HOW TO RECOGNIZE A GOOD SCHOOL
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by Neil Postman

and

Charles Weingartner

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The small book before you is an attempt to indicate some of the background and consequences of what is known as the school reform movement. Much of the material here has been excerpted from The School Book: For People Who Want to Know What All the Hollering is About (Delacorte Press). In that book, we were, of course, able to provide a more comprehensive picture than we are able to give here of what has happened in the past fifteen years and what is happening now. But we believe that from the pages that follow, a faithful reader (someone who will give us a fast two hours) will be able to learn what are the most important ideas that presently infuse the school scene with so much vitality. Toward that end, we have divided this publication into three sections. The first section, “A History of Hollering,” is a mini-history of school criticism circa 1955-70 aimed at providing an account of why so many people have been saying so many nasty things about school. The second section, “What is School?,” tries to state with some precision how the institution of school operates, and especially, to distinguish between that institution’s intractable functions and its changing (and changeable) conventions. “What is a Good School?,” the third section, tries to suggest the palpable effects of school criticism by specifying the ways in which our best teachers and administrators are re-creating the conventions of that most glorious American invention, the public school.

Neil Postman
Charles Weingartner
A HISTORY OF THE HOLLERING

John Dewey was just beginning to get comfortable in his grave when the Russians, of all people, reached down and stuck a spear into his heart. It was 1957. Dewey had died five years before, secure in the knowledge that he was America’s preeminent philosopher of education. Then the Russians launched Sputnik I. As Walter Cronkite might say, this meant that we were behind in the race for space. A lot of Americans went into a grim panic. In those days, you may remember, whenever things went badly for us, the custom was to assume that one of our own had sold us out. On this occasion Dewey was fingered.

The indictment went something like this: John Dewey was the father of progressive education. Progressive education was a kind of gooey, precious, romantic philosophy which stressed permissiveness and life adjustment. There was no place in it for rigorous thinking, discipline, or social responsibility. Moreover, progressive education was championed by know-nothing education professors and had taken over as the dominant philosophy of American schools. As a result, our country had been burdened with at least two generations of self-indulgent ignoramuses—specifically, kids who had no stomach or preparation for building rockets and other important things. And that is why we were losing to the Russians. Life and The New York Times stressed these points hard, but they were moderate compared to Admiral Hyman Rickover, who, for a time, devoted much of his energies to attacking the schools and their Dewey-istic leanings. Rickover, the father of the atomic submarine, was under the impression that a child’s school day was mostly absorbed by “frill” subjects such as basket weav-
ing and free-form dancing. He ferociously denounced the waste of it all, urging that we return to what he called the basics. He was joined by others who accused the schools of quackery and of not understanding the perilous position we occupied as leader of the free world.

There does not exist a good history of those times, and we are not prepared to give one. But it is necessary to make these points: (1) the reaction immediately following the launching of Sputnik I represents the first phase of what might be called contemporary school criticism; (2) most of the complaints of that period were made by politicians, military men, and college professors, not by teachers, students, or parents; and (3) most of the criticisms were prodigiously misinformed. For example, it was not true that the philosophy of American schools was dominated by Dewey's "progressive" ideas. It probably was true that professors of education rated Dewey the foremost theoretician in their field, but this did not mean much in the day-to-day functioning of most schools. In other words, theory and practice did not coincide then, nor does it coincide now.

Neither was it true that students were spending an inordinate amount of time on frill subjects. The school curriculum was substantially the same in 1957 as it was in 1917. There were, of course, some silly courses that had not existed ten or fifteen years earlier, but the school curriculum in its modern version began to form in the 1880s, became more or less established in the 1920s, and remains intact, alas, in most schools to this day.

Finally, Dewey was badly misinterpreted by critics who had obviously not read him. To the extent that teachers were being permissive, they were probably more influenced by their conceptions of Freud than of Dewey. If Dewey stands for anything, he stands for rigorous thinking, self-discipline, and social responsibility. (So does Freud—but that is another matter.) It is virtually impossible to read Dewey without coming to this conclusion, unless of course the reader is in a curiously mangled state of mind. But for all the misinformed ill-will of post-Sputnik school criticism, there was at least one positive aspect to it. For the second time in this century, (the "Progressives" had done it first) the question was raised, What are schools for?

Of course, for many of the critics, the question was rhetorical.
Their purpose in raising it was to give a preformed answer: The schools were an instrument of national foreign policy, a weapon in the Cold War. It followed from this that the best thing schools could do was to produce inspired scientists and competent technicians—and fast. Thus, the first and shortest-lived phase of modern school criticism—let us call it Panic Phase I—amounted to an attack on frill courses and a call for an increase in science and math programs. But the question, What is school for? hovered about, and in a short time, a new group of critics was to grab hold of it and give it a very different set of answers.

But that did not come until the second phase of school criticism had ended. The second phase began roughly in 1960 and was concerned, as Jerome Bruner has put it, principally with the reconstruction of curriculum. What happened was that the professionals moved in. Not the “know-nothing educationists,” who were still reeling from the blows aimed at them in Panic Phase I, but the “real” professionals: professors of mathematics and science. And then a bit later, professors of history and English. As the professionals saw it, if the schools were to produce good scientists and engineers, then it was up to our best scientists and mathematicians to turn out the syllabuses that would do the job most efficiently. What they did, in effect, was to bypass the question, What is school for?, and go straight to the question, What is a subject for?

In a now famous conference held at Woods Hole, Massachusetts, in 1959, the professionals—led by Jerrold Zacharias of M.I.T. and Jerome Bruner, then of Harvard—mapped out their strategy. Some curious things followed. For one, as the scientists began to ask themselves “What is physics for?” or “What is chemistry for?,” they found themselves turning back to John Dewey. As Bruner put it, “The ideal was clarity and self-direction of intellect in the use of modern knowledge”—an elegant way of saying that the scientists rejected the notion that a student’s head needed to be filled with someone else’s answers to someone else’s questions—that is, a lot of facts. Instead, they embraced the idea that the purpose of studying a subject was to learn how to think, which is not only the title of one of Dewey’s most famous books, but also a lifelong concern of his.

In *The Process of Education* (1960), a report on the Woods Hole
conference, Bruner introduces the phrase "the structure of a discipline." By that term he means that each subject has a unique way of asking questions and finding answers, and that this "structure" is what students ought to learn. Moreover, he recommends that the best way to learn it is by doing it, which, of course, is what John Dewey had been saying for roughly forty years. Thus, in the early 1960s, the phrase "inductive method" became popular, as the scientists tried to invent problems that would engage students in a process of inquiry, presumably to help them become self-directing, creative thinkers. At this point, Dewey started to rest comfortably again in his grave.

