

“The Pursuit of Excellence: Education and the Future of America”

*America at Mid-Century Series, Panel Report V of the Special Studies Project
Rockefeller Brothers Fund, Inc. (1958)*

As the story goes, I learned about this book during some historical research. Many of my best discoveries have been the result of secondary references listed in my primary reference. The people behind this book were major business and thought leaders of their era. Here’s what they thought about how American education should move forward in the next 10-15 years.

I hope you enjoy their wisdom and insights. –RJ

***KEY:** Quotations are listed as such and by page number. “T” refers to a “term” or concept I thought was worth noting and remembering or using in the future.

***Podcast Summary:** <https://www.spreaker.com/episode/45481246>

p. 10: “By the time we have brought up a generation of a particular kind of specialist, the need for the specialty may have been replaced by some other even more pressing need.”

p. 11:

- T= “informed citizenry”
- “...specialization is a dead end rather than an adventure to deeper and broader understanding.”
- “Among the tasks that have increased most frighteningly in complexity is the task of the ordinary citizen who wishes to discharge his civic responsibilities intelligently.”

p.12: “...we should educate our young people to meet an unknown need rather than to prepare them for needs already identified.”

p.13:

- Teacher salaries
- “A dynamic society requires above all receptivity to change. To rest on achievement is a denial of creativity and an invitation to stagnation.”
- T= “miracle of voluntary cooperation”

p.14:

- Issue of large corporations requiring individuals to conform to fixed traffic patterns which retards human capabilities and creativity.

p. 15:

- The tug of war between equality and excellence in a democracy
- “...when the rewriting of the rules is designed to banish excellence, to rule out distinguished attainment, to inhibit spirited individuals, then all who have a stake in the continued vitality of democracy must protest.”

p. 16:

- “Every democracy must encourage high performance.”

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- “The eighteenth-century philosophers who made equality a central term in our political vocabulary never meant to imply that men are equal in all respects.”
- T= “equality of opportunity vs. differences achievement”
- “Our conception of excellence must embrace many kinds of achievement at many levels.”

p. 17:

- “Excellence, as we shall later have occasion to note, is a product of ability and motivation and character.”
- “...we must recognize that judgments of differences in talent are not judgments of differences in human worth.”
- “A challenge must be recognized before it can be met.”
- “Our society will have passed an important milestone of maturity when those who are the most enthusiastic proponents of a democratic way of life are also the most vigorous proponents of excellence.”

p. 18: III-The Education System

- “Family, church and school share the fundamental responsibility for education.”
- “Family life is of basic importance in providing the emotional nurture and moral guidance the child needs if he is to develop fully as a person. Social circumstances which disrupt or degrade the quality of family life put in hazard this all-important emotional and moral nurture.”
- Concept of family life delivering the soundness of “human material” into the school systems. These are the schools’ “raw materials” from which to work and mold.
- “...a sound community delivers to the school a reasonably healthy and law-abiding child. As our great cities have learned to their sorrow, if the community delivers warped, criminal, or intractable boys and girls there is little the school can do to save itself from havoc.”

p. 19: Family importance

- T= “academic fitness” of a young person influenced by the out-of-school influences.
- T= “educational ambition” that is bred at home with family
- On reasons for failure in school... “for a good many the primary reason is that their family and neighborhood environment have not provided them with the motivations and values which produce educational ambition.”
- “There can be no greatness without the encouragement to ask much of oneself.”
- “We must recognize that in many areas our educational facilities are poor and our educational effort slovenly.”

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p. 21:

- Growth in American student body population has, “pressed our educators to include in the curriculum an incredible variety of subjects, to take over more and more of the functions of the home, and to accept a sense of responsibility for every psychic or civic crisis involving individuals below the age of consent.”

p. 22:

- “By insisting that *equality* means an exactly similar exposure to education, regardless of the variations in interest and capacity of the student, we are in fact inflicting a subtle but serious form of inequality upon our young people. We are limiting the development of individual excellence in exchange for a uniformity of external treatment.” *Point is made that by rejecting “ability grouping” that more gifted or ready students are held back due to content that is too thin or by a pace too slow thus creating an “inequality” through the total equality efforts.

p. 23:

- “No education system can be better than its teachers.”
- Issue of low-quality teachers coming into the profession who have low energy and lower overall ability.

p. 28:

- “We cannot afford to have our most highly educated people living in intellectual isolation from one another, without even an elementary understanding of each other’s intellectual concerns. Such fragmentation must lead to a loss of social purpose.”

p. 29: Academic testing issues

- “...the tests are effective on a limited front.”
- “...no single test should become a basis for important decisions.”
- “...test scores are one kind of data to be placed alongside other kinds of data.”

p. 30:

- “Adequate attention to individual differences means rejecting a rigid policy of promotion by age; and it means sensible experimentation with various kinds of flexibility in the curriculum to meet the varying needs of young people. And especially it means providing unusually able boys and girls with rigorous and challenging experiences.”

