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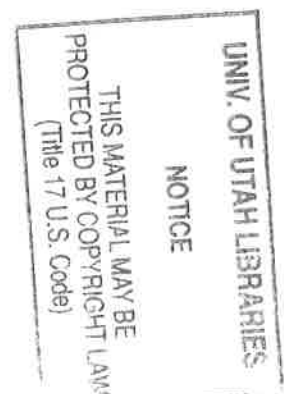
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EDUCATIONAL EXCELLENCE AND THE AMERICAN HIGH SCHOOL

David Pierpont Gardner

Address given at the conference on
"The American High School Today and Tomorrow"
University of California, Berkeley

June 28, 1982



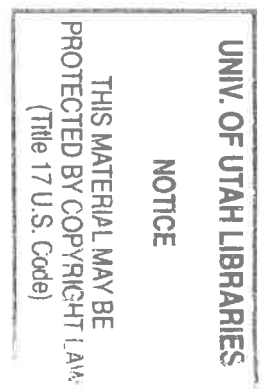
EDUCATIONAL EXCELLENCE AND THE AMERICAN HIGH SCHOOL

David Pierpont Gardner

I wish first of all to commend the Berkeley campus of the University of California for sponsoring this conference; and to thank President Saxon and Chancellor Heyman for their welcome and presence here this evening.

The American high school warrants the attention and concern this conference intends to give it. Harold Howe II, of the Ford Foundation, recently suggested in remarks prepared for meetings of the National Academy of School Executives, that the American high school should be education's centerpiece for reform in the 1980's.¹ It is already well on its way to becoming in the 1980's the most studied aspect of education and schooling in the nation with over twenty-five major national studies now underway sponsored by foundations, federal and state governments, and universities. Whether or not it will also become the educational arena for reform and change is far more problematical than the prospect of it being properly examined.

Howe suggests, quite rightly I believe, that the "place to start working on these problems is among the students, teachers, principals, and parents of the individual school, not with grand plans from Washington--or even Albany, Annapolis, Austin or Augusta. The broad national studies that have been done or that will be done in the years ahead can stimulate thinking, but they cannot determine for a given school and its community how to respond to its problems."²



Conferences of the kind convened in Berkeley this week can surely help; they may even make a difference if the ideas put forth carry meaning and substance for those who do their best each day to help educate our nation's teenagers.

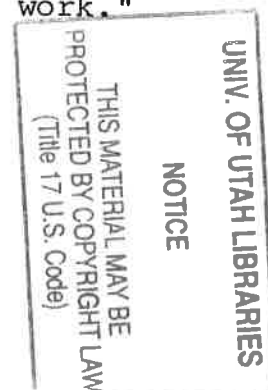
In a recent Time magazine editorial entitled, "Have We Abandoned Excellence?", the pervasive national concern for excellence is evidenced and the price to be paid to achieve it is noted:

"Americans seem especially wistful about excellence now. Standing waist deep in a recession, after 20 years of change that hurled the cultural furniture around and turned much of it into junk, they are apt to think longingly of excellence...."

The deepest American dilemma regarding excellence arises from the nation's very success...Success has cost Americans something of their energetic desire. And those Americans not yet successful (the struggling, the underclass) are apt to aim at ease, not excellence; the confusion contaminates character and disables ambition."

The issues raised in this editorial are hauntingly familiar. Twenty years ago President Kennedy's Commissioner of Education, Sterling M. McMurrin, testified before the House Subcommittee on Appropriations, in part, as follows:

"I believe that we're guilty, and that we know we are guilty of often following a path of inordinate ease and comfort in our educational policy and practice, and we're suddenly aware that all too often we have sacrificed excellence to a very large measure of mediocrity, because we have been unwilling to pay the price that excellence demands--rigor, discipline and genuinely hard work."