It came to pass, of course, that professors of history and English wanted to get into the act. There were lots of government grants available and within two or three years—certainly by 1965—we had not only the new math and the new science, but the new English and new social studies as well. Moreover, since the scientists and other university scholars learned fairly quickly that there is more to schooling than they had at first supposed, there developed a rapprochement between the scholars (who knew about subjects) and the educationists, including workaday teachers (who knew about students). Organizations like the National Council of Teachers of English and the National Council for the Social Studies invited the active and influential participation of prominent university specialists, who advised elementary and secondary school teachers on content. The teachers contributed their knowledge of children and the realities of school life. Together, they would solve the problem of the schools by teaching students to learn how to learn. For a while, somewhere around 1964 or 1965, it seemed as if they could. One thing was sure: the United States was back in the lead in the race for space. No thanks to the schools, of course, but at least the schools had got back on the right track and were protected from the charge of quackery through their alliance with our best scholars.

Everything looked rosy, except for a few minor details. One of them was the problem of the ghetto school. Everyone knew that in such schools, reading scores were low and dropout rates high, but amidst the prevailing optimism, the belief was strong that these problems could be overcome by the application of proper techniques. The new curricula could fix most of what was
wrong, and if they could not, we would just work harder to fix
the new curricula. At some point we would know enough about
language learning, reading difficulties, and the rest so that ghetto
schools could benefit as much as any from the “revolutionary
new approaches,” as they were called.

Up to this point the public had not had much to say, and the
students nothing at all. It is true that laymen had been aroused
to a mild state of concern by the early critics, but only for a
short time before the professionals moved in. When that happened,
everyone kept still in deference to the great American religion
called expertise. There is an analogy to be drawn on this point
between the school problem and the space problem. In the early
1960s, the technicians at Cape Kennedy, nee Canaveral, were
working on the problem of how to get to the moon by 1970.
Since no one was asking whether or not we should go to the
moon, and since laymen had no qualifications to discuss how to
get there, silence was the only option. Similarly, in the early
1960s, since no one was asking what a school is for, and since
laymen believed they had no qualifications for discussing the re-
construction of curriculum, a comparable silence followed. But
not for long. The experts, as usual, had asked the wrong ques-
tion, and this could not go unnoticed forever. Paul Goodman no-
ticed it. And so did Edgar Friedenberg. And Jules Henry.

Goodman and Friedenberg were sociologists, Henry an anthro-
pologist, and what they noticed, first of all, was that the dropout
rates were going up among all social classes, that “psychic”
dropout rates were astronomical, that in spite of the enthusiasm
of many teachers and professional organizations for the new cur-
ricula, students were becoming increasingly alienated from learn-
ing and from almost anything else related to school. They also
began to notice the ways in which school, as a social institution,
functioned to support other institutions, some of which did not
need or want people to be self-directing and creative. They ex-
plored the gap between the official rhetoric about the purposes of
school (for example, to widen the horizons of students) and the
real purposes of school, and they found it enormous. In short,
they discovered that the problem of the schools had not been
seriously confronted. Rickover had only touched the subject, and
Bruner had avoided it altogether. The problem had to do with
the question of what school is for in the first place, and had little to do with how to make instruction more efficient. From the point of view of Goodman, Friedenberg, and Henry, the schools were astonishingly efficient already. According to them, schools trained the young remarkably well to be obedient, passive, and mechanical, and to accept alienation as a way of life.

Two things must be noted at this point. First, the insights of Goodman and the others were not really discoveries. Social scientists rarely discover anything new, in the sense that biologists or chemists do. For the most part, social scientists rediscover. They call attention to things people once knew but have forgotten. There was nothing new in showing how schools serve the needs of corporations, of government, of advertisers, even of demagogues, but the reminders were astonishing, nonetheless, and re-opened philosophical (why) rather than technical (how) questions. Second, Goodman, Friedenberg, and Henry were slightly ahead of their time. Their publications came between 1956 and the early 1960s, when very few people were thinking seriously about the schools. Their work represented, so to speak, only the gathering clouds.

The first drops of rain came in 1964, in the form of John Holt’s little book, How Children Fail. The book caught on almost immediately, to a large extent because it was written by a teacher who could speak in concrete terms about what schools did to children. Here was no abstract sociological analysis. Instead, the book was an almost daily record of how a children’s fear of failure and obedience to rigid conventions destroyed their curiosity and natural love of learning. Soon after, the trickle became a deluge. From everywhere, and seemingly simultaneously, there appeared dozens of books, each one stronger than the previous one in its denunciation of a school system devoted not to the welfare of children, but to the service of a war-loving state and a dehumanizing economy.

It was as if the question Admiral Rickover asked in the late 1950s was finally getting an answer. What are schools for? Not to help build atomic subs, baby, answered the new wave of school critics, who, significantly, seemed to come from all walks of life. There were, of course, the practicing teachers, such as Jonathan Kozol, Herbert Kohl, and James Herndon. There were also journal-
ists and writers, among them George Leonard, Nat Hentoff, and George Dennison. And psychologists like Carl Rogers, William Glasser, and Jerome Bruner (who by now understood the error of his earlier ways). And sociologists David Rogers, Frank Riessman, and Marilyn Gittell. And parents, such as Ellen Lurie. And students, such as Donald Reeves. And even a couple of know-nothing education professors, Postman and Weingartner. Education magazines began to sprout all over the place, as did education conferences and antischool organizations. Inevitably, some people—feeling that the public schools were beyond reform, let alone redemption—began to start their own schools, beginning what is known as the “free schools” movement.

Between 1965 and 1970, there was more ferment over the schools than anyone had seen since the heyday of progressive education. And just to excite matters a little more, people in the ghettos became aroused, then militant. Although few of the school critics were black or Hispanic, the messages they were sending were not lost among the poor and disenfranchised.

What were those messages? The new indictment went something like this: Somehow, during the last thirty years, control of the American school had passed out of the hands of the people and into the hands of bureaucrats. Perhaps the people did not care enough, occupied as they were with an affluence achieved by the vice of a war economy. More likely, their indifference was the result of a pervasive cultural trend toward moving people further and further away from controlling their own institutions. In any event, it was clear that school was not devoted to the interests of individual children, to helping them become autonomous, creative, inquiring people with the will and intelligence to determine their own destiny. In fact, the new critics argued, the school functions to defeat such goals, functioning as a service agency to the dominant bureaucracies of our society.

Almost all of the conventions of school—grading, grouping, labeling, record keeping, bell ringing, testing, etc.—are designed to make students accept the decisions of others, accept fear, accept alienation. Moreover, the argument went, it is no accident that children in the ghettos repeatedly fail. The conventions of school are so arranged as to guarantee that result. Our present economy still demands a large source of cheap labor, and the
school is deeply implicated in a kind of conspiracy to keep the poor people poor. Even the newest of the curricula, the argument went, were at best irrelevant, at worst, obsolete—all in all, a source of distraction which prevented students from thinking about the true nature of their situation.

So ran the indictment. The defendants, who in this case consisted mostly of beleaguered teachers and administrators, replied by denouncing the critics as romantics and, in some instances, paranoics. The trouble with such criticism, the defense argued, is that it comes from people who are not familiar with what really goes on in school and who expect the schools to implement utopian schemes. To which the critics replied that they were only too familiar with the realities of school (which in some cases was not true) and that there was hardly anything utopian in their proposals (which in most cases was true).

