

The New REPUBLIC

The Public Elementary School

THE subject of the present Educational Section of the New Republic is the Public Elementary School in the United States. The discussion has been restricted in the main to the purely educational aspects of the subject—curriculum and methods of teaching. It has not been found possible to include at this time a survey of private experimental schools. The Editors of the New Republic take this opportunity of thanking contributors to the present series of articles.

CONTENTS

The Public Elementary School: Its Status and Problems	William Heard Kilpatrick	1	The Work-Study-Play or Balanced-Load Plan.....	Alice Barrows	16
The Curriculum of the Elementary School.....	Edwin C. Broome	4	The Factory System.....	Margaret A. Haley	18
Practical Revision of the Curriculum...W. W. Charters		6	Any School Morning.....	Agnes de Lima	19
Personal Education	Elisabeth Irwin	7	Enter the Superintendent.....	Leonora Pease	21
Fitting the Curriculum to Individual Children.....	Carleton W. Washburne	10	Reviews of Books:		
Financing the Elementary School Program.....	George D. Strayer	12	Education Moves Ahead.....	Agnes de Lima	23
What Does Labor Want of Elementary Education?.....	Joseph K. Hart	13	Education for Moral Growth.....	H. A. Overstreet	24
			Three Problem Children.....	W. I. Thomas	25
			The Social Personality.....	K. Y.	26
			The Child in Panorama.....	E. C. L.	27

The Public Elementary School: Its Status and Problems

THE public elementary school is the only school for about three-fifths of American children. Is this school doing its duty? Is it meeting present-day demands? Is this large number of future American citizens being educated in our elementary schools in the best way and to the highest degree possible?

A negative answer to these questions is frequent. Certainly there is wide-spread discussion and criticism of our schools. That the American public is questioning its education may be a very healthy sign, but dissatisfaction and complaint will be worse than useless if they do not lead to constructive thinking and action.

What is the true condition of American education? What is the real situation confronting it? One answer seems clear. Our schools are not now equal to their task. We may regret it, but we must admit the fact. What is wrong? Again an answer is clear. The failure is primarily one of adjustment. The fault is one of lag.

Civilization has rushed ahead in unprecedented fashion. The school has moved, but not fast enough. Between school and civilization a lag has developed. A new civilization confronts with a host of new problems and conditions, but the school conception and practice lag behind.

In what respects has civilization rushed ahead? In what respects does the school lag behind?

It is now a commonplace to accept the thesis that pioneer life has set the mould for American custom and thought. This gives the background for the present situation, the condition from which we are now moving. It is equally a common-place and equally true that modern industrialism is the one great inclusive cause which is so rapidly modifying our country. But a lingering pioneer idea and custom is not the whole of our lag. While less often considered it is still true that the intensely practical outlook set for us by our pioneer conditions was accompanied by a formally accepted intellectualistic philosophy,

essentially static in character, inherited from our feudalistic forbears of the old world. The situation confronting the school is thus the arduous task of making over its pioneer outlook and practice and its old-world philosophy to meet the host of demands set chiefly by the rising tide of industrialism. The schools have done much, but much remains to be done. Meanwhile the demands increase. It is this lag that we face.

Are the complaints against our schools then justified? Some are, others are not. We confront in fact two lags and two corresponding sets of critics. The first and significant lag we have seen. The critics who recognize it perform a social service. Their criticisms are well founded. We must consider their suggestions seriously. The other critics are very different. Failing to see the real situation they regret that the schools have even tried to change. This is the second lag. These critics lag behind the lagging schools. Their complaints are ill founded. To these belong, it would seem, Dr. Pritchard and with him many others who complain of costs and fads and frills. A situation confronts them which they ignore. Eyes have they indeed but this situation they do not see.

