

# SOME NOTES ON EDUCATION

From Senator Barry Goldwater's

## *The Conscience of a Conservative*

I AGREE with lobbyists for federal school aid that education is one of the great problems of our day. I am afraid, however, that their views and mine regarding the nature of the problem are many miles apart. They tend to see the problem in quantitative terms – not enough schools, not enough teachers, not enough equipment. I think it has to do with quality: How good are the schools we have? Their solution is to spend more money. Mine is to raise standards. Their recourse is to the federal government. Mine is to the local public school board, the private school, the individual citizen – as far away from the federal government as one can possibly go. And I suspect that if we knew which of these two views on education will eventually prevail, we would know also whether Western civilization is due to survive, or will pass away.

To put this somewhat differently, I believe that our ability to cope with the great crises that lie ahead will be enhanced in direct ratio as we recapture the lost art of learning, and will diminish in direct ratio as we give responsibility for training our children's minds to the federal bureaucracy.

But let us put these differences aside for the moment and note **four reasons why federal aid to education is objectionable** even if we grant that the problem is primarily quantitative.

The **first** is that federal intervention in education is unconstitutional. It is the fashion these days to say that responsibility for education “traditionally” rests with the local community – as a prelude to proposing an exception to the tradition in the form of federal aid. This “tradition,” let us remember, is also the law. It is sanctioned by the Constitution of the United States, for education is one of the powers reserved to the States by the Tenth Amendment. Therefore, any federal aid program, however desirable it might appear, must be regarded as illegal until such time as the Constitution is amended.

The **second objection** is that the alleged need for federal funds has never been convincingly demonstrated. It all depends, of course, on how the question is put. If you ask, Does State X need additional educational facilities? the answer may be yes. But if you ask, Does State X require additional facilities that are beyond the reach of its own financial means? the answer is invariably no. The White House Conference on Education in 1955 was, most of us will remember, an elaborate effort to demonstrate popular support for federal aid. As expected, the “consensus” of the conference was that more federal aid was needed. However, the conferees reached another conclusion that was hardly noticed by the press. “No state represented,” the Conference report stated, “has a demonstrated financial incapacity to build the schools they will need during the next five years.” What is lacking, the report went on, is not money, but a “political determination powerful enough to overcome all the obstacles.”

Through the succeeding five years, congressional committees have listened to hundreds of hours of testimony in favor of federal aid, but they have never heard that 1955 finding successfully contradicted. What the White House conferees were saying in 1955, and what proponents of federal aid to education have been saying ever since, is that because a few States have not seen fit to take care of their school needs, it is incumbent upon the federal government to take up the slack. My view is that if State X possesses the wealth to educate its children adequately, but has failed to utilize its wealth for that purpose, it is up to the people of State X to take remedial action through their local and state governments. The federal government has neither the right nor the duty to intervene.

Let us, moreover, keep the problem in proper perspective. The national school system is not in distress. Shortly before the Senate debate this year on increased federal aid, I asked Mr. Arthur Flemming the Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare, how many of the Nation's school districts were in actual trouble – how many, that is, had reached their bonded limit. His answer was approximately 230. Now there are roughly 42,000 school districts in America. Thus, proponents of federal aid are talking about a problem that affects only one-half of 1 percent of our school districts! I cannot believe that the state governments responsible for those areas are incapable of making up whatever deficiencies exist. It so happens that the same deficiency figure one-half of one per cent-applies to my own state of Arizona. And Arizona proudly turned down federal funds under the 1958 National Defense Education Act on the grounds that Arizonans, themselves, were quite capable of closing the gap.

This may be the place, while we are speaking of need, to lay to rest the notion that the American people have been niggardly in support of their schools. Since the end of World War II, Americans have built 550,000 classrooms at a cost of approximately \$19 billion – almost all of which was raised at the local level. This new construction provided space for over 15 million pupils during a period when the school population increased by only 10 million pupils. It is evident; therefore, that increased school expenditures have more than kept pace with increased school needs.

Here are some of the figures. In the school year 1949-50 there were 25 million students enrolled in various education institutions in the United States. In the year 1959-60 there were 34.7 million – an increase of 38 percent. During the same period revenues for school use, raised largely at the local level, increased from 5.4 billion to 12.1 billion – an increase of 124 percent. When school expenditures increase three and a half times as fast as the school population, I do not think that the adequacy of America's "traditional" approach to education is open to serious question.

The **third objection** to federal aid is that it promotes the idea that federal school money is "free" money, and thus gives the people a distorted picture of the cost of education. I was distressed to find that five out of six high school and junior college students recently interviewed in Phoenix said they favored federal aid because it would mean more money for local schools and ease the financial burden on Arizona taxpayers.

The truth, of course, is that the federal government has no funds except those it extracts from the taxpayers who reside in the various States. The money that the federal government pays to State X for education has been taken from the citizens of State X in federal taxes and comes back to them, minus the Washington brokerage fee. The less wealthy States, to be sure, receive slightly more than they give, just as the more wealthy States receive somewhat less. But the differences are negligible. For the most part, federal aid simply substitutes the tax-collecting facilities of the federal government or those of local governments. This fact cannot be stressed often enough; for stripped of the idea that federal money is free money, federal aid to education is exposed as an act of naked compulsion – a decision by the federal government to force the people of the States to spend more money than they choose to spend for this purpose voluntarily.

