Is the public school obsolete?

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The problems of education in the slums can be grouped under two broad headings: inadequate public support and excessive bureaucratic timidity and defeatism. Both have been catalogued ad nauseam elsewhere, but a brief review is needed to put the remedies I want to discuss in context.

I— The money problem

As a rule of thumb, America spends about half as much educating the children of the poor as the children of the rich. The difference derives from two factors. First, the annual expenditure per pupil in a prosperous suburb is usually at least fifty percent more than in a slum in the same metropolitan area. Second, this additional expenditure, in combination with better family and neighborhood conditions, encourages suburban children to stay in school half again as long as slum children (from kindergarten through college, instead of from first through tenth or eleventh grade). The cumulative result, in round figures, is that the taxpayers typically spend less than $5,000 for the formal education of most slum children compared to more than $10,000 for many suburban children. (All these figures are very rough, varying from individual to individual and from place to place. Thus while we spend twice as much on children born in Scarsdale as on those born in Harlem, we spend perhaps ten times more on the
children of Scarsdale than on the children of Tunica County, Mississippi. Conversely, we spend about the same on children born in Harlem as on those born in Montgomery County, Maryland. But allowing for regional and urban-rural variations, the basic rule of thumb is accurate.)

If America were to try to provide all her children with equal opportunity to develop their talents, obtain ample adult incomes, and share in controlling their own and their community’s future, this pattern of expenditure would probably have to be reversed. If we wanted to offset the miseducation which takes place in a slum home and neighborhood, we would probably have to spend twice as much on formal education in the slums as we do in the suburbs. Instead of starting slum children in school later than suburban children, as we now do, we would have to start them earlier. Instead of keeping slum schools open fewer hours per day than suburban schools, and providing fewer slum children with opportunities to study all year round, we would have to reverse the balance. Instead of creating schools which encourage slum children to drop out as soon as possible, we would have to find ways to keep the slum child learning even longer than suburbanites. Instead of having larger classes, worse books and shoddier buildings in the slums than in the suburbs, we would have to reverse the pattern — aiming, for example, at an average class size in the slums of 15-20 children instead of 35. Instead of spending less — often much less — than $500 per child per year for education in the slums, we would have to spend more like $1500 per year. Hopefully, the result would be that slum children stayed in school longer than suburbanites, qualifying themselves for professional jobs in which skill can offset the wrong background. Instead of a cumulative total of less than $5000 per child, we would have to aim at a total of perhaps $25,000.

In strictly fiscal terms this would not be much of a strain on the national economy. There are something like ten million children now growing up in what the Johnson Administration has defined as poverty. Raising expenditures on such children’s education to $1500 per year would cost the nation something like $11 billion annually; providing them with pre-schools, kindergartens, and colleges might add another $8 billion to the bill. In the long run there is abundant evidence that this investment would repay itself by raising taxable income and by cutting expenditures for welfare, unemployment, police and other slum symptoms. Even in the short run $11 billion for better education would place comparatively little burden on a well-managed economy. Assuming the President continues to listen to liberal rather than conservative economists, the GNP should increase by at least $150 billion between now and 1970, and federal tax receipts should go up at least $30 billion if the present tax structure is
maintained. Unless the Vietnam war spreads, Congress could increase the authorization under Title 1 of the new Elementary and Secondary Education Act, to $20 billion by 1970 without straining the federal budget.

But of course this is not going to happen. Almost nobody really wants to make America an egalitarian society. Ours is a competitive society, in which some people do extremely well and others do equally badly, and most people are willing to keep it that way. For as long as anyone can remember, for example, the richest fifth of the population has earned about ten times as much as the poorest fifth. The ability to influence political and personal events is probably even less equally distributed. As a result, there is enormous competition for the jobs which provide comfort and personal power. And despite a lot of pious rhetoric about equality of opportunity in this competition, most parents want their children to have a more than equal chance of success. Since access to good schools and colleges has become increasingly critical in this struggle, there is constant competition to guarantee one's children access to the "best" schools. This means that if the schools down the road get better, local ideals will rise too. If other schools raise their salaries and begin to lure the best teachers, local schools will respond by doing likewise — if they can. If Washington begins to pour large sums of money into the slums to equalize opportunity, middle class areas will respond by pouring even more money into their schools, in order to keep ahead. Or, to be more realistic, they will begin demanding that Washington help middle-class as well as slum schools. If they don't get the money from Washington they will turn to their state legislatures, where they are likely to get a sympathetic hearing.

