

An Obligation to Educate

Schools exist to teach. You'd never know it, though, looking at public education, a system run by-and-large for the sake of the people who run it. The kids are often the last people considered.

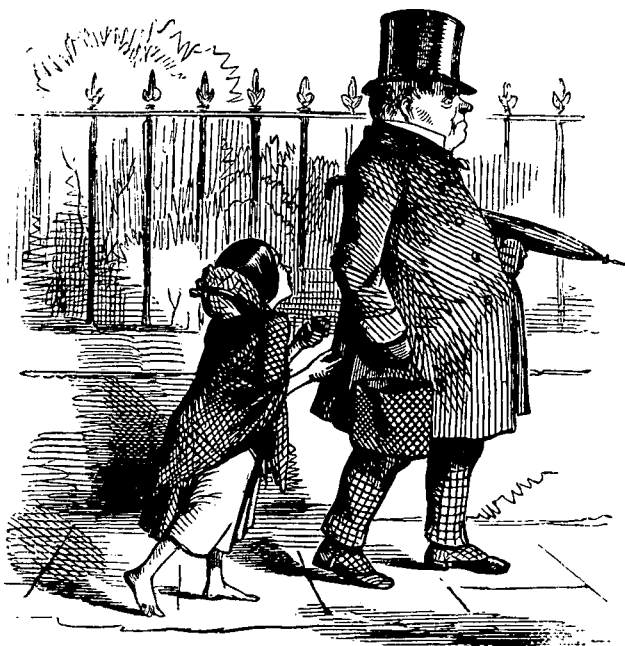
by William J. Bennett

WHEN I BECAME secretary of education, my wife, who is a teacher, said to me: you're a teacher. You're a professor. As secretary of education, you should go into classrooms and teach the kids. If people actually see you doing it, it will give you much more credibility to comment. And I said rather huffily to Elaine: I am secretary of education. I do not do retail. I do wholesale. And she, as a wise girl and daughter of a businessman, said: *do* retail and you'll do better wholesale. Find out what is going on in there.

So I went to schools. I was on the road every week and ended up visiting about 115 schools: third-grade classes, seventh-grade classes, eleventh-grade classes. I saw all sorts of schools. We tilted toward schools in poor communities, places where not much was supposed to be happening. Sometimes we went to average schools in those communities. Sometimes we went to miraculous places where people were turning things around, like Garfield High School in Los Angeles where Jaime Escalante was teaching. He's gone from Garfield now. This great teacher — the greatest teacher in America, maybe the greatest teacher in the world — is now in Sacramento because the unions couldn't deal with his methods. He had 75 students in his class and some of his colleagues said union rules say you

can have only 22.3 students in your class. He said fine, you take some of them and teach them calculus. They said we don't know calculus. He said then get out of my way and let me teach. He was turning these kids out of the East L.A. barrio, sending them to UCLA and Southern Cal and MIT and Cal Tech in record numbers, getting not one cent more than anybody else, and actually getting a lot of heat from the system.

It is encouraging to go to a school like that, where kids who come in with almost nothing leave blessed by their schools, by their teachers, by their principals. They can read. They are interested and want to go on. When you see it actually happening, you are encouraged. You know it's possible. When people say you cannot educate these kids, you know they are wrong. It is being done in American schools, but it is not being done in most American schools.



IT IS *discouraging* to go then into schools with essentially the same kids, in the same kind of neighborhoods, and see lousy education going on — to see class after class of kids on their way out of school with a diploma — or without one — on their way into crime, drugs, teen-age pregnancy, and wasted lives. If you thought this was a matter of pre-determined reality, that if you were born a certain way or a certain color or a certain class that that's just the way it has to be, you might have a sort of stoic resignation about it. But when you see that

William J. Bennett served as U.S. Secretary of Education from 1985 until 1988. He delivered these remarks at a meeting of the American Forum in Los Angeles April 9.

kids *can* learn, that schools can make a mighty and dramatic difference in their lives, then you get angry about it.

THAT'S WHY, as secretary of education, I became a revolutionary. I argued for choice: for giving parents the kind of say they should have in the education of their children by letting them go to the schools that are doing a good job and leave the schools that are doing a bad job. That ability to choose puts the welfare of the students first in a system that now runs by-and-large for the sake of the people who run it rather than for the kids.