It should be stressed that in spite of the idealized images of school evoked by the "romantics," most of their complaints were against the conventions of the schooling process, not its basic structure. For example, the critics did not, for the most part, question whether or not the schools should exist, or even whether or not students should be compelled to attend them. What they wanted was an overhaul of the procedures governing the relationship among students, teachers, and administrators. They took for granted that schools could function humanely; they were angry about the fact that they did not.

Somewhere around 1970, the romantic phase came to an end. Some of the critics were not educators to begin with, and so moved on to other things. Some became discouraged by the capacity of the system to resist change. And some simply became tiresome. Those who remained at their stations were soon overrun by a new wave of critics who represented—as a sizable group still does—a stage of almost total disillusionment with the schools. In a way, this is Panic Phase II—the second coming of the idea that our schools are a betrayal and an abomination. Only this time, the attack comes from the Left, not the Right. Its leading figure is Ivan Illich, whose book, *Deschooling Society* (1971), presents the case for eliminating schools altogether and replacing them with an informal, noncompulsory network of educational resources. In Illich's view, the conventions of schooling are trivial and hardly
worth changing. The trouble with school, he contends, is in its basic structure. Schools compel. Schools judge. Schools mandate. Schools discriminate. Schools certify. Schools punish. Therefore, why try to make them better? The school, according to Illich and many of his followers, is our latter-day medieval church, through which all must pass who wish to achieve any status in our society. The school is essentially a political institution, not an educational one. Europe eventually de-churched itself; why should not America (and other similarly “schooled” countries) de-school itself? If it did, we would have a more humane and democratic society, one which values pragmatic performance competence and provides many and diverse avenues to education, to success, to a decent life.

Illich’s critique of the schools is not essentially different from Goodman’s or Friedenberg’s. What is different is that Illich has abandoned any hope that schools can be reformed, and he has tried to offer a comprehensive alternative to them. Those who have criticized Illich’s views have tended to reply that what he is saying about the function of schools has already been said, and that for all of its truth or even half-truth, there is no possibility that schools will be eliminated in America. Therefore, his arguments are irrelevant. Among those who have found his views appealing, there are some who believe it is not necessary to eliminate schools but only to rebuild their basic structure through such means, for example, as the voucher system. There are also a number of de-schoolers who are engaged in developing free learning systems as a kind of transitional stage between a schooled society and a nonschooled one.

There you have a fifteen-minute history of the past fifteen years of school criticism. Naturally, there are a number of important details omitted, but we believe the narrative contains no serious deformities, as far as it goes. As you may have noticed, we have not alluded to a number of issues that, over the years, have appeared on the front pages of newspapers as school problems, such as busing, violence, drugs, and so on. We have excluded them here because they have not been the focal point of any serious attempt to achieve school reform. Most of these “crises” are symptoms of large social and political problems, and while they clearly affect (and infect) the schools, they are
not susceptible to solution by the schools themselves. For example, the issue of busing arises not out of any deficiency in schools but simply because in America black and white people do not live in the same neighborhoods. And not even Ivan Illich has offered a solution to that.

To take another example: Without question, problems in the schools are linked in several ways to the problem of technology, the problem of decaying cities, the problem of large demographic shifts, and certainly to the problem which Martin Hamburger calls "surplus people." According to Hamburger, the social milieu in which young people grow gives distinctive clues as to how much they are needed in their society. The milieu is the message, he says, and in countries like Japan and Israel children are eager learners, not because their schools are delightful or even interesting, but rather because they know that their society needs them, most especially as workers. In America, for a variety of reasons, our economy does not presently need all of our people. Our government now stipulates that 5 percent of the population may be "acceptably unemployed." (And this 5 percent does not include any of the 12 percent on welfare.) Moreover, it is fairly clear by now that all those television commercials urging the young to stay in school for economic gain are misleading: the majority of youngsters who stay in school do not do much better economically than those who drop out. Thus, the message of our milieu is that, in some respects, it does not matter if you are a diligent learner in school.

The point we are making here is that these considerations are important to a general understanding of how schools are affected by other social systems. We have not included them here because we have been talking about the development of a body of criticism about how schools operate, not other social systems.

Assuming, then, within this limitation, that our narrative of the recent history of school criticism is accurate, what does it all mean?

In the first place, school critics, like other critics, tend to overestimate the influence of their ideas. The fact is that there are many schools in the country that have not been touched by any of this. For example, there are no doubt teachers and administrators in every city in America who are just getting around
to reading Admiral Rickover. Moreover, there are many teachers and administrators who have heard the hollering but have been outraged rather than changed by it. Large numbers of school people, however, have heard the hollering and have made some effort to modify the schooling process. (Specific changes that are being made, and why, will be discussed in the third section.)

Here it is necessary to say that although we have compartmentalized school criticism into phases, with beginnings and endings, the reality of the situation is much more complex and fluid. This is due largely to the fact that the critics we have discussed really asked different questions. To Rickover and his group, the critical question was, How can school best serve the national interest? (Rickover would be stunned to know it, but John Dewey, George Counts, and some other progressives were also absorbed by the very same question, but with "national interest" more broadly defined.) To Bruner, and other curriculum builders, the key question was, How can a subject best be taught? To the romantics, the question was, What is school for? And to abolitionists like Illich, the real question is, How can we best get an education?

Each of these questions has infused the school issue with interest and vitality, and together they have led inexorably to the most important question of all: What role can school realistically play in the education of our youth? In the next two sections, we will deal with that question. Whether they like it or not the schools will be dealing with it for the next twenty-five years.
WHAT IS SCHOOL?

Understanding something usually means being able to make distinctions. In this chapter, we want to offer several distinctions—none more important, for our purposes, than the distinction between education and school. It is an obvious enough one, although many people talk and act as if it is not. Simply, education is a lifelong process of learning how to negotiate with the world. For "negotiate with," read: understand, accept, cope with, manipulate, triumph over, enjoy, be-one-with, or whatever is your fancy. For the moment, the important point is that it is lifelong, which means it begins before you enter school, and ends when you do.

Of course, it is entirely possible for someone to miseducate himself—that is, not learn how to negotiate with the world very well or, at least, not learn how to negotiate with important parts of his world. And it hardly needs stressing that one's education requires the presence, attention, and support of other people, preferably people who have learned how to conduct their own affairs with some degree of satisfaction. But education is a do-it-yourself job, whether done badly or well. As someone once said of Mussolini, he was a self-taught man who was a bad student, and who had an even worse teacher. Perhaps that can be said of most of us. In any case, education is not an institutional responsibility and never can be. Each person will educate himself in a unique way, using as much of a community's resources as he has the will and intelligence to appropriate.

School is another matter. It is true enough that in theory the most important purpose of school is to give an individual some assistance in educating himself, which means that ultimately the
quality of a school may be judged by its capacity to achieve that purpose. But like any complex institution, school can easily get sidetracked by political, social, and economic considerations, and this fact has sent many a school critic in search of some other line of work. It is best to acknowledge, at the outset, that schools serve many masters, yield to many constraints, have many items on their agenda, and therefore cannot always concentrate their resources on assisting an individual in educating himself. Thus, "to be schooled" is not the same thing as "to be educated."

