Galen Saylor

# "Don't Just Do Something"

*School people need to define clearly and intelligently what they believe to be proper goals for education.*

"DON'T just do something; stand there!"

It is high time for those who control and administer and those who teach in the American elementary and secondary schools to stand steadfast for something. They should take a stand for the kind of education that promises to contribute maximally to the attainment of educational goals. Such goals must be valid, comprehensive and acceptable to people of vision, imagination and integrity, and must square with the basic democratic traditions of America and the facts about human growth and development.

Our failure in the past to provide adequately and fully such an education for all children and youth and the growing demands of our times have resulted in many criticisms and pressures to change education, in some instances radically. Are we, as a result of such forces, now just to do something, and not, rather, to define clearly and intelligently what we believe to be proper goals, policies and programs for education in this country?

Throughout the land many schools have set up workshops or curriculum committees to make revisions in the high school curriculum. Many of these schools state as their object that of becoming what might be termed a "Conant" school. It is interesting to note in this connection that at no point in the report by Dr. Conant has an effort been made to define the basic and primary functions and goals of secondary education in this country. Yet the Conant report will, without question, have a most marked influence on education in this country.

The first great report on the character and nature of secondary education in America was the report of the famous Committee of Ten. That committee stated definitely what it conceived to be the function of the secondary schools: "Their main function is to prepare for the duties of life that small proportion of all the children in the country . . . who show themselves able to profit by an education prolonged to the eighteenth year. . . ." With this as a base the nine conferences proceeded then to plan a program for the secondary school.

Another great document in American secondary education was the "Cardinal Principles of Secondary Education," prepared by the Commission on the Reorganization of Secondary Education.

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This entire report was a statement of goals, objectives and principles for secondary education. It was used by 16 subject-matter and administrative committees as a basis for formulating a program of studies and recommending content for the secondary schools of America. That far-sighted Commission said that "Education in a democracy, both within and without the school, should develop in each individual the knowledge, interests, ideals, habits, and powers whereby he will find his place and use that place to shape both himself and society toward ever nobler ends." This report has profoundly molded the program of the secondary schools during the past half-century. Or has it?

## Objective and Program

For in 1959 we must ask ourselves whether we really ever believed in health, for example, as an objective for secondary education; or is it just to be health for the 75 to 80 percent who are not strong? Do we really think esthetic beauty is worthy of attention in the secondary school; or is it just a time filler for those who cannot profit from four years of a foreign language? Is worthy home membership now to be shunted aside as an objective of secondary education, to be served by the home, an institution that by the time a pupil has reached secondary school may have already failed to give him a foundation for a rich, moral family life?

Are we to hang our heads in shame because some critic holds up to ridicule classes in family life education, or co-ed homemaking? Is learning to drive a car to be relegated to the back alleys or the country lanes because some person of prestige in a totally different field says that this is not a function of the American secondary school? Are all the intellectually able pupils of the high school to be guided into or assigned to an honors track that commits them to take a heavy program of foreign language, science and mathematics almost, if not completely, to the exclusion of music, art, industrial arts, physical education, health, driver education, homemaking, typing, journalism or dramatics? Have we in 1959 abandoned as an unrealistic, wasteful dream, the democratic concept that education in America is designed primarily to develop the potentialities, capabilities and talents of each person that will contribute significantly to the good life in our society?

At the elementary school level, the concept of education for the development of the whole child has come under attack. The school, we are told, has no business "meddling" with the lives of children or trying to guide their moral, emotional, social and physical development. It should stick strictly to its traditional 19th century task of preparing children to live in the world as the adult finds it. Homework, we are told by some critics, develops moral fiber and desirable personal traits, so we load it on. Time just to be a growing, developing child is an unacceptable extravagance in this day and age; rather, we must enroll him in a foreign language class after school or on Saturday, or see that he participates in a science hobby club, or remains after school for work in an honors class on leadership.

In many schools throughout the country, the size of the class group assigned to a teacher is edging up alarmingly. Thirty-five to 45 pupils frequently are assigned to an elementary school classroom or to a secondary school class. Is it possible under such circumstances for even the best of teachers to provide the

kind of education boys and girls need? This practice is often the result of inadequate support for the schools. But have the American people really ever defined the kind of education they want for their children so that the necessary funds can be made available? Some forward-looking communities have, and in such instances the size of classes remains consistent with what we have learned about quality education.

