

Bill Honig's Balancing Act

“**T**he educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity.” In April 1983, with these apocalyptic tones President Reagan’s National Commission on Excellence in Education catapulted the state of our nation’s schools into a major national issue.

Since then cries for educational “reform” have filled the air—often from the same interest groups and experts who until a year ago smugly praised American schools “as the envy of the enlightened world.”

State after state has scrambled to analyze the shortcomings of their schools and attempt to upgrade standards. According to Representative Steve Bartlett (R-Texas), a member of the House Education and Labor Committee, state education spending has risen 7 percent in the last year—and this in an era of tight state budgets.

Joseph Rodota, in the public-affairs office of the Department of Education, reports that “there has been a virtual explosion of interest in improving the quality of education.” Since or just prior to the issuance of the commission’s report, “A Nation at Risk”:

- 50 states have education task forces in existence.
- 44 states have increased high school graduation requirements.
- 42 states have revised teacher preparation and certification programs.
- 35 states are assessing student evaluation and testing.
- 33 states are in the process of creating master teacher programs.
- 25 states are raising state college admission requirements.
- 20 states are about to adopt some form of merit pay program.

● More than half of the school districts in the country have increased the number of credits needed to graduate in the basic subjects of English, science, and mathematics.

Nowhere has the pace of change in education been greater than in California, long known as a national trend setter and incubator for public policy experiments. The California public-school system is a gigantic laboratory: more than 1,000 independent districts, 7,321 schools, 169,000 teachers, and more than 4 million students.

In 1982, California voters anticipated public concern over deteriorating educational standards in the rest of the country by ousting three-term Superintendent of Public Instruction Wilson Riles in favor of a lean, ascetic lawyer-turned-educator named Bill Honig, 46, who campaigned on a platform of “shaking up” the public schools and steering them away from any roles as “substitute parents or babysitters.”

A liberal Republican, Mr. Honig tapped a vein of public anger at the soaring cost of public education that has coincided with plummeting Scholastic Aptitude Test scores. In the last decade, the verbal SAT scores of college-bound California seniors dropped a full 43 points, from 464 in 1972 to 421 in 1983. A statewide Field Poll taken in 1981 asked respondents to rate 34 public institutions. Public schools came in third from the very bottom, just ahead of oil companies and the welfare bureaucracy.

Mr. Honig infuriated both the Right and the Left in his expensive media campaign. Although he championed a back-to-basics ap-

proach to learning, he was a staunch opponent of the tuition tax credit or voucher plans supported by conservatives. The California Teachers Association, which has poured more than \$1 million into state races since 1978, was appalled at Mr. Honig’s assertion that 15 percent of teachers were incompetent and that laws should be changed to make it easier to fire poor instructors.

What Can Johnny Do?

Within seven months of taking office, Mr. Honig was able to outmaneuver both tight-fisted Republican Governor George Deukmejian and the Democratic-controlled legislature by pushing through the first real increase in funding for the public schools since Proposition 13’s passage in 1978. The education bill increased state support for education from \$7.7 billion to \$8.5 billion. The measure was also a delicate balancing act between conservative and liberal priorities for education.

Included were several steps that have been urged for years by the Republican minority in the legislature, such as:

- New regulations making it easier to discipline students who are chronic troublemakers and to discharge ineffective teachers.
- Incentive programs for school districts to increase the average school year from 175 to 180 days a year. From kindergarten through high school, California students currently spend an average of a year and a half less in class than the national average.
- A tightening of requirements for earning a high-school diploma so that graduating students will

have taken at least four years of English, two years of science and mathematics, and three years of social science. Mr. Honig hopes to add a required course in "Individual Freedom and Civic Responsibility."

Mr. Honig was able to persuade the teachers' unions to swallow many of these provisions by sweetening the pot with many of their own pet goals:

- School districts will be able to select up to 5 percent of their instructors as "mentor teachers," who would receive \$4,000 a year extra to help improve the skills of new or incompetent teachers.

- Starting pay for teacher salaries, now averaging \$14,000 a year, will be increased to \$18,000 to \$20,000 over three years. John Mocklar, education adviser to Democratic Assembly Speaker Willie Brown, says the increased beginning salaries "will halt the exodus of bright, committed people who want to teach but wind up in private industry so they can feed their families."

Attempts to require current teachers to take a basic-skills competency test in mathematics, English grammar, and essay writing were fought off. Under current law all new teachers seeking certification in California, along with full-time teachers seeking administrative posts, have to take such a test. To date, 31 percent of new teachers and 37 percent of sitting teachers have failed the test. Privacy provisions allow current teachers who fail the test to go back to teaching with no penalty. "The education community believes that so-called accountability tests are just thinly veiled efforts to shift the blame for bad home lives and ghetto conditions away from politicians to the teachers," says one former official of the California Teachers Association. "Teachers are only as good as the children they're given and hounding them with nitpicking tests will only lower their morale."

