

A LOSS OF NERVE

by Diane Divoky

As the 1970s draw to a close, everyone has something to say about "the schools." Congressmen variously fret about why Johnny can't read, or why he must be bused 10 miles to school to achieve "racial balance," or why he is subjected to tests clearly biased in favor of those who can write "Standard English."

From the Washington bureaucracies and the tax-exempt education lobbies come studies documenting the vandalism, drug abuse, and violence in the schools, the impact of sharply falling enrollments, the need for ever more "funding." Parents are paying more in taxes to support their local schools; to hear them talk, they are getting less and less in return for their money. Educators counter with reports of a rising incidence of teacher "burn-out," the classroom equivalent of shell-shock; beset by administrative busywork, indiscipline, and a perceptible lack of esprit in the classroom, thousands of teachers are fleeing to greener pastures.

Dissatisfaction exists in many quarters. Like civilian employers, the armed services are now aware of a "new illiteracy"; this year, the Pentagon has been forced to launch remedial reading programs for thousands of its \$419-a-month recruits, many of whom hold public high school diplomas, just to make sure they can understand basic safety manuals. Virtually every major college, from Yale to Stanford, has remedial classes in mathematics and English.

Reflected in bleak TV documentaries, in *Time* cover stories, in *Redbook* essays, is the gnawing popular suspicion that, as educator and author Paul Copperman told a congressional committee earlier this year, "for the first time in our history, the educational skills of one generation will not surpass, will not equal, will not even approach those of their parents."

This suspicion is not confined to journalists, reactionaries, or the relatively well-to-do. Even in the nation's less affluent precincts, private schools are doing a brisk business. In Washington, D.C., it is calculated that the average child's test scores drop further below the national median with every year he

spends in District schools; black and white parents of even modest means seek out Catholic and independent institutions. In Oakland, California, the parents of 40 percent of all schoolchildren, many of them low-income blacks, are scrimping to educate their offspring outside the municipal system. In all of California, once the nation's pace-setter in public education, the private schools' enrollment share has doubled in three years, to 12 percent.

On a more general level, the press, politicians, parents, and school administrators have revived an old American debate over "standards." There is plenty of evidence that, despite increased outlays for education, the *measurable* results, at least, are unsatisfactory. In the decade ending last year, average scores on the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) taken by high school seniors, dropped 37 points on the verbal portion of the test, 24 points on the mathematics segment. A 1976 test administered to all Philadelphia high school seniors revealed that 13.5 percent of them could not fill out a job application; more than 8 percent did not know the meaning of "credit," "deposit," or "beware." And according to a 1979 report prepared for Senator George McGovern (D-S.D.), "functional illiteracy" among 17-year-olds may be as high as 13 percent for whites, 42 percent for blacks, and 56 percent for Hispanics.

Back to Basics?

Admittedly, trying to define "functional illiteracy," as Theodore Roosevelt said in another context, is like "trying to nail currant jelly to the wall." Yet something is clearly amiss when even school children complain that the schools are too soft. According to a 1978 Gallup Poll, 57.5 percent of elementary-school students and 44 percent of those in high school felt that school and homework "weren't demanding enough."*

The politician's impulse, under pressure, to "do something" may lead him into a briar patch. In 40 states, legislators have sought to prescribe complicated new recipes for "minimum competency" and "proficiency," attempting to satisfy both egalitarians and meritocrats. Almost invariably, they have ended up devising standards that really change nothing. When

*For a dissenting view, see "No Homework: A Student's Right!" by Jerry F. Kotnour, in *Education Digest*, May 1978. Kotnour, learning coordinator at Orchard Ridge Middle School in Madison, Wisconsin, reports that many teachers have concluded that homework "not only deprived students of their 'free time' but added a great deal of unnecessary work for themselves. And, by not giving homework, teachers have found that student attitudes toward school work improve."

most of a school district's children fail one set of competency tests, as they did recently in Baltimore, the solution is to name a new commission to replace it with another, more palatable test. If that doesn't happen, the courts may step in. Thus, Florida's minimum competency test was voided last July by a federal judge, who found the exam "valid and reliable" but also "racially biased."

