

The Saturday Review

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The Private School Controversy

1. Education: Engine of Democracy

By JAMES B. CONANT



James B. Conant

OUR American system of tax-supported schools is essentially unique in several respects, but people are inclined to take for granted certain assumptions that underlie the development of our public schools. They realize all too little what would be the consequences of drastic alterations and are, therefore, too complacent about some types of hostile criticism; they are too little willing to make the sacrifices required to maintain our schools as effective instruments of our democracy. Those involved directly with public schools themselves are at times perhaps unaware of certain challenges and reluctant to make adjustments required by these challenges. If I appear somewhat critical of one phase of secondary education, I trust that no one will misunderstand me. I hope that it is unnecessary for me to spend any time reaffirming my deep conviction that the expansion of our free tax-supported schools in this country has been an essential element in our national life.

The doctrine of equality of which De Tocqueville wrote so long ago in his report on America has come to mean in the United States not parity of status for adults but equality of opportunity for children. The vast expansion of secondary education in this nation has created a new engine of democracy; it is of the utmost importance how this engine is to operate in the future. If we so desire it can be used to

EDITOR'S NOTE: Last month President James B. Conant of Harvard University, speaking before the American Association of School Administrators, strongly criticized the role of the independent school in American life. His remarks have since been bitterly attacked and spiritedly defended by educational and religious leaders throughout the country. Because SR believes the question raised by Dr. Conant to be one of the most important of our time, it publishes his address in full, together with comments on it by two critics of his position: The Most Reverend Richard J. Cushing, Roman Catholic Archbishop of Boston, and Allan V. Heely, headmaster of Lawrenceville School and author of "Why the Private School?"

restore fluidity to our social and economic life each generation and in so doing make available for the national welfare reservoirs of potential talent now untapped. At the same time, by stressing the democratic elements in our school life and the comprehensive features of our organization, we can promote the social and political ideals necessary for the harmonious functioning of an economic system based on private ownership but committed to the ideals of social justice.

We desire on the one hand to provide through our schools unity in our national life. On the other we seek the diversity that comes from freedom of action and expression by small groups of citizens. We look with disfavor on any monolithic type of educational structure; we shrink from any idea of regimentation or unifor-

mity as to the details of the many phases of secondary education. Unity we can achieve if our public schools remain the primary vehicle for the education of our youth, and if as far as possible all the youth of a community attend the same school irrespective of family fortune or cultural background. Diversity in experimentation we maintain by continued emphasis on the concept of local responsibility for our schools.

Both these ideas are to a considerable degree novel in the United States; a combination of them is to be found nowhere else in the world. Let me, therefore, remind you of the other approaches to education found in the closely related cultures of other English-speaking nations.

When I visited Australia last summer I discovered what was to me an amazing phenomenon: a sharp dual system of education, many private independent schools, and a centrally controlled state system of free education. Though we have much in common in our educational practices, this dual system serves to place in sharp contrast our American scheme. Let me make it plain that I am not criticizing the educators of the Antipodes. Education is not an exportable commodity. What is a good system for one type of society may not be good for another. Nevertheless, it is interesting to see how several ways of accomplishing the same objective may be arranged.

NOWHERE in the world today does the Protestant private school flourish as it does in several Australian states; this on a continent more recently settled than North America and in a society famous for its labor governments and its concern for social welfare. In two of the large Australian



states there are more students sixteen to seventeen years of age enrolled in private schools than in tax-supported schools. This is no new phenomenon. Quite the contrary. The tradition of the great public schools of England (public in the British sense, not ours)—the tradition of Winchester, Eton, Harrow—was brought to Australia in the mid-nineteenth century. This tradition, somewhat modified, has flourished there ever since. As a consequence there is in Australia a dual system of secondary education.

What are the factors that have favored this duality in education? From my observation there are two: first, the firm belief on the part of many Australians that secondary education should not be divorced from formal religious instruction; second, the fact that there are large urban centers in each Australian state. (In spite of the size of the continent and the statistically thin population, half the inhabitants live in large cities.) The private schools are situated with few exceptions in the large metropolitan areas (Sydney, Melbourne, Adelaide); unlike the English public schools, they are not primarily boarding schools but rather day schools with a nucleus of boarders. The tuition has consequently been kept relatively low and the range of income groups of the families patronizing them is fairly broad. In each capital city there is a group of more or less competing schools, each with church connections; there are Church of England schools, Methodist schools, Presbyterian schools, Catholic schools. These schools in some states are attended by students who receive state scholarships, but for the most part the schools are privately financed. The students who go on to a university (about half the graduates) must all jump the same academic hurdles. So the state to a surprising degree controls the curriculum; there is pedagogic uniformity coupled with social diversity—almost the exact reverse of the American situation.

