

Public

Education

Prepared by  
Staff education committee  
JOIN Community Union  
4533 North Sheridan  
Chicago, Illinois  
Phone: 334-8040

When we talk of the public schools, a number of things come to mind:

1. Many children leave school without knowing how to read and write, without understanding history or the society they live in.

2. Schools are segregated, keeping white children from Negro children, rich children from poor children. The Negro children and the poor children get worse educations as a result, but everyone is pulled down by segregation.

3. Notions of democracy, freedom, authority, and right and wrong are taught in ways which leave children unable or unwilling to question the way America is run.

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To understand why schools fail in these ways we must try to see how a school system fits in with the rest of society. For the business, political, and military interests which run society (and therefore run our school systems) are careful that the school system prepares children to live in the society they run. In Chicago, the Mayor appoints the Board of Education. The president of the Board is a former president of the Chicago Real Estate Board. Other members of the Board of Education include an insurance executive, a doctor, and an Inland Steel representative. There are 2 union officials among the 11 members of the Board. (Sargent Shriver, now head of the war on poverty, used to be president of the Chicago Board of Education.)

In the pages that follow, we will try to see how the failures of education fit into the larger picture of social, political, and economic injustice. For if wealth, privileges, power, and rights are distributed unjustly, schools must be unjust too. The amount of justice in society and the amount of justice in education go hand in hand.

## PART I : Why children don't learn to read

There are two reasons why children (and particularly poor and working class children) don't learn basic skills: one is that schools are too crowded and teachers are too inexperienced to teach children. Basically, this is a problem of not spending enough money on education. The second reason is that the schools assume that poor and working class children don't have the "ability" to learn --- so schools don't try to teach them.

Public school systems were started over a hundred years ago in America for two main reasons. First, people believed that democracy couldn't work unless everyone had a basic education. Children needed the skills of reading and writing, and they needed to learn how to judge different ideas, in order to take part in making democratic political decisions. The people who started public schools also believed that there was too big a gap between the rich and the poor and that the poor could get richer if they were educated. Public education was seen as a way of strengthening democracy.

The second reason for starting public schools in the 1840's was that new industries needed workers for their factories. These factories needed workers who could read and write and who were trained to obey orders. Thus, businessmen supported public schools (though at a low level) because public education increased the production (and profits) of industry.

But since the school systems were set up, the kinds of jobs available have changed. Businessmen have tried to get the school system to change along with them. At first, factories just needed workers who could read and do simple arithmetic. Later, they needed more skilled workers.

At the turn of the century in Chicago, businessmen had a campaign to separate vocational (trades) training from other education; they

planned to have the government spend a great deal of money just on vocational training so that there would be more skilled workers available. By about 1910, shorthand, business English, and typing was part of the high school curriculum for girls; trades and crafts were available for boys.

In the last ten years, the military and industry have not needed factory workers so much as they have needed scientists and engineers. The country started spending more money on education after Russia launched the first Sputnik satellite. Schools began to train people in science so that this country could compete with Russian science. Most of this increased spending has been for programs for "gifted" children (children that do well on "ability" tests and are being trained to be scientists). In 1961, for example, the United States Office of Education was spending  $1\frac{1}{2}$  million dollars on special projects for "gifted" children --- far more than is spent on special education projects for ordinary children.

As automation has continued, industry has had a smaller desire to educate ordinary children, because jobs are not available anyway. While industry insists on more public money for the training of scientists and engineers, they do not care if most other children are lost along the way.

(It is important to remember that all businessmen are not agreed on this. Inland Steel in Chicago, for example, is anxious to get more money for educating poor white and Negro children. They believe that unless this is done, conditions in the ghetto will get so bad that riots and violence will result.)

On the whole, however, the state, federal, and local governments have been unwilling to provide money for decent educations. As a result, Mayor Daley recently estimated that the high schools in Chicago

had 40,000 more students than they could handle. He predicted a 25% rise in the number of school age children by 1980, but there are not enough new schools planned to take care of this increase.

There is a shortage, not only of buildings, but of teachers --- in September, 1966, the school board needed 500 more teachers than it had. Many good teachers are not willing to teach in city schools because of the overcrowding and bad conditions. School teacher salaries are also very low; many teachers could make more elsewhere.

Dedicated teachers say that their children could learn in a different kind of school. If there were fewer children in a class, the teacher would have time to find out what the children were thinking and talk to them about things they wanted to know. But as one teacher from Stewart School said, with 39 children in her class, she couldn't allow discussions because children would get too interested in what they were doing and be harder to control.