In reaction to middle-class parents' complaints about a lack of rigor, school bureaucrats have here and there created "back-to-basics" programs or special "fundamental schools," both harking back to a simple, golden era (which never was). The back-to-basics "movement," which originated in the small town of Lagunitas, California, in 1972 and is promoted by numerous groups throughout the country, claims to have inspired fundamental schools in 21 states. "Basics" does not mean a return to a 19th-century classical education—there is no sudden resurgence of interest in logic, Latin, or versification—but instead heavy doses of discipline, patriotism, and the "three Rs." In essence, the basics movement springs from a nostalgic mood that periodically sweeps the nation; it incorporates no substantive educational philosophy.

Tracing Failure to Success

Some critics of the basics approach, despairing of broader reform, have joined specialized lobbies—the Council for Exceptional Children, the Association for the Gifted—and so champion the neglected subgroup of their choice. Partly as a result, children are now screened and sorted by educators into categories for special attention under ever more exotic labels: "pre-delinquent," "pseudo-hyperkinetic," "dysgraphic," "agnosic."

Other educators care less about particular kinds of students than about particular kinds of "useful" or "relevant" courses. The curriculum groans under their demands: We have career education, sex education, health education, nutrition education, death education, leisure education, and courses in wilderness survival and mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. All of them are

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competing for a place on the classroom menu. And the competition can be fierce. Howard D. Mehlinger, a professor at Indiana University, has described one (unidentified) school where the "teachers' guide" to English and social studies begins:

In the 10th grade, study is concentrated on the growth of democracy, and especially on the form of government which developed. Such a study should be brief and to the point in order to allow time for the unit on driver education.

During the ups-and-downs of the last 20 years, school administrators have proved themselves to be adaptable, flexible, *au courant*, concerned. Implacable in their open-mindedness, willing to try all solutions to any problem, they now seem to puzzle over why they appear to have accomplished less as they have sought to do more and more.

A "crisis in the schools" is not a new phenomenon. Articles in education journals routinely begin with italicized citations bemoaning declining standards, lax discipline, and rotting skills. "Sound like 1979?" the author asks. "In fact, it's from a study conducted in 1949." Or 1929. Or 1900. Sometimes the problems have been overcome; sometimes they have not. Sometimes the solutions have created problems of their own. Some of today's problems may stem from a "victory" two decades ago.

During the 1950s, when the "rising tide" of postwar Baby-Boom kids started entering school at the rate of 4 million a year, twice the wartime rate, split classroom sessions and crowded buildings became a fact of life. TV commentator Edward R. Murrow lamented that the United States had become a "have-not" nation ("We have not enough teachers. . . . We have not 340,000 classrooms . . ."). The problem was clear, the solution obvious.

We passed the bond issues, poured the foundations, put up the walls, pump-primed the technique-minded teachers colleges—in short, made the system bigger fast. The number of teachers grew from less than 1 million in 1950 to 2.3 million in 1970, as America's per-pupil spending on schools doubled. In the midst of expansion, when the Russians boosted Sputnik I into orbit in 1957, many Americans echoed *U.S. News & World Report* ("What Went Wrong in U.S. Schools?") and were eager to play catch-up in quality as well as quantity. The brain race of that era—which essentially meant teaching science, math, and foreign languages faster and better to more bright boys (there was no call for *women* engineers)—seemed just another expression of

THE AMERICAN TEACHER: A PROFILE

There are 2.2 million teachers in U.S. public schools, half of them in small towns or rural areas, the other half divided about equally between suburb and city. Teacher salaries vary by region. While the average U.S. teacher earned \$14,244 in 1978 (less than the average policeman or fireman), the average salary in Mississippi was \$11,150, and teachers in New York City received \$18,600. (The differential reflects the higher formal credentials of New York teachers as well as their higher costs of living.)

Americans continue to rate teachers highly in public opinion polls—and in the voting booth: Of the 55,000 teachers who ran for local office last year, 80 percent were elected. State and local education officials, however, are burdened by incompetent teachers who occasionally attract considerable publicity—and are almost impossible to fire. (Of the 239 teachers New York State sought to dismiss in 1977–78, only 18 actually lost their jobs.) Some school districts, notably Dallas, are now giving standardized tests to candidates for teaching positions to weed out the incompetent *before* contracts are signed.

