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Community education: a life-long learning process

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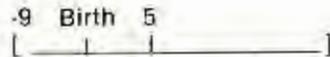
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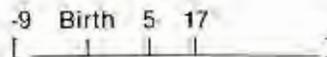
From Day 1 To 5 Years



By the time the Jackson's child is 5 years old, research tells us that his personality and his values will be pretty well molded. Between his birth and his fourth or fifth birthday, that child will subconsciously acquire attitudes toward life, will learn his own approaches to personal problems and will decide to be a success or a failure. His parents need to know that they can encourage his psychological growth and that through classes and interaction with others, they can equip themselves to raise him successfully. They can air their own frustrations and learn to deal with them.

During early childhood, the Jacksons' child will need the health care and preventative medicine that children of more economically secure families receive. Where can he be treated? Community health clinics can expand their roles to meet preventative needs while schools can assist by providing breakfast and lunch programs to those in need to improve nutritional benefits that the child might miss at home. His physical needs cared for, the child of working parents also benefits from supervised play with other children, so strong service and family oriented child care centers are also needed for the period from birth to 5 years.

From 5 To 17



It is for the ages 6 through 17 that the Jacksons and couples like them expect the community to provide education for their children. This essay is not designed to attack the existing K-12 program; indeed, our American educational program offers children a vast amount of knowledge. But it is obvious that among American youth, major social problems do exist. Many teenagers and even pre-teens vandalize, drink heavily, abuse drugs, run away from home and fail to win a comfortable and healthy place in society. The community has resources to show these youth the alternative to losing, and the winning can begin happening in the school itself. Some communities have already begun identifying students who do not function well in a structured classroom and curriculum but who do show promise in open classes and in classes which use the community and its businesses as their schoolrooms. More importantly, we already know that most of the students' problems originate at home even though the conflict erupts at school. If the whole family, through a community program, can be involved in the K-12 program, then certainly some of the conflicts may be resolved.

What I would like to describe now are four kinds of young people who emerge from the K-12 program and who, along with their parents, can benefit from community education beyond the elementary and high school years.

First is the individual who at some point, for some reason, becomes so disillusioned with education—or more precisely, with the way he feels in the classroom—that he becomes a *dropout*. Mentally the dropping out may happen in the fifth grade or even as early as the second, but the law keeps the dropout a student until grade eight.

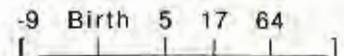
The second kind of person encounters an unhappy school experience, but some pressure or person keeps him in the classroom until graduation day when he shakes

his fist at high school and all other forms of education. I can identify with that student and with that feeling of disgust; it is an uncomfortable immature state and so I call this second type of student the *directionless*.

The third kind of student shows a happier, brighter exterior to his teachers; in reality, however, after the second or third class session, he instinctively discovers what the instructor wants and for the rest of the school year does just enough work to get by. Easily recognizable by his clowning in the classroom or by his surly nonchalance, this student is the *system-beater*, the person who bluffs his way through school and short changes himself out of an education. Unrespectful of authority, he will probably go through life gambling with the system.

The fourth type of student enjoys learning and may flourish in a structured classroom or may actually be so motivated that given the necessary facilities and information, he may create his own learning experiences. Unlike the dropout, the directionless and the system-beater, the *enthusiast* does not need additional basic skills and information, but he will always be looking for learning.

From 17 To 64



At some time after graduation, each of these students will realize a desire for more education; and we as educators must be ready to provide the wide range of educational opportunities they will need between the ages of 18 and 64. The most obvious need exists for the dropout whose lack of diploma and skills blocks him from a job and pushes him toward crime. School may represent society's structure to the dropout, and he may need personal attention to those negative feelings before he can go on to get basic skills.

The second student, the *directionless*, may actually have a job, but more than likely there is little room for advancement and less room for personal growth. Frank Jackson, for example, already knows he needs vocational retraining and at the same time realizes that for him and his family to flourish, he needs to become a careful consumer. Community education helps there too.

