school offers some kind of science instruction. But in many districts, local voters decide through their support for bond issues and levels of taxation whether the local high school will offer physics and biology, as well as chemistry. They decide whether the school library, if there is one, will add new books every year, or whether it will have to make do with the Five Foot Shelf donated by the Mothers Auxiliary back in 1930. They determine whether the history teacher will have extra time to prepare for class, or whether he will have to double as gym instructor. They decide whether the English teacher's class load will allow the effective teaching of writing or not.

Local control of education has given us some remarkably fine grammar and high schools. But it has also given us some abysmally bad ones, and here is where the balance between State responsibility and local control comes in.

New Jersey ranks third in the Nation on its expenditures for each student. You have a right to be proud of that record.

But your State government, as distinct from local governments, pays only 21 percent of the cost of education in New Jersey. By that index, it ranks 46th in the Nation.

What does that mean?

It means that your State has relatively little control over local education. And if New Jersey is typical of most industrialized States, it suggests that you had better take a hard look at what is going on in local education.

For in most American metropolitan areas, the professional and middle classes are leaving the cities for the suburbs. They earn their money downtown, in the midst of noise and smoke. But they take their paychecks home to a bucolic land of well-tended lawns and well-scrubbed kids.

Fair enough; that is their privilege. The trouble is, some kids have to live in that smoke. Some kids have to play in those alleys hung with last year's campaign posters. Some kids have to go to those schools where there aren't enough textbooks to go around, and where the sweet young things who graduated from teacher's college last June can hardly wait for the engagement ring that will start them on the road to the suburbs.

These are the children who tend to get lost in the statistics... in the educational statistics, anyhow. They will show up later as other numbers: figures on drop-outs, figures on umemployment, figures on crime and relief and military service rejection rates.

But in the meantime, they can be hidden in a comforting batch of numbers that indicate average expenditures per classroom and average pupil-teacher ratios. For the averages conceal, rather than disclose, the tragic gaps in quality between our best schools and our worst. Education is not a matter of averages; it is a matter of individual lives.

And it is these individual lives at the bottom of our social ladder that must be the concern of the State, for many local communities are either unwilling or unable to provide them with an adequate education. No matter how many of its functions a State delegates to its local communities, it cannot delegate its obligation to supervise what every locality does with its freedom to support schools.

I am not suggesting that the State must impose a complete economic equality on all its schools, taxing the rich to ensure that every school has a kidney-shaped swimming pool because a few suburban schools have them. Nor am I urging that the State should control the curriculum in local schools, dictating every detail of what should be taught.

But I am arguing that the State must determine what minimum of educational quality it will require in every school, and that it must tax sufficiently to provide that minimum quality. It must install a kind of academic floor beneath which local schools must not fall. This still leaves to local governments the option of deciding how high its academic ceilings will be... of setting the local tax level high enough to bring school quality up from the State-imposed minimum to the level of excellence that local citizens want for their children.

It will seem to some that in urging a stronger role for the State in education, I am attacking that concept of local freedom which is so deeply rooted in American tradition.

That may be; but in defining the proper relationship between State and locality in education, I believe that we must stop parroting slogans and examine the implications of this freedom we claim to value so highly. In spite of the fact that extending State prerogatives would diminish local freedom, I support that extension.

For I do not believe that any locality should have the "freedom" to impose a poor education on any of its children because of civic apathy, or out of the dangerous notion that the children of the poor must suffer because their fathers do not make a proportionate contribution to the public purse. Nor should any locality be forced to short-change its children on education because it has not the tax-base to assure them a minimum opportunity to develop their abilities. Such so-called local "freedoms" diminish the freedoms of American children to become complete American men and women, and if no one else will speak for them, the State must.

Further, it is increasingly clear, the State must raise a strong voice in any discussion of higher education, too. For the face of higher education is changing with a changing Nation. Like it or not, our society is becoming more and more interdependent, and its public agencies must take a hand in planning matters that were once left to private groups.

Planning for higher education is one of these matters. We have outlived the day when we could relax with Adam Smith in the serene conviction that an Invisible Hand will guide the ship of state through wind and waves to a snug harbor. We cannot assume that rising demand will always produce the proper supply; that somehow or other, the philanthropies of wealthy individuals or the zeal of religious bodies will give us colleges and universities where and when we need them.

Inasmuch as New Jersey has come late to really comprehensive planning for public higher education, you have the chance to profit from the experiences of other States. Their successes and errors suggest at least three components of planning higher education.

First, you must decide what range of academic programs you want to offer your college and university students. What will be the future demand in New Jersey for such occupational specialties as agriculture and psychiatry, social work and dentistry? What kinds of professional men will your cities and farms, your industries, schools, and public agencies require 5, 25, and 50 years from now?

Second, what kinds of continuing education should New Jersey offer its citizens? I am thinking here not only of those who have a bachelor's degree, but of working adults who do not have a diploma. Many of them would like to pursue studies that will improve their skills or the quality of their personal lives.

Finally, and most important, who is going to guide the development of higher education? We know who runs the public elementary and secondary schools; the State and local districts do it with appropriate elected or

appointed boards to take policy responsibility. But publicly supported higher education is in many ways a more delicate matter, and no State can abandon its character to the rigidities of legislation or the shifting forces of political circumstance. In raising this matter, I am referring especially to academic freedom.