The loss of experienced teachers may be more serious than the presence of bad ones. Teachers' median age and number of "years in teaching" are declining, indicating a higher dropout rate. Classroom violence, red tape, and lack of support from administrators take their toll, especially in big city schools. When the National Education Association asked its members in 1976 if they would choose teaching as a career if they could do it all over again, only 37 percent said they "certainly would," down from 52 percent a decade earlier.

America's love of "bigger and better."* In 1958, when Congress passed the National Defense Education Act, the U.S. Office of Education budget doubled. For the first time, the federal government was in the school business in a big way.

The speedy, effective response to both the Baby Boom and Sputnik left a lasting psychological impression on teachers and policymakers alike. By the early 1960s, confidence in the schools to accomplish any mission that society might assign it—be it helping win the Cold War or ending racial strife—was abnormally high. There was a bullish sense that if education could

* Under the impact of Sputnik, the proportion of college-bound high-school students studying a modern foreign language rose from 20 percent (1957) to 24 percent (1965). But the all-time high—36 percent—was reached in 1915. A precise figure for 1978 is not available, but by all accounts it will not exceed 15 percent. Interestingly, it now appears that Russia's Sputnik "triumph" was largely illusory; Soviet technology lagged far behind that of the United States. See Leonid Vladimirov, *The Russian Space Bluff*, London: Stacey, 1971.

THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS

	1961	1971	1976		1961	1971	1976
Highest degree held				Median age (years)			
<hr/>				<hr/>			
Percent of teachers holding:				All teachers			
Less than B.A.	14.6	2.9	0.9	40.9	35	33	
B.A.	61.9	69.6	61.6	Race			
M.A. or 6 yrs.	23.1	27.1	37.1	<hr/>			
Ph.D.	0.4	0.4	0.4	Percent of all teachers who are:			
<hr/>				Black			
Time per week spent on all duties (in hours)				White			
All teachers	47	47	46	—	8.1	8.0	
Elementary	49	46	44	<hr/>			
Secondary	46	48	48	Other			
<hr/>				—			
Median years of experience				3.6			
All teachers (years)	11.0	8	8	<hr/>			
<hr/>				Sex and marital status			
First-year teachers				Men (%)			
% of all teachers	8.0	9.1	5.5	31.3	34.3	32.9	
<hr/>				Single			
				5.4			
				Married			
				25.2			
				27.9			
				25.1			
				Women (%)			
				68.7			
				65.7			
				67.0			
				Single			
				16.9			
				14.2			
				13.6			
				Married			
				42.8			
				44.0			
				46.1			

Source: National Education Association, Status of the American Public School Teachers, 1975-76, 1977.

erase our perceived lag in science, it could erase our social ills as well. Never mind that serious books, such as Evan Hunter's harrowing *Blackboard Jungle* (1954), had already disputed that notion. When the civil rights movement appeared on the national scene, few educators doubted that providing equal opportunity and social uplift for blacks, Hispanics, and the poor was one of *their* responsibilities. And politicians fell over themselves to endorse that belief. "The answer for all our national problems," said President Lyndon Johnson, "comes to a single word. That word is education."

Education had always been a central concern in the United States, a path to economic opportunity for the poor, the crucible of assimilation for the vast waves of immigrants arriving in the 19th and early 20th centuries. But during the 1960s, the claims for education became excessive. If the federal government

would only put up the money—as indeed it did during 1965–69, the peak years of Lyndon Johnson’s “Great Society”—the schools would finish the job: integrate sparring social groups, compensate for past inequalities, boost the have-nots to a better life. “Upward Bound,” “Higher Horizons,” “Headstart,” and all the other pioneer “compensatory” education programs of the mid-1960s, with their upbeat names and their common assumption that a couple of years of educational tinkering and a couple of billion dollars from Washington would turn disadvantaged youngsters into middle-class achievers, seem incredibly naive in retrospect. But what must be remembered is how deeply educators believed—and were encouraged to believe—that they could cope with any social challenge rapidly and efficiently.

