FRED M. HECHINGER
EDUCATION EDITOR
"THE NEW YORK TIMES"

EDUCATIONAL CHANGES IN THE UNITED STATES FROM THE LAYMAN'S POINT OF VIEW

Fifteen years ago, at the end of the second World War, I found myself suddenly and somewhat unexpectedly in the role of a foreing correspondent. My territory included most of Europe, as far North as Finland and as far East as Poland. It extended through the Balkans and the Near East and across the sea to Israel. Even under normal circumstances, it would be an arrogant understatement to say that I was ill-prepared to report on that vast area with its even more vastly different populations.

But these were not normal circumstances. The war had closed an epoch. A new chapter in history was struggling to be written. Political, economic and social theories and ideologies were being overthrown and re-molded.

Even an experienced observer would have lacked a solid point of reference, and I was anything but an experienced observer. Political partisans everywhere waited in the modern ambush of hotel cocktail lounges to tell the American observer "the truth".

It was then that I learned, under the stress of necessity, that a real reflection of a nation's mood and a people's course could

be gained—not from the claudy crystal ball of the political "spokesmen" but rather from the plans and practices of each country's schools and universities. The words and actions of the teachers and the professors, though by no means a guarantee of the truth, were the unmistakable yardstick of national aims.

It was a lesson I have never forgotten. It is one I hope I shall always apply in estimating the future of my own country. It is the yardstick I ask you to keep in mind as I try to look, with you, at the changes which have taken place, and will take place, in the panorama of American education.

What is happening to American education today is the reflection of gigantic changes in our society and, more important, in the place of the United States in the world. Up to 1940, America enjoyed the glorious luxury of being self-contained and as nearly self-sufficient as any great nation could ever hope to be. The borders were secure. The frontiers—a word to be dreaded in less fortunate countries ringed by hostile troops—in America still meant the exploration of unknown opportunities within its own land. Fortress America was real. It was a haven of safety. It could set its own standards. Even during the cruel distress of the Depression, it could work out its own solutions, based on its own pragmatic optimism rather than on the hate-propelled theories of Europe.

Inevitably this self-contained security was reflected in American education. The American school could afford to be self-centered. It could afford to be non-competitive in a society of apparently unlimited resources and opportunities. It could devote itself to leisurely, motherly concern with the needs and even the wishes —sometimes whims— of every child. As it need not fear economic waste, it need not worry about educational waste of time. It was sufficiently sure of the relative permanence of its way of life to justify as one of education's primary concerns the mere adjustment to that way. As that society was self-centered (or, in political terms, isolationist), its schools were understandably child-centered; as the world around the school knew it could determine its own speed, the teachers in the school knew that it was safe, without pushing, to let children move "at their own pace", without too much effort.

Perhaps most important, Americans looked out from the ramparts of Fortress America and saw men and women, helpless and oppressed and at the mercy of outside forces. Seeing this, Americans reacted, rightfully conscious of their freedom, by making their schools and their educational thinking the bulwark of individual freedom and opportunity.

We have reaped rich fruit from all this. A few weeks ago, when the University of Chicago appointed its new Chancellor, a distinguished scientist, he said that but for the efforts of his high-school teachers he would still be laboring on a Nebraska farm. Ralph Bunche, one of our outstanding diplomats, the son of a post-office clerk, rose through this system of educational opportunity and concern for the individual. And so, we benefit immeasurably today from the hopeful, free and all-embracing schools and their confidence in people.

In 1940 an epoch ended. In 1941 America entered a great world struggle. We entered it still in the knowledge of our invincibility but also with the foreboding that Fortress America was no more.

The post-war world in which we are living now has been called many things—the atomic age, the technological revolution, the world of missiles and of man's conquest of space. All this has brought about vastly different demands on American education.