Diversity in American secondary education is assured by our insistence on the doctrine of local control. We have no restrictions on the variety of approaches to secondary education presented by our thousands of local boards. Indeed, to an outsider I should think our diversity would look like educational chaos. But this is a characteristic of our flexible, decentralized concept of democracy. The time may conceivably come when a state or the Federal Government may jeopardize this concept, but as far as secondary education is concerned I do not detect any danger signals in that direction now. The NYA threat which was real in the 1930's has almost been forgotten.

I do believe, however, that there is some reason to fear lest a dual system of secondary education may in some states, at least, come to threaten the democratic unity provided by our public schools. I refer to the desire of some people to increase the scope and number of private schools. At present the proponents of such a movement are often not outspoken in their demands, but a dual system of schools with tax money flowing in some form to private schools seems to be a possibility in some people's minds. In this connection I think it is only fair to insist that the critics of our public schools should make clear their stand on two important points. To each one who attacks our public schools I would ask the simple question: "Would you like to increase the number and scope of the private schools?" If the candid answer is in the affirmative I would then ask a second question: "Do you look forward to the day when tax money will directly or indirectly assist these schools?" If the



Discovery

By Elizabeth K. P. Stokes

WANT to see me touch a turtle?"
—Strutting Master of Timid
World,

Bread-and-Milk Wonder,
Descends upon the turtle
With courage of commando,
Yet with fastidiousness, too,
As a rakish cap goes to battle.
Pouf! For the turtle!
Fat finger advances! Retreats!
Lagging feet hasten
The ascending beat
Of his strident voice,
Sidling from enemy flank:
"Do you want to see me?"
"... want to see me?"
See you lack of confidence
Conquer more than you think?
"Surrender!" From the tank
Of crawling horror
A beaded head thrusts
And is met: By fading falsetto:
"Do you want to see me?"
"All right, if you don't, I..."
And he captures
His first alibi,
"All right, if you don't,"
He trails off, and
Pondering discovery of
Formula invaluable,
Salutes!
Victor general to turtle.

answer is again in the affirmative the lines have been clearly drawn and a rational debate on a vital issue can proceed.

NEEDESS to say I would find myself on the opposite side from this hypothetical candid critic of public education. But what I am more concerned with in the year 1952 is to make the hostile critics of the public schools in the United States show their colors. One of the most vocal of these is a Protestant clergyman who reveals himself when he writes: "The Communist is not, as a matter of fact, much of a revolutionist. The Communist would only substitute the logical secularism of Karl Marx for the pragmatic secularism of John Dewey." If this clergyman would start off all his attacks on modern education by stating that for him secularism and Communism are equal dangers the reader would be in a better position to evaluate what he was about to read—or he might decide to skip it altogether.

There are many sincere Protestants, Jews, and Catholics who believe that secondary education divorced from a denominational religious core of instruction is bad education. They erroneously assume that the tax-supported schools are not concerned with moral and spiritual values. This is essentially the point of view of the headmasters of the Australian private schools. Now, that such people have a right to organize their own schools I do not question. The United States Supreme Court settled the law on that point in the famous Oregon Case of 1926. But I do question the honesty of their tactics when they attack the public schools in an attempt to undermine confidence in secular education.

I am well aware that in several English-speaking nations public funds are used to assist church-connected schools. This is the practice in England, Scotland, and to some degree in some Australian states. Whether the state and the church or churches can develop a working arrangement that prevents a state control of the church or church control of the state is another story. My concern is with the United States. We do not have and have never had an established church. To my mind our schools should serve all creeds. The greater the proportion of our youth who attend independent schools, the greater the threat to our democratic unity. Therefore, to use taxpayers' money to assist such a move is, for me, to suggest that American society use its own hands to destroy itself.

In some of our large Western cities

private schools are today attracting an increasing number of the sons and daughters of the well-to-do. To offset this, here in New England there seems to be a reverse tendency for fathers who attended private schools to send their children to public schools. Where the national balance lies no one can say. But I cannot help regretting that private schools have been established in the last twenty years in certain urban areas where a generation ago a public high school served *all* the youth of the town or city.

There is no use for us who are emotionally committed to public schools as schools for all to denounce or bemoan the growth of private schools. The founding of a new independent school in a locality is a challenge to those connected with public education. Granted the "snob aspect" of some of these new independent schools, nevertheless, I feel sure that in many cases they would never have come into existence if the management of the local high school had been wiser. Education is a social process. This is a free country and people will not be pushed around by educators. What is required is for those concerned to improve the high schools; public school administrators must recognize the validity of some of the criticisms now directed against them in terms of the failure of the high school to provide adequate education for the gifted. The problem is especially acute in metropolitan areas. The success of the private school in Australian cities should be a reminder of where we may be headed.