Lack of money is only one reason why schools don't teach. Another reason is that public schools don't try to teach poor and working class children. Since our society no longer has decent jobs for public school graduates to fill, the schools claim that these children couldn't learn anyway. One or two exceptions are made, and one or two poor white or Negro kids are given a "rich man's public education." But on the whole, poor and Negro children are considered useless and unable to be educated.

Beginning in the first grade, children are separated and given different treatment and different educations. The school system decides that some (potential leaders, scientists, and businessmen) are worth caring about, others can be ignored, others are "problems" and need to be controlled.

In Chicago, this separation is done mainly by "ability grouping."

Children are put into separate classes according to their score on the IQ test. Children who do well get placed in the top "ability groups" and generally get the best teachers and a great deal of special attention. Children in lower ability groups are taught less, so from the day they enter school, children who do poorly on the "ability test" have less chance. By the time they are in high school, many of these children have fallen so far behind that the guidance counselor decides that they can't learn very much. So they are given a "vocational" program or sent to a vocational school to learn a trade. But most vocational schools are so badly run and badly equipped that their graduates have little chance of getting a skilled job.

One of the problems with this method of "ability grouping" is that the IQ tests don't measure ability at all. The test depends on knowing about things that middle class children are much more likely to know than children from working class families. The test is made up by middle class "experts" and much of it tests whether you know certain words (like "castle," "lighthouse," "violin,") and recognize certain pictures (like sheep or tennis rackets). Children who have grown up in city slum neighborhoods have not learned many of these things. The things they do know from their own experience aren't on the tests. They use different words from middle class children, but people who make the tests don't think their words are important.

The IQ test is written, and most of it depends, on how well children read. Many wealthier parents start teaching their children to read at home, and can buy books to help them. So these children do well on "ability" tests.

The best proof that these tests don't test ability is that people's scores on them change. The difference between IQ scores for rich and poor children increases as long as children are in school.

Special classes of children with low IQ's, which had a small number of students and a lot of individual attention, have raised IQ scores 20 or 30 points.

Despite all this, IQ tests are used by school officials to prove that poor children have less ability to learn. This fact is then used to justify teaching poor children less. Poor children then learn less, wind up as service station attendants rather than doctors, and their children are poor too.

## PART II : Segregation in the schools

In addition to "ability groupings" the other main way of separating children is by school segregation. This means that children of different races and economic classes are sent to different schools. The Board of Education says this is an accident --- "Naturally a school in a Negro neighborhood will have all Negro children." However, often schools are segregated on purpose, not by accident. In addition, there is nothing so sacred about "neighborhood schools" that children could not be integrated if the school board wanted it that way.

In 1965, 90% of Chicago's Negro elementary school children attended schools that were all or almost all Negro. 76% of Chicago's white elementary school children attended schools that were all or almost all white. This is more segregation than there was two years before.

The same is true of high schools. In 1965 there were 10,000 more Negroes in segregated high schools than in 1963. Only 18% of Chicago's elementary schools are integrated; only 25% of the high schools.

Teachers are also segregated by race. Nine out of ten Negro teachers work in segregated Negro schools.

Is this an accident? Children are assigned to schools by district

lines drawn by the board of Education. Often these lines are drawn to make children attend schools far away from their homes to keep schools segregated.

The Board of Education still builds new schools in the middle of all white or all Negro areas, not on the borders where they would be easier to integrate. When Negro schools get crowded, the school board builds trailer classrooms next to them, even when there is vacant space in white schools nearby. The rules of the Board make it very hard for children to transfer from school to school.

The same methods are used to segregate poor and middle class white students. Brenneman school children (mostly middle class) are a special exception to the rule that children in that area go to Stockton Upper Grade Center after the sixth grade. This keeps the Brenneman children from going to school with the poor white children who go to Stockton.

In the same area of the North Side there are three white high schools: Senn, Mather, and Sullivan. Mather and Sullivan are overcrowded because nearly all the middle class parents in the area send their children there. They keep their children out of Senn, which has poor and working class children. Since Senn had vacant classrooms, the Board of Education suggested that some of the students in Mather and Sullivan should be transferred to Senn. The parents in the area protested so much that the old district lines remained and the situation has not changed.

What is the effect of this segregation? In 1954, the Supreme Court ruled that segregated education could not possibly be fair, because when some kids were separated from others they got a sense of inferiority which made it harder for them to learn. (White kids, of course, got a false sense of superiority.)

Still, as we have seen, schools are not integrated, and many liberals have given up. They now call for "quality education" in the ghetto -- a program of making poor white and Negro schools better without trying to mix the different races and classes together. In the next few years, people in movements for social change all over the country are again going to have to face the question of whether separate education can ever be equal.

