School and Society:  
A Conservative Perspective

Happy, if learning, not debauched by ambition, had been satisfied to continue the instructor, and not aspired to be the master!  
—EDMUND BURKE

THE CONTINUING CRISIS in public education also sees a continuing pattern of reform proffered by minds bent on solving what are now decidedly fixed problems. There is no end to strategies for remedying educational ills and improving students’ academic performances. One plan being advanced is that of offering teachers salary incentives tied to performance-based pay. Bonuses and other rewards would also be given to teachers who qualify, the amount to be decided by a committee of administrators and other teachers.

Not surprisingly teachers of language and literature tend to be overlooked, which reflects a mischievous attitude towards the discipline of English studies on the part of educational reformers. At a time when students read less and write poorly, this attitude points to some of the deeper reasons why educational troubles are unceasing. That the language of instruction itself is being challenged or compromised in order to accommodate the rising number of non-English speaking students further depletes the instructional process of what is being taught, how it is conveyed, and what standards are to be met. In short, respect for a common standard of language and achievement is something that is being disregarded by the authorities who contend that material correctives can put an end to educational troubles.

We choose to subordinate intellectual seriousness to a reliance on numbers and figures as the way of going to the heart of the difficulties. In paying inadequate attention to matters of substance, we choose to circumvent basic educational needs. That is, we refuse to begin with principles of improvement and educational values in the belief that we can mend corrosive phenomena. To begin with, we insist on dislodging the place of the humanities in the curriculum, as we embrace schemes of reform created by imprudent theoreticians who, since the time of John Dewey, have contributed to the growth of educational wastelands in the United States.

Social adjustment and social engineering in tandem remain the criteria of our educational purposes and effectiveness. We seem to hear next to nothing about traditional literary texts or axiomatic ideas that need to be preserved and
passed on; and though a plethora of statistics and techniques affect educational policy, any substantive reference to moral character or to moral virtues is considered politically inappropriate, and any mention of the tradition or the existence of a sacred patrimony is muted.

In the midst of concerns and proposed cures for the ongoing educational crisis, little heed is paid to humanistic precepts, or to the core value of the humanities, or to the Judaic, Christian, and classical tradition. We are encouraged instead to accept prescriptions developed by postmodern minds loyal to quantitative reductionism and the worship of abstract concepts of perfection that dissipate the meaning of civilization in historical continuity.

The meaning of humane civilization is something scarcely acknowledged by politician and reformer alike, part of the dead past and of the irrelevance of the moral life and the ethical life. Solutions now revolve around the things of the world without spiritual roots or reference, oblivious of an organic view of the world, stubbornly mirroring the iron-clad views of the perennial calculators and geometricians who beckon a new morality.

The emphasis and the changes that regularly assault our ears and our minds stress monetary rewards based on measurements and salvific theories of teaching and learning. Ignored in the continuous empirical process and vocabulary of educational reconstruction is any reference to the civilizing potencies of the changes that are offered. To review some of the reports detailing educational reorganization makes for mostly dreary reading, spawned as they are in educational laboratories and framed by “economical politicians” impervious to the art of teaching as a discipline of thought, analysis, and judgment. The object is not one of civilizing a student’s sensibility, sharpening his or her cognitive sense, enriching a student’s historical sense, and fomenting the thought process.

Words of value—piety, discipline, tradition, standards, principles, values—are rarely evoked, as the spurious lexicon of progress assumes the highest importance. The educational texts, guides, and inspiration are those that routinely appear in best sellers. And the experts who devise policy are those who usually dominate the mainstream media, including even entertainment celebrities who are invited to produce answers to serious issues. Sadly, the academics who should be helpful are consumed by ideological mandates and have their own agenda and “spin.”

The purpose of education should be one that sustains and enhances the values of civilization, a word not heard even from the mouths of presidents of prestigious colleges and universities. If anything, even a glance at both the internal and external conditions of educational institutions reveals an ascendant barbarous spirit concretized in slovenly language, slovenly dress, and slovenly manners of many students—and teachers. Standards of civilization, no less than standards of discrimination, are hardly ever defended though, without standards, disorder hardens both character and culture, and diminishes the moral tenor of the learning process.

