I WAS A HIGH SCHOOL DROPOUT . . .

It has been more than fifty years since H. G. Wells made the statement that the whole world was engaged in a race between education and catastrophe.

There are many who believe that we are now on the brink of that catastrophe.

In a nation whose students make up more than one-quarter of the total population, there is an expanding atmosphere of student discontent, a mood of aimlessness and dissension. Juvenile delinquency is increasing, one million American boys and girls become school dropouts each year, and a U. S. Government report indicates that these school casualties will increase by seven and one-half million by the end of the decade.

WHY?

I believe I may be uniquely qualified to suggest some answers by virtue of the fact that I was once a dropout myself. I am now, at 74, rounding out 50 years of experience as an educator, a teacher of some 50,000 young boys and girls. Thus, I have had an opportunity to observe and learn from both sides of the fence.

I was a dropout long before the word became ominously known among educators, sociologists, and parents. I quit school after one semester of the ninth grade, despite the fact that both my parents were school teachers. My mother had been a county superintendent of schools on the Kansas prairies, and my father was secretary of the school board of the Sumner County High School in Wellington, Kansas, even at the time I decided to be a "dropout."

I was not a delinquent. Nor was I bored with school. My early grades in such subjects as physiology and algebra, and my early interest in science, astronomy, and nature study might indicate that I could have become a doctor, a scientist, an astronomer, a biologist, or a taxidermist if I had chosen to do so, and at one time or another I considered all of them. But I liked music better. I played the viola. I wanted to study music.

And then, as now, music played second fiddle to the hard-core academics of the public school curriculum. Then, as now, anyone who wanted an early start in serious training in music had to get it by private instruction outside of school hours or in specialized private music schools. When I asked my school principal for permission to miss school for one half-day a week in order to go to the Wichita College of Music, 30 miles away, to study music, he gave me a flat No. He was adamant, despite the fact I offered to make up my school work during evenings and weekends. The idea was preposterous! Nobody could skip school just to take music lessons.

So, I dropped out and studied music; and by the time I was old enough to be a junior in high school, I was a member of the Minneapolis Symphony Orchestra. From there I went into music education.

Recent research studies have attempted to prove the relationship between school dropouts and delinquency. The Michigan State Bar Association's Committee on Juvenile Problems has even proposed that the compulsory age for school attendance be raised from 16 to 17 as a means of dealing with the dropout problem. In my opinion this would not solve the basic problem and might, in fact, aggravate it. It does not necessarily follow that being out of school causes delinquency. In fact, it is possible that delinquency and dropout are related only because they are different responses to the same problem: compulsory regimentation within our schools.
DO SCHOOLS EXIST FOR STUDENTS—OR...?

Students have little or no choice as to where and when they go to school and what subjects they may study. They are forced by law to spend a specified number of years in the schoolroom and a specified number of hours or weeks in certain specified courses, the choice of which is largely dictated by state legislative bodies, with little or no regard for the students' desires or goals.

It is my belief that the discontent reflected in our school dropout problem is the serious consequence of educational systems shaped to serve military, political, and economic needs, rather than the needs of the students themselves.

THAT GOVERNMENT IS BEST WHICH GOVERNS LEAST...

Our educational crisis today stems from two opposing ideologies which can be capsuled: Man versus the State. Individualism versus Collectivism. Freedom versus Regimentation. Libertarianism versus Authoritarianism. All express the same conflict. And in the opinion of many, the power of the political collective is gradually chipping away at the foundations of individual freedom, in education as elsewhere.

Our Declaration of Independence states that (Men) "are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness..."

This concept is at once spiritual, political, and economic; spiritual in proclaiming the Creator as the endower of men's rights and, thus, sovereign; political in that it implicitly denies the State as the endower of men's rights; economic because it implies also the right to sustain life by the fruits of one's own labor.

The American ideal of individual liberty and limited government is losing ground—in education as elsewhere. I believe that the uncertainty and discontent of today's students are part of the social and political currents of the times. Educators from coast to coast have expressed alarm at the increasing regimentation of students and regimentation of curricula, both of which create an ambiance of impersonalized nonentity and deny the youth of today their inherent right to freedom of choice in seeking their own outlets for individual expression.