With the end of absolute security and absolute economic and technological superiority, a sense of competition has entered our educational thinking. In plain language, the all-American picnic is over. Quite apart from the need to build up America's defensive strength, the demands of modern science, technology and increasing automation on the great mass of ordinary working people is enormous. Two weeks ago, we learned that a complicated new machine that scores hundreds of thousands of college entrance tests had made some serious errors; but a second look revealed that the machine's mistakes had resulted largely from the false information fed into it by men. There is something ironic in the fequency which today's electronic bank statements have to be corrected, like high-school students' compositions, in old-fashioned pen-and-ink. The trouble is that old-fashioned

people, with flaws in their multiplication tables, have not yet been educated to equal the knowledge of the machines designed for them.

But I am getting ahead of my story. What has happened to the citizen's relationship with his schools while his country's relationship with the world underwent such drastic change?

Throughout the leisurely, non-competitive, optimistic years of America's self-sufficiency, the citizen showed little interest in the ways and problems of education. The experts were left to their own devices. Great changes in philosophy were taking place, reflecting the individualistic, pragmatic mood of the age. Together with the psychologists and such important philosophers as John Dewey, the schools were transformed, re-shaped in society's image. With equal unconcern, the public permitted the lesser disciples to abuse and distort the contribution of the masters. And if, much later, the public began to rant against the experts of those days and accuse the educators for having acted in arrogant isolation, it is only fair to add that the isolation could not have lasted long without public apathy.

Remember the great court-room defense of the Captain Queegs —the profesional soldiers between the two World Wars— in "The Caine Mutiny?" Many of them were fools — some arrogant fools. But they were doing their duty while the rest of the country abdicated its responsibilities.

In education, the radical change began in 1948, with the mushrooming of a vast citizen movement and mass-involvement. Seventeen citizens committees in support of the public schools in 1948 grew to about 20,000 such groups last year.

With mass-involvment came criticism. The schools were no longer left to their own devices, especially when, along with the general public, the highly educated citizenry began to throw serious doubt on the standards of American education for today's needs. More specifically, the professors at the colleges and universities started to ask embarrassing questions of their colleagues in the elementary and high schools. Along with the jokes about progressive education came the serious question whether the schools, in their pre-occupation with the child, had not forgotten too much about the subject.

And while these critical questions had already been put to the schools for several years, they were given popular urgency and national support only after Russia's first Sputnik shocked a people who had so long taken for granted their superior technological position.

Today —ofter the period of near-panic— educational changes in America are seeking new goals and a rew balance. It is foolish to argue whether the fear of Russian education has been-played. The important fact is that a look at the Russian schools has forced American educators to re-discover something that education in every civilized country could have taught them: the importance of systematic progress in learning and of the cohesive pattern of what is learned. Excesive pseudo-individualism had, in American schools, led to an absurd faith in the student's ability to elect his own course of studies. (That this idea is not yet dead was shown only this year when a group of fairly important educators, in one of those farcical perversions of research, asked several hundred second-grade pupils whether they thought they were learning the things they needed most to know.)

The report on the high schools by Dr. James Conant has done much to remind the American school that education demands an orderly build-up of learning, but this was only the beginning. The truly important change on the current scene is the re-shaping of the curriculum in many areas of knowledge, not from year to year, but in a sweeping all-inclusive plan from first grade through high school.

In this reform, a new team has been formed out of old adversaries: the best and most open-minded of the teachers of the lower schools are working together with university scholars. Out of this new cooperation is beginning to emerge an entirely new curriculum in mahtematics, another in physics, and a third in chemistry. Last summer, the biologists got down to business and wrote —not one, but three new sets of textbooks, with the idea of testing three different approaches in the hope of evolving, in the end, a superior course. When Dr. Zacharias of M. I. T. first proposed his reform of physics teaching, he pointed out that most of the schools practically ignored the great advances of the past

fifty years. Yet, he warned, in the past twenty years, that science alone had been confronted with more new discoveries than it had during the course of the previous 2.000 years.

