EDITORIAL

CRISIS AND CHALLENGE IN AMERICAN EDUCATION

"We have met the enemy and he is us," says Pogo, the cartoon character. The enemy is the crisis in our educational system, and "crisis" is the only term that accurately describes the situation. It is every bit as serious, if not more so, than the crisis that followed the Soviet launching of Sputnik in 1957 — and for many of the same reasons. Our failing public education system threatens our position in the global political and business arenas; and this time, it's not just the Soviets or the Japanese who need to be taken seriously as competitors. Every country in the world that graduates better prepared students than we do — and there are a great many of them — has us at a competitive disadvantage.

My personal concern, and, frankly, sense of frustration have been raised by a number of items which have crossed my desk in the last few months. Late last year, Secretary of Education, William Bennett, recommended a basic core curriculum for American high schools emphasizing writing, reading, language, history, science, math, art, music and physical education; and then he pointed out that only 15% of the high schools in this country now offer such a progam to their students. At the same time, according to *Business Week* magazine, federal spending for education has dropped 17%. In my own state, Illinois, a school pioneering in math and science for gifted students is in danger of closing because of lack of funds, and both the Illinois State Chamber of Commerce and the Illinois Manufacturers Association oppose any tax increases for education — out of fear that higher taxes will cause businesses to move elsewhere. It is disheartening to realize that neither government officials nor businesspeople seem to see the connection between poor education and a poor quality work force.

While your child or mine may not be victims of this crisis, all too many American children are barely literate after twelve years in our school system. Far too many young adults cannot read and write well enough to fill out a job application, and they cannot do math well enough to make change if the electronic cash register fails. They don't know an atom from an aardvark, much less have any ideas about or familiarity with "softer" subjects like art, literature or any music written before 1980. What is worse, they have been so turned off by their educational experience that they have no interest in any kind of formalized learning. The system as it works now doesn't provide basics for the average student, sufficient special help for the culturally and economically disadvantaged or academic challenge for the gifted.

Of course, not every school is a failure. Not every child is lost. We have some marvelous school systems that provide for the needs of most of their students and turn out fully prepared graduates. Unfortunately, there are not

nearly enough of such systems. Too many lose students to boredom, indifference or simple incompetence.

We can already see some of the results of this neglect. According to a study by the U.S. Science Foundation, which compared the scientific education of students from several countries, American students ranked below the middle of the scale. U.S. high school seniors were near the bottom. Last year, 55.4% of the engineering doctoral degrees granted in the U.S. went to overseas students. At Penn State, the figure was 74%.

The problem isn't that we're training too many foreign students, but that we're not training enough of our own. While our best universities are still providing advanced education that is the envy of the world, many of our own citizens are not well enough prepared to take advantage of it. Corporate recruiters for some of the country's leading technological firms complain that they cannot find a single, qualified American to hire.

Easy answers to this problem don't exist. Wringing our hands, pointing fingers of blame or establishing quotas to limit the number of foreign students training in the U.S. are not really helpful solutions. Neither is simply throwing money at the problem.

We must seriously reassess the place that education holds in our own minds. Do we really care about excellence in education, and are we willing to demand it of our own children? Since the improvement of the system starts at home, will we insist that the t.v. be turned off and the homework done? When the option is offered, are we willing to insist our children take a challenging course instead of one that is "fun", and then are we willing to take the time to work with them and their teachers, or go to school meetings and conferences? To a

large degree, our children will take their cues about the importance of their education from us.

More than this sacrifice of time and effort, we are going to have to be prepared to sacrifice some money, and, perhaps more painful, some of our most cherished presuppositions. This country has some enormous economic and fiscal problems to solve, and the educational crisis is part of this larger picture. We are facing some tough choices and some favorite "untouchable" spending programs may have to be touched after all. Everyone's campaign promises to the contrary, we all may have to pay higher taxes.

At the same time, we have to give up the idea that dealing with the educational crisis — either fiscally or philosophically — is the exclusive responsibility of the state or federal government. Education has always been a local issue, a place where individual citizens were deeply involved. People like us are the ones who run for the school board and the PTA, make the phone calls and write the letters that motivate change. A hassle perhaps, but historically, that is the way the job gets done.

Businesses can respond directly to the crisis in education too. An entrepreneur and philanthropist in New York adopted an entire sixth grade class in the South Bronx. He promised a complete scholarship to each child that completed high school with good grades. Better than three-fourths of them accepted his offer. Few of us have the wealth to do something on that scale, but we can involve ourselves in creative ways like internship programs, joint ventures and corporate or trade association scholarships. This is not the time to reject plans just because they are innovative or non-traditional.

Certainly such ventures take time and money, but we either become more involved in the business of improving our schools now, or we pay later when we have to implement programs to retrain workers to tasks they should have learned in school in the first place.

We need a change in our national attitude and resolution, just as we did at the beginning of the space program. We must tell our elected officials that we are serious about improving the educational system and are willing to make the necessary sacrifices to do it. We can't expect politicians to commit political suicide. If we routinely respond to the candidate who offers us the easy, short term solution at the price of a mortgaged future farther down the road, then we cannot be surprised if that is what we get.

Secretary of Education William Bennett demands that we "raise the expectations" for our children, demanding the best from them. At the same time, we should "raise the expectations" for our politicians and ourselves as well. We can demand more than the cheap, easy, popular or facile solution to our problems, and by demanding it, we will eventually get it. A democratic country gets the government it deserves — and the government it asks for.

This is a presidential election year. It is the perfect opportunity to get the message across to those we are sending to Washington, to our state capitals, and to our local government buildings. The message is that we need a better educational system and that we are willing to work, sacrifice and support officials who will provide us with the necessary leadership to get the job done.

What is at stake here is nothing less than our children's and grandchildren's futures — futures conceivably populated with more and more under-educated people pushed out into society where they can function only minimally. The longer we wait, the higher the price becomes. If we don't give American children the best training possible, we deprive them of the tools necessary for their own welfare and for the welfare of the country as a whole.

The crisis in American education is real. It is as real a threat as any disease, invasion or high tech weapon. If we ignore it, it will go away — along with any opportunity for our country to maintain its standard of living and its position of leadership in the world.

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