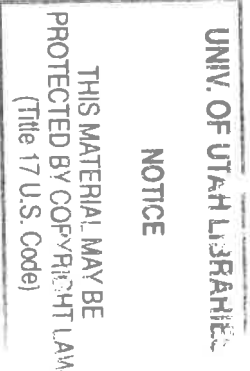


I refer to McMurrin's words and the Time editorial not as an indictment of our perceived inability to attain or to sustain excellence in our lives, but as a reminder of what Benedict de Spinoza long ago observed: "All things excellent are as difficult as they are rare," he said, and indeed, they are.

However difficult and rare authentic excellence may be, it is regarded as a worthy goal, nevertheless, and people tend to attach real significance to its attainment or to its loss. For example, were the American high school to be as well regarded by the public today as it was a few years ago this Conference might never have been convened. Similarly, were SAT and ACT scores not in decline, were remedial work in our colleges and universities not dramatically on the rise, were seventeen-year-olds writing or analyzing significantly better than thirteen-year-olds, were more than a third of our high schools requiring more than one year of mathematics and science for graduation, were the students themselves content with a curriculum less exacting than one they would prefer and were the grades given to students more rather than less reflective of real accomplishment, we would probably not be meeting here tonight.

On the southwest wall of the Jefferson Memorial in Washington, D.C. are inscribed these words:

"I am not an advocate for frequent changes in laws and constitutions but laws and institutions must go hand-in-hand with the progress of the human mind. As that becomes more developed, more enlightened, as new discoveries are made, new

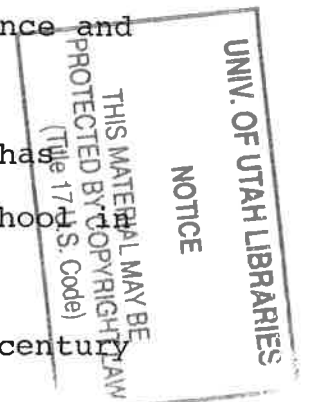


truths discovered and manners and opinions change, with the change of circumstances, institutions must advance also to keep pace with the times."

It is perfectly true, of course, that our social institutions in this country have changed over the years, including the nation's schools. In some respects they have changed for the better as in the instance of the schools' taking in and educating citizens whose sex or ethnicity had previously impeded their educational opportunities and career options; and in other respects they have changed for the worse as in the instance of absolute declines in educational attainment on the part of the average student and grading practices that mislead students into believing that they are doing well when they are not.

The strengths and the weaknesses of the high school will be well covered this week in the course of your deliberations. It would not, therefore, be profitable for me to inventory these except as they may bear upon the matter of excellence. In this respect, I wish to associate myself with the view expressed by Dean Daniel Griffiths that as regards the academic condition of the high school "the heart of the matter is [the] revision of the curriculum, which has become flabby in an climate of self-indulgence and laxity."⁴

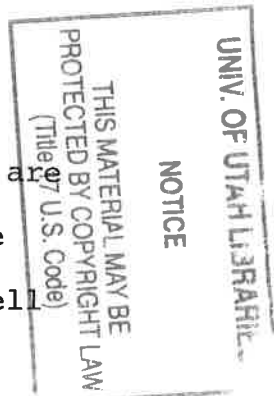
The proliferation of courses and programs which has characterized the development of the American high school in this country arose, in part, in response to what was perceived to be an inappropriately narrow nineteenth century



curriculum. Thus, we have today courses in character education, consumer education, distributive education, driver education, sex education, family education, and safety education--as though the schools are and should be responsible for educating about every aspect of modern life.

The central purposes of the schools--which, as John Henry Martin has suggested, are to foster intellectual competence and citizenship in a free society irrespective of one's chosen field of work⁵--have been smothered, indeed, nearly supplanted by assumptions about the role of the school in society rather than about the role of education in the schools. Our confusion about these matters tends to deprive us of our capacity to make judgments as to the worth of one purpose as against another and as to the significance of student performance in one area compared with another.

