

Is there a Conspiracy against Public Education?

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IS THERE a conspiracy to destroy the free public school system of America? If so, who are the leaders of the conspiracy and what are the real motives of the conspirators? These questions are frequently asked by those who feel that the widespread attacks on free public education have the earmarks of a well-organized conspiracy. So far as I can determine, there is no nationwide organized conspiracy in the usual sense but there are numerous proposals for changes in policies of public education that would ultimately destroy our present program of free public education with its emphasis on education for children regardless of the economic or social status of their parents. The support secured for these proposals is such as strongly to suggest a real conspiracy with shrewd and aggressive leadership. It would be easier to combat the acceptance of the proposals if there were recognized conspirators who would come into the open and make a fair fight.

It is my opinion that there are four dangerous proposals affecting free public education which are of the kind that a group of clever conspirators would advocate.

Four Dangerous Proposals

The first of these proposals is that **PUBLIC SCHOOLS SHALL CONTINUE TO BE ALMOST WHOLLY SUPPORTED BY THE LOCAL COMMUNITY THROUGH THE LOCAL PROPERTY TAX.**

This proposal seems plausible until it is critically examined. I know of no more certain way to destroy the possibility of realizing our ideals of equal educational opportunities than to place the full responsibility for the financial support of schools on the local school districts. The vast inequalities of per capita wealth in neighboring communities within a state, as well as between states, would tend to destroy all chances of equality in educational opportunities if too heavy a responsibility for the maintenance of schools were placed on the separate school district. Friends of free public education should recognize that *those who advocate the support of education almost wholly as a local function are supporting an idea that will bring a revolutionary change in our present theory of education with its emphasis on equal opportunities.* The present theory of public education emphasizes the fact that the support of schools is clearly a function of the state and that the state has the responsibility to foster public education through such financial aid and legislation as will enable local districts to maintain desired standards of educational attainment. If the proposal to treat education solely as a local function gains general acceptance, we may expect that thousands of American children will be denied in the educational opportunities defined in the Children's Charter as adopted by the White House Conference.

A second proposal that is menacing to the cause of free education is the recommendation that **PUBLIC EDUCATION SHOULD RESTRICT ITS PROGRAM BY THE INTRODUCTION OF TUITIONS AND FEES FOR INSTRUCTION BEYOND THE ELEMENTARY GRADES.**

Such a proposal would restrict the educational opportunities available to the children of the poor and others of limited means. It would mean the introduction of the European point of view which emphasizes education above a minimum level as the privilege of certain social classes. In all other countries except the United States, education has generally been considered in terms of social and economic classes. Our country is committed to a democratic rather than a class system of education. If a plan of fees and tuitions for high school instruction were introduced, it would lead to the development of one school system for children of the privileged classes and another school system for the children of the masses. It is important to recall that the American public school represents our most concrete realization

of the democratic idea of equal opportunity for all. *The proposal to restrict free public education by the introduction of tuitions and fees constitutes a vicious attack on the opportunities that America has held out to the children of those of limited financial means. The general acceptance of the proposal would greatly curtail the program of free public education and would eventually destroy it.*

The third of these proposals is that PUBLIC FUNDS BE GIVEN TO SUPPORT NON-PUBLIC SCHOOLS SUPPORTED BY PRIVATE GROUPS.

This proposal has been made in several states during the past few years. It has come from sectarian schools in some instances and from schools that have ceased to have sectarian connection in other cases. In a period of depression it is not surprising that the supporters of non-public schools should seek public funds to carry on work of an educational character. The proposal seems plausible because of the fine quality of the work in many private schools.

Would Defect Our Ideals of Democracy

The advocates of public education, however, should not be deceived as to the possible outcomes of a program of financial support for non-public schools. It would certainly lead to the granting of financial subsidies to a great variety of schools set up by racial, economic, or religious groups in different American communities or developed by private enterprise. If the plan to grant subsidies were actually adopted, we might soon find some states giving aid to the support of separate schools for the children of any group of parents that were united by common religious beliefs, common economic opinions, or common racial inheritances. We might eventually have special subsidies for separate schools for children of parents who were Communistic or Fascist in their beliefs. It should be kept in mind that the public school is one of the few unifying agencies in our American life. It should be recalled that the public school was established in the beginning as an agency to foster and maintain our democratic ideas of government. It should be remembered that one of the great fights in the early period of American education was the one to free it from the control of sectarianism. If our states were to subsidize the establishment of a variety of types of schools the public school system would gradually be destroyed and a great variety of schools would develop. It is true that the state might still accomplish some of its purposes by a strict and rigid type of supervision of the non-public schools receiving state aid, but such supervision would involve the state in many controversies respecting freedom in matters of religion and freedom of expression of opinion on social and economic questions. In my opinion *the proposal to divert public funds for the support of a variety of types of non-public schools is a very serious menace to the continued support of an adequate program of free public education. It is encouraging to know that many church leaders and officials of private schools are unalterably opposed to state aid for their own schools because of the fear of state interference with their freedom.*

The fourth proposal that would undermine public education is that THE PROGRAM OF OUR PUBLIC SCHOOLS SHOULD BE REDUCED BY ELIMINATING THE TYPES OF INSTRUCTION THAT PARENTS OF WEALTH ARE QUITE CERTAIN TO PROVIDE FOR THEIR OWN CHILDREN.