In terms of numbers involved the dual nature of our present system may seem slight—92 per cent of our secondary school pupils are in public schools. In terms of a stratification of society on economic and religious lines, however, the duality is marked indeed. In socio-economic terms we are not as far from the English public school system as we sometimes like to think. Chancellor McConnell of the University of Buffalo, reporting on English education, notes the predominance of public school graduates (in the English sense) over grammar school graduates in the entrants to Oxford in 1948. A half dozen of the best-known Eastern colleges in the United States would show a similar social phenomenon; they enroll something like half their students from private Protestant schools which encompass only a few per cent of an entire age group. But it is only fair to point out that these same colleges have been trying desperately hard in the last twenty-five years to attract a larger number of public high-school graduates, particularly from various

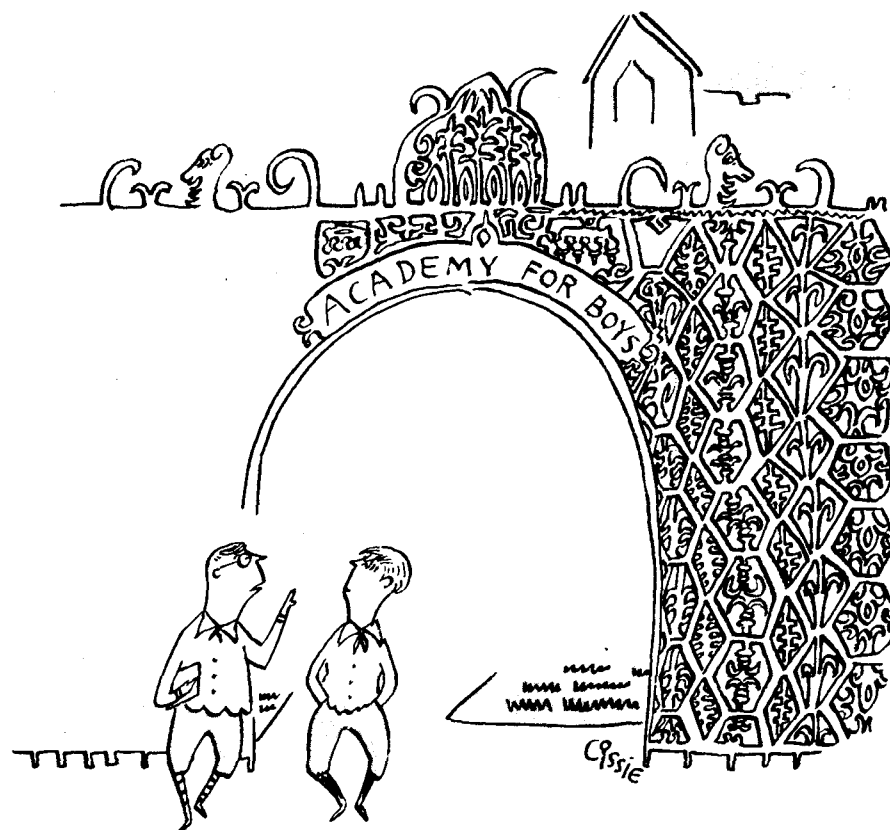
regions of the country. They aim to be national in terms of geography and representative of all income groups; that they have to some degree succeeded in moving nearer their goal is, to me, a hopeful sign.

What is the basic objection to a dual system of education, you may ask? Or put it the other way around: what are the advantages of free schools for all? To ask these questions is almost to give the answers. If one accepts the ideal of a democratic, fluid society with a minimum of class distinction, the maximum of fluidity, the maximum of understanding between different vocational groups, then the ideal secondary school is a comprehensive public high school. If one has doubts about the ability of secular schools to promote the growth of moral and spiritual values, then these doubts must be weighed against the democratic objectives I have just listed. Similarly, if a family questions the ability of a high school to prepare a gifted boy adequately for university work, the family will have to balance these misgivings against the advantages to the boy of mixing with all sorts of people when he is young.

OF this much there can be no doubt. A society which wished generation after generation to perpetuate class distinctions based on hereditary status would certainly demand a dual system of schools; so too would a society

like that in the Province of Quebec which wishes to perpetuate two different cultural groups. A dual system serves and helps to maintain group cleavages, the absence of a dual system does the reverse. This is particularly true of the secondary schools. Indeed, I would plead with those who insist on sending their children to denominational schools that they might limit their insistence on this type of education to the elementary years.

Our liberties will only be secure in the hands of the people, Jefferson declared, and in the hands of the people with a certain "degree of instruction." This belief coupled with the doctrine of equality has led to an enormous expansion of secondary school and college enrollment in the United States. With this expansion has come, by necessity, revolutionary changes in the curriculum of the schools. Unless one is prepared to maintain the thesis that there should be one type of general education for the well-to-do, another for the poor, there can be no retreat from the present position. And let me make it clear I advocate no retreat. Furthermore, in suggesting a greater emphasis on the identification of the scholastically gifted and their education in languages and mathematics, I have by no means repudiated the movement that has led to the liberalizing of our high-school curriculum. Quite the contrary, I believe this movement should spread,



"Just wait until I graduate and write a book about this school!"

for there are far too many public secondary schools today that are trying to use a program suitable for the intellectual development of a few as the basis of the general education of the many. There is too little effort made to develop the course in what has been called "common learnings" now used in only a few schools.