If you are a parent, one of the obvious implications of this distinction is that it would be foolhardy to leave your child's education up to the schools—for example, to expect the schools to teach a love of art or music or literature, or a respect for good manners, or a distrust of drugs, or a healthy attitude toward sex. And it does not make any difference whether they are "good schools" or "bad schools." The effect that even the best school has on the total education of a child is vastly overrated and, in comparison to the home (not to mention friends, relatives, and television), relatively small. If you are a student, you would be deceiving yourself to blame any deficiencies in your own education on schools. And, as we said, if you are an education critic, you will be constantly disappointed if you expect school to assume an all-encompassing role in the education of the young. (That is why John Holt, one of this decade's most eloquent education critics, has announced that he is no longer interested in schools.)

What we are saying should not be construed as either an apology for or an attack on schools. We mean simply to point out that there are important differences between a personal goal and a social institution, and that to ignore those differences is fatal to an understanding of either. The distinction between education and school is similar in this respect to the distinction between love and marriage. The song to the contrary, love and marriage do not necessarily go together, and only a fool expects the institution of marriage—all by itself—to transform him into a loved and loving human being. To say this is not an accusation against marriage, just as it is not an attack on the courts to point out that the institution of law is not the same as the personal quest for justice and it is not an attack on the church to say that participation in a religious institution is not the same as leading a
religious life. Quite the contrary. By pointing out the limitations of an institution, we do away with the need to defend it against unreasonable demands and clear the way for a realistic appraisal of what it can do and might do better.

What we are talking about, then, are the limitations of the schooling process: Education and school are not synonymous, and the failure to keep this difference clearly in mind can lead to grievous and expensive errors.

So much for what school is not. What, then, is it? As we have said earlier, school is an institution. This means that, like the church or marriage or the law, it has a history, and a specialized vocabulary, a population of bureaucratic functionaries, and a complex set of rules and procedures all its own. It assigns different roles, rights, and responsibilities to the various people involved in it. It structures authority in a particular way. And it is surrounded by a network of “support systems” which insure its survival. But for all their significance, these features are peripheral, not central, to the definition of school. What defines school as an institution is the specific set of essential functions it serves in our society. Everything else about school—its language, its rules and procedures, its authority structure, its support systems—is simply a set of instruments for carrying out those functions.

This distinction—between the essential functions of school and the conventional ways in which it carries them out—is critical to an understanding of how schools can be changed, or cannot be. Perhaps an analogy or two will help to illustrate our point. Suppose you were in a position to make significant changes in our prison system. What are the possibilities? You could improve the quality of food and medical care. You could provide prisoners with more meaningful work to do and pay them more for it. You could introduce more serious efforts at rehabilitation (whatever that means). There are many things you could do, but there are just as many that you could not, and still have a prison. You could not, for example, decide that there should be no guards (although you could have better trained guards). You could not decide that prisoners will determine the length of their stay (although you could improve the parole procedures). You could not decide to permit prisoners to live in their own homes (although
you could allow more frequent visits by friends and relatives. It is among the essential functions of prison to supervise prisoners carefully, to detain them for periods of time established by law, and to isolate them from the rest of society for the duration of those periods. These functions, along with a handful of others, define the prison as an institution. To change them does not reform the institution; it abolishes it.

The specific procedures by which prison accomplishes its functions, on the other hand, are conventions—and therefore subject to change. You do not need steel bars and thick walls, for example, to isolate prisoners from the rest of society. The same function can be achieved, and has been, by confining prisoners to an island surrounded by hostile waters or, for that matter, to a fairly comfortable farm. Either way, you still have a prison.

Let us take one more analogy. In our culture, it is an essential function of criminal law to inform a defendant of the crime of which he is accused, another function is to define what shall and shall not constitute admissible evidence at a trial, and still another function is to provide a jury to consider the evidence and reach a decision about it. You might make significant reforms in the law by changing the time, place, and language in which the defendant is informed of the charges against him, by changing the rules regarding evidence (for example, to admit wiretap information), or by altering the procedures for selecting jurors. You might even decide to reduce the number of jurors from twelve to nine, or to seven, or to five. To do so would change the conventions of law, but leave the basic functions of the institution intact. But you could not decide to do away with the jury altogether, or abolish all rules of evidence, or leave the defendant wondering about the nature of the charges against him. That would change the essential functions which define law as an institution—and it would thereupon cease to exist.

The point of these analogies is not that the law and prisons and schools are alike in their social and political roles (although that case has been argued) but that their existence implies certain basic functions that cannot be altered without eliminating the institution altogether. It may be a good idea to have prisons, or it may not; but if you have them, you cannot pretend that they are convalescent homes. It may be a good idea to have
schools, or it may not; but if you have them, you cannot pretend that they are resort hotels.

All of which brings us to the central question of this section: What are the essential functions of school as an institution, and what are simply conventions for carrying out those functions?

To begin with, and to avoid pointless, abstract philosophical objections, we must say something about our use of the word "essential." We do not mean it in the Platonic sense of an essence. We mean simply this: When you look carefully at all those places that are called schools, you find that no matter how much they may differ, they share some common functions. These functions derive their authority from tradition and law, as well as from the conceptions (and misconceptions) a society holds about human development. Among those who do systems analysis, such functions are called invariants. They are the scaffolding which gives the institution its particular shape. Exactly how the scaffolding originated and evolved is a subject for the historian. Suffice it to say that these structural invariants are supposed to insure the fulfillment of the main purposes of the institution. When they do not, you are left with a pointless design, which needs to be torn down and replaced by something else.

It has been argued that such is the case of the institution known as school. But we do not think most people believe that such a point has been reached. It is entirely possible that in the years ahead, the essential functions we are about to specify will completely disappear, replaced by others manifestly more suitable to social conditions and beliefs. But as things stand now—for us, in this time and place—the institution known as school, for all of its irritating, even preposterous, defects, does not appear to be in jeopardy of crumbling. We are not saying that this is either good or bad, but only that it is so. As a consequence (as we shall try to show in the third section) the most realistic hope of improving school lies in modifying its conventions, not its essential functions.

One other point before turning to the question. We want to call attention to the level of abstraction we will be working at. For example, in addressing the question, What is school?, one may give answers such as these: It is an institution for keeping people in line, for keeping poor people poor, for regulating the economy,
for promoting sexual inhibition, and so on. Some of these answers may be true or not, but in all cases, they are highly debatable and, most important, exceedingly abstract. As you will see in a moment, we have settled, for the most part, on a lower level of abstraction because it seems to us that at this level one can best see why schools operate the way they do. For example, if you are a parent who wishes to understand or change some procedure in a school, it would be ludicrous to approach an administrator or teacher with the idea that he is serving the military-industrial complex, or trying to keep children off the labor market. To the extent that such statements might be true, they have little to do with him, or you, or your child. Therefore, we have directed our aim at a level of discourse that can provide the basis for practical discussions about what is happening in school. And so, to the question, What are the essential functions of school, and what are its conventions?