The fact is that American society, while providing almost unlimited opportunities for particularly gifted individuals, does not provide unlimited opportunity for its people as a whole. On the contrary, American society has always been organized on the assumption that while some will do very well, many will do very badly. Equality of opportunity therefore means not just an equal opportunity for everyone to become President, but an equal opportunity for everyone to end up a street cleaner. No sane family or community wants that kind of equality for their children. They struggle to keep that kind of opportunity as unequal as possible. Inevitably, those who have money and influence struggle more successfully than those who do not. Children who grow up in the slums can see this. They know that America contains failures as well as successes, jobs which pay desperately low wages as well as jobs which pay extremely good ones, styles of life which are miserable as well as styles which are comfortable. Unless they have both unusual faith and unusual talent, they know that their future is, at best, one of comparative failure. It is this comparison, far
more than absolute deprivation, which underlies the sickness of today’s slums. It is this comparison with the rest of America which makes jobs and living standards that seemed more than adequate a generation ago seem intolerable today. (It is no accident that the “poverty line” shifts from one generation to another. As a rule of thumb, we can predict that any family which makes less than half the national average will feel poor, and will be defined as poor by liberal economists.)

This comparative standard must also be kept in mind when evaluating programs for upgrading slum schools. A man’s employment prospects are not improved by teaching him ten percent more if, at the same time, all his neighbors are being taught twenty percent more. Increasing a school’s budget by fifty percent will not equalize the opportunities open to its students if, at the same time, competing schools also get 50 or even 100 percent more money.

II — The bureaucracy problem

It would be politically difficult to equalize opportunity between the slums and the suburbs under the best of circumstances. But not even the better financed slum schools (e.g. those in Harlem, on which more money is spent than in most suburbs outside the New York area ) achieve results comparable to suburban systems. This in turn makes it even more difficult to raise the necessary money than it would otherwise be. If an extra $20 billion a year would bring slum children up to the academic level of their suburban rivals, some legislators would support the expenditure out of idealism. But many legislators feel — and not without reason — that even if they gave the schools an unlimited budget, the children of the slums would continue to grow up both personally and academically crippled.

These fears may be exaggerated. They certainly ought to be tested empirically before being accepted at face value. The Ford Foundation, for example, instead of sprinkling money around in dozens of different projects and places, ought to try raising school expenditures in one slum area to, say, double the level in nearby suburbs — just to see what would happen. It would, of course, take many years to tell. Children who were more than two or three when the experiment began would already have been scarred, often hopelessly, by the existing system. It would be a generation before the impact of the extra money on today’s infants could be fully weighed. But if it turned out that an extra $100 million a year made a dramatic difference in, say, the slums of Washington, D. C., it would become very much easier to get comparable sums from taxpayers in other areas.

Unfortunately, an extra $100 million might not make a dramatic difference in Washington — or in most other places either. Much that has been said and written about slum schools, not only in Washington but in places where race is not an issue, suggests that inadequate
funds are only part of their problem. They also have the wrong motives and objectives. Some slum schools seem to be less educational than penal institutions. Their function is more to pacify the young than to teach them. They are ruled by fear, not love, infected by boredom, not curiosity. Such schools should not be given more money; they should be closed.