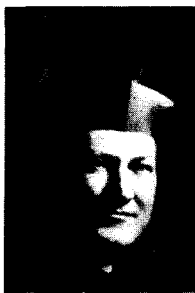
By organizing our free schools on as comprehensive a basis as possible we can continue to give our children an understanding of democracy by practising it in school. Religious tolerance, mutual respect among vocational groups, belief in the rights of the individual are among the virtues that the best of our high schools now foster. An understanding of the political machinery of our federal union, of the significance of the Anglo-Saxon tradition of the common law, the distinction between decisions arrived at by "due process" and those obtained by social pressures—by duress—all this is now being achieved to some degree in the free public schools of this country.

WHAT the great public schools of England accomplished for the future governing class of that nation in the nineteenth century the American high school is now attempting to accomplish for those who govern the United States, namely all the people. A system of schools where the future doctor, lawyer, professor, politician, banker, industrial executive, labor leader, and manual worker have gone to school together at age fifteen to seventeen is something that exists nowhere in the world outside of the United States. That such schools should be maintained and made even more democratic and comprehensive seems to me to be essential for the future of this republic. The false antithesis between education for the gifted and education for *all* American youth must be resolved. If this can be accomplished, then one demand for a further increase in private independent education will largely disappear.

The growth of free public high schools in this country would indicate to me that public opinion in the United States has been committed to a single, not a dual system of education. The history of the rest of this century will prove whether or not the commitment is irrevocable. The verdict will depend in no small measure on whether the comprehensive public school can win a wide support. I believe that such support will be forthcoming. In short, the answer to the question, "Can we have both unity and diversity in secondary education?" is that we can and that we must.

2. The Case for Religious Schools

ARCHBISHOP RICHARD J. CUSHING



—Boris

Richard J. Cushing

alternative left open to persons who care to be considered loyal members of the community, Doctor Conant's words will bring great comfort and increased boldness in pressing the campaign of secularism against independent schools, above all, religious schools. To the rest of us, his words should be a warning of the direction of the battle and of the accelerated speed with which it is being waged.

The discerning will note that President Conant states his criticism of independent schools like the parochial school in words which are much more forthright, candid, and uncompromising than has been customary among earlier propagandists against the independent school. President Conant does not say, as some others have said, that he merely objects to tax help for children who attend independent schools like parochial schools. He does not even suggest that his objection is to the standards maintained in such schools. He puts aside all such rhetoric—and for that I think that we should be sincerely grateful to him—and announces without qualification that his objection is to the parochial and private school as such. He sets forth clearly his conviction that those who believe in "democracy" or in "American principle" should not argue about tax support or about standards, but should take the position that the independent school, whether it pays for itself or not, whether it meets standards or not, is

DOCTOR Conant's statement is a sign of the times. To those who seek the imposition on all citizens, in the name of something which they call "democracy," of a single state school system, with no honorable alterna-

an offense against "democracy," a violation of "American principle," as Dr. Conant and his associates now define "democracy" and "American principle." Independent schools like the parochial school, we are told, offend against democracy because they bring what Dr. Conant calls "a divisive attitude" into American society, and they do so because they are not state monopoly schools.

Such a statement from such a source is astonishing. It is also a little exasperating, coming as it does from the President of Harvard University, in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, in this late year of grace. When Doctor Conant announces that independent schools operated for religious reasons have introduced "divisive attitudes" and "stratification" into the American community, while making not so much as a passing reference to the past 300 years of educational history in Massachusetts, with its "numerus clausus" in colleges, its admission restrictions of a completely non-academic character, and its ingrained caste system, he is either indulging in high humor or in something considerably less attractive.

IT took a long, long time—the time required for the poor finally to build their own private schools—before a university president was heard to announce that private religious schools are inconsistent with American democracy! Some of those who heard that announcement must have come from cities within the United States where Catholic nuns have long been teaching colored children who, until very recently, were prevented by "divisive attitudes" in their communities from receiving any chance for education proportionate to their ability or dignity. The Roman Catholic Sisters received them in independent parochial schools operated on a religious basis in accordance with "an American principle" older and more valid than Doctor Conant's principle of the "single public school system for all children." It would have been interesting to hear the comments of the educators from such states, states into which no parent, priest, or teacher of our tradition introduced the idea of "divisive attitudes" and "stratification," but into which our schools brought the best opportunity children of embarrassing color, regardless of

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