I saw this dramatically illustrated more than once while I was education secretary. In 1986, California's Superintendent of Public Instruction Bill Honig was in my office at the Department of Education with Albert Shanker, president of the American Federation of Teachers. I had been pushing hard for choice and Honig said to me: give us five more years. If we don't dramatically improve education in five more years, I will be up in front of the parade with you arguing for choice. Well, the five years have passed and I have never heard from Honig, and California has not set records for educational achievement.

I visited a school in Chicago that had a 98 percent drop-out rate. There were hardly any students there at all, but they had a full-time teaching faculty. They had the announcements on every day, even though there was nobody to hear them. This is a bureaucracy gone insane; it was just madness.

And it is not at all unusual. Arlington County, Virginia, just across the Potomac River from Washington, D.C., at one point decided to establish a new elementary school. They wanted to be innovative, so they established something called an "Innovative Skills School." They said they were going to emphasize reading, writing, arithmetic, and geography. Innovative! A breakthrough!

WELL, THEY said, if you live in this county, and you want your elementary school child to learn a lot about reading, writing, arithmetic, and geography, send

your child to this school. If you don't, apply to one of the two other schools. Eighty-five percent of the parents applied to that school. Arlington County, by the way, includes dozens of ethnic groups. All the parents, of all the groups, wanted the same kind of education.

So they had 85 percent of the applications at one of the three elementary schools. What did they do? Did they say: 85 percent of the parents want this; we really ought to convert the other schools? No. Instead, they abolished the program. It was too disruptive. It was drawing people away from the other schools. It was drawing people away because it had something sensible to offer. This is where a little market discipline might help.

I talked to a deputy superintendent out there while the program was still going on. He said, well, we'll just take the first 33 percent that apply. I said, that's good, as an interim measure, and then next year you will respond more to what parents want.

HE SAID no, we'll keep the other schools and just keep this one as it is. I asked, why not give the people what they want, particularly when what they want is sensible? He said, well, we want diversity. I said, I see: you want a third of your students to be able to read and write and two-thirds to be unable to do so. He said, that's not very funny. Then he used the locution that really sends my temperature up. He said, these are *our* schools. I said, no, they're not. They're *their* schools. They're paying for the schools; they bought them. Give them what they want. As I said, they went on to abolish the program.

The system is run by-and-large for the sake of the people who run it rather than for the kids. The kids are often the last people to be considered. The results bear this out:

The most recent international comparison tests in math and science — involving 12 countries — show our kids coming in last. (Kids from South Korea came in first.) At the end of the test, the students were asked a final question: how do you feel about your knowledge of math? *There* we came in first. (South Korean kids came in last.) What do you know? Not much. How do

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you feel about it? Feel okay, I'm all right; I've got Walkman, I've got the mall, I'm all set. Let's go.

ANOTHER SERIOUS problem is the politicization of curriculum selection, textbook selection, and even of school board meetings. There is a big push for political correctness. You cannot say anything in a classroom that might offend any person on any day on any given subject. For instance, in reading textbooks while I was education secretary, I found that they had absolutely sanitized the teaching of American history. The texts contained no reference to religion — *none*. When they quoted the Declaration of Independence, they did not quote the "offensive" part, which was: created equal — a fairly significant part of the Declaration, I think. Also one textbook said: Pilgrims were very important people to America. Pilgrims were people who took long trips. And I thought, wasn't there more to it than that? Wasn't there something about religious liberty?

Shortly after that, I went to a school in New Orleans and I asked the third graders, "who were the Pilgrims?" A little girl stood up and said, "Pilgrims were people who took long trips ... seeking religious freedom..." I said, "good." But she wasn't finished. "— and settled in America so their teachers could organize collectively and bargain for better wages." The teacher was properly embarrassed.

What I think is a misreading of the Constitution in Supreme Court decisions has led many of the public schools to think that they cannot say anything at all



about religion, that they cannot refer to the religious backgrounds of the students, and even that they have to be absolutely neutral on all questions. There was that absurd example that Ronald Reagan talked about involving the girl in New York who came into the classroom and said that she found a purse with \$1,000 and returned it to the owner. The other kids in her 10th grade class made fun of her. They said, you dope, that was really stupid. Why didn't you keep the money? When she turned to the teacher for help, the teacher said, well, as the teacher, I would say you're all entitled to your opinion.