The roots of the problem go very deep. At times the problem seems to be public control itself. Because the slum school is public, it is accountable to the taxpayer. As in every other public enterprise, this kind of minute accountability to publicity-hungry elected officials leads to timidity among the employees. Public control puts a premium not on achieving a few spectacular successes but on avoiding any spectacular failures. In this respect there is not much difference between education and other fields of public endeavor. Nevertheless, public control over education has achieved a sanctity and respectability which public control over other enterprises has never mustered. Conversely, the ideologists of private enterprise have, with the conspicuous exception of Milton Friedman, been comparatively slow to apply their arguments in behalf of private schools.

Yet public control is not a sufficient explanation of the problems of the slum school, for public control seems to have worked quite well in some suburbs and small towns. The problem seems to be that in the slums public control has been linked to inadequate funds for performing the job assigned. Slum schools have found it difficult to get extra money even when there was reason to believe that the marginal return on this money would be very good. Educators might argue, for example, that doubling expenditures in the slums would treble results. But since we have no good way to measure this, sceptical legislators have been slow to provide extra money. As a result, pay scales in big city school systems have been too low to compete with most other jobs requiring equivalent training, skill, and masochism. And so, in turn, many slum teachers and administrators have comparatively little competence, confidence or commitment.

In city after city this has led to the creation of a system of education whose first axiom is that everyone, on every level, is incompetent and irresponsible. From this axiom comes the corollary that everyone must be carefully watched by a superior. The school board has no faith in the central administration, the central administration has no faith in the principals, the principals have no faith in the teachers, and the teachers have no faith in the students. Decision-making is constantly centralized into as few hands as possible rather than being decentralized into as many hands as possible, in the hope of reducing errors to a minimum. Of course such a system also reduces individual initiative to a minimum, but that is a price which a publicly-controlled bureaucracy, whose aim is not profits but sur-
vival, usually seems willing to pay. In such a system it seems natural not to give the principal of a school control over his budget, not to give teachers control over their syllabus, and not to give the students control over anything. Distrust is the order of the day, symbolized by the elaborate accounting system, the endless forms to be filled out for the central office, the time clocks and the two-way radios for monitoring classrooms from the front office, the constant tests and elaborate regulations for students.

In such a system everyone gets along by going along with the man over him. Most come to see themselves as play actors. The student tries to dope out what the teacher wants, and gives it to him. Usually all he wants is a reasonable amount of quiet in class and some appearance of docility in doing assignments. The teachers, in turn, try to figure out what the principal wants. That usually means filing grades and attendance records promptly, keeping trouble over discipline to a minimum, and avoiding complaints from parents or students. The principal, in turn, tries to keep the central administration happy (and the administration tries to keep the school board happy) by not sticking his neck out and by damping down “trouble” before it gets “out of hand.”

Organizational sclerosis of this kind is extremely difficult to cure. For obvious reasons innovation from the bottom up becomes impossible and unthinkable. But even innovation from the top down is difficult. It is easy to get people to go through the forms of change, but it is almost impossible to get them to really change, because they are frozen into defensive postures based on years of stand-pattism. If the principal tells the teachers he wants them to revamp the curriculum, they immediately begin looking to him — not to their students in the classroom — for cues and clues about what kinds of changes to propose. If the teachers tell the students to think for themselves, the students interpret this as just another move by the teacher to complicate “the game,” another frustration in their efforts to “give the teacher what he wants.” If the school board tries raising salaries in order to attract new kinds of teachers, it must still assign them to the same old schools, where they are still treated like filing clerks. So the more imaginative and dedicated teachers leave after a year or two for other schools — often in suburbia — which treat them better. In such circumstances more money may just mean more of the same.

A business which becomes afflicted with this kind of disease either goes bankrupt or else creates a monopoly or cartel to protect itself from more dynamic competition. The same is true of school systems. Were it not for their monopoly on educational opportunities for the poor, most big city school systems would probably go out of business. If, for example, the poor were simply given the money that is now spent on their children’s education in public schools, and were
told they could spend this money in private institutions, private schools would begin to spring up to serve slum children. In due course such schools would probably enroll the great majority of these children. The case of the parochial schools illustrates this point. These schools are seldom really free, but many parents, including some non-Catholics, make considerable sacrifices to send their children to them. In some cases, of course, this is a matter of religious faith. But if one asks parents why they prefer the parochial schools, the answer is often that they think the schooling itself is better than what the public schools in their area offer. Evidence collected by Peter Rossi and Andrew Greeley of the National Opinion Research Center suggests that the parochial schools usually do do more for their students than their public competitors, at least judging by the records of their alumni. This seems to be so despite the fact that they have less money, pay lower salaries to lay teachers, have larger classes, older buildings, and fewer amenities of every sort.