The sciences have, it is true, responded more readily to reform than have the humanities and social sciences. In fact, there is today some public grumbling that there is danger in over-emphasis on science. But the answer increasingly given to this complaint is that the knowledgde of science had, in the past, been almost totally lacking in what used to be considered general or liberal education. I know that, educated as I was in the liberal arts tradition, I face the modern world unhappily as a scientific and technological illiterate, and I know this is nothing to boast about. What we are beginning to see, I believe, is not an unbalancing of the curriculum by the inclusion of too much science, but the inevitable recognition that a deep understanding of scientific concepts is part of modern man's liberal education.

Nor is there as much conflict and difference between science on the one side and the arts and humanities, on the other, as we non-scientists like to believe. It is the non-scientists who talk about the mysteries of "scientific method" as a world apart. The great physicist Rabi said as much recently. The true scientist, he added, considers imagination, enthusiasm and the power of the intellect more important than any kind of method. This ought to be an encouraging view for those who like to believe that there is much common ground which the various areas of knowledge share.

If the re-discovery of cohesion and orderly progression is one of the important changes in the new American approach to science, mathematics and history, that change as also revived, like a breath of fresh air, our approach to foreign languages. Here, too, America's place in the world has had a vital influence. Living in a safe, selfsufficient, English-speaking Fortress America is one thing; trying to cope with a world which demands American understanding, involvment, leadership and partnership is quite another story.

The new realities have destroyed the myth that Americans are by nature endowed with a mysterious inability to speak anything but English. We are currently in the process of discovering

that youngsters can and do learn foreign languages in elementary schools and that they can develop their ability to perfection —provided that they continue their study for five or six consecutive years. It is very likely that we are on the way to scrapping the kind of language study that made Heyward Broun say he had learned Beginner's French only to find out, when he first arrived in Paris, that nobody there spoke Beginner's French.

I repeat that, although we were led to the re-discovery of the importance of systematic, orderly progression in learning by the Russiam example, we could have learned exactly the same lesson from the French, the Scandinavians, the British and the Germans. There is, however, another new lesson which is bringing about major changes in American education and for which credit must honestly be given to the Russians. That lessons is the importance of exposure.

European education has taught us the importance of excellence but traditionally Europe has applied the theory of excellence only to a selected few. America gave to the world the great ideal of education for all. Now —and America is just beginning to be conscious of this— Russia has moved into another phase of educational pioneering: it is trying to combine the American success story of mass-education with the European tradition of excellence.

Some Americans sneer at this as a pipedream. They say it cannot work. In the total or totalitarian sense, of course, it will not work: I don't think for one moment that Russian educators seriously believe that every student can be expected to master physics, advanced political science or higher mathematics. But that is not the point. The important lesson to be learned is that exposure of the great majority of students to the fountainheads of knowledge is bound to unleash a mass of now largely undiscovered, unchallenged talent.

I believe that the American school, having been challenged, is beginning to move in the same direction of total exposure to knowledge. This will test severely our ability to train the teachers needed for this gigantic task. It will also test our ingenuity and willingness to improvise, to be unconventional, to depart from limitations imposed by the trade-union traditionalism within

the teaching profession. The only reason why I omit today a discussion of the instruments of ingenuity —television, the use of wide ranges of citizen abilities alongside certified professionals and various re-arrangements of the learning pattern— is that I consider these details of methods rather than fundamental changes in American education. Let the goals of education change and the new goals be widely accepted, and I am confident the new arrangements will be made.

As this happens —and it is happening new in our most forwarlooking communities— we will not, it is reasonable to hope, swing over to the Russian extreme of being so subject-centered as to believe that, given a good teacher, every child can master every subject. But we will never again invoke the mushy, sentimental platitude that "we are teaching children, not subjects". To put it in positive terms, we are on the road to being child-conscious and subject-inspired.

I hope I have not given you the impression that American education is about to solve all its problems and to wipe out all its old mistakes and follies. Or indeed that we may not be capable of inventing new follies, and do it with fervor and enthusiasm. We can safely leave their review to the twenty-fifth anniversary of the great buildings whose dedication we now celebrate.

