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# A PROPOSAL FOR A Poor Children's Bill of Rights

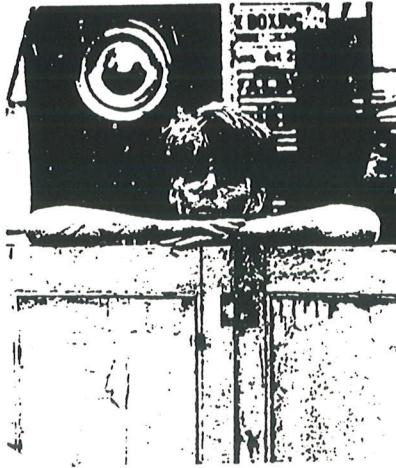
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**R**eliance on formal education as a significant vehicle for social mobility is an unpopular article of faith these days. There is not now, nor has there ever been, an American "equality of educational opportunity." That is historically evident. It is equally clear that there might be. Few other social institutions offer potentially so much as schools, and ingenious men must make them work.

Very simply, we are involved in a struggle by the poor to catch up. But thus far the rich, at a time when the gross national product rises to over \$800 billion, become further enriched and the poor get poorer. It is obvious that the poor, particularly the minorities, no longer are willing to accept this state of affairs. That they have abandoned placid tolerance gives us some hope, but only if we correct this disparity. To do otherwise, general society assumes a perilous risk.

Given the general conviction about the urgent need to solve the problem, what does society do?

Ours is a simple proposal: to use education—vastly improved and powerful education—as the principal vehicle for upward mobility. While a complex of strategies must be designed to accomplish this, we wish here to stress one: a program to give money *directly* to poor children (through their parents) to assist in paying for their education. By



doing so we might both create significant competition among schools serving the poor (and thus improve the schools) and meet in an equitable way the extra costs of teaching the children of the poor.

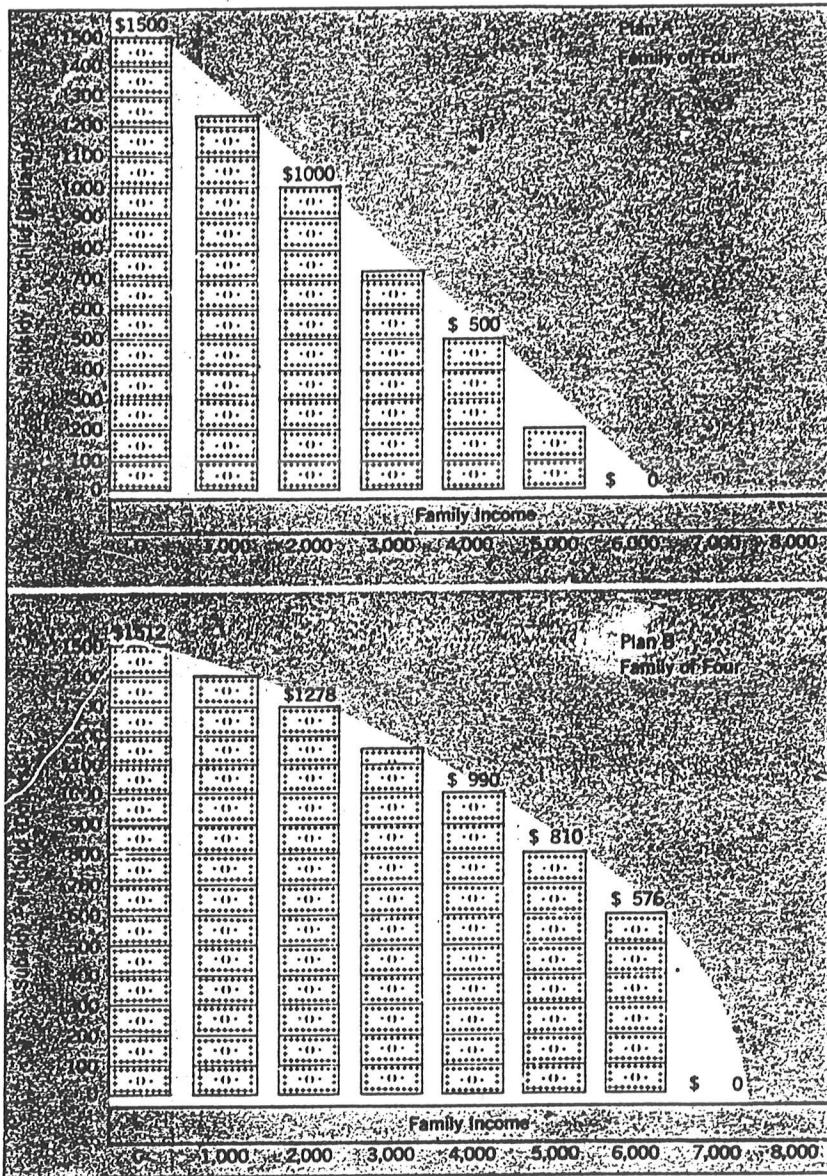
The idea of such tuition grants is not new. For almost two centuries variant proposals for the idea have come from such figures as Adam Smith, Thomas Paine, John Stuart Mill and more recently from Milton Friedman, the conservative University of Chicago economist. Its appeal bridges ideological differences. Yet it has never been tried, quite possibly because the need for it has never been so demonstrably critical as now.

