

## "Redeeming" American Education?

EDITOR'S NOTE: While thousands of Americans are still reading and arguing about Rudolf Flesch's "Why Johnny Can't Read" (SR July 30), the publishing house of Alfred A. Knopf is planning to issue next week a book that may well create fresh storms among educators and parents. Its name: "*The Restoration of Learning*." Its author: Arthur Bestor, professor of history at the University of Illinois and author of a book that caused its share of controversy when it was published two years ago called "*Educational Wastelands*." Its price: \$6. Once again SR is following its practice of presenting a summary of the book that is just as objective as we can make it (see below), along with two opposing views of the work (see opposite page). Arguing in favor of the book is Arthur Lynd, author of "*Quackery in the Public Schools*," former college teacher, currently a Manhattan advertising man. Taking the opposite view is Maurice R. Ahrens, head of the department of elementary education, University of Florida.

IN 1953 Arthur Bestor stirred up educational circles with a scathing book entitled "*Educational Wastelands: The Retreat from Learning in Our Public Schools*" (University of Illinois Press). Mr. Bestor is not unequipped for the tournaments over educational theories. He is a professor of history at the University of Illinois, has taught at Yale, Stanford, Minnesota, Northwestern, the University of Wyoming, and Columbia University's Teachers College, has served as president of the Illinois State Historical Society, has served as a member of the Committee on American Civilization of the American Council of Learned Societies, and is the author of numerous articles and books on education.

Since he raised so many controversial issues in writing of "*Educational Wastelands*" Dr. Bestor felt it his duty to search for answers to them. He records his search in his new book, "*The Restoration of Learning: A Program for Redeeming the Unfulfilled Promise of American Education*." The volume is divided into four parts: "The Purposes of Education," "Aimlessness in Education," "Roads to Educational Reform," and "Enlightenment and Liberty." The first section is devoted to a recapitulation and expansion of his earlier indictment of those in the "interlocking directorate of educationists" who, he says, water down liberal education into meaningless curricula, discourage independence on the part of public-school teachers, and substitute unrealistic pedagogy for scholarly competence. Many school administrators and professors of education, according to Dr. Bestor, are likewise disturbed "at the dangerously anti-

intellectual tendencies of such programs as 'life-adjustment' education" and at "the overemphasis that is given to mere pedagogy in state certification requirements."

Dr. Bestor is worried about what he calls "foolish and irresponsible tampering with the fundamental curriculum." For example, instead of strengthening the teaching of the Three R's some educationists, he says, are devising ways and means to cut down attention to these studies. He deplores the fact that after "nine full years of formal schooling a student need not be expected to read his mother tongue or to know the multiplication table." What education should strive to produce on every school level, he says, is the disciplined mind; it should be produced through the command of written English, foreign languages, mathematics, abstract processes of analyzing, generalizing, and criticizing. Dr. Bestor emphasizes that "these intellectual abilities are required, not merely as prerequisites for advanced study, but also and especially for intelligent participation in the private and public affairs of a world where decisions must be made on the basis of informed and accurate thinking about science, about economics, about history and politics."

Without "the development of generalized intellectual powers," Dr. Bestor continues, training in a professional and vocational direction defeats itself. Tricks of a specific trade may be picked on the job as well as in school, but it requires well-rounded intelligence to apply those "tricks of the trade" constructively. Further, Dr. Bestor notes, "Liberal education is designed to produce self-

reliance. It expects a man to use his general intelligence to solve particular problems. Vocational and 'life-adjustment' programs, on the other hand, breed servile dependence. Originality, reason, and common sense are at a discount; maxims, formulas, and rules (the most degraded kinds of book learning) are at a premium. One can search history and biography in vain for evidence that men or women have ever accomplished anything original, creative, or significant by narrowly conceived vocational training or by education programs that aimed merely at 'life adjustment.' The West was not settled by men and women who had taken courses in 'How to Be a Pioneer.' The mechanical ingenuity that is the proverbial characteristic of the American people owes nothing whatever to school-room manipulation of gadgets. To transfer to the classroom the kinds of learning that occur naturally in real life is evidence not merely of a disbelief in intellectual training. It reveals also a contemptuous lack of faith in the native good sense of the common man." Dr. Bestor states his belief that "vocational training can be integrated with liberal education without destroying the values of either."

DR. Bestor charges that "wiltully or not, professional educationists are effectually discouraging the entrance of good students into public-school teaching"; this is proved, he says, by statistics which show "that among those who willingly enroll themselves as majors in education the level of intellectual ability is appallingly low."

Despite this bleak picture Dr. Bestor is able to point out that there are thousands of teachers whose work stands up to the most searching scholarly scrutiny. This kind of professional responsibility is not being furthered, however. Teachers are being forced to divert more and more time into pedagogy at precisely the moment when they need to develop greater scholarly competence than ever before."

In summary, Dr. Bestor suggests that remedial action be taken all the way up and down the academic line: More rigorous action in training all students in the rudimentary arts; improving our methods in dealing with slow learners; granting teachers real academic responsibility and freedom; raising incentives for good teachers to join the school system; loosening the dictatorial hold of the "interlocking directorate of educationists" who are arrogating to themselves greater and greater power over teacher and curriculum.