Perhaps the most obvious institutional essential of school is its time-structuring function. Just about every school that ever existed has assumed the responsibility of organizing, in some fashion, the way its students occupy their time and, not incidentally, the way parents occupy their time. This is as true of the most progressive free school as it is of the most reactionary traditional school. In each of them, there is a time when something called school starts, and a time when it stops. There is also a time when certain activities take place, and a different time for others. Without that, you have no school. On the other hand, the particular way in which a school slices up time is conventional. The nine-month school year, the five-day week, the seven-hour day, the forty-five minute period—these are all conventions. You do not need that particular set of conventions to have a school, any more than you need bad food to have a prison, or twelve jurors to have a court of law. But you do need some way to serve the time-structuring function. That is essential.

Another essential function of school concerns what students do during the time structure provided. That is, every school structures, in one way or another, the activities in which students are to engage. This means that, by definition, there is no such thing as an unstructured school. There are only schools which use different conventions to structure activities. The major difference
between a free school and a traditional one is that the former includes as one of its activities the student's choosing what he will do next. And his choice is structured, obviously, by the options the school provides. Whether a school provides twenty activity options or none, and whether choosing is considered a legitimate student activity or not, is a matter of convention. What is essential is the activity-structuring function itself.

The way in which schools carry out their time- and activity-structuring functions depends on the way they exercise another essential function: the defining of "intelligence," "intellectual ability," "achievement," and "good behavior." Without some standard (implicit or explicit) of what constitutes intelligent behavior, important knowledge, necessary skills, and good deportment, you do not have a school. The content of those definitions is conventional and will vary from one school to another, even from one age to another. The traditional school may define intelligence as reading skill, the progressive school may define it as question-asking ability, and the free school may define it as self-knowledge. Good behavior may mean uninhibited self-expression in one school, cooperation in a second, obedience in a third. The important point is that no matter what conventions they use to do it, every school is compelled to provide such basic definitions.

Out of that institutional essential grows another: evaluation, or more plainly, judging. All schools exist, in part, to judge some aspect of a child's behavior, usually the skills and attitudes the school has defined as essential to intelligence or good behavior. What those skills and attitudes are, we have already noted, is a matter of convention. Time was when most schools evaluated a student's knowledge of Latin. Nowadays, such knowledge is not thought worthy of evaluation. For some curious reason, schools presently want to evaluate such things as map-reading skills. But that is how conventions are. They change. Not quickly, not easily, not even for the better, but change they do, such as the procedures used to evaluate students. Standardized tests, grading systems (A, B, C, or whatever), report cards—these are all conventions, which means that they can be, and have been, replaced by other procedures. But whatever procedures schools use, they must evaluate something if they are to remain schools.

The school's responsibility for evaluation leads to still another
essential function: to differentiate between those who are evaluated and those who do the evaluating. In other words, schools always create a separation between the roles of teachers and students, between the judges and the judged. In a progressive school, the role of the teacher may be quite different from the role of a teacher in a traditional school; even their titles may be different. But whether they are called "masters" or "facilitators" or "resource persons," in all schools teachers have one role—whatever it may be—and students another. That is essential. What is conventional is whether the teacher is authoritarian or democratic, progressive or traditional, certified or not. There are schools today that are even using students as teachers, which we think is a splendid new convention. The point is that you still know who are the teachers and who are the students in any given situation. If not, you may have a "dynamic learning environment" or an "ongoing education happening" or a "total life experience," but you do not have a school.

One characteristic of what we are calling institutional essentials is that they are most clearly observable in the breach. That is, the essential functions of school are often more visible when they are not being served than when they are. This is especially true of the school's supervisory function. Very few teachers would list "to supervise and control the young" among the important functions of school. But you have only to imagine the consequences of failure in this function to see at once that supervision is essential, so essential, in fact, that it is one of the few requirements every state government specifies in its definition of school. The procedures used to provide supervision are of course conventional. Consequently, the legal definition of what constitutes adequate supervision will vary from state to state. But in the eyes of the law and most everyone else an institution must provide some form of supervision of the young if it is to qualify as a school.

The responsibility of the school to supervise reflects a broader function: to serve the economic, social, and political interests of the group that nominally pays to support it. Whether a given school is fulfilling that function well or badly is often a topic of heated, even vicious, public debate. But in the end, through one set of conventions or another (for example, school board elec-
tions, PTA's, "community control"), the school is held accountable to its constituents. The form such accountability might take is now one of the most disturbing issues in public education.

Accountability is not confined to the existing needs of the community. It includes a responsibility to the future as well. Every school has, as one of its essential functions, to prepare students in some way for the economic and social realities they will encounter as adults. More specifically, school functions as both a training ground for and an entry point into higher education, the professions, other social institutions, and jobs. Most schools exercise this function through the convention known as curriculum. The content of the curriculum is determined, in theory at least, by the requirements of college and industry or, to be more accurate, by the school's perception of those requirements. Whether any given curriculum does, in fact, prepare students for the future is an open question. What is not so open is that every school attempts, through one set of conventions or another, to meet that responsibility.

The function of school we have just described—to prepare students for the social and economic realities they will encounter as adults—helps us to stress a point we may not have made clear enough in the preceding pages. It is that every essential function of school we have identified is integrally related to every other function. We have said that school functions theoretically to prepare students for their future. To fulfill that function, it must identify the knowledge, skills, and attitudes young people will need to survive. In doing so, school defines intelligence, intellectual ability, and good behavior. To determine how well or poorly the student's performance matches up with those definitions, school evaluates behavior. To serve its evaluating function, school differentiates between the roles of teacher and student. On the basis of its evaluation, school structures time and structures activities in an attempt to modify or control the student's behavior. By structuring time and activities, school insures supervision of the young. In providing supervision, as in its other functions, school is accountable to those who pay for it. And as part of its accountability, school aims at preparing students for the economic and social realities they will encounter as adults.

So there you have a capsule definition of school: It's an in-
stitution which serves that particular set of functions. We do not claim that this is the only way to define a school. We do claim that this distinction—between essential functions and conventions—is important to keep clearly in mind, especially for anyone who wants to evaluate criticism of the schools or to play a role in helping to change a school or even to start one.

There have been several school critics, as we have already pointed out, who have attacked with great eloquence the foundations on which the idea of a school rests—what we are calling institutional essentials. They have, in effect, called for the elimination of such functions as time structuring, evaluation, and role differentiation. In all cases of which we are aware, such critics have ultimately become discouraged and have either dropped out altogether or have turned away from schools toward larger educational issues. In either instance, they are no longer a force for school reform and will have very little practical effect on the lives of our children. Criticism of the institutional essentials makes interesting reading, quick reputations, and, sometimes, first-rate sociology. But it does go very far in generating practical changes in schools. Practical changes come through the re-creation of conventions, and this is true in all social systems, especially the school. Of course, to some people (for example, radical critics), practical change is a synonym for insignificant change. But this is the case only when those trying to make change are timid or lack imagination. In the next section, we will discuss thirty-five specific changes that the schools are presently moving toward—all of them practical, and none, in our opinion, are insignificant.
WHAT IS A GOOD SCHOOL?

