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THE  
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For The  
SUPPORT OF SCHOOLS



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Superintendent of Public Instruction

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# THE RESPONSIBILITY OF GOVERNMENT For The SUPPORT OF SCHOOLS\*

By JAMES H. RICHMOND

Superintendent of Public Instruction

## The Crisis in Education

One of our most pressing social problems is to determine the place of public education in the total picture of government. Until the great depression hit us, most people took our schools for granted. The majority of us gave little attention to the character and measure of financial support extended for their operation; but when the national income was cut in half and the weight of taxes began to bear heavily upon us, society became tax-conscious and school-conscious.

It was comparatively easy for the government to restrict school support; and this was done in practically every section of America, despite the fact that in all probability the public schools of this nation had given a better account of their stewardship than any other agency of the government. People in every section of the country, some actuated by sincere motives, others inspired by malice and selfishness, began to inveigh against the heavy bills for education. School boards were criticized for ambitious building programs, school administrators and teachers were attacked for introducing too many "fads and frills" into the schools; and, consistent with mass psychology, most of the criticisms came from those who had insisted, and rightly so, upon an improved school service. Today, more people are studying, analyzing, criticizing, and defending the public schools of America than at any other era of their development. On the whole, this is wholesome. Thoughtful school leaders welcome public scrutiny, for they know better than anybody else that the schools can stand the test. They have kept the faith, which cannot be said of all servants of society during recent years.

\* An address delivered, in the fall of 1934, before a number of state and district education associations.

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It is true that education is costing more now than in former years, but every other agency of the government is costing more—the added cost being due primarily to public needs and demands, stimulated by a more sensitive social conscience. Let it be understood, however, that since one-fourth of the people of this nation are engaged in the school business, the cost of education is not unreasonable since only one income dollar out of every thirty-three goes to the support of public schools of America. Not the least cause of added school costs has been the great increase in high school enrollments. Today, approximately 6,500,000 pupils are attending the high schools of America, as against 3,500,000, ten years ago. During the last two years, many additional thousands have sought admission to high school as the direct result of N. R. A. policies prohibiting child labor. The public is demanding complete high school facilities, our complex social order requires them, and the youth of America is entitled to them. Our people will never permit arrogant selfishness to rob their children of this fundamental right and privilege of Democracy. Aristocracy in secondary education, as it now exists in most European countries, is repugnant to our philosophy of life and government.

### **Education First a Local Responsibility**

Education was first recognized as a parental responsibility, and was so considered by the English Common Law. For reasons that are well understood by students of history and sociology, the Church in the early stages of our social development assumed responsibility for the education of our children. Later, when society began to develop an educational conscience, local districts were constrained to tax themselves for school support. For a number of years practically the only taxes raised for the schools were secured from local sources, and even today in most of our states the major burden of the school support rests upon local communities. Sparsity of population, an agrarian state of society, lack of good roads, and a simple social order made this type of school support feasible and satisfactory.

A little over a century ago the great prophet-evangelist of public education, Horace Mann, began his work of building a state school system. Prior to his time much academic recognition had been given to the state's responsibility for education, but little had been done about it; even after some state school systems began to function in a feeble manner, the public schools were looked upon as pauper schools and were generally referred to as "common" schools.

### **The State's Responsibility for Education**

But pressure of economic forces compelled the states to assume an active responsibility for the support of public education. Our

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nation was making great industrial strides. These changes brought children into industry. Labor protested against this because of the cheap competition of child labor; society rebelled against it because of the injustice of a system that would tie immature children to the wheels of industry. Moreover, labor began to demand educational rights for their children which, up to this time, had been extended only to the well-to-do and socially prominent. Industrial leaders were insisting upon better trained people in their organizations. All of these demands, actuated by whatever motives, compelled society to strengthen, enlarge and dignify the public school. Education became more than a local responsibility; it was definitely recognized as a fundamental obligation of the state. Compulsory attendance laws were passed, teaching standards were raised, public institutions of higher learning were organized and supported, in part, for the purpose of training teachers for the schoolroom, who, in turn were to train children for democratic citizenship. The culmination of society's interest and responsibility for its children is reflected in the Children's Charter, adopted by President Hoover's White House Conference.

