

## NINETY TWO AND HURRYING

by Bill Duren

When I reached 90 I wrote a piece about being 90 for you, my friends at Cardiac Rehab. Then a sequel at 91. Those were mostly yarns about times long past, with some more serious thoughts in the second piece. When I reached 92 last November Mary, my wife of 67 years, had come down with what turned out to be her last illness. Because of my own troubles before and after losing her I have never got around to writing my age-92 opus. Now I am rushing to get it done before 93 rolls around. I know a few more stories about those ancient days, but will save them for 94. Since my adult life has been spent as a professor, I want to write about teaching and learning. This time it will be about pre-college schools, and the one for age 93 will be about colleges and graduate schools. I am treating you as members of the general public and trying to see if I can make sense to that audience. I would like to hear from you as to whether I have succeeded or not. My previous writing on it has been shop talk for insiders. But to correct what is wrong with our schools and colleges today will require a better understanding by the consumers, that is by the general non-expert public, by students, future students, their parents and relatives, voters and by taxpayers, both of what is right as well as wrong with our schools, and how they got that way. This is my small contribution to such an understanding.

The public is right to be concerned by the poor performance of many of our schools and the serious consequences of that for our national well being and for our competitive position in the world economy of the future. But I think the media are arguing about rather superficial, or political, or fashionable topics, and not about the real reasons that so many nations, even third world nations, excel us in teaching the skills needed for survival in the modern world. I will not say anything about these current flaps in the media. For I think that, if I have anything to say, it must be from the viewpoint of my old age. To get to the real troubles we have to go back to 1893. That was before even my time, but not by much.

Plan for an American High School. After the Civil War there had been a great boom in education, especially in college education because of the 1862 Land Grant act of Congress that endowed the second state university in each state, the ones called Penn State, N.C. State, etc. But there was no system of public secondary schools to prepare students for them; only the private academies that we now call prep schools. That placed an un-American barrier to college, even though a poor boy could study on his own and get into college by passing an entrance examination. -- That is what my father did. --

In 1893 a national commission, headed by Charles W. Eliot, president of Harvard, presented a plan for a system of public secondary schools to offer, but not require, four more years of free public education beyond the then-standard eight grades. The main objective for Eliot's plan was to keep the doors of opportunity open to all American 14-year-olds. In Europe he had seen that a specially talented 14-year-old could get into a college-preparatory school, even with a subsidy. But many more had no such opportunity. Their future from that point was determined by class, wealth, or decision of some bureaucrat. Eliot's 1893 report called for a new American kind of school, not dominated by the universities, or controlled by federal bureaucrats, but governed by local school boards. They were to provide a free college preparatory curriculum for all who chose it

and could qualify, but their main business would be to offer everybody an optional free extension of general education through 12 grades.

Teacher training was to be done by a system of state colleges called "normal schools". At first these were separate colleges, but eventually they were merged into universities as divisions called "School of Education". Presumably they were only to ensure a supply of trained teachers, and were not intended as an exclusive route, or closed shop, to a job as a teacher. That question was not firmly decided.

It was still necessary to spell out the new schools' college preparatory duties in more detail. So Eliot's second report in 1899 defined the 15 standard units for college admission which the high schools were expected to offer. A couple of years later the College Entrance Examination Board was established whose SAT test scores would provide a check of the student's scholastic aptitude that was independent of his school grades and recommendations. It was a long time before these tests were required for admission by any except the leading private universities. -- In fact I got them started at UVa in about 1957 by persuading our reluctant president to require them. -- A second set of tests measure the student's actual achievement in high school subjects. These arrangements affected only the college-preparatory curriculum and not the larger general and vocational curricula of the new high schools.

Then at the end of World War I the required, or standard, general education was extended through high school, but with the college-preparatory curriculum still optional. That is the way it remains to this day, except that the number opting the college-preparatory curriculum has steadily increased.

The Public Education Bureaucracy. Eliot's scheme was right for the time. His American High Schools have been wonderful for this country. But even from the beginning it was incomplete. In his zeal to keep American youths free of economic or bureaucratic compulsion that would limit their opportunities, he did not provide for the overall management that was necessary for the system to work.

As soon as locally-controlled high schools got under way there emerged, to fill this void, an unofficial institution that I shall call the Public Education Bureaucracy (PEB). Its main players are the superintendents, the deans of the schools of education, and the permanent administrators in the state and federal departments of education.. They are all administrators. The teachers are their employees; and do not belong to PEB. The principals are in an intermediate, critically important, position. PEB is not regulated because officially it does not exist. But it has nearly a free hand to operate the schools as it sees fit, with an ever-wary eye on local and state politics, which nearly always works towards degraded quality. It is subject only to overall budget controls by the state. I shall be criticizing PEB, so let me say at the outset that PEB has done us a good service overall, and we owe it a debt of gratitude for making the loose system work at all. Without PEB there would have been total chaos.