Before we discuss the economics and details of our proposal, it should be emphasized at once that an open society cannot be constructed by good schools alone. As Paul Goodman has warned:

... There is plenty of social mobility, opportunity to rise—*except precisely for the ethnic minorities* (our emphasis) who are our main concern... but the statuses and channels are increasingly stratified, rigidified, cut and dried... By plain social justice, the Negroes and other minorities have the right to, and must get, equal opportunity for schooling with the rest, but the exaggerated expectation from schooling is chimera—and, I fear, will be shockingly disappointing."

Even as we educate our poor and equip them with the skills necessary to hold responsible and meaningful jobs, we must insure absolutely that, once the requisite skills have been acquired, jobs will be available. To fail here will assure a social explosion unlike any we have experienced thus far.

There are two reasons why equality of educational opportunity does not, in fact, exist in the United States. First, there is the simple fact that the schools and the children who attend them differ in many respects. Second is the fact that since the time of Thomas Jefferson we have misconstrued the phrase—equality of educational opportunity—as meaning



**TWO EDUCATION-SUBSIDY PLANS.** Providing subsidies to children in families (up to half the population with school-aged children) could cost \$17 billion a year. Two sample plans: Plan A is a linear function and cheaper than the exponential function, Plan B.



equality of opportunity. Thus *Plessy vs. Ferguson* (1896) established the concept of *separate but equal* facilities. It was not until 1954, in *Brown vs. Board of Education*, that the Supreme Court reversed this principle.

What, then, is meant by equality of educational opportunity? We feel that the stringent demands of our modern industrial society call for an *equality of attainment*. This does not mean that the schools should be attempting to make everybody the same; that is *prima facia* absurd. What it does imply, however, is that we should make the schools appropriate for people with respect to

their environment. That we are not doing that at the present time is quite evident.

James Coleman has reminded us that "home" also educates. Homes also differ. Schools, rather than being alike ("equal"), must differ just as homes do. In short, education must be planned for the child in his complete milieu, not just within school.

The concept of equality of educational opportunity, then, concerns the *relative intensity* of two sets of influences—school, and home and neighborhood.

Coleman, writing recently in the *Harvard Educational Review*, elaborated on the nature of the problem: "If the school's influences are not only alike for the two groups, but very strong relative to the divergent influences, then the two groups will move apart. Or more generally, the relative intensity of the convergent school influences and the divergent out-of-school influences determines the effectiveness of the educational system in providing equality of educational opportunity. In this perspective, complete equality of opportunity can be reached only if all the divergent out-of-school influences vanish... Given the existing divergent influences, equality of opportunity can only be approached and never fully reached. The concept becomes one of proximity to equality of opportunity. This proximity is determined, then, not merely by the *equality* of educational inputs, but by the *intensity* of the school's influence...."

What all this boils down to is that *we must discriminate in education in favor of the poor*. We must weight the education scales in favor of the poor for the next generation and commit a major share of our resources to providing superior educational programs for them. The U.S. Commissioner of Education, Harold Howe, supports this view: "My plea in this regard is not for *equal* education but for *better* than *equal*." Howe, quoting President Johnson, writes that "you do not take a person who for years has been hobbled by chains and liberate him, bring him up to the starting line of a race and say 'you're free to compete with the others' and justly believe that you have been completely fair."