In 399 B.C., a court in Athens convicted a teacher on a charge of corrupting the morals of the city's young men. The judges gave the teacher a cup of poison to drink, and he drank it. He talked for a while in those last hours of friendship, virtue, and wisdom, and then he died.

I do not know the names of any of those Greek judges who passed sentence on the teacher, and I doubt that many scholars of the classics know them. But we all know the name of Socrates, and we all know the name of his student, Plato, who told us how Socrates taught and died.

One of the most irritating things about great teachers is that they do not always say what the people who pay the tuition bills would like them to say. They often produce disturbing ideas; our sons and daughters come home from college and echo sentiments alien to our firesides and the embroidered samplers on the walls. When we ask where they heard such pernicious nonsense, we learn that Dr. So-and-So told them. And the normal reaction -- especially if Dr. So-and-So teaches in a tax-supported institution -- is to turn the rascal out.

I do not mean to imply that every provocative or irritating faculty member is on that account alone a great teacher. Ph.D.'s are no more exempt from folly or rashness than insurance agents, plumbers, or commissioners of education.

But if we expect our colleges and universities to support and refresh our society, we must guard the right of their faculty members to produce distrubing ideas. We must insulate them from the financial consequences of our irritation. We must realize that the price of maintaining an open society is permitting and even encouraging the criticism of our most cherished beliefs. If we pay our college and university faculties to tell us only what we want to hear, they shall quickly learn to tell us only what we already know.

The history of civilization is in large part the story of societies that did not develop the capacity to appraise and alter their own institutions. It is also, in large part, the story of trouble-makers like Socrates whose ideas survived the indignation of decent, responsible, substantial men.

Decency is no substitute for intellect. Some professors do not pay their real estate taxes on time; others do not maintain their lawns, or barbecue steaks in the backyard on summer evenings. Many professors do not, in short, do any of the things that popular folklore says a red-blooded American should do, and in consequence, we may resent them.

But liking is irrelevant to education; the point is to listen to our scholars, and to protect their ability to speak honestly.

We can give them the necessary protection, first of all, by establishing citizen groups of trustees or regents or whatever the State choses to call its custodians of higher education. These people must have the corporate authority for policy decisions, and they must be so appointed that their rotation insulates their decisions from the varying winds of day-to-day controversy.

Secondly, these custodians must have major planning prerogatives so

that they can adjust the developing character of public higher education to the economic and social needs of its people with the benefit of long-range perspectives.

A citizens' board with these characteristics would have no difficulty in attracting to its membership persons of the highest caliber.

What I have said so far boils down to two major points. First, some States have given local communities too much authority for setting educational standards, and they should retrieve some of that authority and use it to ensure equal access to quality education for all.

Second, States must realize that higher education requires at least as much planning as a new sewer system, and they must learn that learned men -- like teenage daughters -- must often be taken on faith because they appear beyond hope and have exhausted our charity. Each State needs a responsible, authoritative body especially to govern higher education.

But all this emphasis on the State is to some degree beside the point, for "the State" is an abstraction. Who are the real, live human beings who must make these decisions about education?

You have a Governor; you have a State Commissioner of Education; you have school district superintendents, deans of liberal arts, high school librarians, principals, teachers, and all the other human apparatus of education. One would think that this hierarchy could provide as many decisions about education as any citizen could want.

If decisions were their only job, they could. But it is at once the good fortune and the problem of American education to be part also of a political system.

A governor who presses too hard for tax increases runs the risk of being voted out of office. A State university official who defends the right of an unpopular faculty member to speak his mind runs the risk of being appointed out of office. District superintendents, school principals, and teachers must constantly weigh their obligations as educators against their vulnerability as public servants.

The major thing wrong with expecting a political system to do educational work is that most students can't vote. The people who are most directly affected by deficiences in our schools cannot register an effective protest.

That leaves protest up to the educators, to those who have the courage and the consicience to speak out against educational neglect and penny-pinching and injustice. And some of the finest are being forced out of office every year, wearied by public apathy, frustrated by the loss of battle after battle, silenced by elected officials who are willing to lead only after they know which direction the voters want them to go.

Educators have no monopoly on wisdom. The public should speak up to educators, demanding good reasons for the actions they advocate.

But the public should also speak up <u>for</u> educators. They must let their elected representatives in the legislatures and city councils and boards of education know that they support excellence in education; that they know the price of excellence, and that they are willing to pay it ... with dollars, with votes, with themselves.

That is why so many of you here today are not educators ... because in the end, it is not the educators, but you, who are in charge here. You

take charge every time you vote down a bond issue or put it over, every time you browbeat a teacher or back her up, every time you try to silence a professor instead of defending his right to say unpleasant things, every time you grasp or neglect an opportunity for your State to move vigorously into greater responsibility for the planning and financing of education.

This conference offers you the opportunity to take charge at a critical moment for education in your State. It was called to stress the fact that fine schools and excellent colleges do not come cheap ... and to find out how much the citizens of your State are willing to pay to get them.

I hope you will agree that New Jersey deserves the best.