THE IDEA OF A SCHOOL

During recent months a move to establish a new school in Annapolis has been initiated. A steering committee has been formed to proceed with the chartering and incorporation, a certain amount of information has been assembled, and a great many conversations have been held among parents associated with the move. But at this date the school remains little more than an idea, and the hard work of translating that idea into practice remains for the future. If the school is to become an actuality by September of this year, it is perfectly evident that energetic measures will have to be taken immediately. This memorandum from what will be the governing Board is a first step, necessarily prior to a meeting of seriously interested parents at which working committees can be appointed and further details of budget, location, plant, etc. can be discussed.

The following remarks, representing as they do an attempt to articulate the principles and policies that will guide our efforts, have deliberately been made dogmatic and brief, not, of course, to suggest that they embody ultimate truths but because circumstances seem to make such rhetoric appropriate. It is in our view of crucial importance at this stage of the venture that all involved be in substantial agreement concerning the fundamentals of the school. Without such agreement commitments by parents could hardly be anything but tentative and real help from them in getting the project firmly established could not be anticipated. What seems desirable right now is a statement of policy with which individuals can with conviction agree or disagree. The working cadre of parents must come from those who agree.

We are unfortunately constrained to plan the projected school curriculum as if it were isolated from the secondary school and college with which its program should ideally be integrated. Similarly we cannot here take into account the ramifications of the school with the family, society at large, or, perhaps, the Church. We take a partial view, certainly, when we separate the school from these latter social forms; but we run a risk of distorting our view more seriously when we separate it from the former. There is one sense at least, in which we must look at the school as part of a process that continues, even though it does not culminate, in higher educational institutions. For in common with these higher institutions the school has one prime purpose: to foster the intellectual development of the individual. To this end all activities in the school must be subordinated. We shall take this, therefore, as a statement of our cardinal principle, defining the overall purpose of the school. It is, we feel, precisely this principle that is largely ignored by contemporary educators.

Nevertheless, because the years spent by a child in the school represent a <u>first</u> stage in a long process, the school curriculum is subject to its own peculiar demands. Marked disadvantages, for instance, follow from the fact that young children are emotionally immature, that they have no "experience", that they lack habits of study, arts, and skills which can be exploited during later stages of learning. On the other hand the school also has its peculiar advantages, not possessed by the secondary school or college. For if the lack of acquired disciplines is a handicap, the innate curiosity and unprejudiced minds of children provide, more than adequate compensation. Current educational practices seem phenomenally successful in stifling this natural desire of children to know, to ask questions and to seek answers. The age old vision of the free, thoughtful individual seems all but forgotten in many of our schools.

In light of the above remarks we can now define the task of the school, as we conceive it, in fairly specific terms. The duty of the school is to help the child develop those habits and acquire those arts and skills that will insure his continued growth to intellectual maturity in subsequent years. This means it must help him learn (on an elementary level, of course) the arts by which human beings deal with symbols-numerical, verbal, and musical. The acquisition of information, which occurs so effortlessly in most children, will be subordinated to this end as will be the development of his imaginative and aesthetic powers and of what is vaguely termed his "personality". A child who is learning to read, to write and to reckon can very well practice these arts with materials that furnish him incidentally with the fundamentals of geography, history and the sciences. Good literature, biography, and properly chosen historical writings furnish material superior in every respect to the ordinary reading textbooks. If he must write he might with interesting results write about a painting, a project in science, or a poem. This does not imply that a child's artistic and "creative" urge need be frustrated. They can fruitfully be brought into play in projects ancillary to his main tasks, though under no circumstances should they become substitute activities. Mathematics should never be taught as the pointless drill work it has become in many schools. Unilluminated by any abstraction, with its "practical" aspects communicated through the device of cutting innumerable imaginary pies and apples, it is small wonder that mathematics now becomes for most students mere drudge work and mystery.

