Conant's "Shaping Educational Policy"

SHAPING EDUCATIONAL POLICY, by James Bryant Conant, McGrawHill, 138 pp., $1.95.

By FAYE LEVINE, December 8, 1964

One of the first things James Bryant Conant, does in his latest book, *Shaping Educational Policy,* is to admit to a grave moral defect in the first book he wrote about education, *The American High School Today*.

In that book, he outlined the comprehensive high school, which was to embody the cohesive heterogeneity of American society through its large size, its widely varied student body and its rich academic and vocational program. But Conant now admits that in his first work he purposely turned his back on the problem of racial segregation, and "said not a word to indicate that certain schools I visited were comprehensive only in so far as white youth were concerned."

Conant Concrete

Since then (1957), the former president of Harvard seems to have had a profound change of heart. Besides himself, he bitterly blames the rest of the educational "establishment," notably the National Education Association, for actively silencing the discussion of segregated education. He blames them also for slighting the problems of metropolitan school system, for impeding legislation like that which would give teachers of academic subjects higher salaries, and for their generally conservative activity; but it is his charge on segregation that is the most vehement.

Favors Commission

And to solve the problem of an unworthy ruling clique in a firmly entrenched position, one of whose most revealing misdeeds has been the perpetuation of a segregated school system, Conant proposes a revolutionary reorganization of power. The right to make educational policy should be taken away from teachers' groups, local school boards, and courts, he says, and given to strong boards of education. These boards would be composed of "lay citizens" (i.e., not educators) and would be responsible to the elected legislature.

Citing New York and California as states where this is done extremely well on the public school level and the college level respectively, Conant makes an appeal to "interested citizens" in other states to effect this needed change.

But segregation is by no means the only pressing issue Conant sees. Since 1956, "revolutionary" changes have taken place in American education, he says, from new methods like language laboratories, programmed instruction, and television, to improvements in the content of physics, chemistry and mathematics courses. Significant organizational changes were recommended for high schools in *The American High School Today*. In this latest book he expands his perspective and tells what sort of changes are needed in the entire educational system if his, or anyone else's, substantive recommendations are to be carried out.

He abhors the organizational mess that is now American education: reactionary teachers' organization, unnecessary regional accrediting agencies, competitively selfish private colleges, disorganized state educational authorities. In some states the highest education officials are elected, with the result that they are "in a relatively weak position, willing tools" of unofficial lobbying groups like the NEA. In others, numerous small colleges compete for what state funds are available, with no central considerations determining the allocation of funds. Conant's answer to these problems, as to integration problems, is greater power at the top, centralization at the state level and full-time education officials.

Other Issues

It is clear that Conant's whole heart is in planning, order, effectiveness, and a perfect Weberian "rationality." He mentions almost wistfully the centralized direction that is possible today in the educational systems of England and France.

Yet he is too much of a pragmatist to do more than mention in passing the "drastic Constitutional amendment" which would be necessary to make this possible. America, like West Germany, is a federal government, he says, without the power to establish a national educational policy. And so we must work something out given our decentralized system.

Radical Revision

Hence Conant's concluding recommendation is for an "interstate planning commission," composed (like the state boards of education) of citizens, to facilitate interstate cooperation and some kind of national direction. It is not a flamboyant proposal. Indeed, it is a little disconcerting that Conant, after spending nine years studying American education, should recommend that a commission make "a detailed state-by-state study of American education."

It even seems a little dull to speak of commissions and studies, when one would like to hear of dramatic schemes of sweeping away and purification. Even Conant seems to be restraining himself, secretly dreaming of complete nationalization, central administration, and "citizens'" control.

But perhaps the power of his proposal lies in its modesty. Conant's recommendations, as they have come out, have been immediately respected, and the chance that these latest will be put into effect are very great. This possibility is reflected in his style: calm, facty, occasionally tiresome for its quantity of detail. But it displays a pragmatic realism that is immediately convincing. His meticulous details leave no room for question. His interstate planning commission has been so concretely described (he even mentions the necessary time lag between its beginning surveys and its acting on them), that even as he describes it, it has the *feel* of bodily existence.

Change of Heart

This concreteness was also the distinguishing characteristic of *The American High School Today*. In that first book, Conant issued no calls to revolution such as might thrill the hearts of Paul Goodman fans. Perhaps he did not fully realize the long-range theoretical implications of his own suggestions. Yet by presenting a number of specific, carefully thought-out, feasible recommendations for American high schools, he became the leading exponent of the post-Sputnik revolution of academic excellence in American education.

And perhaps this book too will have more long-range effects than a simple summary of the proposals reveals. Certainly it is gratifying that Conant should have broadened his original concerns. At first the spokesman only for academic excellence, he may become the spokesman for social consciousness in the public schools.

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