#### A Poor Children's Bill of Rights

We propose a Poor Children's Bill of Rights which will frankly discriminate in favor of poor children. It would be based on a "free enterprise" approach to education and would be patterned after the G.I. Bill of Rights following World War II and the Korean War.

It would, quite simply, give money in the form of a coupon to a poor child who would carry the coupon to the school of his choice, where he would be enrolled. The school chosen could use the sum as it saw fit. And the supplementary grant which the child would give to his school must be large enough to motivate the school to *compete* for it. Our judgment is that a grant of \$1,500 per child per year (about three times the current per-pupil national expenditure) is a necessary figure.

Our research suggests several alternative patterns which provide sliding scales—allowing for the allocation of different amounts of money proportional to family income and number of school-aged children. For practical political purposes, as well as equity, it might be better to employ a scheme based on a sliding scale rather than one that would simply provide \$1,500 for each child defined as



poor. As an example, the accompanying charts [see illustrations, page 60] show how the two different sliding-scale formulae would work for a family of four. For families of five, six, seven or more, appropriate adjustments in the formulae in income relative to a given subsidy would, of course, be made. Regional equalization formulae necessarily would be employed to deal with such problems as the one inherent in the fact that New York, for example, spends \$912 per child per year while Mississippi spends only \$315.

The charts show what the educational grant—under each of the formulae—would be to each school-aged child in a family of four, depending on the level of income. The chart shows quickly the maximum family income level that would be subsidized.

The estimated total cost of the various plans we have considered ranges from

approximately \$11 to \$17 billion per year, depending on the formula and on the number of families served. If families with incomes up to \$10,000 per year are included, up to half of the population with school-age children would receive an education subsidy. Generally speaking, for the Poor Children's Bill of Rights, formulae that are linear functions (such as A) are cheaper than exponential functions (such as B). However, exponential functions have the advantage of decreasing more slowly than linear functions (as income increases) until the maximum subsidized income is approached. At this point exponential functions rapidly—and, from an administrative point of view, neatly—approach zero.

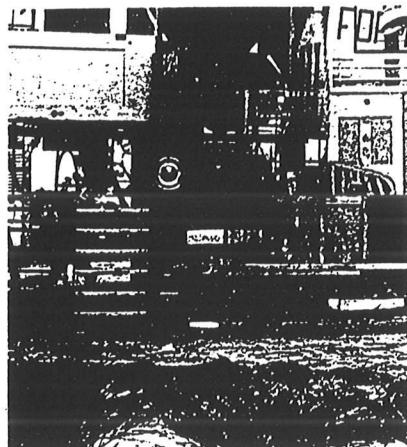
#### An Investment That Would Repay Itself

For political reasons it might be necessary to include a large proportion (up to 50 per cent) of the nation's children: one guesses that much of the political opposition to the Poor Children's Bill of Rights would come from upper-middle- and lower-middle-class groups. (Or, put more graphically, from some of the people who stoned Martin Luther King in Chicago.) However, if the children of these people were also included under the program, it is reasonable to expect opposition to diminish in some degree.

There are some 10 million children now growing up in what the Johnson Administration has defined as poverty (approximately \$4,300 per year for a family of four). Our simplest plan, that of providing a \$1,500 subsidy to each poor child, would cost about \$15 billion per year, less than the current expenditure for highways and about half the annual cost of the Vietnam war. In straight fiscal terms this would not place much of a strain on a well-managed economy.



However, even the \$15 billion figure is deceptively inflated. Christopher Jencks points out that "in the long run there is abundant evidence that this investment would repay itself by raising taxable income and by cutting expenditures for welfare, unemployment, police and other slum symptoms." Michael Harring-



ton elaborates on the expense of maintaining poverty:

"The tensions, the chaos, the dislocations... are a major item in the budget of every municipality. In some cities a quarter of the annual funds are devoted to taking care of the special fire, police, and health problems created by the slums. The cost of keeping these people at the bottom year in and year out (rather than making an investment in real change once for all) is considerable."

And British educational economist Mark Blaug writes:

"A number of studies, in such diverse countries as the United States . . . Israel, Mexico . . . India . . . and Uganda, have all shown that both social and private rates of return on investment in all levels of formal education are typically positive, meaning that the *lifetime earnings of educated people more than recoup the cost of their education.*"

One of the principal advantages of the proposed system is that it would give to the parents of poor children the power to choose the kind and quality of education their child will receive (a not inconsiderable benefit as we shall later see), and it would foster competition between schools, public and private, with the inferior institutions eventually being eliminated.

