

# DÉJÀ VU ALL OVER AGAIN

By Douglas G. Schermer

Iowa ASCD Historian

“We look at the present through a rear-view mirror. We march backwards into the future.” – Marshall McLuhan

Marshall McLuhan described our culture well when he observed that we paint the present on the canvass of the past. He cited “iron horse” and “horseless carriage” as examples. In education I would add “Little Red Schoolhouse,” and “back to the basics.” I understand McLuhan this way: We are driving a Corvette down the highway of the future with a muddy windshield while steering by looking through the rear-view mirror. (You can find more about McLuhan at this web site: <http://www.marshallmcluhan.com/> )

In this article, I will invite you to take a look in the rear view mirror of educational thought as expressed by educational leaders in 1874. In the process we might see our place along this historic trail and better understand where we might be heading. (I am certain you will find the final quotation very interesting.) Could a rear-view mirror be the crystal ball of the future?

Suppose you were invited to attend a conference in our sister state of Hubei, China. Your task is to explain the educational system in America to an audience that has only experienced a top-down, nationally directed, educational system in which standardized tests are the means to determine who goes to the best high schools and colleges and gets the best jobs.

That is similar to the task put before the commissioner of Education in 1872 who was invited to do just that in Vienna. The result was a booklet, *A Statement Of The Theory Of Education In The United States Of America, As Approved By Many Leading Educators*. Thanks to the Internet and the University of Michigan, it is available to us today. The primary authors were Duane Doty, superintendent of city-schools, Detroit, Michigan, and W. T. Harris, superintendent of city-schools, Saint Louis, Missouri. Many

leading educational leaders of this post-Civil War era added their signature of endorsement.

Although not ready in time for the Vienna conference, the federal Commissioner of Education found the document worthwhile.

...in view of the constant demands made upon this Bureau, especially by foreign investigators, for a statement of the school-system in this country; and in view of the natural tendency of such foreigners to fall into the error of supposing that there is a national system of education under control of the General Government of the United States; and, moreover, in consideration of the dangers that have been and are threatening the welfare of the free public-school-systems of many of the States, a clear statement of such fundamental principles as all American educators can agree upon seems most timely, as furnishing to the friends of education everywhere a ready means of refuting the false assertions of those who oppose the establishment and prosperity of the schools in their several localities. (United States, Office of Education (1874), p.5)

Was as that written in 1874 or 1974? My hope and fear is that it could be a quote from the time-warp machine set to 2074. Will we still need to seek common ground around the fundamental principles of American education? Will we still need to refute false assertions about education? Will we have a federally controlled educational system? The Magic 8-Ball comes up “Yes,” “Yes,” and “Probably.”

The reference to the “Commissioner of Education” may give us pause for thought. The federal “Bureau of Education” was established in 1867 (about two years after the Civil War) with the mission of collecting statistics and the dissemination of information relating to education subjects. From this tiny acorn grew our Department of Education.

### **Organization of Educational Systems In 1874**

The 1874 authors first had to clarify that the state was the unit of government that chartered our school systems. The federal government and the newly formed “Bureau of Education” were in the audience rather than on the stage. In 1874 our national educational “system” was a collection of educational “systems” in which the responsibility for education resided in the respective states. Although the states delegated much to the local school districts, they noted that each state established its educational

“system” and sometimes prescribed “more or less the branches of knowledge to be taught.”

It is important to note that states authorized the creation of school districts, prescribed procedures for the election of school officials, and determined the process for funding the schools through a combination of local taxes and state aid. Nevertheless, these 1874 educators saw the local direction and management of the schools as being left to the municipalities or to the local school districts with general supervision reserved to the state itself. Even in 1874, “local control” was essentially what the state gave you permission to do.

The object in our rear-view mirror is of an educational system organized by each state with local school districts taking care of most details. Nothing in 1874 hinted that we might be speeding into a future of a singular, unitary, “education system” with a national curriculum, national assessments, and a national bureaucracy – one easily understood by attendees at the 1872 Vienna international conference on education.

### **1874 Fundamental Principles**

What did those educational leaders believe about the fundamental principles of public education in 1874 and how might that help us understand our role as educational leaders today?

Like them, we share a need to clarify a consensus view about the purpose of education in contemporary American society. Some would refer to this as a “covenant,” a statement of the moral purpose of education. I would argue that many of the statements in this 1874 document might steer us in the right direction! Here are a few examples of what they said:

- The existence of a republic, unless all its citizens are educated, is an admitted impossibility.
- Participation of the people in political functions, especially elections, renders necessary the education of all without distinction of sex, social rank, wealth, or natural abilities.
- The people need an “educated intelligence” to ensure law abiding citizens who know the laws and are able to obey them.