The third person, the *system-beater*, may bluff his way clear through his twenties, possibly even through a college degree; but at some point he will mature and dedicate that intelligence to something he sincerely wants to learn. In his late twenties or early thirties he will want more academic training, social activities or cultural enrichments, possibly even a second degree.

Of all the students leaving the K-12 program the *enthusiast* has the best chance to succeed without further help. Ironically, though, it is the *enthusiast* who always wants more. Excited by new fields of study, languages, crafts and public interests, he will use whatever education is provided. Even young women like Rhonda Jackson, a good student herself, whose decision to marry ended her formal schooling but not her ability or willingness to learn can benefit if the burden of economics and new parenthood can be erased.

There are almost fifty years between 18 and 64 when the community can offer education to the four groups I have described. For the dropout and the *directionless*, we can offer the G.E.D. course, adult basic education and vocational training along with courses for their families. The *system-beater* and the *enthusiast* can use advanced

academic programs and career education. And all the groups can benefit from recreation and health courses, hobbies and crafts, cultural programs and consumer information.

What gives the community its ability to provide such a variety of programs? There are already existing organizations which can be organized into the community education system—the YMCA, the church, local business, park boards and citizens organizations just to name a few—just as there are existing facilities which can be used in the process: civic centers, parks, supermarkets, garages, church buildings, beauty and barber shops, radio and television stations, theaters and, of course, the neighborhood school.

From 64 To 99

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One group of people has already learned some things from existing organizations. Trained, educated, experienced, and wise, those over 65 often are retired by society before they are ready to enjoy the free time retirement is supposed to supply. In contrast to what some of society believes, those over 65 do want to learn and are prepared to use their learning as well. Recently the dean of a college came to talk with me and in conversation shared this: "I'm 64. Next year they'll retire me and, you know, I'm just now beginning to feel that I know what it's all about." And in another instance, I watched a group called the Golden Voyagers working as aides in elementary schools. An 84 year old woman knelt on hands and knees to play with a 5 year old girl. The light in their eyes and the joy in their faces showed that they were being truly educated. Our older people are another of the community's vast resources to be identified, involved and appreciated in life-long education.

From -9 to 99, people never stop seeking. As educators we have provided opportunities for learning and must provide an even wider range. But the other step in

establishing life-long community education is to help individuals specifically identify their own needs. We cannot merely announce their deficiencies and enroll them in a Thursday night class in consumer math. Instead we must ourselves clearly differentiate between the terms *wants* and *needs* before we can guide anyone else to discovering their own.

Let me explain. I stayed in high school only to participate in athletics. I did not enjoy academics and I did not enjoy high school social life. If I had ever dropped out, it's highly doubtful that I would have ever returned, especially if someone had suggested, "Don, why don't you come back and take that English course?" Instead, the community offered a night program which included a basketball league, and I wanted to be a part of it. I was comfortable on the court and after a time decided that since some of the players were staying for English classes and humanities courses, I might as well try them too. Without help I knew for sure that I wanted to play basketball, and the community provided the chance. What I identified later was my real need for more academic work, and again the community provided the opportunity. That kind of help is what I am supporting for the whole range of age groups discussed already. By fulfilling an individual's wants, we may also guide him to see and respond to his needs.

Charles Stewart Mott said, "For each of us, there is a time for taking stock—for comparing our intentions with our accomplishments . . . Even if a man feels no necessity to justify his life to others, there is no escaping the necessity to justify it to himself. There are many ways to approach such a reckoning. Each man's life has its own private record of success and failure in his responsibilities to himself, his family, his associates, his community and his God. It is not always easy to set forth an honest balance sheet when human and abstract values are involved, but one can try."

One day between 18 and 99, one looks in a mirror and sees an image he wants to alter. We the community must provide the means of making that change.

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