Milton Friedman, who proposed a system similar to the Poor Children's Bill

of Rights in 1955, recognized these advantages. "Parents," he wrote, "could express their views about schools directly, by withdrawing their children from one school and sending them to another to a much greater extent than is now possible." Further, he notes that "here as in other fields, competitive private enterprise is likely to be far more efficient in meeting consumer demands than either nationalized (publicly run) enterprises or enterprises run to serve other purposes."



One can only disagree with Friedman in his emphasis on *private* enterprise. Competition between *public* school systems, or even between public schools within a system, easily can reach the same desired ends.

The allowance scheme here presented is seen erroneously by all too many as *new* and a *most radical* form of conservatism. It was in 1776 that Adam Smith wrote:

"The public can facilitate this acquisition (of reading, writing and arithmetic among children of the poor) by establishing in every parish or district a little school, where children may be taught for a reward so moderate, that even a common labourer may afford it; the master being partly, but not wholly paid by the public; because, if he was wholly, or even principally paid by it, he would soon learn to neglect his business."

Tom Paine, writing in the 1790s protested, with relevance for today, that "it is monarchical and aristocratical Government only that requires ignorance for its support," and proposed the distribution of four million pounds to working-class families according to the size and the age of the family. The government was to pay:

"... to every poor family, out of the surplus taxes, and in room of poor rates four pounds a year for every child under fourteen years of age; enjoining the parents of such children to send them to school, to learn reading, writing and common arithmetic."

In the 19th Century John Stuart Mill endorsed a similar idea, and in 1926 Francis Cardinal Bourne, Archbishop of Westminster, proposed that each poor parent "... would receive an annual... coupon for the cost-per-child amount, entitling the child to a place in any recognized school...." He stated that "... the adoption of this novel project would... relieve poor parents of a social disability and would vivify Education by a spirit of wholesome rivalry...."

In spite of its ideological antiquity, there are a number of advantages inherent in our proposed scheme: it would concentrate dollars on the children who need it most. By taking her child to school X, the mother gives to that particular school as a supplementary grant three times the amount of money spent on the average per student for education.

Accordingly, this provides an incentive to middle-class schools to take in poor children.

It would give to the poor some power to choose and control their own destinies. Many believe that the sense of powerlessness and inability to choose and control one's destiny is a major factor in perpetuating poverty. Writing in *The New York Times*, Floyd McKissick bluntly puts the problem:

"Public education is a monopoly.

Black people have no alternative to public education. They are trapped in public schools until they are old enough to drop out.... Boards of Education... are not responsible to the community in black areas."

Analyzing the "Coleman Report," Michigan psychologist Irwin Katz writes in the *Harvard Educational Review*:

"For Negro students, sense of control was clearly the most important attitude.... Moreover, the relation of Negroes' sense of control to achievement was considered stronger than that of any family-background factor... or objective school characteristics...."

Mario Fantini of the Ford Foundation adds:

"... a 'parents' lobby' with unprecedented motivation and commitment might arise. Nor should the possible effects on parents in

their own right be overlooked. Few people can engage in a social cause and not themselves be transformed."

Fantini predicts that parents may even be stimulated to enlarge their own education, but, most important, it would mean for the parents "...a tangible grasp on the destiny of their children and (the) opening to richer meaning for their own lives." The ability to control their own destinies definitely will instill in poor people a necessary pride and dignity of which they have been cheated.

Competition will be developed between schools, public and private. Not only between existing schools, but between present institutions and new schools, which there is ample evidence to believe The Poor Children's Bill of Rights will promote. Responsive to the communities they serve, particularly in black urban areas, they also will compete.

Those who would argue that our proposal would destroy the public schools raise a false issue. A system of public schools which destroys rather than develops positive human potential now exists. It is not in the public interest. And a system which blames its society while it quietly acquiesces in, and inadvertently perpetuates, the very injustices it blames for its inefficiency is not in the public interest. If a system cannot fulfill its responsibilities, it does not deserve to survive. But if the public schools serve, they will prosper.

The plan could cause a kind of decentralization which would promote diversity, pluralism, responsiveness to the needs of the community being served and, indeed, even greater efficiency.