The first tremors of doubt—doubt that “more of the same” was enough—could be felt just as the 89th Congress set the Great Society programs into place, once again doubling the federal education budget. The assault came first from a group of writers—Paul Goodman (*Growing Up Absurd*), Edgar Z. Friedenberg (*Coming of Age in America*), John Holt (*How Children Fail*), Jonathan Kozol (*Death at an Early Age*)—most of them more or less radical teachers and social critics. As the United States drifted into the Vietnam War, as conditions for many blacks in the inner city failed to improve, these “New Romantics” called America’s values into question—and especially the role of the schools in forming and perpetuating those values. They did not doubt that the schools could change society; but they insisted that the schools must be changed first.

These writers and others attacked the schools as deadening institutions that taught a mindless subservience to authority, encouraged competition that pitted child against child, and stuffed students full of useless facts instead of nurturing their abilities to think and, above all, feel. “Children are subject peoples,” wrote John Holt in *How Children Fail* (1964), adding:

School for them is a kind of jail. . . . We encourage children to act stupidly, not only by scaring and confusing them, but by boring them, by filling up their days with dull, repetitive tasks that make little or no claim on their attention or demands on their intelligence. Our hearts leap for joy at the sight of a roomful of children all slogging away at some imposed task. . . .

Teachers were stung by such criticism and, perhaps, attracted by the Rousseauian simplicity of the proposed remedies. If rigid instruction was a barrier to curiosity, then loosen the

reins. Before long, the rhetoric, if not the reality, of open classrooms, free schools (with no fixed curriculum), “self-paced” instruction, and “affective” education was visited on the schools—first in the suburbs, where people were more trendy and prosperity reigned; then in the cities, nourished with “seed money” from such philanthropic foundations as Ford and Carnegie. As time went on, superintendents of schools in rural Indiana or North Dakota boasted of their innovations and alternatives, even gave tours of the rooms where pillows and rugs and hamster cages had replaced the rigid rows of maple desks.

Day Care Extended

Administrators may have known that many of the changes were merely cosmetic, but many teachers took the complaints to heart and tried earnestly to keep abreast of the (latest) new wave. As sociologist Christopher Jencks has pointed out in *Working Papers* (July–August 1978), teachers, in their role as colonial administrators, have always made accommodations to keep the natives happy, have used “bread and circuses” to ease tensions. But in the past, such concessions were generally coupled with the inner conviction that there were nevertheless bodies of knowledge—history, Latin, math, English—worth teaching and worth learning, whether or not a teacher had any *real* enthusiasm for the subject he taught. Amid the turbulence of the late 1960s, Jencks contends, all that changed:

There seemed to be so many competing interpretations of reality that it was hard to defend one to the exclusion of others. This led not only students but many teachers into the kind of spongy cultural relativism that treats all ideas as equally defensible. But if all ideas are equally defensible, none is worth bothering with.

For the many teachers who had long taught a certain set of novels or social studies “units” only because that was what the local school board decreed—teachers who did not in fact believe that Shakespeare or the U.S. Constitution could be exciting or relevant—the challenges of the 1960s were particularly unnerving. When students asked for “relevance” or “honesty” or “excitement,” educators found it easier to throw out the staples in favor of what might amuse or appease, rather than defend the traditional curriculum. Milton and Wordsworth were often replaced by the lyrics of Bob Dylan, essay writing by film criticism, history by courses with names like “Social Concerns

THE "TOP TEN" SCHOOLS— IN NATIONAL MERIT SCHOLARSHIPS

Schools	Location	Enrollment	Student/ Teacher Ratio	1978 Semi- Finalists
Phillips Exeter*	Exeter, N.H.	965	8:1	53
Stuyvesant	New York, N.Y.	2,762	N.A.	53
Bronx Science	New York, N.Y.	3,320	22:1	36
Evanston Township	Evanston, Ill.	4,200	14:1	34
R. J. Reynolds	Winston-Salem, N.C.	1,500	22:1	34
Walt Whitman	Bethesda, Md.	1,950	30:1	31
Ben Franklin	New Orleans, La.	698	24:1	30
Scarsdale	Scarsdale, N.Y.	1,709	14.4:1	29
Phillips Academy*	Andover, Mass.	1,166	14:1	27
Shaker Heights	Shaker Hts., Ohio	1,677	15:1	26

*Private School

Source: National Merit Scholarship Corporation and staff interviews.