The **fourth objection** is that federal aid to education inevitably means federal control of education. For many years, advocates of federal aid denied that aid implies control, but in the light of the National Defense Education Act of 1958 they cannot very well maintain their position. Federal aid under the act is conditioned upon compliance by the States and local educational institutions with various standards and specifications laid down by the Department of Health, Education and Welfare. *There are no less than twelve direct controls of this kind in the act.* Moreover, the acknowledged purpose of the act is to persuade local educational institutions to put greater emphasis on the physical sciences and other subjects directly related to national defense. I do not question the desirability of encouraging increased proficiency in the physical sciences, but when the federal government does the encouraging through the withholding and granting of funds, I do not see how it can be denied that the federal government is helping to determine the content of education; and influencing content is the last, not the first, stage of control.

Nobody should be surprised that aid has led to controls. It could, and *should not* be otherwise. Congress cannot be expected to appropriate the people's money and make no provision for how it will be spent. Congress would be shirking its responsibilities to the taxpayer if it distributed his money willy-nilly, without regard to its use. Should Congress permit the use of federal funds to subsidize Communist schools and thus promote the cause of our enemies? Of course not. But a prohibition of such use is clearly an exercise of federal control. Congress will always feel impelled to establish conditions under which people's money is to be spent, and while some controls may be wise we are not guaranteed against unwise controls any more than we are guaranteed against unwise Congressmen. The mistake is not the controls but appropriating the money that requires controls.

So much for the evils and dangers of federal aid. Note that I have not denied that many of our children are being inadequately educated, or that the problem is nationwide. I have only denied that it is the kind of problem that requires a solution at the national level. To the extent the problem is quantitative to the extent we have too few classrooms and pay some of our teachers too little money – the shortages can be taken care of by the localities concerned. But more: to the extent the problem is qualitative-which in my opinion it mainly is – it is manifestly one that lends itself to correction at the local level. There is no place where deficiencies in the content of an educational system can be better understood than locally where a community has the opportunity to view and judge the product of its own school system.

In the main, the trouble with American education is that we have put into practice the educational philosophy expounded by John Dewey and his disciples. In varying degrees, we have adopted what has been called “progressive education.”

Subscribing to the egalitarian notion that every child must have the same education, we have neglected to provide an educational system which will tax the talents and stir the ambitions of our best students and which will thus insure us the kind of leaders we will need in the future.

In our desire to make sure that our children learn to “adjust” to their environment, we have given them insufficient opportunity to acquire the knowledge that will enable them to master their environment.

In our attempt to make education “fun;” we have neglected the academic disciplines that develop sound minds and are conducive to sound characters.

Responding to the Deweyite attack on methods of teaching, we have encouraged the teaching profession to be more concerned with **how** a subject is taught than with **what** is taught. Most important of all: in our anxiety to “improve” the world and insure “progress” we have permitted our schools to become laboratories for social and economic change according to the predilections of the professional educators. We have forgotten that the proper function of the school is to transmit the cultural heritage of one generation to the next generation, and to so train the minds of the new generation as to make them capable of absorbing ancient learning and applying it to the problem of its own day.

The fundamental explanation of this distortion of values is that we have forgotten that purpose of education. Or better: we have forgotten for *whom* education is intended. The function of our schools is not to educate, or elevate, society; but rather to educate *individuals* and to equip them with the knowledge that will enable them to take care of society’s needs. We have forgotten that a society progresses only to the extent that it produces leaders that are capable of guiding and inspiring progress. And we cannot develop such leaders unless our standards of education are geared to excellence instead of mediocrity. We must give full rein to individual talents, and we must encourage our schools to enforce the academic disciplines to put preponderant emphasis on English, mathematics, history, literature, foreign languages and the natural sciences. We should look upon our schools – not as a place to train the “whole character” of the child a responsibility that properly belongs to his family and church – but to train his *mind*.

Our country’s past progress has been the result, not of the mass mind applying average intelligence to the problems of the day, but of the brilliance and dedication of wise individuals who applied their wisdom to advance the freedom and the material well being of all of our people. And so if we would improve education in America – and advance the fortunes of freedom – we will not rush to the federal treasury with requests for money. We will focus attention on our local community, and make sure that our schools, private and public, are performing the job the Nation has the right to expect of them.

## **Note from Internet Publisher: Donald L. Potter**

March 13, 2014

I have been publishing on the Internet since late 2003. Much of what I publish has to do with practical matters of education: reading, math, handwriting, spelling, etc. Visitors to my website are aware that I have studiously avoided matters relating to politics.

This brief publication is an exception to my previous practice, and with good reason. I have become convinced that the shameful prevalence of illiteracy in our country cannot be the result of a mere fluke. Nor can it be blamed on sociological factors such as low socioeconomic background, etc. Anyone who has extensive experience teaching children to read *must* know that teaching reading is not as difficult a feat as the current staggering rates of illiteracy would make it seem.

Pumping more money into education and developing new programs, whether based on so-called scientific research or psycho-linguistic stargazing, has had no measurable impact on improving reading achievement.

I first read his *Conscience of a Conservative* when I was in High School. Since the book was written in 1960 and I graduated in 1965, I probably read it in 1964. The book has had lasting impact on my views favoring limited government and individual responsibility in matters of education. It is for this reason that I am delighted to teach at a private Christian Academy, which neither seeks nor accepts federal or state monies. Our superior educational system is completely free of any outside interference.

I would beg the kind reader to give serious attention to everything Senator Goldwater wrote here concerning the dangers of involving the Federal Government in matters of education. I believe you will agree with me that the author's evaluation of the situation has proven to be *prophetic* of the steadily declining state of education in America.

I can only imagine the negative reaction that we would get from Senator Goldwater concerning the *Common Core Standards* devious attempt to take complete control of the nation's educational system.

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