As our national problems change, so do our education issues. Right now, for instance, we are in the midst of a deeply troublesome crisis which is inextricably linked to the crisis of our great cities. When you read about that pressing issue of urban renewal, you must picture alongside the desperate urgency of the renewal of the schools in overcrowded, under-financed American cities. In fact, the decay of the American city cannot be halted until and unless the city schools can again become attractive enough to appeal to the entire range of the population —from very poor to rich, or at any rate comfortably middle-class.

It is no secret to you, and it would be less than honest to bypass this fact here, that it has become fashionable to attribute the present urban dilemma in large reasure to the latest group of newcomers to our cities—the newcomers from Puerto Rico. This

is sheer nonsense and a lie born of a conscious evasion of responsibility.

Each group of newcomers has been singled out to carry the burden of blame for present and pressing crises. Those who point their fingers instead of applying their hands are the descendents of newcomers. I was a new-arrival myself. So were the Italians, the Poles, the French, and they, too, spoke a diferent language. And they too, posed a problem to American schools. So did the Irish, and one of them is now the President of the United States.

To doubt that the schools can conquer similar problems today would be to doubt the validity of the American experiment. The only different aspect of the search for solutions in the Sixties is that the schools must, in addition to their old tasks, acknowledge the new reality of nation wide shared by American purposes and by people of all ethnic and sectional origins. The reforms no longer can be made piecemeal, at the discretion of 45,000 school boards. The curriculum improvements are no longer left to occasional forward-looking local educators. The support of education is no longer a local "option". It cannot be left to the mercy of provincial politicians or to half-hearted efforts at improvement. Today, in the enlightened citizen's and layman's view, education must be the responsibility of all American institutions, from the village council to the national cabinet and the President.

The reason—again from the vantage point of the non-expert observer—is plain beyond doubt. From the purely practical point of view, education—more and better education—has become a bread-and-butter necessity. There are today in the United States about 42,000 different categories of jobs. Two generations ago, the majority of all jobs required no skills at all, or at best very low skills. Today only about one-fifth of the 42,000 job categories can be filled with people without specific and specialized education. And even on the highest level of training, it is already true that yesterday's engineering school graduate, with all his specialized knowledge, is becoming as obsolete as the propeller plane, the miracle of yesterday, which he helped to design.

And on the level of the every-day citizen, the desperate need for more and better education is at least as vital. Every man, woman and child living in the United States today has at

his disposal constantly and regularly more news, more information, more detailed reports about the world around him—near and far—than the occupant of the White House had fifty years ago.

Relentlessly, the information comes to all of us. But all the information, all the up-to-the-minute news is worse than meaning less—it is oppressive and confusing—unless we can sift it, digest it, understand it, act on it with wisdom and with an eye to the consequences of our action. The challenge to the modern citizen is to learn to cope with that flood of knowledge—or to be overwhelmed by it, drown in it.

This means that more than ever, American education is a shared problem, shared across the land and no longer a patchwork of local islands in provincial isolation. If Fortress America has disappeared, the most important change on the school scene is that the Fortress of the American school district and school board is emerging from its isolation, too.

This does not, and must never, mean that American education is being turned into an instrument of national policy. It means that the American schools are the insurance of national purpose. There is no reason why the emergence of national standards should be mistaken for standardization. American education is not turning into a tool of the state but establishing a target of shared ideals.

The task of the future is not to make the individual less important but to make him less self-centered, less self-indulgent, less self-satisfied. The American school will—unless it fails to understand the changing world—remain idealistic about the power of education but become unsentimental and tough about the rigor of learning.

Today the United States is on trial as the representative of something more than a nation. All this the test of a civilization. The test is not whether a new set of ideas can be found. Those put up to us by Jefferson, Thomas Paine and Lincoln could answer most of the questions that are put to us in Latin America, Asia and Africa. The test is whether we will pay the price of those ideals.

Our schools hold the key to the answer. They have, for too long, echoed the language of the confortable. They must now

again mold their pupils: must again make them compassionate toward distant goals but hard in resolve and intellect.

If the schools fail in this, the civilization that will fail with them is more to be pitied than to be missed. If the schools succeed... and there is hope in sings of a renaissance of learning... they will have done no more than their duty.