We speak repeatedly of the important work of education, we persist in denying grim realities in and out of the classroom. Though we rightly expect more from our teachers, we forget that countless hours are spent by young and old alike indiscriminately watching television, which is a chief architect and agent of mindlessness. Violence in all forms, salacious sex, mayhem, interpersonal strife, consumerism, sports events are pervasive scenes in the electronic media and the shaping spirit of the language and actions of the young. Anything that approaches a noble, or honorable, or virtuous degree of achievement is dismissed.
Clearly, our problems are systemic in nature, and until we discern the perils they pose, all the incentives and changes we initiate are without avail. The fact is that the changes we contemplate do not necessarily signify reform and are likely to be invalid in a given setting. The origins of our educational woes are ultimately not considered or adjudicated insofar as we refuse to examine ourselves or our culture realistically. Too often we defer to the idylls of illusion, as we chase after chimaeras and concoct a dreamworld in which the discipline of history is as unwelcome as the discipline of intellect, or the discipline of order.

Indeed, the paradigms of humane civilization are whittled away by consuming relativism, which encourages us to glorify the spontaneous moment and to impugn uplifting principles. Our classical tradition, in this connection, is sacrificed to chronolatrous temptations; and moral vision is replaced by an antinomian vision of society and culture. Is it any wonder, then, that civilization is neither evoked nor identified as a beneficent goal or as an ordering force of authority in the pursuit of education? A confusion of time-honored, time-tested values, of first things and of first principles, prevails in a fervent quest for freedom that transforms into egalitarianism as embodied in mediocrity as the common educational standard. Decadence is inevitably synonymous with standardization and quantification as the inherent despots of modern educational theory and practice.

Educational conditions must ultimately reflect national proclivities and policy, and unless we perceive this final sum of our condition we cannot attain even a modicum of solution, of what has gone wrong and of how we have failed ourselves, of the destiny of the nation, and of any aspiration for excellence, and as such, too, we suffer lethal consequences in the form of a larger disorder of the community and the soul.

When we even commence to assess the schemes for remedying the ills of education we see that we are simply seeking to advance an equality in disorder, that this is our impelling task, that we are still adding to the errors of ideology. Style and not content, predictably, informs the kind of educational measures we want to adopt. The current “reformers” are still the same “terrible simplifiers” concocting utopian formulas for future improvement. Yet nothing really changes and nothing really improves in our educational hurly-burly as long as we disregard fundamental ideas that have consequences.

Presumptuous educational reformers prefer in the end to make political statements that have hollow meaning and defy circumspection and caution. Ironically, even when state test scores in English sometimes go up, reflecting favorably on a doctored learning process—and on experts and leaders who promise “marvellous” results—we also learn that the reading tests were made easier, even as teachers preparing their students paid subsuming attention to the need to simulate testing conditions. Thus test results can become a deceptive form of manipulation. Not the art of teaching but the art of the scam is found at the center of educational improvement. Thus, too, the plan to give each student a laptop and to woo new teachers for math and science underscores the belief that investing more money for change will automatically solve thorny problems. And if it happens that something does not work, then we are assured that something new and exciting will be tried until the problem is fixed. This is the essence of an adventurous approach to our educational ills.

As is often the case, educational problems are now judged by sociologists, behaviorists, and psychologists as the occasion for applying exciting, innovative therapy techniques of unknown effectiveness. It will be noted, too, that hu-
mane principles of general education are sparingly considered, or if they are, they are identified with purely pragmatic ends, with training for power, with the new technics and technicians—and, hence, the demand for more mathematicians, scientists, engineers who will bring about a New World Order, all in the name of terrestrial progress.

The law for things, no less than the law of change, impels our perception of a future lacking the significations of history and of continuity. As long as our educational politician-reformers and theorists persist in implementing a spurious vision, the possibility of real change is elusive. The stark fact is that the separation of formal education from cultural education ultimately leads to unhappy results. In fine, the abnormalities and the anomalies of a sensate hyperculture constitute a phenomenon of alarming proportions, to the degree that we abjure the living interconnections of education, character, and culture.

The images of this hyperculture are inescapably vulgar in their realities. Indeed, what contemporary educational planners disdain to admit is that hyperculture itself supplies all the master teachers needed for a technologico-Benthamite civilization. And it is precisely this hyperculture, as it permeates all our values, our institutions, and our national life, that defines not only national character and opinion, but also standards of thought and accomplishment. The fact is that we simply do not acknowledge the long-range influences of an American hyperculture that spreads seeds of confusion and disorder. As José Ortega y Gasset warned sixty years ago, the “school, when it is truly a functional organ of the nation, depends far more on the atmosphere of national culture in which it is immersed than it does on the pedagogical atmosphere created artificially within it.”