This led to a considerable public debate which, in turn, led to the school board saying that the teacher was absolutely right: that teachers can't take a position on such things. People see that and say: this is a desert. Children need to be encouraged in the right direction. If these people can't or won't tell the difference between right and wrong, I want something else.

When I was at Chapel Hill in North Carolina, before becoming education secretary, I met a young university couple — a yuppie couple — in their late 20s or early 30s. We began talking about schools. I asked them where their children went to school. They said, Catholic school. I said, are you Catholics? They said, oh no, we're atheists. I asked why they wanted to send their kids to Catholic schools. They said, well, we want them to hear those arguments and we don't know how to make them. We believe what we believe. But we're not so sure our lives have worked out as well as they might have. We'd like our kids to be exposed to something else.

IT WAS interesting and thoughtful and in some ways generous, I thought, on the part of these parents. A lot of parents *want* their kids to be exposed to the teaching of ethics, and I think they should have that opportunity. I want the arbiter of what the children hear, in the first instance, to be the person who has the most interest in that child: the parent. We need to give parents the power of choice. The schools will have to compete for the parents' attention and for their money because students will be walking around with scholarships in their pockets and schools will want to attract them. The result? The schools will have to be good because word will get out where the good schools are and that's where people will want to go.

Choice is also the answer to the vice-like control un-

(Please turn to page 35)

Goodbye, California

A recently departed Californio reflects on how his former state has done itself in: pandering to interest groups, giving itself over to factions, all with the surrealistic goal of creating a utopia.

by James L. Schefter

GOODBYE, CALIFORNIA, your dream is done.

It's not that I didn't give you a shot. Fifteen years is a fair chunk of my life. But now anyone with eyes can see that this City of Angels is well down the path to becoming the West Coast Philadelphia, and this once-Golden State is so far gone to economic and social disaster that its fate is sealed. What is true of Los Angeles is true of California.

Los Angeles is a city that doesn't work, a city that depleted its treasures by trying to be all things to all people, then squandering the rest by turning itself over to the narrow passions of a shrill few. As Los Angeles degenerates — and who would argue that it isn't, almost daily, becoming a worse place to live? — it is sinking the region, and the state is not far behind. I will not sink with it.

When you declared war on the middle class, California, you doomed yourself. When you handed the bureaucracy over to selfish interests and the government to factions that shamelessly pander to every interest group, all with the surrealistic goal of creating a utopia, you did yourself in. California cannot survive without an economically strong, socially happy, educationally sound middle class. None of those conditions exist today. And they will not return, despite the wishful forecasts of economists. Economic recovery is not in California's foreseeable future. Period.

Los Angeles is riddled with incurable diseases and the state is infected.

The Los Angeles problem has too many facets. The salad bowl is one of them. I shouldn't have to learn 77 different languages in order to enjoy the standard of ver-

bal and written communication that I once took for granted. I should not have to pay for every ethnic and nationalistic folk in the world to take up residence here while maintaining their separate old-country values and languages.

There's great value in preserving heritage, keeping it safe and secure and remembered. There's also great wisdom in the adage "When in Rome..." The price of living here should include a strong dose of linguistic and cultural conformity. It doesn't and that's socially wrong and economically destructive.

The good life I want should offer a sharing and merging of cultural and social values, a concept now disdained by Southern California advocates of salad-bowl-not-melting-pot tribalism. But where in the history of the world have tribes lived together for any significant time without merging in the melting pot or warring for supremacy? Not here. Not anywhere.

Commonality is a foundation of the good life in society. Diversity is welcome, but not at the absolute expense of commonality, only as an adjunct to it.

THROUGHOUT HISTORY, the social contract has included a common language. A common means of communication doesn't eliminate true multi-cultural opportunities to enjoy and learn. But here in Southern California we endure a Topsy-like Balkanization with its rigid enclave-barrio-ghetto-Little This and Little That evasions and escapes and walls. Good fences may good neighbors make. But walls create suspicion. Walls create fear. Walls separate.

Congestion is another problem. So long as we try to provide, with little or no cost to the user, goods and services pegged to an absurdly unachievable standard, then

James L. Schefter is a professional writer. He moved out of California this spring.