School is a place that performs the functions described in the preceding section, but can such a place help one to get an education? Well, as we have said, only partly. You may have noticed that in the last section educating was not listed as an essential function of school. This was not a snide omission. In theory, educational experiences are supposed to be the consequences of all the essential functions and carefully developed conventions of the schooling process, and once in a while it may actually work out that way. Quite often it does not, which is why Ivan Illich has attracted a wide following of de-schoolers.

If school cannot always provide educational experiences, should we have such an institution? As we have implied, this is a nonproductive question. We have school, and it is not going to go away, at least not all at once and not in the near future. There are at present 48 million children attending public schools, another 6 million in private schools. That means, among other things, that school is one of America’s largest industries, the total elementary and secondary school budget coming close to 50 billion dollars annually. Anything less than a cataclysm on the order of the melting of the glacial ice caps will leave school intact, so far as its essential functions are concerned.

Well then, can schools be made better by changing their conventions? This is an extraordinarily difficult question. To begin with, we have the problem of what “better” means. To Admiral Rickover it would mean one thing, to Jerrold Zacharias another, to Jonathan Kozol still another. To Ivan Illich the question is analogous to asking, Can we improve cancer? Obviously, there are
positions in this matter which cannot be reconciled. Nonetheless, from the perspective of many school people and school critics, as well as parents and students, the answer is, Yes, schools can be made better. But that is just the beginning. To most people (although they would hardly put it this way) a school is good when its conventions serve all the essential functions of the institution without preventing children from having educational experiences. A school is very good when its conventions actually promote educationally valuable experiences.

But what are educationally valuable experiences? And how are they promoted? Here is where the problem gets sticky. For example, it is an essential function of school to supervise the behavior of children. One of the many conventions invented to serve that function is the requirement that elementary school children line up before entering their classrooms. (This is so in many schools, not all.) Is there anything educationally valuable about that? Some say that it teaches children to be orderly and disciplined. Others say it has nothing to do with orderliness and discipline, that it is strictly a convenience for teachers. Supervision, they say, does not require immobility, and immobility is neither natural nor valuable for children.

Another example is that most schools have a convention that children with similar reading or I.Q. test scores be grouped together. This is a means of achieving a more efficient structuring of student activities, which, in turn, is supposed to facilitate learning. Does it really? Some say children learn more when they are all doing the same thing at the same time. Therefore, there should not be great ability differences among them when they start out. Others say, however, that children can learn just as efficiently, if not more so, when they are with others of a wide range of ability. Moreover, grouping according to test scores creates a caste system and makes many children believe they are stupid—permanently.

A final example: schools must evaluate. In order to do that, most schools have a highly competitive grading system. Is this convention educationally valuable? Those who say yes believe that real life is competitive and that children need to learn early that their success will always come through someone else’s failure. The grading system, therefore, reflects the way things really are
and prepares students to face reality in the future. Those who say no believe that this is a false concept of success and failure, and that, in any case, there is time and opportunity enough for children to learn about competition. Schools should help everyone grow in confidence, and therefore, no one should fail.

You can see, then, that in developing a concept of a good school or an improved school, there are two questions that have to be resolved. First, what are educationally valuable experiences? Second, what conventions will best promote them?

These questions, in point of fact, have been more or less resolved by many active school people and school critics. All of the hollering over the past fifteen years has not been for nothing. It has resulted in a pattern of consensus as to how to proceed in making a school better. You may not agree with these conclusions. You may even feel that what has been defined as better is your definition of worse. Nonetheless, what we are about to describe is, in fact, the direction in which most school change is presently moving.

Time structuring

1. A school is good when its daily time sequences are not arbitrary (forty-five minutes for this, forty-five minutes for that, etc.) but are related to what the students are doing. If something takes twenty minutes to do, why drag it out? If something takes an hour and twenty minutes to do, why cut it short?

2. A school is good when children are not expected to do the same thing in the same amount of time. This amounts to recognizing that there is a difference between expecting a student to learn something and expecting him to learn something at a predetermined pace. Learning rates vary, and a good school is one that does not penalize or reward such variation, but accepts it as natural. It also accepts the fact that the rate at which something is learned is related to the interest of the learner more than anything else. In bad schools, a slow learner is often being punished simply because of lack of compliance, not ability.

3. A school is good when students are not required merely to serve time in courses, like in a jail sentence. In a bad
school, there is a preoccupation with taking courses, such as English 6, Social Studies 8, and Science 7. A good school is more concerned with the achievement of competence than it is with time-serving. Thus, in a good school the question is not, “Have you taken . . . ?” but “Have you learned . . . ?”

4. **A school is good** when it allows students, at least to some extent, to organize their own time—i.e., decide how they will use it. In educating oneself, one must make that decision continuously. The idea here is to help children learn to organize and use time by giving them that experience in school.

**Activity structuring**

1. **A school is good** when the activities it requires are not arbitrary (for example, “We’ve always done that”) or based on discredited claims (for example, “The study of grammar strengthens the mind”). A school is good when it can assert on some empirical and rational basis that its activities have relevance to the lives of children. This does not necessarily mean a student can use what he learns later in the afternoon. It does mean that there is some demonstrable evidence that many students have, at some time or other, found these activities useful in the pursuit of an education. Of course, if you can learn something in the morning that you can use later in the afternoon, it does wonders for your morale.

2. **A school is good** when it does not require all students to engage in the same activities, but gives them considerable latitude in choosing from among many options. Since educating oneself involves making decisions about one’s activities as well as one’s time, it is a good idea for a school to give students a chance to learn how to choose among activities. This does not necessarily mean there should be no requirements. A good school may or may not have them, but it will always allow for individual variations and for considerable student participation in identifying and suggesting worthwhile activities.
3. A school is good when it recognizes that no matter how logical its activity structuring may be, the process is next to worthless if students are alienated from their activities. In other words, the psycho-logic of activities is more important than their logical structure. For example, it may seem logical to require *Julius Caesar* in the tenth grade, *Hamlet* in the eleventh, and *Macbeth* in the twelfth. Or it may seem even more logical to start with geometry, then move to algebra, then to trigonometry. But if these or any other sequences are turning students off, what good are they?

4. A school is good when its activities are student activities. That may seem obvious, since it cannot be much of an activity if the students are not doing it. But in many schools, subjects like English, history, and science are mostly teacher activities in that teachers do most of the reading, writing, talking, and thinking. The students take notes, which is a fine activity for training stenographers, but not much good for anything else. A school is good when its activities require students to do the heavy work. Moreover, student work should have some relationship to what scholars in a particular field actually do. The more correspondence between student intellectual activity and scholarly intellectual activity, the better.

5. A school is good when its activities are not confined to a single building but include the resources of the whole community. Activities which put students in touch with real people and problems outside the school walls have an enormous educational potential; because they are real, they are unusually dynamic, and they have variety.

6. A school is good when its activities bring together students of great diversity in background and ability. There is, in fact, no evidence that bright children learn less when they are with slow children than when they are with other bright children. There is evidence, however, that when children are labeled slow, they tend to develop a bad—sometimes incurable—case of low self-esteem.
Defining intelligence, worthwhile knowledge, good behavior

1. A school is good when it moves away from valuing memorization and ventriloquizing and moves toward valuing question asking, problem solving, and research. This does not mean a good school foregoes all information giving—for example, through lectures and text assignments. It does mean that a good school wants students to do as much inquiring, generalizing, and verifying as possible.