The looseness of PEB's structure, its unaccountability, and its many conflicting motivations are at the root of many of our difficulties today. But we have become so used to leaving management to PEB that we look for more immediate causes of our current ills. I feel strongly that for a real cure of our present troubles we must go back to 1893. We must keep Eliot's plan, but build it into a complete national system that will

work, in which each player is accountable, and knows his responsibilities and his limits. Then PEB will no longer be necessary. We should retire it honorably, with our national thanks.

That is easier said than done, but there are some non-invasive federal agencies that will serve as models for such a reform. I will describe one such below. The reason I am writing this to you is that I feel the public must be involved in building the new system, and making it work.

Ongoing faults of Eliot's plan. The two curricula. To review some of our current difficulties that are traceable to flaws in Eliot's plan, let us first look at those two curricula. They expanded the opportunities for our 14-year-olds as long as the choice was optional and students and their parents could make well-informed decisions. But now so many jobs depend on the reading, writing, math, and science skills in the tougher college-bound curriculum; and so many more depend on a college degree itself, that choosing of the non-college-bound general curriculum at age 14 can close forever these doors of opportunity. -- And I do mean forever because subsequent remedial teaching to catch up simply does not work. -- To make matters worse, in too many cases we now have Guidance Counselors making the decision for the student. That is precisely the old European way that Eliot was trying to avoid. Also school administrators have consistently overestimated the fraction of their students that is not college bound, thus magnifying the problem.

Deficiencies of local management. The idea of making the high schools independent and locally controlled has created other serious difficulties. The countries whose schools outperform ours do not have as nice school buildings as ours, but all have much stronger financial and quality control exerted by the central government, more uniform standard content, stricter qualification of teachers, and better class discipline. Our local school boards cannot train teachers or school administrators, set their qualification standards, or assure the degree of uniformity in the curriculum that is necessary in this country where people move around. These responsibilities were deliberately not given to the federal government in Eliot's plan. And there was no provision for coordinating these functions into an educational system, either on the state or national level. Can the American High School be reinvented to realize Eliot's objectives, avoid European discrimination and bureaucratic compulsion, but still maintain high performance? No such solution is in sight yet.

Lock step. In any school system there are faster learners who should move ahead in their studies, or they will become bored and lazy, and never reach their full potential. No nation can afford this kind of loss; and for the individual it means a loss of opportunity that can never be recovered. On the other hand simply advancing the bright student beyond his age group may create lifelong emotional damage. -- I had this problem myself. I was advanced two grades. The result was that I never belonged with my classmates. I wanted to play with younger kids, and I wanted to talk to grown men. -- Our politically controlled local schools handle this problem badly. Dumb students outnumber bright ones; so they have the parental votes to hold back those uppity whiz kids and keep them

from taking unfair advantage. Locally financed schools lack flexibility and resources for multitrack programs. And when they do offer special "gifted student" programs PEB usually insists that they be open to everybody who applies. So they usually turn out to be time-wasting publicity gimmicks; not the real thing. Or they set up "magnet schools" for gifted students in poor neighborhoods; and that usually works badly too.

Poor performers, who may be not so bright, or just not motivated, make up the other half of the problem. Holding them back by failing grades creates intolerable problems, both social and political. So we have "social promotion". That doesn't solve the student's academic difficulty. And the end result for the school is a slowdown to the dumbest level, and lack of stimulation for the normal kids.

National or state managements handle these problems better than Eliot's local school boards, with highly political PEB playing the trump cards.

Schools of Education. Eliot's idea of the normal schools for teacher-training was interpreted by PEB to mean that only these schools could provide the training necessary for certification as a teacher. This meant that the only people who could become teachers, without expensive retraining, were those who at age 18 committed to teaching as a career. Such a decision is not natural for 18-year-olds, especially not for superior students or young men. The result of this self selection at age 18 has been that our qualified teachers are fewer in number, and less able than they could be. And it has meant that Education schools are made up of people who on average are weaker academically than those of other schools. Too bad!

Many teachers hate the education courses they have to take. I think this came about because Eliot's general education scheme set school educators free of the rigid old curriculum of studies handed down from the middle ages. They then had no traditional content to guide them for their general studies, and no accepted standards. It was inevitable that the course material and texts written for these made-up subjects, starting from scratch, would be pretty empty stuff. It is, as is evidenced by the junk that makes up so much of the Education School library.