For reasons that are traceable to demographic changes in the population, the structure and character of family life, the governing structure of our nation's schools, the nature of the work force, the composition of the student body, the patterns of school funding, the contending views of professional educators, and the politics of education, the schools have tended to take the view in recent years that if education is to be had, it is to be had in the schools. Such assumptions, or ambitions if one prefers, are increasingly unrealistic and, in my opinion, will be made obsolete by forces at work within our society that are well



beyond the capacity of the schools to control. The education of our citizens will be less and less the monopoly of the schools in the formal and conventional sense of the term and their futures will be promising only if what they undertake to claim as their proper and legitimate role is fitted to what they are uniquely able to do well, i.e., to help develop in their students the intellectual skills of effective speaking, reading, writing, comprehending, analyzing, reasoning, interpreting, extrapolating, synthesizing and computing, and the evaluation of evidence and proof; and to foster the skills of citizenship which will enable students to fix their place and possibilities within the scheme of the larger social structure, to understand the broad sweep of ideas that have shaped the world and animate its economic, political, cultural, religious, and social systems, and to grasp the significance between free and repressive societies.

The high school population in the United States is declining. There are exceptions in some states, but not in many. Public confidence in the high school is declining. Student and teacher satisfaction with the high school is waning. Funding for the high school is eroding. Under such pressures, social institutions tend not to adjust but to react defensively. However natural, even understandable, such a response may be, it seems to me that it is one which must be avoided at all costs for the implications of

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letting "nature take its course" are simply too consequential for the nation to allow.

What constructive, in contrast to defensive, response is realistically within our capacity to seek and to attain? Alfred North Whitehead, in my opinion, provided the key to it years ago when he admonished, "Do not teach too many subjects," but "What you teach, teach thoroughly."⁶

In a recent article prepared for the Phi Delta Kappan by Theodore C. Wagenaar, high school seniors' views of themselves and their schools were reported, comparing those held near the beginning of the 1970's with those reflected at the end of 1980.⁷ Three major trends were reported.

The first was that students in 1980 attached a greater measure of importance to academic subjects. This was the case even though the number of hours of homework assigned per week had declined dramatically, and their study habits were an acknowledged source of real difficulty for them.

The second was that seniors in 1980 attached greater significance to high income and job security than they did in the early 1970's, even though seniors in 1980, as they did throughout the 1970's, continued to stress a happy family life and personal friendships more highly than they did job security and high income.

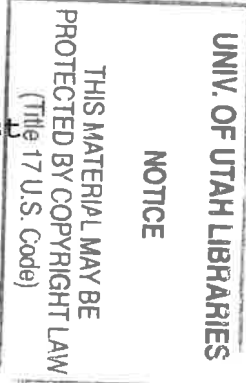
The third was that "expectations for education and employment of men and women are more similar in 1980 than



they were in 1972,"⁸ an apparent derivative of the women's movement and the nation's economic condition.

These trends, and related ones that reinforce them, appear to offer as encouraging a prospect for a revision of the high school curriculum as we have seen in some time. The renewed interest in academics, the lessening of sex-related differences as they bear upon education and employment expectations, and the increased interest in work-related values tend to cohere rather than to diffuse our curricular options. State and local school boards and the educators who work with them should be seeking, it seems to me, to devise a high school curriculum that embodies the essential purposes of the school in our society, viz., the fostering of intellectual competence and citizenship in a free society. The home, churches, voluntary associations, employers, community organizations of one kind or another, the television, the computer, public libraries and similar institutions and learning resources will be increasingly capable of meeting the remaining educational needs of our society and will, very likely, be able to do so at less cost and with more ease and convenience than could conventional, formal schools.

I am not arguing here for "minimum competencies" or "back to basics" as those concepts and movements are being advocated at present. But I am suggesting that the place of the school in our society and the role it can effectively play has been much overstated. This, in turn, has led to a



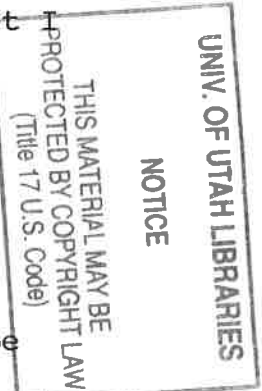
taking on of burdens, programs and purposes for which the schools are peculiarly ill-fitted, to a spreading of scarce educational resources, to a confusion between the educational significance of one school program compared with another and to a levelling of expectations on the part of students, parents and teachers. Under these conditions the idea of excellence tends not to flourish however much rhetoric there may be uttered about it.