## Yes

By Albert Lynd

**I**N THE last few years many statements have called attention to the debasement of learning in our public schools. Dr. Bestor's new book is the definitive statement. It is written by an eminent historian with twenty-five years of teaching experience. It is learned, lucid, and complete in its survey of the present damage and in its program for reform.

The chief agent of debasement has been the academic *arriviste* impertinently titled "Professor of Education." Since his rise to power the decline in our high schools of what Dr. Bestor properly calls the "intellectual disciplines" is a matter of record. Enrollment statistics of the last few generations show drastic percentage declines in such subjects as geometry, physics, and foreign languages. In many schools history survives largely as a diluted ingredient of something called "social studies." The Professor of Education is gutting the curriculum in the name of "democracy" and, more recently, in the name of "life adjustment."

Since "life adjustment" may require time for countless concerns (such as how to buy groceries, how to choose a dentist, etc., *ad inf.*) there is necessarily less time available for serious study in the intellectual disciplines, even if the New Educationist loved them. In fact, he abominates them. He regards what he calls "traditional learning" as a mere "accumulation of facts." As Dr. Bestor indicates, this is an absurdity which could not be uttered by any man with personal experience of real learning.

Dr. Bestor provides abundant and stupefying examples of anti-intellectualism in the new pedagogy. The New Educationist insists that students can get all they need of the intellectual disciplines in those scraps that may be retained in a "core" of "common learnings." It is said that the curriculum is being "integrated" in a way that will help students to solve "life problems." Dr. Bestor points out a logical flaw here. The proper solution of any problem begins with analysis, not synthesis. For the solution of the most difficult problems that beset us today we need analytical tools furnished by the formal disciplines that Educationists despise: mathematics, the sciences, history, languages, and others. Dr. Bestor's discussion of the relation of genuine learning to the actual problem of living—problems about which the Educationists talk so much—is clear and convincing.

The author's program for the restoration of learning turns upon a pro-

posal that qualified scholars and scientists reclaim their jurisdiction over the content of school courses and the training of teachers. Professors of Education—preferably without that presumptuous title—should confine themselves to the techniques of pedagogy. They have made some valuable contributions to those techniques, it is not denied. But let them leave the content of education to persons who know something about the several arts and sciences. An enormous gulf separates secondary-school teachers professionally and intellectually from the mathematicians, historians, and others on university faculties.

In the Educationist ideal today teachers of mathematics, for example, are not primarily mathematicians; teachers of history should not even pretend to real scholarship in history. They are committed to a perpetual study of "Education." A teacher today with a good record of scholarship in the liberal arts may even be considered handicapped, by her concern for "subject matter," in her life-adjusting career as a "glorified baby sitter." The phrase is Dr. Bestor's, and his opinions in this section are supported by the letters of many teachers who have had a good education in the liberal arts. They are among the bitterest critics of the Education courses into which they are forced.

**D**R. Bestor discusses at length and with much wisdom the school problems raised by universal attendance, and by the slow learners. He shows how these problems may be tackled, if there is a will to do so, without committing our schools to intellectual nihilism in the name of "democracy."

What "democracy" means to some members of the new cult is shown in Dr. Bestor's Chapter 13. There were frantic efforts by the Education *bund* to prevent the publication of Bestor's earlier writings on the schools. Most interesting were the antics of an Educationist who became president of the University of Nevada. He fired from his faculty a biologist who dared to circulate a Bestor article and who had also objected to the lowering of university entrance standards.

Considering the furor created by Dr. Bestor's "Educational Wastelands" all hell may break loose with this larger work. That could be a good thing. It could help the school-owning public to make a clear distinction between reputable scholars like Dr. Bestor and hacks in academic disguise.



## No

By Maurice R. Ahrens

**F**OR THOSE who have read "Educational Wastelands" Professor Bestor's new book will be a great disappointment. All of the chapters in his earlier book have been included in this one, either in identical or revised form. The fifteen new chapters, in which some new areas are explored are largely devoted to a somewhat repetitious amplification of ideas and concepts presented in the original volume.

Since "Educational Wastelands" has been analyzed and evaluated in a flood of reviews in many periodicals there would be no point in reiterating here evidence of the author's faulty thinking, of his frequent use of sweeping generalizations without supporting data, of the complete void in his understanding of the public-school program ("I have chosen to study the philosophy of the professional educationists rather than to make a tour of the classrooms. . .") and of his "stacked" selection of references in the literature in order to prove his contentions. Rather I should prefer to concentrate this review upon three new chapters in which Professor Bestor attempts to spell out an organizational plan for the public-school program—kindergarten through junior college.

The three new chapters (19, 20, 21), each titled "Educating the Slow Learner," are misnamed because they actually describe an organizational plan for all children and youth in our public schools. This proposal is completely impractical, unrealistic, and fantastic. Professor Bestor has demonstrated again the naivete of a person who tries to comprehend the organization and curriculum of the public schools from an examination of the literature alone.

The plan which he suggests is one which is essentially based upon the homogeneous grouping of children according to mental age. Children of all mental ages would enter kindergarten at the chronological age of five and remain there until they have attained a minimum mental age of six. (This would mean that a child whose I. Q. is fifty would continue in kindergarten for seven years, although Professor Bestor would relent and keep him there only three years.) Following kindergarten he would divide all children into six groups (according to mental ages). Two groups would remain in kindergarten, two would be placed in the first grade, and two in the second grade. Each

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