There is, of course, considerable reluctance among non-Catholics (and also among anti-clerical Catholics) to admit that the parochial schools might be doing something of value. Most non-Catholics, including myself, have an instinctive distrust of the Church. We have readily accepted the proposition that its schools were “divisive,” despite research evidence which shows that aside from their religious practices parochial school graduates have about the same habits and values as Catholics who attend public schools. A similar prejudice clouds efforts to discuss what have traditionally been called “private” schools. Educators have taught us to use “public” as a synonym for “democratic” or just plain “good”, and to associate “private” with “elitist” and “inequality.” In part this is because when we think of a “public” school we conjure up a small-town or suburban school which is responsible and responsive to those whom it serves; a “private” school, on the other hand, is imagined as a posh country club for the sons of the rich. Yet using this kind of language to describe the “public” schools of Harlem surely obscures as much as it reveals. The Harlem schools are hardly more responsible or responsive to those whom they nominally serve than the typical “private” school. They are “public” only in the legal sense that the Post Office, for example, is “public”, i.e., they are tax supported, open to all, ultimately answerable to public officials who have almost no interest in them. Conversely, while it is true that “private” schools have in the past catered mainly to the well-off, this seems to reflect economic necessity more than social prejudice. If the poor were given as much money to spend on education as the rich, there is every reason to assume that the private sector would expand to accommodate them. Indeed, if we were to judge schools by their willingness to subsidize the poor, we would have to say that private schools have shown more interest in
the poor than public ones. Has any suburban board of education used its own money to provide scholarships for slum children? Most refuse to admit such children even if their way is paid. Many private boards of trustees, on the other hand, have made such efforts, albeit on a small scale.

Private control has several advantages in a school which serves slum children. To begin with, it makes it possible to attack the problem in manageable bites. It is inconceivable that a big city school system can be reformed all at once. Failing that, however, it may be impossible to reform it at all. If, for example, the system is geared to docile teachers who do not want and cannot handle responsibility, how is it to accommodate the enterprising minority who have ideas of their own and want freedom to try them out? The superintendent cannot alter the whole system to deal with a handful of such teachers, even if he wants to. But if he does not alter the system, the better teachers will usually leave — or not come in the first place. Somehow the system must be broken up so that its parts can develop at different paces, in different styles, and even in different directions. Little cells of excellence must be nourished, gradually adding to their own number and excitement. Unusual talent must not be spread so thin over the whole system that no single place achieves the critical mass needed to sustain a chain reaction. Yet this is just what a conventional, centrally controlled system tends to do, for in such a system “special treatment” for a particular school is quickly defined as “favoritism.” (This attitude is illustrated in the response of big cities to the offer of federal funds under the new Elementary and Secondary Education Act. Almost nobody wants to concentrate this money in a few places to create really good schools; everyone wants to spread it across the whole system.)

A second virtue of private schools is that they get away from the increasingly irrelevant tradition of neighborhood schools. Every psychologist and sociologist now recognizes that what children learn formally from their teachers is only a small fraction of their overall education. What they learn informally from their classmates is equally or more important. For this reason it is extremely important to expose slum children to classmates who teach them things which will be an asset rather than a liability as they grow older. A school which draws only from the slum itself will not provide this kind of stimulus. Instead, ways must be found to mix slum children with racially and economically different classmates.