- Education is necessary to realize the idea of civil society.
- The goal of meeting human wants and needs through the creation of distribution of wealth requires the American system of public education, one that is supported by community contributions in form of taxation.
- Educated and intelligent people are necessary to the preservation of property, the creation of wealth, and the actualization of justice.
- In their view, modern corporations (remember this was 1874) could not exist without a system of free popular education that ascended from the primary grades to the universities.

Missing from their list were references to self-esteem, whole child, an appreciation of the arts, sex education, or the need to be competitive in a global society. I saw no evidence of a stated need to understand and get along with people in different cultures unless French and German classes addressed that outcome. In this sense of specific content knowledge, perhaps the road on which we travel has changed from mud to asphalt, although our direction is essentially the same.

## **1874 Curriculum**

What about the curriculum in the post Civil War era? Let's take a quick look. Suppose it is 2074 and the media report that Iowa still has the highest percentage of working parents and the greatest need for day care services of any state in the nation. Would this 1874 description of the need for "socialization," "character education" and "body basics" still be accurate? Here is how they phrased it:

The frequent separation of the younger branches of the family from the old stock renders family-influence less powerful in molding character. The consequence of this is the increased importance of the school in an ethical point of view. In order to compensate for lack of family-nurture, the school is obliged to lay more stress upon discipline and to make far more prominent the moral phase of education. It is obliged to train the pupil into habits of prompt obedience to his teachers and the practice of self-control in its various forms, in order that he may be prepared for a life wherein there is little police-restraint on the part of the constituted authorities. (United States, Office of Education (1874), p.13)

Our predecessors' view of how the school day is to be structured (I would interpret what comes next as a statement of the "hidden curriculum") indicates to me that this "object is really *IS* closer than it appears." See if you can find "productive, collaborative worker" in this statement.

The commercial tone prevalent in the city tends to develop, in its schools, quick, alert habits and readiness to combine with others in their tasks. Military precision is required in the maneuvering of classes. Great stress is laid upon (1) punctuality, (2) regularity, (3) attention, and (4) silence, as habits necessary through life for successful combination with one's fellow-men in an industrial and commercial civilization. (United States, Office of Education (1874), p.14)

Turning to the "stated curriculum," the authors of this document seemed to divide the curriculum content into two main domains – (a) mastery of the material world and (b) communication with other people.

The concept of "mastery of the material world" seems to be at odds with our current notions of ecology, but it may well be one of the core values of American culture, especially during the Westward Expansion. They saw arithmetic and geography as the keys to mastery of this material world.

The first theoretical study necessary for the mastery over the material world is arithmetic -- the quantification of objects as regards numbers. In American schools, this is looked upon as of so much importance that more time is given to it than to any other study of the course. Its cultivation of the habit of attention and accuracy is especially valued. After arithmetic follows geography, in a parallel direction, looking towards natural history. Arithmetic is taught from the first entrance into school, while geography is begun as soon as the pupil can read well. (United States, Office of Education (1874), p.15)

Their domain of "communication with other people" did not bog down in reading wars over phonics, whole language, directed instruction, or politically correct reading strategies. Nevertheless, I believe their approach to reading and literature, based on graded readers with well chosen selections, would be familiar to most of us, although the content of the literature would be much more inclusive.

The first theoretical study necessary to facilitate combination of man with his fellow-men is reading the printed page. Accordingly, the prevailing custom in American schools is to place a book in the hands of the child when he first enters school and to begin his instruction with teaching him how to read. As soon as he can read, he is able to begin to learn to study books for himself, and thus to acquire stores of knowledge by his own efforts. The art of writing is learned in connection with reading.

This culture, in the direction of knowing the feelings, sentiments, and ideas of mankind, is continued throughout the course by a graded series of readers, containing selections of the gems from the literature of the language, both prose and verse. This culture is re-enforced about the fifth year of the course by the study of English grammar, in which, under a thin veil, the pupil learns to discern the categories of the mind and to separate them analytically from modifying surroundings and define them. (United States, Office of Education (1874), p.15)

Other subjects taught in elementary schools included drawing, vocal music, and rudimentary natural science along with declamation of oratorical selections and debate.

### **1874 Secondary Schools**

In the light of our current discussions about the status of high schools and their future, I suggest a look at high schools in 1874 would be worth the effort. I doubt that in 1874 it was possible to imagine the expectation that all students would graduate from high school. As recently as 1940, it was estimated that only 20 percent of adolescents graduated from high school.

In 1874 secondary schools, students might study algebra, geometry, calculus, and simple engineering such as surveying and navigation for the purpose of mastery of the physical world. Other subjects would include “natural philosophy” (physics), and natural history. The humanities consisted of rhetoric, English literature, Latin, and modern languages such as German or French,

There were three types of secondary schools described in 1874 – high schools, academies, and seminaries.

