

AMERICA AND EDUCATION

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EDUCATION AND SELF-GOVERNMENT

Two hundred years ago, Americans declared their independence from rule by a distant king. That is a fact we all know. But what we do not always realize is this: at the same time, the American people declared themselves independent of any authoritarian rule. We were not rebels against the King of England alone. We rebelled against the idea of any king, even an American king.

The real message of the Declaration of Independence was reinforced a little over a decade later by the Constitution, which carried the message, loud and clear, that the people

were to retain for themselves the political independence they had fought for. The message was this: "We, the people, take upon ourselves complete responsibility for our own government and our own well-being. Upon our own initiative, we will succeed or fail."

There were many, many people who said we could not do it. How can people govern themselves? Where will they get the knowledge of events, the wisdom of state, the mere information they will need to act in their own behalf?

The answer was clear, and it came almost immediately from the founding fathers: the success of democracy depends on education. Men like Jefferson could, and did quote the wisdom of the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle, who put it very well. He said:

All who have meditated on the art of governing mankind have been convinced that the fate of empires depends upon the education of youth.

The fate of American society depends on exactly the same thing. For that reason we must all share in the enterprise of education. Here in Craven County, as in every city, town, and farm community in this nation, the children must learn, or our freedom shall be lost. Never has there been a nation of the ignorant that was not a nation enslaved, by economic poverty, by disease, and by the politics of unbridled power and demagoguery.

Americans have always understood how fundamentally important education is to us, and to our spirit as a nation.

(TOKE-ville)
In 1835, when Alexis de Tocqueville published his famous book, Democracy in America, he saw this spirit in our people

and touched on it in these words:

They (the Americans) have all a lively faith in the perfectability of man, they judge that the diffusion of knowledge must necessarily be advantageous, and the consequences of ignorance fatal. . . .

No natural boundary seems to be set to the efforts of man; and in (the American's) eyes what is not yet done is only what he has not yet attempted to do.

That is why education has always been of paramount importance to us. We believe that human beings may make as much progress as their abilities and knowledge will permit, if they will only try. Ours is a nation of distant horizons. We dream of going further than any man has ever gone. We will, if we can just figure out how, go to the distant stars in search of new possibilities. And it is education which turns our dreams into real achievements.

But education isn't forever. Unvalued, unsought, unappreciated,

it vanishes. Knowledge has no life of its own. It does not wait, like a valuable mineral beneath the surface of the earth, simply to be discovered and mined. It does not lie still, like the water of a hidden lake to quench the thirst of a casual wanderer. It is not so constant even as the air we breathe. If we let mankind neglect the knowledge that it has, we have, it will be, and it is gone. Let a man study to know all he can, let him grow in wisdom all the days he lives, of his life, and in the end, everything he knows dies with him -- unless he turns, to those who come after him, and gives them what they need to carry on.

That is why we must teach. That is why we must have books and blackboards. The peice of chalk in a teacher's hand is the key to the survival of all our abilities. In that piece of chalk is the ability to build a home or erect a skyscraper

or a church. In it is the skill of the surgeon who can repair a defective heart. In it is the wisdom of the counselor or minister who can help a troubled mind find peace. In just a piece of blackboard chalk our economic livelihood, our values, our defense, technology, shelter and laws have their beginning.

Education means a more civilized society. It means being able to find a skilled doctor or a lawyer when we have medical or legal problems. It means something as commonplace as leaving our car to be fixed by someone who can read manufacturer's information about the new models. In a thousand ways, from the mundane to the sublime, education benefits all of us.

EDUCATION AND THE INDIVIDUAL

Thus, the community is made strong. But we should not

forget that America is founded on stubborn individualism, and therefore we should consider what education means to each and every youngster who comes to this school in the fall.

Let me return to Aristotle for a moment, Once, someone asked the great philosopher what the difference was between an educated person and one who was ignorant. Aristotle replied, "Exactly the difference as between a living person and a dead man."

If education works for a young person, and if he works at education, he feels himself come alive. As his knowledge grows, his individuality grows. And as his abilities mature through use, so he gains faith in himself and his own abilities. There is a test of equal importance to the spelling test, the math test, the English test. It is the test of an emerging

personality. It is right to ask, can he spell? can he

follow mathematical reasoning? does he know his grammar?

And it is right to ask, as well, is he becoming mature, self-confident, and able? The knowledge of math facts may make it possible for a student one day to solve a problem of water pollution or energy use. Just as surely, his development as an educated person gives him the willingness to try, in the first place.

Education benefits the individual in endless ways, but

I do want to mention three of them.

EDUCATION AND ECONOMIC FREEDOM

First, education gives a person economic resources. We have heard, from time to time, how much a high school or college education is worth, in dollars and cents. It is possible, and

correct, to put such a value on education. No student should be sent out into this world unable to make a living. Remember that one of the freedoms for which our forefathers came to America was economic freedom in itself. Education, rightly done, does lead to adequate wealth and secure leisure -- two things one philosopher has called "the great civilizers of mankind." We owe it to our children, and to our whole society, to see to it that our schools raise up new generations to take up useful economic roles.

THE INDIVIDUAL AND HIS COMMUNITY

The second thing a good education does for a person is to give him a sense of connection to the community. We are a people who have lived for 200 years by certain principles of self-government. We have lived, for much longer than

that, by certain values and ideals. Our common history binds us together. Recourse to common principles and tested values strengthens those bonds. It is distinctly human to share in traditions which last longer than our own lifetimes, and to be sustained by them. Education rightly taught and rightly studied, brings the youth into the world of his town, his state and nation, and -- beyond these -- into the great world-wide community of thought and belief.

THE INDIVIDUAL AND THE GREAT TEACHERS

The third thing education may do for the individual is give him models for action. The man with no knowledge of those who have gone before him is a man alone. He has inadequate resources to deal with the troubles of life. We parents cannot predict everything which will befall our children.

We cannot prepare them for all eventualities. They must face much without us -- but that doesn't mean they must face it alone.

Education can put a person in touch with others more experienced and more wise, even if they lived a thousand years ago. In the hour of indecision and doubt, he can take down a book from the shelf and find that others have faced the same crisis before him. Perhaps it was Lincoln or Robert E. Lee. Perhaps it was Washington or Jefferson. Perhaps it was a great poet, or scientist, or theologian. For the educated person, one of these could provide exactly what is needed for the present -- a gift from the great past. Only the truly educated person knows where to go, to hear those voices which never stop teaching.

CONCLUSION AND DEDICATION

Today, we dedicate a new school. We provide it for our own benefit, and for the benefit of those making the hard transition to adult standing in the community. We will prepare them to receive, keep, and expand the factual knowledge of our society.

We prepare them to become human beings of unique skills, stature, and personality. We prepare them to stand alone when they must, and to stand with the community when it is fitting to do so. We prepare them to take over the stewardship of American life and the American land.

For all these things, and for every worthwhile thing the children may dream of -- which may be beyond our own dreams -- we dedicate this school. May it be a place of great beginnings.