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p. 32:

- “If we are serious about equality of opportunity, we shall be serious about individual differences, because what constitutes opportunity for one man is a stone wall for the next.”

p. 33:

- “We can then insist, as we must, that democracy is not to be conceived as an invitation to share a common mediocrity but as a system that allows each to express and live up to the special excellence that is in him. We can then demand the best of our most gifted, most talented and most spirited youngsters. And we can dedicate ourselves to the cultivation of distinction, and a sense of quality.”

p. 39: IV-The Use and Misuse of Human Abilities

- “Unused talents lead to personal frustration but they also deprive a society of the mainspring of its vitality.”
- “A society must learn to regard every instance of a misuse of talent as an injustice to the individual and an injury to itself.”
- In relation to the Negro and underprivileged... “It is not so much that developed talent is rejected but that talent is not allowed to develop. It withers under the cumulative impact of poverty and ignorance at home, degraded neighborhoods, poor educational facilities, limited job opportunities, and the ever-present fear of rebuff.”

p. 40:

- “Until the Negro has been offered equal opportunity with the non-Negro to develop and use his individual talents to the utmost, and until he can be encouraged to make the most of his opportunity, we shall have failed to achieve our moral goal.”

p. 41: *Stats on Korean military reject rates as compared to national average of 19.2% vs. 34-58% with the poorest and least educated nine states.*

- “This illustrates the truth that poor education in any one area of the nation should be of serious concern to the whole nation.”

p. 42: Comments on “retirement security,” older workers, and culture of aging in America as older are pushed into the “periphery” of life.

- “...the man facing economically secure retirement at 65 would fear boredom as intensely as an earlier generation had feared want.”
- “For others it is a dreaded break in the texture and tempo of life, leading to personal dissatisfaction on the one hand, and to wasted ability on the other.”
- “...the waste of human talent in the premature retirement of still vigorous people clearly calls for remedial action.”

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p. 43:

- “...part of the problem with rescuing talent is to recognize talent.”
- “As a result an apparent shortage of talent may often represent only a shortness of vision.”
- “Education is never finished. One must be continually exposed to it if one does not wish to stagnate. A degree is not an education, and the confusion on this point is perhaps the gravest weakness in American thinking about education.”

p. 45: V-Motivation and Values

- Americans’ lack of purpose and our youth’s lack of fondness for adventure or challenges of the unpredictable.

p. 46:

- “...a nation only achieves the kind of greatness it seeks and understands. Only if we value intellectual excellence shall we have it.”
- “...a substantial part of our task is to insure that the individual may be exposed to a context of values in which high performance is encouraged.”
- “Another task is to insure that young people are exposed to sufficient variety and challenge in their lives—to insure that they not be placed too early on an inflexible schedule of education, career preparation and job. Certainly for the most talented segment of our population, we must leave ample room for the sort of lesson one learns when one goes down a blind alley of one’s own choice, for the sense of adventure involved in doing something unpredictable, for the zest generated by pursuing one’s own inner urge rather than always doing what is ‘sensible.’”

p. 47:

- “The kinds of greatness which our society produces over the years ahead will be the kinds of greatness we inspire, and will have to be securely rooted in our values.”
- “If we ask what our society inspires in the way of high performance we are led to the conclusion that we may have, to a startling degree, lost the gift for demanding high performance of ourselves. It is a point worth exploring.”
- “The characteristic picture of the citizen-as-consumer has taken a firm grip on the national imagination; and the consumer is, almost by definition, a creature devoted to self-gratification. He must be constantly and ingeniously served milder cigarettes, softer mattresses, and easier driving cars. If his dollars are to continue flowing, he must be endlessly catered to, soothed, anointed, protected, healed, cajoled, and generally babied.

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p. 48:

T= “the cult of easiness”

- “Our chief wants in life is someone who will make us do what we can.” -Emerson

p. 49:

- “...every good and excellent thing...stands moment by moment on the razor-edge of danger and must be fought for.” -Thornton Wilder
- “We believe that the individual should be free and morally responsible: the two are inseparable.”
- “...education is a process that should be infused with meaning and purpose.”

* *Ron Jones (Updated 6.28.21)*