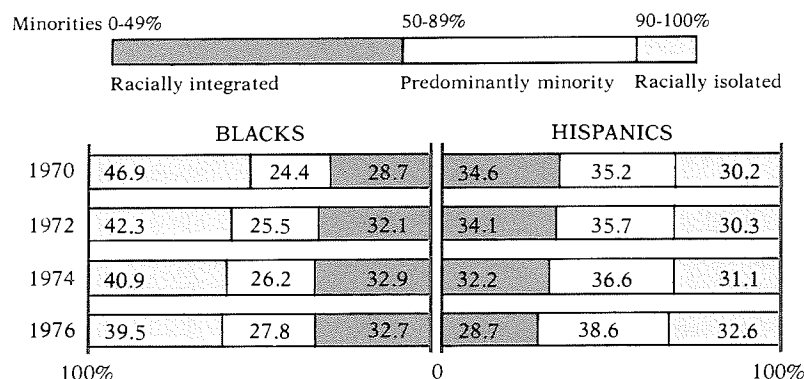
What makes a good school good? The 10 high schools with the most semifinalists in the 1978 National Merit Scholarship test—a nationwide exam given to high-school juniors—differ greatly in size, ethnic composition, and median SAT scores.

But the similarities are even more striking. All assign "heavy" amounts of homework, and all have little faculty turnover and low student-teacher ratios. All kept their basic curricula more or less intact during the 1960s. Half the schools choose their students by means of tough exams and/or admissions procedures. The other half are selective by accident: They are located in prosperous suburbs where many parents are college graduates and most care deeply about their children's education. "Our community regards success as an ordinary activity," explains C. A. Zimmerman, the principal of Shaker Heights High School.

At each of the top 10, students and teachers share a distinctive *esprit*. "Traditionally, R. J. Reynolds has been a super high school," says its principal, Robert D. Deaton. Money can't buy that feeling. A recent study—*Fifteen Thousand Hours: Secondary Schools and Their Effects on Children*, by Michael Rutter et al. (Harvard, 1979)—suggests that the "spirit" of a school, fostered by a strong principal and strong teachers, can make the difference between success and failure, even in slum areas.

Does Exeter's "timeless vision" (as its catalog puts it) account for its No. 1 ranking? An admissions dean at rival Andover thought not. Students taking the National Merit Test, he sniffed, compete only against other students in their state, and New Hampshire has a notoriously poor public school system.

CHANGING PATTERN OF INTEGRATION IN U.S. PUBLIC SCHOOLS



Source: U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare, Office for Civil Rights.

Hispanic students are increasingly attending "racially isolated" schools (above); the situation for blacks is slowly improving, except in the Northeast. Parents' worries a decade ago over poor facilities and teachers have given way to different concerns (below).

SCHOOL PROBLEMS MOST CITED BY PARENTS

("What do you think are the biggest problems with which the public schools in this community must deal?")

	Public school parents		Parochial school parents		No children in school		National total	
	1979	1969	1979	1969	1979	1969	1979	1969
Discipline	26%	24%	32%	39%	24%	27%	24%	26%
Drugs	14	—	7	—	13	—	13	—
Finances	12	15	4	7	12	15	12	14
Poor curriculum	11	5	17	9	10	3	11	4
Poor teachers	12	20	12	24	9	14	10	17
Integration	7	12	15	8	9	15	9	13
Lack of facilities	2	27	—	26	2	17	2	22

Source: *The Gallup Polls of Attitudes Toward Education, 1969-1973*; "Tenth Annual Gallup Poll of Attitudes Toward Education," *Phi Delta Kappan*, September 1978 and 1979

U.S. PUBLIC SCHOOLS, 1879-1979: A HISTORICAL SUMMARY

	1879/80	1929/30	1939/40	1959/60	1969/70	1977/78
Total public school enrollment (1,000s)*	9,867	25,678	25,434	36,087	45,619	43,731
Nursery, K-8 (1,000s)	9,757	21,279	18,833	27,602	32,597	24,810
Percent of population aged 5-17 in public schools	65.5	81.7	84.4	82.2	86.9	89.2
Total nonpublic school enrollment (1,000s)*	N.A.	2,651	2,611	5,675	5,700	5,025
Total Catholic school enrollment (1,000s)*	N.A.	2,464	2,396	5,253	4,658	3,289
Public high school graduates (1,000s)*	N.A.	592	1,143	1,627	2,589	2,837
Percent of all 17-year olds graduated from all high schools	2.5	29.0	50.8	65.1	75.7	75.1
Pupils per teacher† in public schools*	34.4	30.5	29.1	26.0	21.4	18.7
Average length of school term (days)	130.3	172.7	175.0	178.0	178.9	N.A.