There are several results of segregation that create inequality in the education children get.

When poor children and Negro children are segregated in their own schools, they often get worse schools than white middle class children. Middle class parents have a greater chance to influence school boards.

In 1961, the U.S. Civil Rights Report said that the Board of Education spent 25% more to operate a white school than to operate a Negro school. Spending for maintenance and supplies was 50% higher in white schools.

Classrooms in Negro schools are overcrowded. The average Negro elementary school classroom has 34.4 children; the average white classroom has 29.7 children. In Stewart school, a poor white school, there are some classes with as many as 39 kids, and hardly any with less than 30. A study of Detroit showed that schools in poor neighborhoods had an average of two more kids per class than middle class schools.

The Board of Education hires some teachers who do not meet its normal standards. Most of these "uncertified" teachers work in Negro schools. 27% of the teachers in Negro schools are uncertified, while 12% are uncertified in white schools.

When teachers in Chicago were asked whether they liked their

schools, 65% of the teachers in upper middle class schools said they liked working there very much. Only 17% of the teachers in low income schools liked them very much. The result is that teachers ask to transfer from low income schools about twice as often as from middle class schools. Schools in poor neighborhoods are left with very few experienced teachers.

Negro schools have fewer libraries, guidance rooms, and auditoriums. Many schools in low income neighborhoods lack special facilities (like music rooms and lunch rooms). Schools in ghettos are usually older and not as safe.

Even money that is set aside to help poor children is sometimes used for other children instead. A war on "poverty" grant of 30 million dollars was recently used in three Chicago school districts; only one of these was poor.

Of course, segregated schools is not the only cause of the different treatment given to children. Even in integrated schools, the poor or Negro children have two strikes against them: they don't have the room and the quiet to do homework at home; they don't have the money to buy supplies, and they can't afford to stay in high school when they could be working; they are punished more than children from families with influence.

If a teacher looks down on a child, he can't teach the child very much. But many of the people who run and teach the schools pay less attention to working class children. In one city where teachers were asked which children they liked best, most of the best liked children were middle class. Many teachers look down on working class parents and make them afraid to come to school and talk about their children. These attitudes also make it harder for children from working class homes to learn very much in schools.

For it is not just the very poor who get less from the school system. A study in Detroit showed that schools in neighborhoods where the average income was less than \$7,000 a year have fewer certified teachers, less money for books and supplies, older buildings, larger classes, and worse health programs than schools in neighborhoods where people make more than \$7,000 a year. This means that the children of most working people get cheated along with Negroes and the very poor who live in slums.

The fact is that all children get cheated by segregation. Just as non-union workers force down the wages of unionized men, so does segregated schools hurt the education even of the rich. Instead of giving middle income white children the best education, the school system offers them a consolation prize: "at least they've got it better than the Negroes."

Segregation, like ability grouping, is just another way that the school system fools people into allowing it to avoid providing enough funds for public education.

### PART III : How schools teach notions of right and wrong; and how children learn not to question them

Schools teach children unequal skills. The economy only has a certain number of jobs for educated people, and the rest get left out. But a child learns more in school than just skills. Schools also teach children notions of right and wrong, good and bad. They give them a picture of what society is like, and teach them ideas about how it should be. In school, children develop attitudes that say our society is run the way it should be.

Textbooks don't necessarily have to spell out these attitudes, for the notions of right and wrong on which the society is based lie

behind almost everything children do in school. Children are indoctrinated without realizing it.

There are several ways in which schools indoctrinate children:

1. Segregation is more than a way of separating children for different kinds of education. It is also a way of teaching children to accept the way society is run. When white and Negro, rich and poor children are separated in different schools, they can't mix with each other, understand each other, see what they have in common. When segregated children grow up, they know only their own kind. So they almost automatically begin to think they are better (or worse) than those who are strange to them. Segregation insures that a generation later, poor whites and Negroes will be unlikely to join together to fight for social change. It makes it hard for white and Negro parents to join together today.

2. The way schools are run also prepares children to accept society the way it is.

Schools try very hard to make children believe that people in positions of authority are always right. In a classroom, the teacher is the authority. What she says is right because she is the teacher, even if it doesn't make sense to the child. If a child thinks about a question in a different way, a way that seems right to him, he is usually told "that's the wrong answer."

This makes children worry about saying things the teacher will like, instead of figuring things out themselves. So children learn not to think for themselves.

In poor communities especially (but in other neighborhoods, too) schools make children afraid --- afraid to act different, afraid of arguing with the teacher, afraid of getting the wrong answer.