Symptomatically, all the talk of educational improvement discounts the areas of music appreciation, of art, of geography, not to mention manners and civility, and deceptively focuses on the sciences and on mathematics as the way to salvation. Meanwhile, students continue to show lackluster mathematical skills without the aid of a computer. In fact, no plan for educational improvement, and especially for teaching performance, can eradicate problems embedded in the breakdown of family values and stability, in sexual aberrations, and in squalid private and public conduct. At the same time, we cannot expect the educational system to remedy debilitating maladies that have developed over decades of neglect and have contaminated minds and souls.

Even to glance randomly at the magnitude of violence and perversity around and in us indicates just how overwhelming is our educational plight, as the profanities of hyperculture inevitably transfigure into the profanities of education. Our educational dissonance, multidimensional and multilayered, is thus passed over by educationists in a mad race to alter things. It is all too evident that the very nature of the educational crisis and its rectification complicate basic ills, even as these tell us that we seem to be going nowhere, that the situation will go on as long as we do not deal with inherent problems, or simply re-assert a failure of nerve to seek for a fundamental re-orientation.

It follows, then, that confusion and disorder are consequential offshoots of facile theories spawned by clever publicists, journalists, and advocates who discount universal verities and traditions. The crisis of education, alas, has become too much of a game in which players have high stakes but little or no genuine comprehension. Gamesmanship undermines education as a means of acquiring knowledge and character.

The true mission and ethos of education in the context of the humane disci-
Disciplines are pushed aside, to judge from the solutions routinely unveiled to arrest educational defects. Conveniently forgotten, above all, is education’s civilizing task if the inveterate pull of barbarism is to be resisted. And until education is seen as fundamental resistance to the lures of discivilization, and until the validity of this perception (or sensibility of principle) is recognized, no amount of improvement can succeed.

What agents of educational change, in their utopian quests and Rousseauist audacity, habitually defy is both the law of limits and “the ancient, permanent sense of mankind.” This defiance embodies modernism’s fierce repudiation of all the good things that Edmund Burke associated with manners and the dignity and grace of life. As the crisis of education quickens at all levels, we increasingly find ourselves at the mercy of those who would perpetuate the defects and follies of the educational system: “imprudent theorists,” “economical politicians,” “gnostics of education.” And what we have in this tripartite alliance is a further reinforcement of the orthodoxy of enlightenment, of “enlightenment liberalism,” the sanguine and fashionable assumptions of which are closed to rational discourse. The viral condition of American education testifies to the dominance of this phenomenon and to the irresponsibility and insensitivity of planners of change.

Contemporary reformers who posit change as a canon of holy writ prolong the dualism of the sciences and the humanities, and radical doctrines that reject the checks of intellectual tradition and historicity. These reformers are guided by a tacit acceptance of an empirical image of man and by millennial dreams that militate against standards of discipline and authority that in time transform into disorder in the name of cultural “diversity.” Indeed, their suppositions and procedures are shaped by and subservient to political ideology that countermands any “principle” of conservation, of transmission, and of improvement.

Richard M. Weaver adroitly perceives great peril in the ideological process when he declares: “Insistence upon a political theory as the principle by which all educational policies are to be adjudicated is totalitarian radicalism.” The fallout of this insistence can now be observed in the momentum with which a progressivist educational dynamic has been heightened, as the Deweyite commitment to “the larger social evolution” and to “democracy in the classroom” has escalated on a cosmic scale with the growing demand for a New Social Order and the introduction of democracy throughout the world, even when this means preemptive military action.

Still, Weaver’s prophetic voice cannot be easily silenced when he reminds us of the costs of renouncing elevating principles of education and choosing instead to adopt methodologies that replicate the causes of internal and external disorder. “The student is to be prepared not to save his soul,” Weaver also warns, “or to inherit the wisdom and usages of past civilizations, or even to get ahead in life, but to become a member of utopia resting in a false view of both nature and man.”

These two foregoing statements are found in Weaver’s *Visions of Order: The Cultural Crisis of Our Time* (1964), which directly addresses the conditions and circumstances of deterioration and debasement in American education that are more expansive and more threatening today. To study Weaver’s words, with particular reference to the employment of even more “inventive” efforts to secure educational progress, is to be reminded of present-day misdirections.

Clearly, there is little or no sign of lessening the emphasis we give to the potentialities of human nature that far outweigh an awareness of human limits.
or the paramountcy of moral obligations. Inevitably we find ourselves more concerned with defeating the enemies of democracy than we are the enemies of the Permanent Things. There is no more disturbing example of an inversion of values than the priority of the concerns we display—or of the power of the seductions of a utopian faith. This commentary, then, is presented with a sense of urgency and the belief that it is imperative to reclaim and renew school and society according to a tempered, mediatorial conservative perspective.

—George A. Panichas