Though details will have to be worked out with great care, the kind of curriculum envisaged at present would be somewhat as follows. During the first three years there would be three daily classes in reading, writing and mathematics. In the fourth year science would be coordinated with the other three, absorbing some of the time of the other classes perhaps and exploiting the skills already acquired there. In the fifth or sixth year, when the child would be familiar with basic grammatical concepts, the study of a foreign language should be introduced. The study of music should evolve gradually with the years, beginning with singing and listening and progressing to the point where the child could read music fluently. We can imagine our ideal student at the end of nine years, thus:

1. He should be able to read English of an "adult" level with good comprehension, if not with adult sophistication, and to analyze grammatically what he reads.

2. He should be able to write intelligible English prose.

3. He should be able to read and to translate into good English one foreign language.

4. He should be competent in elementary mathematics, including geometry, algebra, trigonometry, the use of logarithms and possible the slide rule.

5. He should be able to read music fluently.

6. He should possess a basic factual knowledge of
    a) world history
    b) American history and government
    c) geography
    d) the natural sciences

7. He should be capable of carrying out fundamental laboratory measurements, of using a microscope, dissecting kit and other basic laboratory tools, and of reporting adequately on simple experiments.

8. He should be able to study by himself in a disciplined way when his interests lead him to progress beyond the assignments.

Obviously in this scheme the teacher is of vital importance, and we shall have to face the unhappy fact that the kind of teacher needed will be hard to come by. In the first few years particularly a rare combination of qualities will be required: a depth of understanding that will enable him to intuit a child's frustrations and to share his simple delights; a tolerance of childrens' emotional vagaries combined with firmness and intelligence in channeling them; imagination and wit adequate to the challenge of translating abstract truths into terms relevant to a child's world, and vice-versa; an ability to exploit the spontaneous and unpredictable interests of a child in such a way as to encourage him to progress without the teacher.

In essence this means that an educated teacher must be found, one who himself or herself is at home in the wide range of fundamentals to which the child is to be introduced. Furthermore, this requires more than superficial familiarity; for childrens' questions about numbers, words and things, and about meanings, are often profound questions; and the teacher who cannot recognize their profundity is soon going to detray the child into premature and unreflective dogma. We can hardly expect to find a person of these qualifications emerging from the mill of our teacher's colleges; and so we shall be ready to ignore conventional qualifications involving courses in child psychology, teaching methods, and the hundred and one ways to keep the school register, in order to find a teacher with an education.

There remains, finally, the thorny problem of how the classes, grades, sections, forms - however they are to be called - should be ordered so as to be synchronized with the overall development of the child. We now conceive the nine-year program as divided into three sub-units of three years each. Classwork within the first and second three-year units will progress to a point where prerequisites for the next unit are met. Considerable flexibility might be allowed within any single three-year unit to take into account the differing rates of development of individual children in various disciplines, but in no case would advancement into the next three-year section be permitted until all prerequisites had been fully satisfied. Work should be paced so that the child of normal intelligence could complete the work in the allotted time. Exceptional children would be encouraged to extend and intensify their learning activities within their own age group rather than being jumped to a more advanced section. Initially we plan to start with only the first three-year unit, comprised of children from approximately six to eight years of age.

Since the teacher and the school cannot adequately substitute for a nursemaid or a baby-sitter, children will be dropped when in the considered judgment of the teacher and the school authorities emotional maladjustment or sheer incapacity preclude learning and interfere with the work of other children. All judgments as to the satisfactory completion of required work will be strictly the prerogative of the teachers and the school officials. Enrollment, of course, will be open to all qualified students regardless of sex, race, color, or creed.

We cannot, unfortunately, discover any way to offer such education cheaply. We anticipate a ratio of one teacher to about fifteen students, and we intend to pay our teachers decent salaries. While estimates at this point are extremely tentative, our cost per student will probably be about $500. With the help of parents we shall try to raise funds to support the venture and hope to be able to offer some aid to deserving children.

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Thomas K. Simpson
Chairman of the Board