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Projecting With Space Journal

Our Problem--Yours and Mine

Wernher von Braun

Two bright six-year-olds were out on the playground at recess. They were closely examining a spider crawling on a brick. "Don't touch it!" exclaimed one first-grader. "It's a poisonous *Latrodectus mactans*!" he added. "How do you know it's a black widow?" asked the second. "Whether or not it's a black widow," replied moppet number one, "the markings indicate that it is definitely of the genus *Latrodectus*." At this point, the school bell rang. "Let's go back to class," said one of the youngsters. "We've got to finish stringing those darned beads."

This, of course, is an apocryphal story. I tell it here merely to point out an obvious fact: **To neglect our children with precocious talents is nothing short of criminal waste of our human resources.** Adlai Stevenson once summed up this problem in his eloquent prose: "We must not let indifference or unwillingness cause us to fail to see the problem of education in human terms—in terms of boys and girls with abilities and aspirations, children who may either be held down and defeated by a poor educational system or be given new possibilities and new goals by a good one. When we neglect education in an age of global conflict, we risk the very safety of our nation and the future of freedom in the world."

No one with any compassion or common sense has ever, to my knowledge, presumed to suggest that bright students should be accorded attention at the expense of the average student or the slow student. What has been suggested is that the bright student in some instances has been *penalized* because of his brightness. In this regard, I hope and believe that elementary teachers are playing a vital role in developing and keeping alive the specialized interests of gifted children.

We all can agree with Mr. Stevenson that education is the passport to a better society. It may stick in the craws of some, but it is a fact of life in 1958 that the race is to the swift, and the battle is to the strong. The day is past when a student can expect, in his bland innocence, to "get by."

When we compare ourselves to other countries, we sometimes find that we have been weighed in the balance and found wanting. The New York *Herald Tribune* reported recently that Prince Charles, heir to the throne of Great Britain, at the age of eight is studying French grammar, world geography, long division, and multiplication, and getting "advanced drill in reading, writing, and spelling." This of course is the Blue Plate Special for a future monarch, but it shows what some youngsters are capable of digesting. The Gymnasium which I attended as a boy started its students out with a stiff course in the classics at the age of ten and Cornelius Nepos at twelve. I have never regretted my good fortune in being exposed to such a diet. This same preoccupation with education is true of the rest of Europe and of the British Commonwealth of Nations.

Dr. Lawrence G. Derthick, U.S. Commissioner of Education, returned recently from a trip abroad accompanied by ten U.S. educators. They were sobered by what they saw. In Leningrad they noted a striking fact which pointed up what they described as Russia's "total commitment" to education: biology, chemistry, physics, and astronomy are required of all pupils, regardless of their individual aspirations. Language studies begin in the second grade.

The Soviet race for military supremacy is no more of a challenge than their race for supremacy in education. We cannot meet this challenge by leaving the problem to educators or to politicians alone. It is a people's problem. It is our problem.

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