A further result is that both their courses and their library unduly emphasize methods. -- Methods of teaching what? -- Another subject of great importance to them is school administration. They have professors of the academic subjects that their graduates will teach, duplicating the offerings of colleges of Arts and Sciences. The justification for this is that the subject matter must be learned in the form suitable for presentation to school pupils. But in the Education School faculty these subject-matter teachers are second class citizens; so they tend to be second class scholars themselves. Not all of them, of course but far too many. The result is not good for our high schools.

Where not to expect help when things go wrong. When things go wrong in the present loose arrangement parents can create some pressure, but not as much as in private schools where parents finance their schools by tuition payments. The PTAs seem to be managed by PEB to raise money for things not in the state or local budget, and are steered away from anything critical.

A conscientious and well informed chairman of the local school board can have a good influence, but that is limited to matters subject to local choice as well as local

agreement. The force of local politics is usually to make school easier, not tougher. But recently the state boards of education have begun to set some standards. For example, the Virginia State Board of Education in 1995 issued standards spelling out what children should learn at each grade level. It isn't clear how those standards will be enforced, but the initiative is encouraging. There have also been some recent moves to tie pay raises to teacher qualification and performance, but nobody knows how to do this fairly. Local school boards and PEB oppose it vigorously because it would complicate their problem of finding teachers. Now, if they can't find a science or mathematics teacher for a vacancy, they can appoint an English or history teacher for it on a temporary basis. Ultimately, of course, that becomes permanent.

Teachers' unions have been growing recently. They form a natural adversary to PEB, and they could be a force for reform. However, their basic interest is in better pay and better working conditions for teachers, although they profess to stand for better service to the pupils. Given a choice of smaller classes OR a raise in pay, there can be no doubt which they will choose. They too oppose any move to tie pay raises to teacher qualifications.

The universities would seem to be a force for maintaining quality in the schools and holding PEB responsible. They have the power of denying admission to poorly prepared students, and they could expose poor performance in certain schools when they find it. They could refuse to conduct remedial teaching for students who enter with deficiencies. They also have the schools of education, replacing the normal schools, that train the teachers and conduct research on issues in education. But I think we can forget about universities as a force for reform as long as the present system prevails.

Universities exercise only broad budgetary control on their subsidiary schools. On matters of educational policy the School of Education is more influenced by PEB than by the administration of its university. And the system motivates universities to admit students with academic deficiencies, and give them remedial instruction. For it is good public relations to say that they are helping disadvantaged students. They can also collect tuition for it and get the teaching done cheaply by graduate teaching assistants. This has the double advantage for them that it earns a profit; and it supports graduate students for whom no other financial support exists, often foreign students. But this teaching by GTAs is often poorly supervised, uneven, sometimes extremely poor in quality, and ineffective for make-up in any case. Moreover it undermines teaching in the high schools because guidance counselors can then say: "Don't worry about it. They will teach you that in college." This feedback produces still more deficient students. In fact this behavior may be the major factor in the poor performance of our high school graduates.

The U.S. Department of Education. When we come to the huge organization of education at the federal level you and I are really out of our depth. It is too big and complicated to describe in everyday words. But I think that the shortcomings and consequent mistakes that were inherited from the old Eliot scheme and PEB can be recognized there too..

Education has now been elevated to the cabinet level in the federal government; and it should be. But before that was done PEB should have been removed from it, with its conflicts of interest, confusion, power brokering and inside politicking. And the

looseness of Eliot's old plan should have been cleared up. The powers, responsibilities and restraints of Department of Education personnel should have been spelled out. These things were not done.

The right way might have been like the way that the government is related to science and technology. The science agencies of the government are really in the government, responsible to Congress; not to the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS), the professional medical societies, or any science bureaucracy. In their support of basic research, which is most like the support of education, their program administrators are disciplined not to promote any notions of their own about what is good for science, who gets the money, or what they do with it. On the other side universities, individual scientists, scientific associations, industry and science-using branches of government are free to develop their own proposals about teaching and research. The two sides meet in the National Research Council -- established by President Lincoln -- with its associated prestigious and unpaid National Academy of Science. There, in neutral NRC/NAS territory, plans are made, advice to Congress is generated, and selections are made for grants and fellowships from money appropriated by Congress. - At different times I have worked in all three of these levels; so I know them. -

With a Department of Education structured in this way, we could have established objective national curricular standards for students and teachers, and could have organized the national system, without letting its bureaucrats exert any control of individual schools, students, or grants of money. PEB could have been made unnecessary.