What can we say about the idea of excellence and, more particularly, about excellence in education? Harvard philosopher Robert Nozick suggests that the notion of excellence nearly always has reference to a particular thing, type, or some other scheme of classification.

"Something is always excellent of a sort, an excellent thing of a certain type, or excellent as something. There can be an excellent painting, or an excellent car, or an excellent shortstop..."⁹

Nozick also suggests that excellence is at base a comparative notion, i.e., how something compares with other things of its type or referenced class. For example, on a good day, I would be regarded as an excellent skier by a group of persons attempting to ski for the first time, but would not be so regarded in the National Freestyle Championships held at Snowbird, Utah.

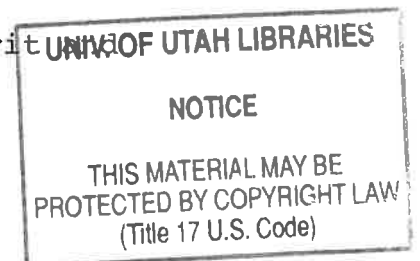
The notion of excellence also implies standards. Pre-existing standards of excellence are the benchmarks against which performance and achievement are judged to be excellent or not so excellent. Standards of excellence must necessarily be particularistic to the event or specific area



of interest. In some areas, of course, there is little agreement about what the standards should be or about how best to define them and, hence, uneasiness about the notion of excellence itself. Moreover, we should be careful not to over-generalize about standards as they are considered at any one point in time compared or contrasted with another point in time.

These three characteristics of excellence--its reference to particular qualities or events, its comparative nature, and its dependence upon judgments made with respect to standards--may seem, and probably are, commonsensical. They are nonetheless, distinguishing and important attributes which help guide our thinking and assist us in both identifying and furthering excellence in our chosen work, our schooling and in our individual lives.

Competitive endeavors, by their very nature, require judgments to be made about the merit of one's performance compared with another's. In some instances, the determination is relatively straight forward and is free of ambiguity, e.g. the winner of a 100-meter dash whose time can be compared not only with the other competitors but also with established records of earlier races in the same event. In other endeavors, however, a more sophisticated measure of judgment is required in assessing the quality or excellence of one's effort, e.g., in judging the significance of a scientific experiment or the architectural merit



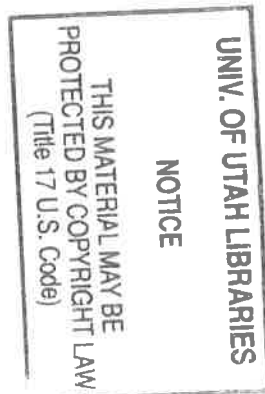
structural integrity of a high-rise building in the design stage.

Allow me to draw an example from women's gymnastics. This sport illustrates well the notions of particularity, comparison, and standards in assessing excellence.

First, gymnastics requires judges who are as equally or more qualified than the participants themselves. Judges undergo extensive training, are tested each year, must meet requirements of rigorous on-going training and activity, and are certified to judge only at specified levels of competition. Second, the sport of gymnastics has developed specific standards for performance and adopted a point system to reflect them. In scoring optional routines, for example, the judges evaluate participants according to criteria of difficulty, execution, combinations, composition, and bonus points. In addition, point deductions are listed for specific occurrences such as falling from the beam or uneven bars.

These standards of performance in gymnastics have, interestingly enough, changed over time as more has been learned about the sport, its inner subtleties and remaining potential, and as the level of competition has improved.