As I have already stated, the major part of public school support still comes from the local communities, but there is a definite trend toward larger state support. The more progressive states are taking seriously their constitutional mandates imposing upon them the responsibility for guaranteeing equality of opportunity in a public school system for all the children. Glaring inequalities of wealth within the bounds of a particular state, brought about by industrial development, which tends to concentrate wealth in certain sections, have made it imperative for the state to share to a greater degree in the expense of public education. In Kentucky, and this is true to a greater or less degree in every other state, certain local districts levy the maximum school tax permitted by law and yet receive only a fractional part of the per capita support for the education of their children that other more favored communities obtain from levying the minimum tax. Such inequalities are un-democratic and detrimental to the best interests of society. Frequently, the wealthier communities object to the state underwriting a larger part of the educational bill on the ground that these particular communities are taxed to aid in the education of the children in the other sections of the state. This is true, but let it be understood that the more fortunate communities are continually receiving new leadership from the less favored sections and are securing the trade from these sections, without which those wealthier areas could not prosper. In the city of Louisville, where I hold my citizenship, thousands of other Kentuckians have come to live, and it is to the best interests of that city that the educational facilities of every section of the State be such that these adopted

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sons of Kentucky's metropolis may be equipped to serve Louisville to the greatest advantage. Furthermore, Louisville owes her wealth, in part, to the outlying sections of Kentucky and adjacent areas in other states, without which the city could not prosper and grow. Lord Macaulay, in fancy, pictured the London of the dim, distant future, where an artist from another civilization may be seen reclining against the crumbling pillars of London Bridge, sketching the sad ruins of Saint Paul's Cathedral. Build a wall around Louisville, or any other city, place on top of that wall a sign—"Thou Shalt Not Enter", and in a few months that great city will become the desolate habitat of bats and owls, as drear and dead as Macauley's fanciful picture of Britain's metropolis.

Only in the matter of school support do our states insist that local communities bear the major part of the tax load. In building roads, no such policy is adhered to. Roads are built where they are needed, without regard to the financial ability of the particular section through which they go. As a matter of fact, in Kentucky, the best roads are usually found in the poorest sections of the state, due to the fact that, before a liberal road building program was inaugurated, only the more favored sections were able to build good roads. If it is a sound governmental policy to build good roads where they are needed, why is it not equally as sound to establish good schools where they are needed? The financial maxim in road building is "Get the money where the money is and build the roads where they are needed". Let us adopt this philosophy for the schools—"Get the money where the money is and spend it where the children are".

Another fundamental reason for the necessity of the state assuming the greater measure of educational support is the declining adequacy of the real estate tax. When ours was an agrarian nation, this tax, in all probability, was the fairest that could be imposed upon the people, but now that more than fifty percent of our people are urban, and since the major portion of our wealth is represented in industrial, financial and transportation enterprises, such a basic tax is not only inadequate but eminently unfair. It is not right to impose upon farmers and small home owners the major burden of school support. Other forms of taxation that should take, and are, in part, taking the place of the real estate tax, can only be levied by the state, thus making it not only desirable but necessary that the state extend greater support not only to the schools but to other governmental agencies as well.

Thus far, I have endeavored to show you that at the outset the responsibility for the education of our children was left to the parents, actually assumed, in most instances, by the church; later, local political units began to tax themselves for this purpose, and finally the

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states, by constitutional mandate, took over in principle, at least, the social obligation for a public school system. Briefly, I pointed out the gradual change in the attitude of the states, which has been reflected in an enlarged state school support, made necessary by flagrant inequalities in the wealth of the various sections of the state.

### **The Federal Government's Responsibility for Education**

But the responsibility for public education does not end with the state. The federal government cannot escape its obligation in this matter. We are citizens of the United States. Our people have a common destiny and the welfare and happiness of one section is dependent, in a large measure, upon the welfare and happiness of every other section. The same inequalities of wealth exist among states as are to be seen in the various sections of a single state. The twelve ablest states in the Union have three times the per capita wealth of the twelve poorest states, which means that if the latter exert the maximum effort in support of their schools, they can only do one-third as much as the ablest states. The existence of such inequalities is unfair and un-democratic.

The persistent attitude of the federal government in usurping the whole field of taxation is making it increasingly difficult for the states to secure adequate revenues for the support of their governmental agencies. Last year, Kentucky paid more taxes into the federal treasury than were collected for all state and local purposes combined. Moreover, the wealth of many sections of America is being poured into a few financial centers. The swollen fortunes in New York, the piled-up billions in Wall Street, represent the thrift and wealth of every other section of America. It is only fair that part of the taxes realized from this wealth should go back to the states from which much of it originated. This can only be accomplished by federal taxes, and, as a matter of fact it is being partially distributed in this way. Why should the schools be denied a share in this distribution? Other agencies are not overlooked—roads for instance.