In principle, of course, this kind of ethnic and economic mixing ought to be easier within a public system than a private one. But this may not be so in practice. In a publicly controlled system every school is required to follow essentially the same educational policies and practices as every other one. This means that the differences between
schools derive largely if not exclusively from the differences in their student bodies. (Ability to hold good administrators and teachers seems to depend largely on this, for example.) So long as the student "mix" is decisive, middle-class parents are understandably reluctant to send their children to school with substantial numbers of lower-class children. White parents feel the same way about schools with large numbers of Negro children. But if the traditions and distinctive identity of a school depend not on the character of the student body but on the special objectives and methods of the staff, middle-class parents who approve of these objectives and methods will often send their children despite the presence of poorer classmates. This is clearest, perhaps, in the parochial schools. It might also be possible in non-sectarian private schools, if these had the money to give poor children scholarships, or if outside groups provided such scholarships to large numbers of children.

Getting rid of the neighborhood school, whether by creating city-wide public schools or private ones, could also have the virtue of providing the poor with a real choice about the kinds of schools their children attend. At present, the neighborhood school must try to be all things to all people in its area. Anything daring is bound to displease somebody, and so must be avoided. But if schools could simply tell those who disliked their methods to look elsewhere, and could look all over a large city for a clientele which wanted a particular brand of education, there would be a better chance both for innovation in the schools and for satisfying the diverse needs of different students. It should be possible, for example, for poor people to send their children to a school which segregates the sexes, or employs the Montessori method, or teaches reading phonetically, or emulates the Summerhill approach. Not everyone wants such things, but some do, and they should be able to get them. Given the present outlook of the men who control big city public schools, the only way to make these choices available is probably in the private sector.

In principle there are two ways to develop a larger measure of private initiative and room for maneuver in educating the poor. One would be to provide tuition grants to children who opted out of the public-controlled schools, equal to what would be spent on them if they stayed in. These tuition grants could be used to pay the bills in private schools. There are not, of course, enough private schools today to handle all the potential applicants from the slums, but more would spring up if money were available. But even without tuition grants it should be possible to create much more diversity and decentralization in the schools. School boards could, for example, contract with various groups to manage particular schools in their own system.

A university might be given contract to run a model school system in the slums, as suggested by the Panel on Educational Research and
Development of the President's Science Advisory Committee. This is apparently to be tried in New York.

A local business group might also take over the management of a school. (If Litton Industries can run a Job Corps camp, it can surely run a school.)

A group of teachers might incorporate itself to manage a school on contract from the citywide board. This could be done at no expense within the present system, using present personnel and facilities, and it might have appreciable advantages. Suppose, for example, that the New York City Board of Education were to rent its facilities to their present staffs and provide them with a management contract subject to annual review. Ultimate control over the school could be vested in the teachers, who would hire administrators. Hiring and firing teachers, budget-making, programming and so forth would all be decided on the spot. If the school did a poor job — which some surely would — the contract could be terminated. A group of parents, working through an elected board, might also take over a school. This alternative, which should be especially appealing to the New Left and to the prophets of "community action," is perhaps better described as a new kind of public control than as private control. In effect, it would mean replacing responsibility to the taxpayer-stockholder with responsibility to the consumer — a kind of educational cooperative.

All these alternatives aim at a radical decentralization of both power and responsibility. All would liberate the schools from the dead hand of central administration, from minute accountability to the public for every penny, every minute, and every word. They all recognize that so far as the slum child is concerned, the present system of "socialized education" has failed, and that some kind of new departure, either "capitalist" or "syndicalist," is needed.

Either tuition grants or management contracts to private organizations would, of course, "destroy the public school system as we know it." When one thinks of the remarkable past achievements of public education in America, this may seem a foolish step. But we must not allow the memory of past achievements to blind us to present failures. Nor should we allow the rhetoric of public school men to obscure the issue. It is natural for public servants to complain about private competition, just as private business complains about public competition. But if the terms of the competition are reasonable, there is every reason to suppose that it is healthy. Without it, both public and private enterprises have a way of ossifying. And if, as some fear, the public schools could not survive in open competition with private ones, then perhaps they should not survive.