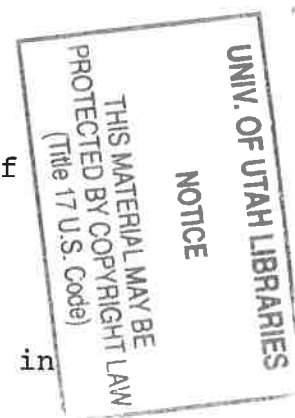
Education at all levels has much to learn from endeavors such as gymnastics, dance and other fields where explicit judgments as to quality of performance must be made with skill, toughness, and knowledge if the performance itself is to have meaning for the athletes or artists



involved or for the endeavor itself, for that matter. Many disciplines, however, are hesitant to make such explicit judgments. Thus, both the interested observer and the public in general gain the impression that excellence in such studies or subjects is either easily or never attained because no one is quite certain what excellence means.

Failure to distinguish between work that is excellent as contrasted with work that is not, diminishes public regard for such endeavors. To fail to distinguish excellent from mediocre or failing performance in the schools, seems to me to have important and long-term consequences for us as individuals, as professionals, as educators, and as a society. Such failure dulls our incentive to strive and to achieve and drains away our respect for what we do both by those who observe us and by the loss of self-esteem as well.

Permit me to draw an illustration from my work with the National Commission on Excellence in Education. Based upon my own observations in the schools, as well as the research and experience of others as reported to us, students want and need to be challenged. They are quite willing to be worked to the level of their potential and feel cheated if they are not. Various streams of educational research, including the much publicized effective school research, confirm the importance of teacher and school expectations in raising the achievement levels of students. If we as teachers or administrators hold and express high levels of

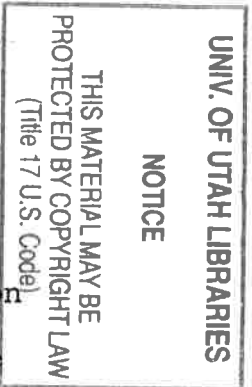


expectation and performance, students will respond; teachers will respond; and, parents will respond. The fault, in part, lies in not expecting more even though in doing so, we are obliged to make hard decisions and students must come to terms with some hard lessons of life.

There is, of course, a tendency for some to view a commitment to excellence in our schools as elitist and as hostile to the unfinished agenda of further enlarging educational opportunity. In this view, educational excellence and equality of opportunity are seen as competing, almost mutually exclusive, with undue attention to the former being considered as undemocratic and to the latter as being too democratic.

Our nation has a long and cherished tradition of egalitarianism. In the 19th century, many foreign observers and even many Americans believed that by its very nature, the United States was incapable of producing anything of real distinction. The British critic, Matthew Arnold, for example, deplored the forces that worked against any kind of distinction in our national life and talked about the leveling process fostered by a democratic society.

We have been an ambitious nation in attempting to achieve both equality of opportunity, and excellence in our educational system as well as in other facets of our country's life. And, contrary to the pessimism expressed by our critics, the American educational system has long enjoyed a deserved reputation for both its egalitarian



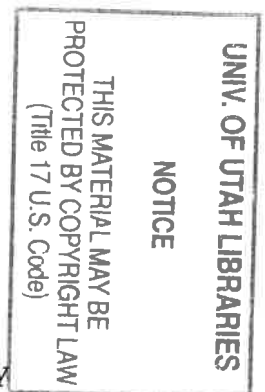
accomplishments and the excellence of many of its programs and products.

Our schools serve a much broader segment of the population as compared to other countries, including the most industrially advanced; yet we have produced, as a percentage of our larger pool, as able and well-trained individuals as any nation on earth. Professor Thorsten Husén of the Institute of International Education at the University of Stockholm, Sweden, recently reported to the National Commission on Excellence in Education that the top nine percent of American students perform just as well on standardized performance tests as the top nine percent in other industrialized countries, even though the latter's education systems tend to be more "elitist" in their purposes, programs and selection of students than is our own.