These lessons in authority are carried through life. Schools

prepare children for factories, for example, because schools are run like factories. There is a person (the teacher, the boss) you have to take orders from, and you have to produce quickly and efficiently what he wants. One famous critic, Thorstein Veblen, pointed out that the school's view of knowledge is shaped by business ideas. Veblen said that learning is seen as a "saleable commodity, to be produced on a piece rate plan, rated, bought, and sold by standard units, measured, counted, and compared by mechanical tests."

Many of our country's leaders believe that schools do not teach authority, obedience, and conformity well enough. They argue that schools ought to reduce the crime rate by making children more fearful of authority. (The U.S. Office of Education once wrote that schools should train people in "responsibility" so that there would be "more honesty in the payment of taxes and less exploitation of social security benefits.")

3. Schools indoctrinate children not only by the way they teach, but also by what they teach. Schools try to give children a "middle class" picture of the way things are. Books that are used to teach children to read tell about white people who live in suburbs with nice houses and lawns to play on. The fathers of these families go to work in a suit.

Sometimes children from slum neighborhoods learn these lessons so well that when they are asked to draw pictures of the houses they live in, they draw pictures of the houses they see in their readers.

Other children, who aren't fooled so easily, see that this is just the opposite of what they learn from their own lives. So they stop trying to learn -- and when they are older, they drop out. The only other choice for them is to decide that the school is right about life and they are wrong; they begin to mistrust their own judgement and consider themselves inferior.

Schools teach notions about how politics should be by the way they teach history and civics. Every school has its class elections, but these are elections without issues and without power. Children are prepared for similar elections in "real" life.

Schools teach American history mainly by talking about what the Presidents have done. Such history trains people to look at politics to see important decisions made --- it trains people to ignore the decisions made by businessmen and industry. Children are taught about the American revolution by reading about the lives of George Washington and Benjamin Franklin; they are taught almost nothing about the lives of the baker who sold Franklin his bread or about the slaves who worked on Washington's plantation. Children are taught the country was settled by immigrants --- but they are not taught the history of Negroes or even of the peasants who immigrated. Schools filled with children of workers teach almost nothing about labor history; children learn about the civil war, but nothing of the thousands of unsuccessful struggles through history of people fighting for freedom and a decent life.

Children may not remember the facts of history after a few years. But they do pick up this attitude toward history and toward politics; they carry this attitude through life, making it very difficult for them ever to ask questions about our society.

Bertolt Brecht wrote a poem describing the way history is taught and written:

At what expense the victory fell?

Every ten years a great war.

Who sold the paper?

So many details.

So many questions.

## The Seven Towers of Thebes

Who built the seven towers of Thebes?

The books are filled with names of kings.

Was it Kings who hauled the craggy blocks of stone?

And Babylon, so many times destroyed,

Who built the city up each time? In which of Lima's houses,

That city glittering with gold, lived those who built it?

In the evening when the Chinese wall was finished

Where did the masons go? Imperial Rome

Is full of arcs of triumph. Who reared them up? Over whom

Did the Caesars triumph? Byzantium lives in song,

Were all her dwellings palaces? And even in Atlantis of the legend

The night the sea rushed in,

The drowning men still bellowed for their slaves.

Young Alexander plundered India.

He alone?

Caesar beat the Gauls.

Was there not even a cook in his army?

Philip of Spain wept as his fleet

Was sunk and destroyed. Were there no other tears?

Frederick the Great triumphed in the Seven Years War. Who

Triumphed with him?

Each page a victory,

At whose expense the victory ball?

Every ten years a great man,

Who paid the piper?

So many details.

So many questions.

So we see how the schools are tied in with every other injustice of society.

As long as industry does not see public education as being in their own interest, there will be no money for education.

Or, so long as the tax system is unwilling to take funds from the corporations and individuals who can afford it, there will be no money for education.

So long as whites and Negroes are divided against themselves to the benefit of the political machine, education will be shortchanged.

So long as no movement exists which demands that schools "tell it like it is," schools will make excuses for the way things are.

#### Some questions to think about

1. Set up a debate with a friend. One of you take the side that "Integration is a phony issue. What we need is a decent education and we don't care who's in class with us. Besides black people need their own schools which they can control themselves." The other side argue for integration of the schools.

Another debate is for one side to argue that \* the reason the crime rate is so high is because schools aren't as strict with kids as they used to be. "What we need is a little more of the cane."

2. Try to rewrite Brecht's poem, using examples from American history that you learned in school.
3. Who is for integrated education in Chicago? Who is against it?
4. What is "ability"? How should education take account of it?
5. Make up some stories that you think children's reading books should include.