Bill Whitehurst, an aide to State Senator Gary Hart (D-Santa Barbara), who authored the competency test legislation, says "the teachers' unions have made their peace

with the basic-skills test as long as the methods of dealing with poor scores are left up to them."

Mr. Honig is now seeking to create a Quality Education Foundation, made up of 10,000 citizens around the state who will lobby for educational reforms and increased funding at the local level.

Gene Prat, a professional educator who ran against Mr. Honig for superintendent in 1982, says that the reforms "are a fig leaf to cover up the vastly increased spending for schools." Mr. Prat contends

tations through a Golden State high school diploma program, patterned after New York State's Regents Scholars program. Such a diploma would be granted only after vigorous examinations in academic subjects and would grant holders access to additional financial aid money for college.

The new superintendent is widely suspected of having political ambitions, and Sal Russo, Governor Deukmejian's deputy chief of staff, believes he is already running for governor. He has become a favored

Nowhere has the pace of change in education been greater than in California, long known as a national trend setter and incubator for public policy experiments.

that more money only encourages perpetuation of an inefficient, bloated education bureaucracy. "We have 12 percent or 500,000 fewer students in school than in 1970," he says. "But we have 81,000 more school employees—87 per 1,000 students today compared to 68 school employees per 1,000 students in 1970. We spend over \$3,000 a year on education for each child in California. The more money we spend the less we get unless we shake up the system, something Honig will never do."

Mr. Honig believes a temporary quarter-cent sales tax or increased corporate tax might be necessary because "we are going to need 150,000 to 200,000 new teachers in California in the next 10 years." However, he scoffs at those who blame Howard Jarvis's tax cuts for declining school standards. "Proposition 13 did not cause a deterioration in the schools. . . Johnny can't read, write and compute because we haven't expected him to do enough of it. Children being children, they're going to take advantage of our lowered expectations."

Mr. Honig hopes to raise expect-

intellectual guru to neoliberals who have little patience with the demands of teachers' unions. Mr. Honig was a featured speaker at the first neoliberal conference in Reston, Virginia, last year, where *Washington Monthly* Editor Charles Peters said, "Bill Honig is the most interesting figure in American education today and after [Secretary of Education] Terrel Bell, the most important."

The eclectic mix of journalists, public-interest lawyers, and academics who dominate the neoliberal movement find Mr. Honig simpatico. Seeing the economic pie of the booming 60s shrink, they are more willing than previous liberals to challenge the encrusted spending constituencies of the Democratic party. They are impatient with demands for privilege from labor-union bosses and public educators. They find that government by and for the special-interest liberal spending groups is often as alien and hostile to them as those of business-oriented Republicans.

To them Mr. Honig is an appealing figure who challenges the old guard of teachers' unions and administrators in favor of a more in-

tellecual, results-oriented approach. "The education battle in California is between those whose major goal is earlier tenure and bigger paychecks and liberal reformers who are challenging them for the first time," says Robert Lynch, a former board member of the Los Rios Community College District. "The establishment woke up one day and saw there weren't going to be any decent public schools to send their kids to unless they corrected the abuses."

Loops and Detours

What direction will the battle over public education take in California, and perhaps the rest of the country, in coming years? Stephen Rhoads, Republican education consultant to the assembly's ways and means committee, believes that the days of the independent school

district may be numbered and will probably end first in the Golden State. "As funding for schools has shifted to the state level because of Proposition 13, so have calls for more state oversight of abuse," Mr. Rhoads says. "We will probably see more regional education centers and less input at the local level, much as has already been done in Hawaii."

California may also see the first clash between an energized public desire for better schools and continued antitax sentiment. Howard Jarvis, the octogenarian gadfly of tax-cutting fame, has just qualified an initiative for this November's ballot that would plug loopholes he says liberal courts have drilled in Proposition 13. Passage of the Jarvis initiative would take more than \$1.2 million out of local government coffers. "Much of the tax base

of cities and counties would evaporate," says Robert Fairbanks, editor of the *California Journal*. "It would mean a titanic fight over where budget cuts would come and the local school districts would probably have to get all their funding from state government."

Mr. Jarvis contends that his measure would not harm the schools, pointing to provisions of the state constitution that require education funding to be given top priority by the legislature. But if "Son of Proposition 13" is approved by voters, it will likely mean the detouring, if not the derailing, of Superintendent Honig's "agenda for excellence" in education.

John H. Fund

JOHN H. FUND is a reporter for syndicated columnists Rowland Evans and Robert Novak.