This is precisely why I was a "dropout," and I am convinced that it is the reason today for many of our one million school dropouts a year.

SHOULD GOVERNMENT CONTROL EDUCATION?

Few are aware of the extent to which our schools are already controlled by legislative mandate, including laws on specific content of courses, when and how they are to be taught, textbook restrictions, and prohibitions in teaching. Michigan law prohibits the teaching of birth control in schools; Arkansas and Tennessee prohibit courses in evolution. About two-thirds of the states prohibit teaching any subject except in English. In California, physical education must be taught not less than 20 minutes a day in the elementary grades; fire prevention at least 15 minutes a week in New York; and Wisconsin law requires at least 15 minutes a week on the value of dairy products.

In California and Kansas the entire elementary curriculum is set forth in law. Indiana law prescribes the curriculum at the high school level. Various state legislatures have mandated or made compulsory in our schools a remarkable range of curriculum subject matter—from temperance, tuberculosis, and the evils of narcotics to honesty, morality, the dignity of labor, and kindness to animals.

Such subjects, of course, are not harmful, and the legislators who prescribe them probably have good intentions. But are they not invading the domain of home, church, and community? Do our schools have time to take over functions that could be better performed by the home and other agencies? What is the purpose of education, the proper function of schools?

How far can we go in permitting government to control education?

These are the questions that should be given sober consideration.

The National Education Association, in a lengthy research report issued in 1963, warned: "The tendency to dictate the content of the curriculum and methods of teaching makes the schools 'footballs of politics' among contending groups—a deplorable result."

Equally significant, I believe, is the fact that such practice deprives the students themselves of their inherent and inalienable rights, including freedom of choice in pursuit of an education which will best suit them to the kind of life they want to live, not one dictated to them by politicians. If a student must spend all his school time in required, compulsory courses, he has no opportunity for creative self-fulfillment which is—or should be—one of the basic functions of any educational system.

ARE COLD WAR COURSES FREEZING OUT HUMANITIES AND THE ARTS?

Since the launching of the first space capsule by the Russians in 1957, the trend has been to require science instruction at all grade levels, including elementary. Seven states now require science instruction in elementary grades—Arizona, Idaho, Missis-
sippi, Nevada, New York, Ohio, West Virginia. There is also a trend to make foreign language compulsory. The new law in California is the most notable—and controversial—example. Beginning this school year (1965) foreign language became a required subject in elementary schools, grades six, seven, and eight.

This is an unprecedented educational innovation. Other states offer foreign language at this grade level, but on a voluntary, elective basis. The California language law imposes a total compulsory curriculum in elementary schools. The majority of state schools have only six periods in the school day. Before the legislative action in California, students were allowed to use the sixth period of the day for elective studies—music, art, home economics, and, of course, foreign language—to develop their personal creative interests. Foreign language now becomes the sixth compulsory course, along with mathematics, history, English, science, and physical education, meaning that all six school periods are now filled with mandatory subjects, leaving no “elective” period and eliminating all opportunity for students to exercise any freedom of choice in their course of studies.

Other states, notably New York, Ohio, Illinois, New Mexico, are observing California’s hard-core, Cold War compulsory curriculum with an eye toward imitation. Meanwhile, many educators are concerned over the decline in quality and quantity of instruction in music, art, and the humanities, and the increased emphasis on technical subjects since Sputnik. Many state teacher colleges are de-emphasizing the arts and music training because of future curricula requirements.

Yet, much of today’s technical knowledge and skills will be obsolete by the year 2000, about the time today’s school children will be assuming the leadership of society. The arts and humanities are timeless in their character-molding benefits and opportunity for creative self-fulfillment.

Astronaut Walter M. Schirra, Jr., who orbited the earth in a Mercury space capsule, has commented that some people are “so hepped up on the fact that we should be scientists at the age of 15 or 16 that they’ve lost sight of the fact that there are so many other things that are important. I, for example, wouldn’t tolerate this business if I didn’t have other things of interest to do . . . I’m not a complete fan of this new technological impetus in our school system.”