How does the changed situation demand a changed school? What is the bill of particulars? The story is not new, but is worth re-telling. In general this. In the simpler life of those by-gone times the district school with its three R's curriculum gave a useful addition to life, but for the many hardly entered into its essential structure. The pioneer child was really educated in the pioneer home and community. Life was a simple affair and lay open to view. Merely living the normal child life brought enough of opportunity and responsibility to give a very adequate introduction to the normal adult life. The girl helped the mother, the boy the father. Each thus grew to adulthood seeing and feeling the insistent needs of that simple life. The essential industries were for the most part found either in the home or at most in the community. Food stuffs were raised at home and milled nearby. The raw materials for clothing were not only grown at home but in the literal sense manufactured there. The wider social demands were equally few and almost equally open to view. For these reading and writing were desirable but hardly essential. The needs for reckoning were but slight, little beyond what the average boy would easily pick up. So much for the curriculum from books. And what of moral character? In spite of possible religious instruction this was a home-grown product as truly as were the practical skills. Both were alike the all but necessary results of taking part in the all but universal work of the home. What the school furnished was then a little literary equipment, and that hardly essential as many saw life. Education came otherwise. Life gave it.

Now the times are different. Science and its lusty offspring industrialism have greatly changed things. Life is no longer simple, but highly complex. Business, social life, domestic and foreign political life, even the leisure time of life, demand far more from the individual than formerly. Nor is this all. Not only are the demands far greater and more exacting than formerly, but the opportunities for meeting these are relatively lessened. The home as an educative institution have given up one by one its many industries, yielding them to the factory, so that the modern child, especially the city child, finds his

home very much less educative than was the case with his forebears. And this is so in many ways. He now sees no essential industry in its complete round as was formerly common. Bread may be baked at home, but the average city child has not seen wheat growing or reaped or threshed or milled. A few garments may be made at home, but no sheep or cotton or carding or spinning or weaving has he seen. But this is not all. Mere seeing, as important for understanding as that may be, is small in comparison with the outlook, insight, and attitude that formerly came from responsible participation in necessary processes. The modern city child may have a few household duties laid upon him, but the danger is great that child and parent will both feel these as artificial. Even at the very best the moral character educative effect is but slight in comparison with the effect got from seen-to-be-necessary participation in those many seen-to-be-necessary family enterprises of the earlier days.

When we leave the family for the larger community the educative loss is perhaps not so great, but still real. Common affairs, as subways, telephones, and motor cars, educate the child into how to use them, and such things are so numerous that much learning results, but the deeper and wider social processes are relatively hidden. Whereas in former times grist mill and blacksmith shop were open to all, the factory now says "no admittance." Even where children are allowed to enter, the processes are so complex and involved as to be unintelligible to sight. With no understanding of such matters appreciation is all but impossible, and social solidarity suffers. And it is (if possible) worse with modern government and political party management. These are so complicated that most adults hardly understand them. To the child they are repellant mysteries.

Thus with a wider and more complex world to enter and master, with relatively fewer opportunities to see at close range the workings of that world, with little or no responsible participation in those workings, the modern child presents a very serious educational problem. If this be not met, civilization will surely suffer. Some even fear it may disintegrate. At any rate the danger is real. In the judgment of most thinkers the modern school must be our main reliance. It must re-shape itself as best it can to supply for the modern child an educational institution and opportunity adequate to modern conditions. Home and church, rightly or wrongly, no longer meet the situation.

It cannot be too much emphasized that the task of the school is thus different in kind as well as degree from what formerly prevailed. Then the school's task was mainly to supplement life by adding the Three R's. Now the school must supply the most educative part of life itself. Then ordinary living at home and in the community, directed by insistent family needs, sufficed to give fairly adequate preparation. Now education will be tragically inadequate unless the school can see its newer and larger duty and re-make itself accordingly.

A nearer look at some of the conditions of modern life may bring out more clearly the respects in which the schools must change.

Science and industry have combined to create "the great society" with its factory production, its world markets, and its ever increasing urbanization. The products of industry satisfy the wants of man as never before, but at the same time call into conscious insistence ever new