The federal government has disregarded state lines in many of its projects—Boulder Dam and the Tennessee Valley Authority, for example. These worthwhile enterprises are made possible only by the taxes of all the people despite the fact that only restricted areas will directly profit by them. The same is true with river and harbor improvements. If it is a sound governmental policy to build dams, to drain rivers, to improve harbors, to build roads and to establish a new social and economic order in East Tennessee, and I agree that it is sound, why is it not equally as desirable to extend educational op-



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portunity with an even hand to the children of America, regardless of where they live? for, after all, the United States of America is made up of people, not things, and these people are shifting from locality to locality, and from state to state. Only a fractional part of our citizens are now living in the locality or state in which they were born and reared. State boundary lines are becoming fainter and fainter. Good roads, and other improved transportation facilities, the radio, and our complex social and economic relations, transcending all state boundary lines, very definitely impose upon the nation, as a whole, the responsibility for seeing to it that the children of America, without regard to state lines, are trained to function as good citizens in the country whose destiny soon will be in their hands. What better type of social insurance can the federal government take out than that represented in a sound program of public education—a program not supported in full by the national government, but one in which the federal government has had a legitimate part.

The great depression and the resultant recovery program have impelled the federal government to disregard state lines. In this connection, let me call to your attention the programs of the C. C. C., the P. W. A., Federal Housing and Emergency Education. It usually takes adversity to inaugurate policies which are no less essential in prosperity than necessary in distress. It appears that the federal government finds nothing inconsistent in subsidizing the above-named projects, but at the same time is reluctant to give much concern to the education of our children. What political Moses on a constitutional Sinai has received a Divine mandate, commanding our national government not to intrude in the field of education? Frankly, there have been more specious vaporings concerning this particular point of national policy than has been the case with any other fundamental problem presented to the federal government for its consideration.

As a matter of fact, the federal government has already established the precedent for educational support. The Northwest Ordinance, passed nearly a century and a half ago, specifically recognized the responsibility of the government for the education of the children of the Northwest Territory. For three-quarters of a century it has been subsidizing our land grant colleges, and soon after the close of the Civil War, it established, and still maintains, Howard University for Negroes. Moreover, vocational education for a number of years has been financed, in part, by the federal government. I believe in vocational education and I commend the government for this support, but if it is consistent for the federal government to underwrite special aspects of an educational program, it certainly is not inconsistent for that same government to aid in the support of the larger and more fundamental program of general education.

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Of course, the opponents of federal aid insist that such subsidies carry with them federal control, but the point is not well taken. Federal control has not resulted from aid extended to the land grant colleges or our vocational schools. Certainly, it is true that the federal government sets up certain standards which must be met by these schools before money is released for their support, and these standards have resulted in a greatly improved service; but no effort has ever been made to control them. Local boards of education regulate these colleges and schools and will continue to do so. Even if some federal bureau should presume to intrude in the matter of control, Congress, sensitive to the wishes of the people, would not permit it. The "bogey man" of federal control no longer alarms thinking people.

State lines are constantly being ignored by the federal government. Public works enterprises, transportation regulations, radio policies, and the like, disregard state boundaries, and yet when it comes to the education of our children the national government presumes to take the obsolete position that all matters pertaining to education must be left to the states.

Again, we must not forget that we are citizens of the United States. In times of war, this fact is impressed upon all of us, being called upon to bear its burdens and sorrows; in times of peace the federal government should not be indifferent to its obligation to safeguard the interests and promote the general welfare of all. Let our national motto, "E Pluribus Unum", mean what it says—from among many, one. In historic Arlington, overlooking the Potomac, and within the shadows of the Capitol's dome, sleeps the Unknown Soldier. We know not from what state he came. He may have hailed from Massachusetts, whose "embattled farmers fired the shot heard around the world"; he may have come from Texas, the Lone Star State, that cherishes the glories of a Houston, a Travis and a Crockett; he may have first seen the light in my own State of Kentucky, that gave to the world The Great Emancipator; but even if we do not know whence he came, we do know whom he served. He served America, all of America, and he died for America, and we know also that this same America has a responsibility to all the children of all the states, for ours is a common hope and a common destiny. I believe in the New Deal, and to the full extent of my ability, am helping to make it a success. It ought to succeed; but no governmental policy that fails to give a square deal to the children of America can possibly succeed. Consequently, this New Deal must concern itself with the problems of education. It has already exhibited some interest in this matter, and has extended a measure of emergency aid to the schools; but

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more must be done—a permanent policy for aid to education must be adopted. Trained and enlightened citizenship holds out the only hope for the future and that basic training has been obtained, and must continue to be secured from that great agency of democracy, the Public School.

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