Superior technical skills and scientific knowledge provide only partial assurance of a life worth living. According to surveys by the American Music Conference, almost half of the science educators in our technological institutions also play musical instruments. Among professional men, doctors are most inclined toward making their own music; more than a dozen doctors’ symphonies exist in this country. Traditionally the arts have taken a back seat to science. Yet, great scientists can also be great artists, as both Einstein and Schweitzer proved.

And, curiously, in view of the trend toward a science-oriented school curriculum, the U. S. Office of Education has proposed music and art courses—which “encourage creative but nonacademic abilities”—as a deterrent for potential school dropouts!

There may yet be hope that our legislators—and educators, too—will someday realize that the purpose of education is to bring forth a child’s innate potentialities, to guide him toward spiritual, moral, physical, and intellectual maturity, to awaken his aesthetic and artistic sensibilities, to equip him with something more than the knowledge of how to make a buck or build a rocket.

And none of this can be achieved through coercion, regimentation, depriving students of the right of self-expression, competition, individuality.

FREE ENTERPRISE IN EDUCATION . . .

It has been my privilege to establish and direct a school, an educational system founded on the basic American ideals of inalienable rights, individual liberties, freedom of choice in pursuit of creative self-fulfillment, and free enterprise to compete in a competitive world and to reap the rewards. It so happens, of course, that these basic American concepts and ideals coincide with my own personal philosophy, but they are also highly applicable to educational systems. In fact, if they were not so widely banned or ignored in most schools, we would not now be facing an educational crisis.

In nearly forty years of applying these American principles in an educational framework, at the National Music Camp and Interlochen Arts Academy, our teachers have never been confronted with the problems of dropouts and delinquents that are so prevalent in many schools.

Here, aimlessness is replaced with motivation—through the simple exercising of the inherent rights with which the Creator—not the State—endowed us. The Interlochen system of education reasserts faith in the Individual—versus the State—by giving the student freedom to choose his own course of study (with guidance if he wishes or needs it), freedom to compete with others in his own specialized interests, or to pursue independent research in either arts or academics, freedom to progress at his own rate of learning speed.

The FREE ENTERPRISE concept as applied to education is expressed in Interlochen’s philosophy and motto: CURRICULUM GEARED TO TALENT; PROMOTION GEARED TO ATTAINMENT.
These are not empty words. They are put into practice daily. Interlochen has no required courses. Students come not for credit but for learning. Their choice of subjects is dictated by no one, and is based only on their own choice of the college they wish to attend, and its course requirements. They may spend equal time on creative arts and academic subjects; or in a special Honors course they may take six hours of music and only one or two academic courses—or none.

Most Arts Academy graduates have been accepted into the colleges of their choice, many on scholarship grants, many with advanced placement ratings. One, enrolling as a freshman at Pennsylvania State University, was moved up to fifth term of German along with eight post-graduate students—after only two years of German at Interlochen, technically a secondary school. And this is no isolated example.

It is my belief that there's nothing wrong with our children; the wrong lies elsewhere. Children are not only willing but eager to learn if given the proper stimulus and motivation; but not until education sheds its shackles of regimentation will students shed their discontent.

I am aware that testimonials per se are distasteful to many, but there is one from a 15-year-old boy, a former page for Senator Everett Dirksen, which I believe is significant. In a student-teacher symposium he said, "During my stay in Washington, I did a lot of growing up and I often though about Interlochen. I realized that Interlochen's spirit is truly American. As a page I was relegated to the lowest rung of the ladder of importance, but at Interlochen a person can go as high as he wants... Interlochen means that I can study what I want to study. It means that I must learn to live in a competitive society. It means that I and all my fellow students are important as individuals. Interlochen has a spirit which embodies the principles of America, and I think that we, as Americans, might try to develop that spirit."

No one wrote this little speech for him. It came from the heart of a 15-year-old boy who had found a school that cherished his worth as an individual. That boy will never be a school dropout.

Joseph E. Maddy
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