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They're Playing Our Song

The plight of American education has become big news. So too has the relation between education and technology, which is essential to our competitive position in the world. This focus of media attention on the importance of science and learning to the national weal has never been so sharp. The accompanying sound track is loud and clear. From the reports of the National Commission on Excellence and Governor Hunt's Education Commission of the States to that of the Twentieth Century Fund Task Force on Federal Education Policy, the word is out. The quality of our public schools is declining. There is a crisis, and something must be done.

What else is new? The educational, scientific, and engineering elite of this country have been saying this for some time. Editorials, resolutions, and reports from such groups as the National Academy of Sciences, the Association of American Universities, the AAAS—in fact, from the entire education and scientific establishment—have for several years sounded the alarm. Then what has changed?

What is new is that now we are not the only ones speaking out. The media, who determine what receives public attention, are trumpeting the case. They're playing our song. Education has taken center stage. While we have their attention, we must decide what to do with the opportunity, what to ask for—how, in effect, to discharge our responsibility.

There is one answer that will not wash but is heard too often. That is, "the schools have been doing a great job, but you've asked us to do too much and paid us too little—just give us more money." Although there is some truth in this, it is defensive and self-defeating. The public wants major improvements in the quality of what goes on in the schools.

The highest priority is for professionals in many fields to reach a firm consensus on a small number of concrete measures and mobilize our considerable clout to achieve them. What measures? The public wants better teaching and more challenging and rigorous educational experiences for their children. A new program must (i) address the fact that the public schoolteacher is underpaid and undervalued and that colleges and universities no longer recruit and train teachers effectively; (ii) recognize that new federal dollars and new national leadership in education will be needed at the same time that federal interference in local decisions is reduced; and (iii) forge a new contract between a society that will not pay teachers more until taxpayer perception of their classroom performance improves and a teaching profession that will not agree to such measures as merit pay and master teachers that might help to bring this about. To make this contract, it will be necessary to establish merit-based personnel systems for teachers within the framework of collective bargaining.

A new program must also address pervasive problems in the financial capacity of state and local governments. The traditional responsibilities of state and local government—education, roads, bridges, and public safety—have faced tremendous competition from the new federally stimulated responsibilities of welfare and medical care. "Devolution" of more and more of these latter programs to the states, with less and less federal money to pay for them, has exacerbated the problem. New ideas must be found. Federal assumption of full fiscal responsibility for welfare and medicaid, large infusions of special revenue-sharing funds for education, federal support, with total local control, for science, math, and foreign language teachers and a federally financed but locally administered master teachers program are some of the ideas that have been suggested. While not all improvements cost money, some taxpayers may have to pay more taxes.

The AAAS, teacher organizations, educators, congressional friends of education, legislators, and parent groups should move quickly to seek consensus on a program of action. The opportunity and the need have appeared at the same time. They won't play our song forever.—BREWSTER C. DENNY, *Graduate School of Public Affairs, University of Washington, Seattle 98195*

Science

They're Playing Our Song

BREWSTER C. DENNY

Science **224** (4648), 447.

DOI: 10.1126/science.224.4648.447

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