2. A school is good when it rejects passive acceptance and encourages involvement and independence. Thus, behavior that in the past may have been considered impertinent or disobedient may now be considered healthy, aggressive skepticism, and much to be valued.

3. A school is good when it moves away from valuing knowledge for knowledge's sake and moves toward valuing the use of knowledge in daily life. In other words, a good school comes very close to saying that if you do not act as if you know something, then you do not know it.

4. A school is good when reading ability is considered only one of several possible ways through which students can express intellectual competence and interest. This does not mean that a good school is not interested in teaching reading skills. It does mean that a good school also values talking, film making, audio taping, photography, video taping, and other communication skills. "Valuing" means here that students can earn brownie points with their teachers by demonstrating competence in these skills. In the past, the high priority given to reading and writing has been justified by their importance in the culture; that is, the culture defined them as important, and the schools reflected that definition. Today, the culture is requiring a broader definition of literacy, and better schools are now reflecting that fact.

5. A school is good when it accepts as legitimate many of the new subjects invented, say, during the past seventy-five years or so, such as anthropology, sociology, cinematography, ecology, cybernetics, linguistics, meteorology, marine biol-
ogy, musicology, futurology, urbanology, and so on. The curriculum makers of a good school are not so sure as they used to be about what are basic subjects. As a consequence, students are offered the widest possible range of subjects from which to choose. In other words, a good school acknowledges the knowledge explosion which is taking place, and it tries to reflect its consequences in its definition of worthwhile knowledge.

6. A school is good when it includes self-knowledge as part of its definition of worthwhile knowledge. In a good school, a student's feelings are not considered an intrusion upon his pursuit of knowledge, but a subject of inquiry themselves. Although a good school need not become a psychiatric hospital, it should make a systematic effort to help a student understand himself, get in touch with his own feelings, monitor his own behavior, and so on.

Evaluation

1. A school is good when it moves away from aversive responses toward reinforcing ones. No matter what one's opinion may be of B. F. Skinner, it is well established that acceptance and approval are far more effective than rejection and punishment as a means of controlling behavior. In a good school, students are rewarded for acceptable behavior, but not necessarily punished for unacceptable behavior. If the rewards are worthwhile (to the student) and consistently given, the procedure usually works. (It even works in rehabilitating prisoners.) In several good schools, a revised grading system has been introduced, in which a student is given credit for doing passing work, but does not get an F for unsatisfactory work. He simply gets no credit. Thus, to some extent, failure is de-institutionalized; only success is recorded. There is an analogy here with a driver's license. If you pass the driving test, you get your license. If you fail it, you do not get a nondriver's license. And no one notes your failure on a permanent record card, either. By eliminating the stigma of failure, you eliminate a great deal of fear and anxiety, neither of which contributes to enthusiastic learning.
2. A school is good when it moves away from factory-like processing procedures and toward more humanistic, individualized judgments. In the best schools, this means a relatively nonpunitive grading system, no homogeneous grouping, a minimum of labeling ("good student," "slow student"), and no permanent record keeping. In a few good schools, respect for the privacy of an individual has led to a policy of revealing the teacher's appraisal of any learning experience to no one except the student and his parents (not even to next year's teachers). In an increasing number of schools, students are playing a role in evaluating their own performance. (They usually turn out to be tougher on themselves than any teacher.) The idea is to make evaluation a learning experience, which, in theory, all schools recommend but which, in practice, few accomplish.

3. A school is good when its priorities are broadly conceived, rather than narrowly hierarchical. For example, in many schools a student may be judged slow solely on the basis of reading and mathematical ability. The same student may be an excellent musician, actor, or even group leader, but will receive very little formal recognition for these skills. This is patently unjust, and in good schools, the evaluation system has been adjusted to deal with this problem. In a few good schools, students are even allowed to work out, with the guidance of their teachers, their own priorities for learning. In this way, students can utilize and capitalize on things they do well and are interested in.

4. A school is good when it makes as explicit as possible what kinds of behaviors it wants, assuming that such behaviors are reasonable. In many courses, students are uncertain about how they will be judged because it is not clear to them what they are expected to learn or how they are supposed to demonstrate competence. Granted, it is not always possible or even desirable to provide students, at the outset of every learning opportunity, with a detailed set of specifications for the goals they are expected to achieve. Nonetheless, there are many instances when it is.
One of the best ways to do this is to give the students their final exam at the beginning of the year. If the exam is trustworthy, it will reveal explicitly what students ought to know, or what they ought to be able to do, by the end of the year. This raises another important point about evaluation: It is highly desirable to make quite certain that you actually evaluate what you say you want to, not something else. For example, in some schools, a subject like literature is taught with the aim of increasing the student's interest in reading. But the test the student is asked to pass is about his knowledge of particular literary works. There is nothing wrong with such a test if communicating the content of those works was your aim in teaching the subject. But if your stated goal was something else, then either the test or the goal was dishonestly conceived.

5. **A school is good** when it does not use standardized tests, or uses them only with extreme caution and skepticism. Standardized tests have a way of tyrannizing schools into teaching for the test. In effect, the curriculum degenerates into coaching for the test. In some cases, this would no doubt represent an improvement over what presently exists, but in most cases, it does not. The makers of standardized tests are businessmen, who have their own motives for creating tests, and certainly they have no interest in the particular needs of particular children. Testing should grow from what is taught, and what is taught should grow from who is taught. If a test fits, then it might be useful. Otherwise, the tail is wagging the dog.

6. **A school is good** when there are constructive, nonpunitive procedures for the evaluation of teachers and administrators, as well as students. In many recent cases, attempts to evaluate teachers and principals have failed because the evaluation was done by angry students or parents in crisis situations. But when evaluation procedures are set up in a rational, cooperative, nonemergency context, they usually work and contribute to an increase in school spirit and teaching effectiveness.
Supervision

1. **A school is good** when it moves away from adversary relationships between teacher and student and toward collaborative effort. It is difficult to institutionalize such a change; everything really depends on the willingness and ability of teachers to forgo an authoritarian role. Teachers can be encouraged to do this, however, by eliminating such supervisory conventions as getting everyone in size places, alphabetical order, and permanent seats. Depriving students of autonomy in controlling their own bodily movements is the best way of making them feel like victims and prisoners. In good schools, teachers try to keep such control to an absolute minimum.

2. **A school is good** when students are given opportunities to supervise themselves. Some schools ask students, for example, to handle discipline problems, to serve as crossing guards, to administer tests, to help keep the building in repair, and so on. The idea, of course, is to give students a sense of control in the functioning of the school. There may be no more effective way to teach the need for order and discipline.

3. **A school is good** when it is small enough so that supervision (and just about everything else) can be a personal—a human—problem, not a logistics problem. It is practically impossible for collaborative and meaningful associations to occur in a building with 5000 students, or 3000. No one really knows what the maximum size of a humanized school is, but in various experiments around the country, the figure that keeps coming up is somewhere around 250.