Husén also noted that on the basis of evidence gained from the IEA 20-country survey, two broad generalizations could be ventured:

"(1) The earlier the selection takes place for separate academic schools and programs which run parallel to schools and programs for the remainder of students of mandatory school age, the stronger the association between family background and school attainments. Thus, the longer the period of common schooling for all children, the less pronounced the imbalance between social strata.

(2) The more centralization in terms of uniformity of structure and financial resources, the lower the between-school variability in outcomes."¹⁰

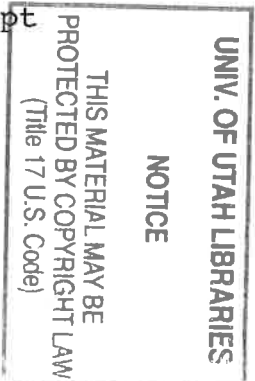


And finally, Husén concludes that:

"The comprehensive system, [the comprehensive American high school], by its openness, lack of selective examinations during the primary and initial secondary school period and its high retention rate, is a more effective strategy in taking care of all the talent of a nation. By casting a net as widely as possible an attempt is made to 'catch' an optimum number of fish. A selective system with early separation of students who are rated to have academic potential is destined to produce good end products. But this advantage is bought at the higher price of excluding a sizeable number of students from lower class homes from further education and of limiting the opportunities for the great mass of students to get access to quality education."

The American comprehensive high school, it would seem, responds to the egalitarian and democratic beliefs that everyone, irrespective of race, sex, social, or economic background, is believed to be capable of and, therefore, should be afforded educational opportunity fitted to each person's potential. Such a view, although still more of an ideal than a reality, is in no respect inconsistent with fostering the achievement of excellence if one is willing, as I am, to accept a notion of excellence that John Gardner so many years ago and with such understanding and insight observed:

"A conception [of excellence] which embraces many kinds of excellence at many levels is the only one which fully accords with the richly varied potentialities of mankind...Our society cannot achieve greatness unless individuals at many levels of ability accept the need for high standards of performance and strive to achieve these standards within the limits possible to them...and we are not going to get that kind of striving...unless we can instruct the whole society in a conception of excellence that leaves room for everybody who is willing to strive..."



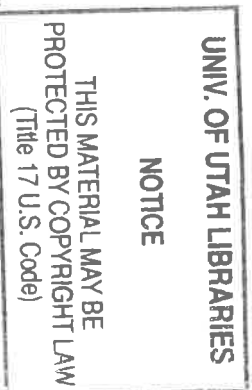
Even though excellence is by definition difficult to attain and is rarely reached, the successful seeking of it by the few, works a positive and encouraging influence on the many who, although in perhaps having fallen short of their ultimate hopes and aspirations, will in the process of striving have accomplished more and grown more and learned more than if the standard were not there for them to seek or if they had not chosen to strive for excellence at all.

When the idea of excellence and the noble effort needed to reach it are neglected, demeaned or opposed, the individual and the society are losers together. To quote John Gardner again:

"We cannot have islands of excellence in a sea of slovenly indifference to standards. In an era when the masses of people were mute and powerless it may have been possible for a tiny minority to maintain standards regardless of their surroundings. But today the masses of people are neither mute nor powerless. As consumers, as voters, as the source of public opinion, they heavily influence level of taste and performance. They can create a climate supremely inimical to standards of any sort."

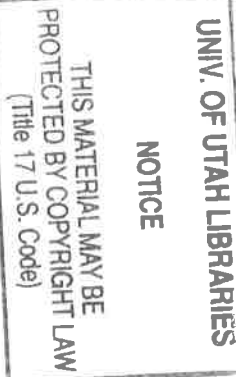
But one might add, they can also create a climate conducive to and supportive of standards, if the idea of excellence is seen to be a positive force in our society rather than one to be shunted aside or ignored.