What do we want schools to do? What constitutes a good education for every boy and girl in America? It is high time for us to face up to this issue—we as citizens, we as members of boards of education, we as staff persons in state departments of education, we as administrators, supervisors, and curriculum directors, and we as teachers. As we have periodically throughout the history of America—in the days of Franklin's academy, in the times of Horace Mann and Henry Barnard, in the quarter of a century of committee study from 1893 to 1918—we must again state clearly and unmistakably what we believe to be the basic and primary functions and purposes of the schools of this nation. No report, no handbook of requirement for graduation, no curriculum guide, no plan for the education of gifted children, no state department regulation has merit or validity except as it helps us better attain goals for schools. Such goals need the acclaim and acceptance of all of those who are competent to participate in decision making about the program and character of American education.

## Goals for the School

We as a society need to agree ever so clearly on the goals and functions of education in our democracy. Similarly, decision-makers in each local school system and in each school building must state the more specific and immediate objectives to be sought through the program of the particular school or school system. Within the scope of the broad goals of education that must evolve out of the life and traditions of America, there remains much to be done in spelling these out in objectives to be realized through the total educational program.

Decisions about building specifications, about equipment to be purchased, about teachers to be employed, about regulations to be established, about teacher load, about length of the school day and of the school year, about grouping of pupils, about requirements for graduation, about tests and quantitative measures of pupil growth to be used—all of these must be predicated on some conception of what outcomes are sought through the educational program of the school. Some schools are "experimenting" with large class groups in which some of the teaching is done by television. Certain evaluations of these programs are made, but many thoughtful educators realize that often the methods being used to evaluate these innovations are not at all based on an adequate conception of what constitutes a good education for boys and girls. The results, therefore, become suspect because of faulty evaluation. But in turn, we have never really evaluated adequately traditional practices on the basis of the same outcomes sought. So we blunder ahead rather blindly, prodded by pressures from first one group, then another.

Curriculum-wise, planning at the local level often is faulty because those involved fail to state overtly and fully the outcomes being sought through the total educational program of the school. Many workshop groups that were busily engaged last summer revising the cur-

riculum so the school would conform to the Conant recommendations seldom ever, if at all, bothered to discuss the objectives of education implied by such action. In fact few of the groups probably even raised any question about the soundness of the recommendations in terms of what their members believe to be the functions and aims of a secondary school.

In many systems, grouping practices are being adopted, ungraded elementary units are being established, report cards are being revised, promotion policies are being changed administratively without so much as even a statement of what valid purposes of education are judged to be served better by such changes. Perhaps the older practices actually are unsound and perhaps changes are needed (I think many changes in school practices and programs are demanded). But let us all first clarify and state overtly our concepts about the educational process before we "just do something."

## Teachers Should Identify Outcomes

Recently a prominent educator reported to a small conference of curriculum workers that one of the most disheartening experiences he had ever had in his professional activities was to attach himself to a pupil in a secondary school and go through the same educational experiences for a day. In one class, pupils in rotation read sections from the text for the entire class period; in another, the teacher lectured the entire period; and so on through the day. Finally he asked a teacher whether pupils had opportunities to participate in discussion, to take an active part in the activities of the class. He was told that discussion was something the pupils did in a six weeks unit in tenth grade English.

Pupils are being short-changed educationally throughout America because teachers have not defined for themselves or their pupils the outcomes that are desired from the activities in which the class engages. The work of the class is largely meaningless, and is uneducative because purpose is lacking. Individuals are of utmost worth, and we as teachers must plan every class period, every session of a club or activity group so that the experiences in which the pupils engage will contribute maximally to the development of each boy and girl in socially approved directions. The development of the intellect, the formation of character, the molding of personality are awe-inspiring activities to teachers. But they can only proceed at a high level if each teacher who guides development has high purposes, has a clear conception of how each class activity, each learning experience will contribute to wholesome growth. Activity without an intrinsically worthwhile purpose is fruitless and a waste of pupils' time, taxpayers' money, and teachers' energy.

Again it should be emphasized that changes are badly needed in American education. Curriculum directors and other educators have long strived to improve the quality of education in this country. But change, as in the past, should and must be predicated on a conception of education that takes full account of all we know about the traditional values of democratic America, about the worthwhileness of the individual, with each child and youth being given the fullest opportunity possible to develop his talents and potentialities, and about the characteristics of growth, development and learning.

"Don't just do something; stand there!"

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