

School or Society: Which Comes First?

While reading draft copy for this issue of *2061 Today*, I was reminded of a claim made in *Science for All Americans*. Chapter 14, "Reforming Education," presents the reform premises on which Project 2061 is based, then ends by saying:

"...better education is necessary for and can lead to a better America. But only if some of today's worst social problems are ameliorated will the schools be able to take the sweeping reform steps that will enable them to have extensive positive effects on society."

One might conclude from this educational twist on the chicken/egg dilemma that we are stymied: we can't reform society until we reform education, and vice versa. I draw no such conclusion. Nor do I accept the argument that, therefore, educators should reform society. It is quite enough for them to focus thoughtfully, inventively, energetically, and persistently on improving the quality of education.

The point is that reforming society and reforming education go hand in hand. Surely educators will stand a better chance of getting on with school reform as America makes headway in:

...combating the terrifying scourge of drugs and violence that daily threaten the lives of many young people;

...finding a way to see that all children can come to their studies in good health, properly fed, and decently clothed;

...overcoming the lingering racism and sexism that still deprive too many children of the opportunity to develop their full potential;

...distributing its resources so that the quality of education available to children is not a function of how rich or poor they are;

...improving the economy as a whole; and

...elevating the status of teaching and other public service professions in the eyes of us all.

To what degree

should school and community

reform efforts merge?

And just as surely, we stand a better chance of improving America as educators make headway in:

...helping all students gain the knowledge and critical thinking skills they need to become thoughtful citizens ready to participate in finding solutions to the social problems they will face;

...ensuring that all students develop work skills and attitudes that will, for their sake and ours, enable them to become productive members of the economy; and

...instilling in its graduates a commitment to health (personal, family, community, and environmental) and lifelong learning (personal and collective) that will provide purpose and meaning throughout their lives.

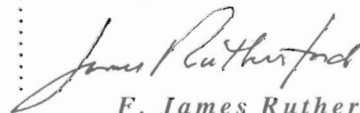
Fair enough. But schooling should not be cloistered from social reform. To what degree should school and community reform efforts merge?

My answer is what I think is referred to these days as waffling. On the one

hand (there's the giveaway), it is not easy for adults to apply knowledge and skills learned in the abstract while in school to the resolution of actual social issues, or for students to connect what they are learning in school to the realities of work that will come later.

On the other hand (inevitable), there is much to be said for school as a safe haven. For many children, daily life is confusing, unstable, even dangerous. As a special institution devoted to children first and community second, schools need to see that children escape those conditions for at least part of the day so that they can experience the fun and satisfaction of learning for its own sake. Moreover, if students get too embroiled in the current affairs of the community (local or global) too soon, they may be deprived of the distance and time that they need to prepare themselves to confront a world in which the issues are very different from those of today's adult world. Education is, after all, for a changing future.

Either way, curricula of the future must wrestle with the question of what balance to strike between school and community. The curriculum models that the Project 2061 teams are designing will almost certainly take different positions on this. Such alternatives are in keeping with the Project belief that as a nation we need a unity of purpose, expressed as learning outcomes, and a diversity of approaches to achieve those goals. We intend to promote both. ■



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