Henry Levin, in "The Failure of the Public Schools and the Free Market Remedy," points out that under a market system, the motive for success among

schools would require that the school meet the needs of its students better than its competitors for any given cost. "Under such a system," says Levin, "the massive inefficiencies and rigidities which currently exist in the public schools would have to yield to more ra-



tional use of resources, flexibility, and innovation. In particular, the schools would have to be more responsive to the needs of their particular students in order to retain them and to attract new pupils."

#### Some Anticipated Problems

There are, of course, problems. By giving power to parents, with all its attendant virtues, one loses some power to enforce integration by race and class. We hypothesize that parents will send their children to the "better" schools and that better schools are by definition integrated by class and race. We concede that this is an hypothesis of high faith.

Congress must build in a requirement of equal access to any school receiving children's allowances (parallel in kind to the affidavits required of universities receiving government contracts under Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964). This requirement would prevent the use of allowances to support *de jure apartheid* schools, white and black. But the requirement would have to be policed assiduously—no easy task! Allowances still could create more "separate" schools than we want or need. Further, by giving power to parents, one asserts trust in them for the welfare of their children. Anyone who has taught in any school knows of the scandal of parental indifference or worse. Then, why build on this pile of sand?

We feel, unhappily, that giving parents more power can only be seen as the least of evils. We trust them little, but still more than we trust the present monopoly

of lay boards and professional schoolmen.

The latter two entities have power and resources now and will retain most of these. Parents will get significant new power under our scheme and will thus have more leverage than before. Power will be better balanced—and it is a balance that is required. We favor no one's monopoly: parents', teachers', or the state's. All have rights and obligations, but all have weaknesses. Wholly parent-run schools will be too parochial and their power base shifting, as children come and go. Domination by teachers has its obvious flaws, as does "state" control, the present system. Parents, teachers and the state all have stakes in the schools, but the stakes are different. The child will be best protected if these stakes are balanced off, one against the other.

#### Plan a Part of Bigger Package

Under our plan, new schools would spring up to receive the new bounty, much as they did in higher education after World War II. There would have to be some form of quick but fair accreditation by regional professional groups and the states to prevent fly-by-night enterprises from fleecing unwitting parents. The last thing that American slums need is Dickensian proprietary schools.

Such accreditation is as tricky to plan and administer as it is necessary. It will require courage and imagination on the part of regional accrediting authorities, and new mechanisms to judge the quality of the "output" of the schools (rather than merely to judge the visible attributes of institutions doing the educating). We operate now on a system that decides which educational car to buy by examining the factory which makes it. Yes, this assessment will be difficult—but it must be done. Perhaps the National Assessment Project, launched several years ago under the leadership of Ralph Tyler, can give direction—eventually—to those who will accredit.

And, finally, the plan, even cloaked with a politically classy title such as "Poor Children's Bill of Rights" must be part of a package, one which surely must include some form of guaranteed annual income and the provision for health and welfare services at a level of accommodation far higher than at present. And, as we have said, relevant education will demand relevant careers for its graduates. Brutally put, educated unemployed are considerably more dangerous than uneducated unemployed. This nation can afford neither.

Freer enterprise in education will provoke high quality only if there is a new breed of professionals to make it happen in the various competing schools. Drastically more powerful and flexible curricula will be needed—and these will be costly to develop. The costs of improving education in the purely technical-pedagogical sense to a point where it does become an effective means of social mobility will be immense.

Racial and class mixing promoted by the scheme will result only if there are school buildings available to hold more and varied children: a federal school-building program established to house imaginative and integrated educational programs is essential. And the public, the parents, will have to be informed about education as never before. Our limited trust of parents might be increased if public information about schooling were better and fad separated from fancy more often. (This will be difficult as the education profession itself is notoriously prone to fads.)

If we do all this we will, perhaps, double the costs of elementary and secondary education. Such would be a social reform of considerable consequence and would vault the federal government



centrally into support of the schools. We propose that half of this increase be in the form of allowances for a Poor Children's Bill of Rights. The use of these allowances would be free, virtually, from federal (or state or local) control. And the total increase would be less than a year's cost of the war in Vietnam.

It can be done. It must be done. □

*Harvey Pressman of the Newton, Mass. Education Development Center, will discuss other aspects of the public-school problem in the October issue.*