The Changing World

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THE TEACHER CRISIS

WE ARE AT LAST getting a good press on the teacher shortage and the problems of the teaching profession. Favorable reports are coming in from many cities concerning improvements in salary schedules. Minneapolis is an outstanding example of a large city school system that has met the problem courageously. We have reason to expect a number of such victories in the months to come. Each victory will strengthen the teaching profession for the important work that lies ahead. Within the profession, however, we should take care that we think clearly with regard to all of the factors which enter into the present crisis in the profession. Even if teachers salaries are raised beyond our fondest hopes we shall not make teaching attractive to the ablest young men and women in our college graduating classes unless we do some other things to the educational profession. The plain fact is, our young people do not feel that education is a really dynamic enterprise. They are not convinced that it comes to grips with the real problems which confront society. They do not see how they can make an outstanding contribution to society by entering this particular profession. Young people are idealistic. To be sure, they want an adequate income and a decent standard of living, but beyond that they like to feel that the enterprise in which they are engaged is appreciated by the public and is in fact a vital endeavor. If, therefore, we wish to attract outstanding young men and women into the profession it behooves us to examine our professional activities carefully and do everything humanly possible to give our schools and colleges the dynamic qualities that on the one hand will meet the needs of our age and on the other will commend the profession to the keenest minds and warmest hearts among our young people.

I believe there are three important changes which must be made in educational institutions before our young people will be attracted to teaching. In the first place, education must come to grips with the really important problems which now concern our society. That means that education must move into the controversial areas. That in turn means that as teachers we will be subjected to criticism. But it also means that our profession will take on a more vital relationship to the improvement of our on-going society. In the past we have been far too timid in these directions. We have failed to give our young people a thorough grounding in the various issues confronting our democracy. We have failed to teach boys and girls to think creatively in the areas of human relations. Our timidity and silence have tended to emphasize static concepts of society, and have given our teaching a dry, stereotyped quality which is anything but attractive to young people in modern times. Let every classroom in America come to grips with the issues which confront our society and with the problems which confront our boys and girls and men and women. Such a step will save our freedom and it will go far toward bringing our ablest young people into our classrooms as teachers.

A second step in vitalizing education is that of making the school a more important factor in community life and giving the teacher a role as an effective leader in community affairs. In the first place we cannot have the kind of education we need for our children if we remain inside

the four walls of a schoolhouse. We must take the school into the community and the community into the school. The school must become an integral part of the supporting community. The school cannot achieve this integrity with the community unless the teacher is a competent community leader and an active participant in community affairs. Once the teacher has taken her place as an effective community leader we shall see a changed attitude on the part of young people toward the teaching profession. One of the reasons other professions such as law, medicine, and engineering are now attracting more able young people than teaching is that the young people feel that in these professions they have a better opportunity to play active roles in community life. If our schools were conducted as they should be no profession could even approach that of teaching in providing opportunities for community leadership, and no profession would be more attractive to young people.

Finally, we can never make the teaching profession attractive to men and women of creative talent unless our educational administration can overcome its excessive centralization and authoritarian domination, especially in our larger cities. Young people have a feeling that their talents will be lost and unused if they enter the teaching profession, largely because of the enormous inertia and excessive centralization which prevails in educational administration. Even in smaller systems there are unfortunate examples of administrative domination which prove stifling to creative efforts. The tragic consequence of over-centralization and dictorial procedures in administration is that such practices and procedures are especially discouraging to young people of outstanding creative talents and abilities. It is only natural that those with greatest imagination are going to suffer most when subjected to authoritarian procedures. It is only to be expected that such individuals are not likely to enter a profession in which there is not full and free play for their talents. In this connection mention should be made of the growing tendency in the larger cities to select teachers on the basis of paper-and-pencil examinations of one sort or another. It is my observation that these examination procedures tend to weed out people of imagination and to select the drudges who are willing to spend hours upon hours learning meaningless facts. The result is that we select our teachers from the ranks of those with little imagination and often little capacity for creative human contacts. Young men and women with imagination and creative talents either fail the examinations or refuse to take them, knowing only too well that these tests call for a type of performance in which they cannot hope to excel. The large cities in this nation could secure the services of hundreds of men and women of outstanding abilities if they had the courage and imagination to alter their processes of selection. They could secure hundreds, perhaps thousands more if they decentralized their administrative organization and procedures, and placed their leadership emphasis on originality, initiative, and creative efforts rather than on conformity, uniformity, and a kind of docility which closely approximates "boot licking."

Salaries are in process of improvement. We should work hard to raise them all we can, but we should not make the mistake of assuming that when we have raised the salaries we have found a solution to the teacher crisis. This solution can be found only as we make the school a vital factor in the solution of the problems now confronting our society, and make the school itself and the teacher active leaders in the improvement of every community. If, in addition, we modify our administrative organization and procedures so as to release the creative talent of teachers we need have no fear that American young people will not enter our profession. But it is going to take hard work to make these changes in our profession in time to really influence the attitudes of our young people materially. We must act and act fast!

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