* elementary and secondary day schools

† includes librarians and other nonsupervisory personnel

Source: U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare, National Center for Education Statistics.

The average pupil-teacher ratio in public schools has declined by almost one-half over the last century. The school year has grown by two months. The proportion of students graduating from high school crested at 75.7 percent in 1969. As the data make clear, demographic declines are nothing new; the birth rate dropped sharply during the 1930s' Great Depression, with a predictable effect on enrollments.

for Today." If one didn't really know what was important to learn, then it didn't matter what one taught.

Besides, a glossy, packaged kit called "Focus on Self-Development" made the hour between 10:00 A.M. and 11:00 A.M. go faster for teacher and pupils than grammar or spelling ever had. In wealthier school districts, technology provided new toys: computers, "audio-visual" machines, closed-circuit TV. The school library became a "multi-media resource center."

By the early 1970s, unquestioning acceptance of the old curriculum had given way to mindless New Approaches under which often the only criterion was what might entertain both student and teacher. In the process, whatever academic rigor and discipline the schools had been held to in the past faded. To avoid complaints, students were automatically promoted from one grade to the next, ready or not. The longer-term effects were somebody else's worry. Many schools' purposes were, in fact, no longer so much educational as custodial—a kind of extended day care system, even in middle-class suburbs.

The kids were the first to smell the difference, to sense that the game had changed. At education conferences, perceptive teachers began to talk about the "faintly hostile boredom" they were encountering in the classroom—the new, easy defiance and facile cynicism of those who would once have been enthusiastic, model students. What the teachers seldom understood was that these new attitudes were a direct response to the shakiness at the center, among the teachers and administrators.

The loss of nerve at the front of the classroom, and in the depths of the educational bureaucracy, got few headlines until the mid-1970s when it was evidenced in lower student SAT scores, and even in a few (unsuccessful) lawsuits brought on behalf of children against their schools for "educational malpractice." By then, the schools were beleaguered on all fronts.

First, bit by bit, researchers began to confirm what some already suspected: The Great Society school programs designed to remedy the effects of poverty were not working, at least not at the fast clip at which Americans had come to believe they could solve their problems. For example, it turned out that the significant gains achieved with preschool children in Headstart, the darling of the compensatory movement, were washed out by second or third grade.*

A second blow came when faith in integration, as both an

*The most comprehensive survey of the plusses and minuses of compensatory education programs is the \$15 million *National Institute of Education Compensatory Education Study* (1978), available from the National Institute of Education.

educational and social tool, lost ground. Putting white and black children together in the same classroom—hailed in the 1966 “Coleman Report” as having an almost magically positive educational effect on minority children, as well as social benefits for whites—proved to be costly, complicated, and, at any rate, no panacea for educational problems. Sociologist James Coleman himself recanted last year: “What once appeared to be fact,” he conceded, “is now known to be fiction.” With the decline of many liberals’ high hopes for integration has come a dimming of the time-honored ideal of the “common school,” that place where children of *all* backgrounds could come together to earn their place in American society.

Meanwhile, the numbers began to diminish. Educators employ a variety of wooden euphemisms—“retrenchment,” “decline”—to refer to a trend that began in 1971 with the abrupt loss of 500,000 children from U.S. schools. With the end of America’s Baby Boom, the school-age population began to shrink fast. At first, administrators viewed the situation as a simple problem that a few adjustments—such as reducing the number of prospective teachers in the pipeline—would fix. Some optimists predicted more money for fewer children. Others saw an eventual decrease in the tax burden.