An exposé of 20th Century prejudice and political myth-making

PEACE STUDIES

A Critical Survey

by Caroline Cox & Roger Scruton

"The teaching of Peace Studies discourages critical reflection, encourages prejudice, and permits the political manipulation of children. However it is taught, Peace Studies remains a non-subject. It is intellectually vapid, cannot be regarded as a genuine educational discipline, and should not be taught as one . . . The inclusion in the school and university curricula of such courses may be seen as part of a trend towards the politicisation of education involving both the lowering of standards and the assumption of foregone conclusions. It is a mark of this movement that the subjects which it countenances have a tendency to incorporate the word 'studies' in their names: 'Women's Studies', 'Black Studies', 'Gay Studies', 'Sports Studies' - roughly, 'for any relevant x , x studies' . . .

It should not be confused with its apparent innocuous purpose - that of encouraging tolerance and teaching children to settle their disputes through peaceful words and gestures. This purpose is better understood in terms of the traditional concept of good manners. It will then be realised that it has always been a part of education and that it is never less likely to be taught well than when confused with the problems of political and military analysis."

Price including postage: £3.25

Available from the Institute for European Defence and Strategic Studies, 13-14 Golden Square, London W1.
(Tel. 01-439 8719/8710. Telex 893513 TOMEDE G)

Baby Feat

More Newborns Are Surviving Infancy Than Ever Before

Carol Adelman

Of all the achievements of the 20th century, perhaps the most heartwarming is the dramatic decline of infant mortality.

It is hard to imagine the grief that so often afflicted families a hundred years ago. Opera star Enrico Caruso, born in Naples in 1873, was his mother's 18th child and the first to survive infancy. At the turn of the century, one of every seven babies born in North America and Western Europe died before his first birthday.

Today, in Western Europe, North America, and some Asian countries, that rate has fallen to one in a hundred. The best record is in Sweden and Japan, where only seven of every 1,000 newborns die in the first year of life; in Taiwan only nine of every 1,000 infants die; in Australia only 10. In the United States, the infant mortality rate has fallen from 120 per 1,000 in 1900, to 60 in 1930, to 26 in 1960, to 12.6 in 1980. It is still falling, and provisional figures show that it reached 10.9 by the end of 1983. The death rate is distressingly higher among blacks—20 per 1,000 in 1981—yet it has been declining at the same rate as for whites.

In the poorer countries of the world as well, UNICEF reports that infant deaths dropped by 50 percent in only 25 years. Infant mortality rates such as 28 per 1,000 in Jamaica, 37 in Sri Lanka, and 54 in the Philippines are roughly the same as in the United States and Western Europe in the 1940s and 1950s.

Spectacular Advances

According to the World Health Organization, the Soviet Union is the only exception to the steady and sustained downward trend in the developed countries. Despite a statistical blackout—after their rate began to rise in 1972, the Soviets removed their infant mortality column from their annual book of statistics—demographers have determined that between 1971 and 1979 the infant death rate in the U.S.S.R. rose from 26 to 39, over three times the U.S. rate and higher than both North and South Korea as well as most of the Caribbean island countries. Soviet officials acknowledged the rise but, along with several researchers in the United States, attributed it simply to better reporting. Murray Feschbach,

demographer and professional Soviet watcher at the Georgetown Center for Population Research, argues otherwise—he blames poor child health care, influenza, feeding deficiencies, pollution, and widespread and frequent abortions, which may make it more difficult for a woman to give birth to healthy babies later on. (In the early 1970s, at the time of the rise in infant deaths, the average Soviet woman had more than five abortions during her lifetime.) The Soviet infant mortality rate has finally resumed its earlier decline. At roughly 30 deaths per 1,000 live births, it is now close to the U.S. rate of 35 years ago.

Among the richer western countries, the successful campaign against infant mortality can be divided into two periods. From 1900 to the 1950s, the most spectacular progress resulted from improvements in sanitation, nutrition, and hygiene. Since the 1960s, it has been principally due to advances in medical technology, particularly in the care of high risk pregnancies and newborn babies.

At the turn of the century, the leading causes of infant deaths in Europe and America were diarrhea, pneumonia, and other infectious diseases. Before the advent of antibiotics and vaccines, about the only way to keep a baby from dying was to keep him from getting sick in the first place and about the only way to do that was to keep the germs away from him. In the countryside, this was possible for families whose wells weren't polluted and whose personal habits were reasonably hygienic. Breast-feeding, much more common among rural mothers, gave babies higher resistance to disease by improving their nutrition and transmitting natural antibodies.

In the crowded cities, death rates were higher. Polluted water supplies brought cholera, typhoid fever, and other debilitating intestinal diseases to babies whose resistance was often lowered by malnutrition. Sanitation was poor and rats carried diseases from one family to another. Infection spread easily through human contact as well. In

CAROL ADELMAN, a health and nutrition consultant in Washington, recently completed a doctorate in public health from the Johns Hopkins University.