The high schools generally form a portion of the free public school-system; the academies and seminaries are generally founded and supported by private enterprise or religious zeal, and are not controlled or interfered with by the State,

although many of them are chartered by it and are free from taxation. (United States, Office of Education (1874), p.16)

Secondary schools could also be classified by their curriculum emphasis such as a traditional academic school, scientific, law, medicine, and theology schools, and normal schools (for the purpose of training of teachers and was most commonly found in the state universities). This suggests to me that some of our theme-based magnet and charter schools are a form of “*deja vu* all over again.”

While most things remain the same, expecting all high school students to be prepared for post-secondary education appears to be a profound change.

### **1874 Separation of Church and State**

In 1874 the issue of separation of church and state was not understood in Europe where religion was often a state function and schools promoted the official faith. Therefore, these educators took time to address how separation of church and state was approached in American schools. In fact, the issue of public funds to support private, religious schools was debated then as well as now.

Very many academies and seminaries have been founded with a view to supplying the Christian ministry with clergymen. There are some denominations more or less hostile to the public-school-system because of its secularity, and these favor a division of the school-funds so as to allow each denomination to carry on its own school-system.

Sectarian instruction is not given in the public schools. Religious, particularly sectarian, training is accomplished mainly in families and by the several denominations in their Sunday-schools or in special classes that recite their catechisms at stated intervals during the week. It is quite a common practice to open or close the public schools with Bible-reading and prayer. Singing of religious hymns by the entire school is still more common. (United States, Office of Education (1874), p.18)

My first experiences as a teacher came as a volunteer for released-time, religious classes in Chicago every Wednesday afternoon. Although not common practice in Iowa schools today, I believe Iowa code considers attendance at religious instruction a

legitimate excused absence. While some things have changed since 1874 in terms of Bible reading, hymn singing, and prayer in schools, the concept of separation of church and state remains. Perhaps their use of the term “sectarian” is a clue as to how they distinguished between what was and was not permitted in public schools.

### **1874 Instructional Methods**

While the above summarizes much of the 1874 thinking about curriculum content, I found only one reference to instructional methods:

The general system of instruction lays special emphasis on the use of text-books and the prevalent tendency is towards giving the pupil an initiation into the method of using the printed page in the form of books and periodicals for the purpose of obtaining information from the recorded experience of his fellow-men; but in many schools and systems of schools equal or greater stress is laid upon the practical method of conducting investigations for the purpose of verification and of original discovery. (United States, Office of Education (1874), p.17)

Text dominated instruction is very large in my rear-view mirror. My first “curriculum” meeting as a rookie principal was devoted to sharing copies of the lists of text books used in our respective schools. In those days our major curriculum work focused on selecting textbooks because textbooks defined the scope, sequence, and content of what was taught (or at least what was supposed to be “covered”). In fact, the text book publisher supplied most of the questions used to assess student learning. My first controversial curriculum decision was that K-8 teachers would all use the same publisher for the new math books. In an era of standards, benchmarks, and high-stakes testing, I remain fairly confident that the text book continues to define what is taught on a daily basis and that “coverage” is a dominant concern.

This final passage surprised me. I suspect that the following thoughts were seen as “progressive” in 1874 and should not be judged in by current standards. Nevertheless, it is an interesting quote:

In the city-schools, female teachers largely preponderate, composing frequently 90 per cent of the entire corps of teachers. In country-schools, the proportion is

very much smaller, but has increased considerably in late years. The pupil, coming directly from home influence, finds a less abrupt change upon entering the school under the charge of a female teacher. The female character, being trained by experience in family supervision to the administration of special details wherein division of labor cannot prevail to any great extent, is eminently fitted to control and manage the education of the child while it is in a state of transition from caprice to rationally regulated exercise of the will; and the development of individuality is generally more harmonious up to a certain age if the pupil is placed under female teachers. The comparatively small cost of female-labor, also, largely determines its employment in all public schools. (United States, Office of Education (1874), pp.17-18)

This document was endorsed by 76 educational leaders including college presidents, large city school superintendents, and state superintendents of education, including the “Hon ALONZO ABERNETHY, State-superintendent of public instruction, Des Moines, Iowa.” I doubt it will surprise you that all 76 were “gentlemen.”

There you have it -- a spin down the highway of history steering by with our rear-view mirror. Some would argue that much of what we do and how we think today was expressed in this document (although with 1874 terminology.) To the extent that has helped you understand the present, I hope you enjoyed time the trip.

#### References:

United States. Office of Education (1874). *A statement of the theory of education in the United States of America, as approved by many leading educators*. Washington, DC: Government Printing Office. Retrieved August 10, 2006 from <http://www.hti.umich.edu/cgi/t/text/pageviewer-idx?c=moa;cc=moa;sid=673e86f561f1225ed1f0e74d6128dec6;rgn=full%20text;idno=AEN5638.0001.001;view=image;seq=0001>