In this regard, Fred Hargadon, Director of Admissions at Stanford and Chairman of the College Board, recently commented about excellence in our nation generally. He noted that some of the corporate executives who were deriding the state of education in the country were



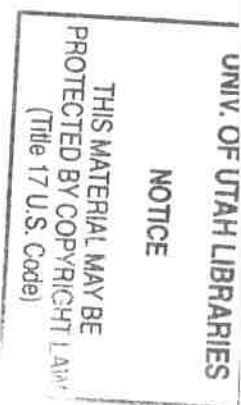
themselves suffering from such things as "social promotions"; that the relative affluence of the past twenty years had allowed businesses to become slipshod in assuring standards of quality in their products and services, e.g., Americans now look increasingly to Japan and Germany for quality products in the automobile business and in other major industries as well. It was his opinion that as a society, whether in business or education, we have come to value excellence less and less and that in doing so we are in an increasingly vulnerable position as a nation.

It is my opinion that the time is ripe for the American high school to narrow the range of its programs by focusing upon what it can do best from among the array of educational programs which presently entangle its purposes and encumber its natural standards. This can be done while retaining the comprehensive character of its student body and the invitation such openness represents to all those who wish to advance their education. This more restrained view of the high school's essential purposes would permit it to concentrate resources, talent and energies upon the development of the student's intellectual competencies and citizenship capabilities. With the focus of the school's educational program being more tightly defined and more narrowly scoped, the formulation of standards and expected levels of performance could be both articulated and benchmarked against a heightened sense of student potential and teacher demand. Genuine excellence, under such

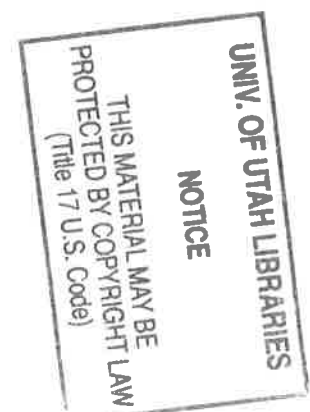


circumstances, would be more clearly discerned and striven for, thus pulling the middle toward the upper reaches of their potential rather than permitting them in the absence of such norms to slip toward the lowest common denominator. The myriad of other educational programs which our citizens have come to seek and which the schools have come to want would, under this scheme, be left to the sponsorship of other institutions and resources in our society as earlier noted.

This revision of the high school curriculum and the more explicit setting of standards are attainable educational objectives. They seem to me to hold a measure of promise for the future that the present course we are travelling clearly precludes. This conference, the work of the National Commission on Excellence in Education, and the other efforts that concerned persons are expending in pursuit of a more productive educational experience for our teenage youth are worth all the time, effort and talent we can muster. There are few aspects of our national life that are as central to the country's future well-being or that should command the attention and concern of its citizens and those who have been elected to represent them than is the quality of schooling in America. I earnestly hope that this conference will help focus the country's interest on this matter and cause those who have the responsibility for leadership both in the teaching professions and in public life to accord this issue the priority it clearly deserves.



I deeply appreciate the privilege of being with you this evening and having been invited to share these few thoughts.



FOOTNOTES

¹Harold Howe II, "Education's Centerpiece for the 1980's," in College Board Review, No. 120, Summer 1981, pp. 3-5, 26-28.

²Ibid., p. 3.

³Time, March 22, 1982, p. 90.

⁴D. Griffiths, "Beyond the Basics," New York University Education Quarterly, Fall 1980.

⁵John Henry Martin, "Reconsidering the Goals of High School Education," Educational Leadership, p. 282.

⁶Alfred North Whitehead, The Aims of Education (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1929, p.14).

⁷Theodore C. Wagenaar, "High School Senior's Views of Themselves and Their Schools: A Trend Analysis," Phi Delta Kappan, September 1981.

⁸Ibid., p. 32.

⁹Tom Wolfe, et. al., "Excellence: The Pursuit, the Commitment, the Achievement," (Dallas: LTV Corp., 1981), p.3.

¹⁰Thorsten Husen, "A Cross-National Perspective on Assessing the Quality of Learning," an unpublished paper prepared for the National Commission on Excellence in Education, April, 1982, p. 40.

¹¹Ibid., p. 48.