It is common knowledge that the people who make the most violent objections to the alleged elaborateness of public education are often the ones who send their own children to private instructors or to special school to obtain the very kinds of training which these critics deplore for other people's children at public expense. It should be observed that parents who can afford to do so usually arrange for private instruction for their children in music, art, and dramatics. They also provide adequate safeguards for the health of their children and spend fair sums of money for wholesome recreation. For their younger children they provide the equivalent of kindergarten instruction. Many of these wealthy parents are strong advocates of these advantages for all children, regardless of economic status of their parents, through the agency of the public schools. There are, however, some persons who are so selfish and penurious that they would deprive the children of the poor of a well rounded program of training. In discussions of this proposal it would seem desirable to consider the pledge to children as set forth in the Children's Charter.

The pledge reads as follows:

“For every child an education which, through the discovery and development of his individual abilities, prepares him for life; and through training and vocational guidance prepares him for a living which will yield him the maximum of satisfaction.”

Our public school program will not be in serious danger of curtailment if proposals for modification are reviewed in the light of the foregoing guarantee to the American child.

THE FOUR PROPOSALS mentioned in this article that would wreck our system of free public education for all children may be summarized as follows: (1) education is wholly a local responsibility, (2) tuition should be charged beyond the elementary school, (3) public funds should be given to private schools, and (4) the school program is too elaborate to be furnished to all children at public expense.

Government is Cooperative Service

These proposals find generous support among those who believe that America's ECONOMIC RESOURCES ARE SO LIMITED THAT THERE MUST BE A MARKED DECREASE IN THE EDUCATIONAL ADVANTAGES OFFERED TO OUR CHILDREN. The acceptance of this point of view by many leading citizens of wealth and influence constitutes a dire threat to the continued support of the present program of public education. Some of these persons would try to justify the shortsighted and in some instances corrupt mismanagement of our economic affairs by charging that the expenditures for the education of children are the prime cause for our various economic ills. The absurdity of such an opinion is apparent when one compares the small expenditures for education with the tremendous losses in income that have been occasioned by incompetent and dishonest management in certain fields of finance. It should be remembered that our recent losses of forty-five billion dollars would, if property invested, furnish enough money to finance the present program of public education without any additional funds from taxes. *Friends of public education should be quite insistent that leaders of taxpayers leagues and representatives of certain financial interests are not permitted to unload the cost of financial blunders on children now enrolled in our public schools and those of the oncoming generations.*

These proposals also are supported by those persons who favor A REDUCTION IN TAXES TO A POINT THAT WOULD THREATEN THE SUPPORT OF ALL SERVICES OF GOVERNMENT. Every service of government is now threatened by the lack of a sane and wholesome attitude towards taxation. *School officials should resist efforts to destroy the confidence of the people in the integrity and honesty of our governmental official and in the value of the cooperative service furnished by governmental agencies. Unless taxes are paid, free public schools cannot be made available to the children of all of the people, and certain other services of government will have to be withdrawn or greatly restricted.*

This is a time when individuals and organizations interested in public education should be on the alert to avoid the possibility of being deceived by plausible but misleading proposals. The real issue before the American people with respect to schools involves the wisdom of our established policy of maintaining free public schools open to all children regardless of the social and economic status of their parents.

From the very beginning of our history as an independent government, those who have been most deeply concerned about the perpetuity of our democratic institutions have lent their full support to a free public school system with an adequate program for all children. The founders of this nation recognized the fact that the permanency of a democracy depends on an educated electorate. They therefore urged the establishment of schools and other means of education. It would be difficult to find a great national leader of past decades who did not believe implicitly in the necessity of a system of free public education. The writings of Washington, Jefferson, Adams, Madison, Lincoln, and other great American statesmen furnish plenty of evidence that our forefathers believed that the promotion of American ideals was inseparately linked with the support of education for all the children of all the people.

Equivalent of a Conspiracy

It is encouraging to find that an increasing number of lay organizations are becoming aware that the equivalent of a conspiracy against public education is abroad. Public school officials should feel obligated to keep such organizations informed of the real facts and should actively seek the cooperation of such organizations as the American Legion, the American Association of University Women, the American Federation of Labor, the National Congress of Parents and Teachers, and other organizations that are concerned with the welfare of American children and the perpetuation of our democratic ideals and institutions. The cause of public education will not be injured by any of the menacing proposals, provided the real meaning and ultimate significance of the proposals are brought into the light of day.

Is there a conspiracy to destroy the free public school system of America? In answer to this question it should be noted that **THERE ARE INSIDIOUS PROPOSALS FOR CHANGES THAT ARE MORE MENACING THAN A REAL CONSPIRACY. IT IS SURPRISING HOW MANY INTELLIGENT AND WELL-MEANING PERSONS HAVE NOT UNDERSTOOD THE REAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THESE PROPOSALS AND HAVE BEEN MISLED BY THEIR SEEMING FAIRNESS.**