Burdens and Blessings

Of course, with the rise in average teacher salaries (from \$8,840 in 1969 to \$14,244 last year) and an inflation rate that halves the value of a dollar every decade, the end of the Baby Boom has meant none of these things. As total enrollment in public schools has dropped by 2 million since 1971—with the prospect of a net 4 million loss by 1985—the cost of running the schools has risen dramatically, some 56 percent between 1971 and 1976.*

Retrenchment means laying off teachers, closing neighborhood schools, and creating bad blood among all parties. A “reduction in force” (or RIF, as teacher layoffs are called) has become an annual rite in many communities. Districts are gen-

*What happens to the school age population after 1985 is anyone’s guess, since children who will begin school that year have yet to be born. The Baby-Boom bulge passed through elementary school in 1971, through high school in 1975. A new upturn in the number of births began in 1976, as the huge postwar generation began bearing children of its own. It is impossible to predict the size of this demographic “echo.” Because the effects of birth-rate decline are compounded (or negated) by migration—families are moving away from the industrialized “frostbelt” states—it is likely that local enrollment patterns will vary widely for the remainder of this century. See “The Ups and Downs of Education” by Hazel H. Reinhardt, in *American Demographics*, June 1979.

COMPETING WITH THE SCHOOLS

Defenders of the public schools often cite "outside" factors as the source of current classroom difficulties—parental neglect, a general disrespect for authority, and, above all, television. In a recent speech, author-critic Clifton Fadiman suggested that TV is only part of a broader problem. Excerpts:

The idea of education was never before opposed by a competitor. It was taken for granted because no alternative appeared on the horizon. But today there is a complete "alternate life" to which children submit themselves.

The alternate life is the consequence of the communication revolution. It is a highly competitive educational system, opposed in almost every essential way to traditional schooling. This system is the linked structure of which television is the heart and which numbers among its constituents film, radio, comic books, pop music, sports.

This alternate life *is* a life; it is not a diversion. It takes up as much of a child's time as school does, and it works on him with far greater effectiveness. It offers its own [contrasting] disciplines, its own curriculum, its own ethical and cultural values, its own style and language.

And this competition, [teachers] are not trained to meet. The alternate life has one special psychological effect [on children] which handicaps the teacher: a decline in the faculty of attention, and therefore a decline in the capacity to learn. Television's great attraction is that it does the work for you, skillfully and systematically. . . .

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erally required to send "pink slips" to teachers the spring before the ax will fall. Because districts can't see that far ahead, they often overestimate the losses and RIF too many teachers. Last spring, for example, San Francisco school officials RIF'd every teacher hired since 1968. Teachers are invariably hit harder than administrators. In Springfield, Illinois, during the last two years, the number of teachers in all public schools declined by 7.5 percent; the number of administrators actually grew by 6.7 percent.

School closings, a new phenomenon in American education, can be divisive and traumatic. Since 1970, more than 2,800 public schools have been closed nationwide, with the rate of shut-downs increasing. Maryland's Prince George's County has closed 25 schools; San Francisco has lost 32. Particularly for suburban systems, school closings seem to set off a kind of mid-life crisis. People in the cities have by now become accustomed,

perhaps inured, to decay; their schools have been in turmoil for two decades and longer. The newer suburbs, however, were built in the 1950s expressly as places to raise and educate children; the realization that a community has aged, that its social mix has changed (more singles, more elderly people), and that it has, on average, 10 percent fewer of the young families with children for which it was designed, comes hard.

As a larger and larger proportion of the citizenry, by virtue of age or decisions not to have children, does not have offspring in school, the support that the schools can expect from the public grows more and more tenuous. The success of Proposition 13, the 1978 "ballot initiative" that cut California property taxes in half, was an angry vote against soaring levies and fat bureaucracy; but it was also a vote against expensive services, mainly schools, that primarily benefit young families and children. Somewhere down the line, there are embarrassing questions to ask about the values of a community that does not see children as its chief burden and blessing, about whether such a place is a community at all.

No one any longer expects our schools to revamp society, but selfishness is not the way to help the schools rise to meet our lowered expectations. We may need a collective largeness of spirit. For all their rhetorical excesses, the radical reformers of the mid-1960s had a point: Schools in America reinforce the values of the society at large. And the values of that larger society currently suffer from a certain confusion. By putting the entire burden of reform on the schools, as Frances Fitzgerald has pointed out in *America Revised*, we are saying in effect: "Let us be saved by the next generation." The real question today is whether the current generation of adults can save the next one.