Role differentiation

1. **A school is good** when teachers forgo their role as sole authority figures, view themselves as learners, and try to develop the idea of a learning community in which the teacher functions more as a coordinator or facilitator of activities than a dictator. Such a role is particularly suitable to junior and senior high school, although it is being widely accepted
in elementary schools on the basis of its success in the British Infant Schools.

2. A school is good when it places in a teaching role the greatest variety of people— for example, paraprofessionals, interested laymen, and even students. Incidentally, the best research we have on teaching effectiveness suggests that (1) students learn more when they are taught by other students than when they are taught by teachers, and (2) students who function as teachers learn more than when they are functioning as students. That is a fact only the foolish would neglect, and the best schools make ample use of students as teachers. Selective use is also being made of knowledgeable, talented laymen—bankers, artists, carpenters, dancers, and so on—who are interested in working with children. The big problem with using students and laymen as teachers is over the question of professionalism. How professional are “professional” teachers? The most realistic answer now being given goes something like this: Although teachers are professionals in many legitimate meanings of the word, they are not professionals in one sense. They do not have command of a complex body of knowledge or generally accepted, replicable procedures which insure that they will obtain better results than people who have not been certified as teachers. This means that there is a considerable difference between an amateur teacher and, say, an amateur neurosurgeon. We may reasonably assume that there is a considerable knowledge gap between an amateur and a professional in the field of neurosurgery. There is no such gap between an amateur and a professional in teaching. This does not mean that teachers do not know anything or that there are no extraordinary teachers, and it does not mean that anyone could become, overnight, an adequate teacher. It does mean that much of the knowledge a good teacher uses is of a practical, nonspecialized nature, available to almost anyone with open eyes and ears. For example, a parent who is raising a child or two has as much opportunity to learn about child development, motivation, reinforcement, evaluation, structuring experiences, and the like, as any good teacher is likely to know and use.
Any specialized technical knowledge teachers have is minimal and, in any case, is easily communicated to anyone—with or without a degree—who wants to know it.

3. A school is good when it is so organized that it can capitalize on what its teachers do best and know most about. Too often, teachers are assumed to be knowledgeable about everything included within a subject, when in fact they might be strong in some aspects of it but quite weak in others. In a good school, teachers need not try to conceal their limitations. Working in conjunction with other teachers, they can exploit their strengths and receive help with their weaknesses.

4. A school is good when students are not objects to which things happen, but are encouraged to be active shapers of their own school experiences. In many good schools, for example, students play a role in designing the curriculum, in evaluating themselves, and in forming general school policy. In a few places, student government is actually a viable medium through which students are a potent political force in school. This is considered a good idea, not for political reasons, but for educational ones. If students are given a chance to wield power, they can learn to do so responsibly. Without any experience with power, students are a sure bet to use it badly when it is available.

5. A school is good when students are not constantly placed in competitive roles with each other, but function instead in collaborative relationships. Ideally, a good school strives to achieve something approaching a family feeling, in which each member is helped to grow in his/her own way, but not at the expense of someone else.

Accountability to the public

1. A school is good when it moves away from bureaucratic paternalism and toward increased community participation. In the best arrangements, this means that there are established channels through which parents can express grievances against the school and also participate in its functioning.
A school is bad when rancorous confrontation is the usual means by which parents call attention to their ideas and complaints.

2. **A school is good** when it offers a variety of alternative programs to the many publics which constitute a community. At the present time, most schools are essentially monolithic, offering one kind of educational program to all their constituents—who, in fact, differ noticeably in their orientation to school. Of course, it is not possible for a school to offer a special program for each member of the community, but the best schools recognize that there are several respectable but contrasting arrangements for learning, each of which is favored by some segment of the community. The idea is to offer as many of these as feasible. In this way, each school becomes several schools, and most students can find a program which suits their particular life and/or learning style.

3. **A school is good** when it is not afraid to be held accountable for its performance. The movement toward contract teaching and behavioral objectives is, in part, a reaction against the traditional resistance of teachers and administrators to being evaluated—sometimes by anyone. In the best schools, the staff tries to make explicit to parents and students what it wishes to accomplish (and what it does not), how it intends to do this, and what kinds of evidence it will accept as a sign of success. If school people refuse to do this, state legislatures will increasingly do it for them, probably to the detriment of everybody.

**Accountability to the future**

1. **A school is good** when its concept of knowledge, attitudes, and skills is oriented toward the future. This does not mean that a knowledge of the past is not useful. It means that a school has realistically assessed what students will need to know in the years ahead, and is making some serious attempts to help students learn those things. For example, subjects like ecology, space technology, and urbanology are undoubtedly of great importance for the future. If they are not part of the curriculum, a school is probably mak-
ing a serious mistake. Skills involving open-ended problem solving and the use of electronic media fall in the same category, as do attitudes which promote strength and intelligence in the face of continuous change. A school is bad—to put it plainly—when it has no viable strategy or plan to deal with vast cultural change. For example, schools that are striving to return to the basics are in deep trouble, and so are their students.

2. A school is good when it interprets its responsibility to the future as a responsibility to its students first, and to other social institutions, such as college, business, and the professions only at a late and convenient hour. This does not mean that schools should ignore, or even treat lightly, the present requirements of college, industry, and business in designing their curricula. It does mean that a good school is careful to avoid serving solely as a processing and certifying agency. It balances the future economic needs of its students with their emotional and social needs as fully functioning adults.

There you have, in our judgment, the thrust of most school changes at the present time. Of course, there is no school any place that has achieved all these changes or is even trying to achieve all of them. In fact, a good school is simply one that is trying to replace many of the old conventions with many of the new.

Why do these changes represent improvement? In some cases, because it can be demonstrated empirically that one procedure is better than another. For example, there is simply no question about the fact that positive reinforcement is a more effective way of changing behavior than is punishment. In other cases, a change is regarded as good because it appears more logical than some other procedure. For example, plain common sense dictates the inclusion in the curriculum of many subjects that did not exist fifty years ago but which are today the focal point of exciting research and new knowledge. But the main reason most of these changes are considered good is philosophical.

More than any other social institution, the American school mirrors what we want to think we are as a people. But when we
approach it to ask, Are we not the fairest one of all?, it keeps replying, in the most irritating fashion, that we are not. And over the past twenty years or so, its replies have become nasty accusations, in some ways, nastier than ever before. Our schools have been telling us that we are becoming dehumanized, empire-building technocrats, that we care more for our missiles than for our children. We are being told, by the facts of our schools, that we are racists, that we aim for mediocrity, that we cherish conformity, that we have no love of learning, that we have lost our moral fervor. It is an ugly picture, but being Americans, we still think all things are possible and all trends reversible. And so, we do what we have always done; we reform our schools in the hope that they may help us to actualize what we fancy is the great American experiment in how to live honorably and intelligently. And this entails asserting that school conventions should promote independence, creativity, egalitarianism, flexibility, and all the other qualities that graduation day speeches celebrate. So ultimately, what is good about a good school is that it takes some of that seriously, even if everyone does not.
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