No such arrangement was made for the new Department of Education to eliminate the conflicts of interest, to separate the money dispensers from the money getters, or to make plans on neutral territory by planners who will not be the direct beneficiaries of funding by Congress. There is an American Council on Education parallel to NRC, but it is not used in a role parallel to NRC's.. Instead we have members of PEB pervading our whole national education structure, wearing two or more hats each, and not prevented from improper use of their money-granting powers. The head administrator, the Secretary of Education, is a short-term presidential appointee. As things stand he has little power to put into effect what his public statements proclaim. The permanent professional insiders let him sound off, and then proceed to do things their way. I see no way to construct a properly structured federal Department of Education out of the mess we now have. The state departments of education look more promising.

Some advice and even more opinion. The Education School's emphasis on methods, rather than substance, works well in the beginning grades. We have many fine first-grade teachers. It seems to be in the middle school, grades four to six, ages about 9 to 12, where our schools begin to slacken. If any remedial teaching is to be done for your kids, this is the place to do it. And if you are in the PTA of a failing school, this is the place where the trouble started, where substance and discipline must begin to replace child's play. And this is the place where it has to be corrected. High school is too late.

Actually even the first grade is too late to make up the deficiencies that have already developed in millions of our little kids. HEAD START has shown that great gains can be made at the kindergarten level. A child's first teacher is his mother, and hopefully his father too, starting well before kindergarten. The child of irresponsible, or

incompetent, or uncaring young parents is at enormous disadvantage before school begins. As a wise lady I know put it: It is the right of every helpless child born alive to be wanted, loved and nurtured. Without that, the mere right to life is empty.

I am happy to see that there are now some small-scale programs to make better fathers and mothers of some of our young parents-to-be. That kind of education should be universal in this country. It should begin with carefully constructed required courses in high school. Those will have limited effect, and would have to be followed up by intense instruction and motivation of every expectant young mother when she is facing the reality of it. This rich country can afford it. I submit that if you want to improve our schools, this is where your work can have its greatest effect.

If you have a precocious, or brighter than average, or more energetic, enthusiastic boy or girl, I would lean toward letting him, or her, skip a grade or two to move ahead -- if the child wants to. School officials almost always advise against it, though the teacher may encourage it. Every case is different; but I think more mistakes are made by holding students back than by advancing them too fast.

If you have a poor performer, I suggest that you withhold TV and other time-wasting distractions. Without delay look for dyslexia, or hearing, or eyesight, or other physical difficulties. Face up to reality, and try to find out whether it is only motivation. If it is lack of motivation, don't help with homework very much. This new thing of parents helping with homework every night is a modern curse. The value of homework comes from what the child does himself. It is hard to conduct a class so that the pupils do enough themselves in class. The teacher has to do a lot of explaining and showing how. Don't repeat this explaining with more talk at home. Try to limit your homework role to helping over snags where the kid has got stuck on his own. If the teacher urges you to help your child; get another teacher.

For fast or slow learners, do a lot of reading to little kids. Help older ones to find the sources they need. Keep looking for suitable books, using trash only if necessary to help start the reading habit. Have collegiate dictionaries, not child dictionaries, handy and use them to settle questions or arguments. For reference books, a child's encyclopedia might be a good starter, but graduate to the full Britannica, or computer version, as soon as possible. That is one thing the computer is good for.

Too many parents, school board members, and text book writers have a false adult idea about what makes a good subject of study for a boy or girl. They think that if it belongs to the real world, and will have practical value in the adult world, then it will be both more understandable and more valuable to the child. This is false; and causes an immense amount of trouble. A good subject for a boy should first be within his experience; and this practical adult stuff is not. Then it should involve him in actively doing something; and those adult matters leave him passively listening to talk -- or not listening. And finally it should be such that he begins the lesson knowing what he is supposed to learn that day, and leaves knowing whether he has learned it or not. Lecturing on material practical in adult life fails these tests miserably. Latin passes them; "social studies" usually do not.

I know this is old stuff; but it can't be said too often.

The teachers you remember are usually not the sweet, loving, easy ones. Instead, they are the tough ones who assigned a lot of homework, read it, gave it back next day

with comments, and were stingy with A grades. They were the ones who really knew you, and appreciated what you worked to do,

And finally, don't let them put your normal teenager in any but the college preparatory curriculum in high school, whether he plans to go to college or not. Be sure that he or she has to do a lot of reading, writing, and math; not just listening and reciting, checking off true-or-false tests, or clicking places on the computer screen. The most important part of lower education is developing skills by practice. Facts that are learned had better be real facts, not just opinions of teacher, or textbook writer, or school board member.

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Well, as you see I didn't make it by my 93<sup>rd</sup> birthday. Thanks again for your birthday cards and recognition at the pizza party. And Merry Christmas!

As ever,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Bill Duren". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned above the printed name.

a.k.a. William L. Duren, Jr.