WHERE THE HIGH SCHOOL FAILS
HOW COLLEGE INFLUENCES AND THE STRIVING TO PRODUCE
THE SUPERHUMAN HAVE HURT SECONDARY EDUCATION

BY WILLIAM McANDREW

The high schools are under fire just now, subjected to a criticism more continuous and violent than in the seventies, when the courts were called upon to decide whether high school instruction was practical and necessary for the public at large. Supreme Court Justice Cooley then declared in a famous ruling that education (not merely rudimentary instruction, but in an enlarged sense) was an important practical advantage to be supplied to rich and poor alike, thus fixing the democratic function of such schools. In commenting upon this ruling, Chancellor Payne of the University of Tennessee said that while “the college is rather a mediæval institution, reflecting the opinions, the culture, and the needs of an obsolete state of society, our high schools must respond quite fully to the exigencies of modern life and thought.” It is now nearly as difficult to find persons who will deny this principle of secondary education as it is to find high schools that really carry it out. The high school of to-day is characterized as antiquated, gone to seed, narrow, illiberal, exclusive, and aristocratic. This is the identical criticism of Samuel Adams’s time. What are the reasons for the persistence of this charge?

For one thing, there is the college influence. That is aristocratic. “The function of the college is to produce a small and highly trained patriciate—an aristocracy, if you will—men of high breeding and supreme attainments who will rise above the level of the commonplace,” declares your college professor. The college man, he says, should be one of a special class. To be a college man is to be a distinct type.

As the American high school is historically a college adjunct and not a superstructure built on the common schools, its spirit is naturally this aristocratic college spirit. The teachers are rarely secured by promotion from the elementary schools; they are college students fresh from the university atmosphere. The course of study is not a continuation of the common-school course; it comes down like a stalactite from above. The questions of high-school management have not been, “What are the most useful ways in which these young people can spend their school time?” but, “What do the college examinations require?”
These policies prevent the adaptation of high schools to the many. They were fair enough in the beginning. When the high schools were established as fitting schools, their business was to fit. You could choose them and pay, or leave them and not pay. Your tuition was an initiation fee into a "small and highly trained patriciate—an aristocracy, if you will." It was none of the public's business what the course of study was. But when the communities took over these schools and paid their expenses from the public funds and by the decisions of the courts declared the rights of all the children to attend, the old defenses of a special education for the few had no foundation in right or reason. That educators continue to conduct public high schools in accordance with those traditions is the most frequent charge by the lay press just now. The apologies uttered by the high-school masters for chinging to obsolete practises constitute a well-known cycle of educational cant.

WHO CAN JUDGE FITNESS?

One of the hardest worked phrases of this scholastic parlance is "the survival of the fittest." So accustomed are we, high-school folks to this idea that it never occurs to us to question whether it may not be wrong to apply it to high-school students at all. It may be the law of plant life, of animals in the wild state, of business, and of war; but to religion, government, philanthropy, and education it is inapplicable. In our own day we have seen the elementary schools repudiate it. The high school and college are the only educational grades that assume as a high duty the exclusion of the unfit. Fancy Christ, or Paul, or Froebel, or Howard, or Wesley, or Wilberforce, or Lincoln confronted with this tenet so common in high-school circles. When I graduated from the high school, one of a class of five, the Commencement orator told us that we were the wheat from which the chaff had been winnowed away. Some of this chaff run that town to-day, and do it well. Last week I heard, at another graduating exercise, a speaker compliment a dozen boys because they were the remnants of two hundred who began with them. At a recent meeting of the school board of Corning, N. Y., it was decided that if parents of children who are found defective in sight and hearing did not immediately take steps to remedy the trouble, the students would be expelled from school. We cannot easily get rid of the idea that education is a privilege for the few. Exclusion from school either by formal act or by indirection is still regarded as an ordinary exercise of the high-school master's prerogative.

The devices to exclude the unfit are many and familiar. It is not uncommon to hear the authorities assert that entrance to high school should be determined by an examination set to high-school standards. In many communities a boy may be able enough to be counted a graduate of a grammar school but not to be admitted to a high school. Even in our largest high schools, with an abundance of teachers and the possibility of variety of service, we have not reached a point where we are willing to adjust that service to the ability of ordinary children of thirteen years of age.

Our pace is set for superior children. A favorite can expression of ours is "upholding the standard." What standard? The grade that those who have completed the elementary school can maintain? Not at all. The president of Harvard says that "we propose to uphold the standard and to uplift the secondary school by our admission examinations"; on the next day the principal of Phillips Academy, Andover, says that "the boy of average ability finds himself taxed beyond his power." For forty years, at least, we have been following this absurd practice of the unattainable standard. I was never able to reach it in high school or college. I have asked hundreds of college men about their experience and never met one who said that he had been given work that he could do well. We set the mark so high that we don't expect it to be hit, but we will accept 60 per cent of what we ask. This practice of discounting complete work is universal in colleges and in high schools. If we were not so accustomed to it, we would regard it as the device of a diseased mind. It is a system of educating men and women not to desire the best. The best is not required. We teach them to be satisfied with indifferent success.

Another favorite theory of our aristocracy is that we high school people train the leaders and should therefore be permitted to take money from all the taxpayers for the education of a few. The men whose sons drop out of high schools do not rally enthusiastically to this war-cry. Even if it were true, the leadership theory does not fit into democracy very well. But is it true that we make leaders? Why is it that Beecher was rated by the
WHERE THE HIGH SCHOOL FAILS

leadership experts thirty-fourth in his class, while number one became an inconsequential barber? Why is it that Linnaeus's teacher said that he was unfit; Darwin's, that he was dull; Seward's, that he was stupid; Swift's, that he had no promise; Wordsworth's, that he was a disappointment; Sheridan's, that he was a defective; Humboldt's, that he lacked ordinary intelligence; Heine's, that he was a dunce; Hegel's, that he was only middling; Byron's, that he belonged at the tail; Huxley's, that he was notably deficient; Schiller's that he showed no proficiency; Lowell's, that he was negligent; Goldsmith's, that he could not learn; Wagner's, that he was a mental slow; Goethe's, that he was unsatisfactory; Emerson's, that he was hopeless; Pasteur's, that he was only average; Thackeray's, that he was undistinguished; Gladstone's, that he had no unusual ability; Watt's, that he lacked the qualities of success; Ibsen's, that he belonged in the lowest grade; Curie's, that he was too stupid for school? Mr. E. J. Swift, in his book on "Mind in the Making," gives thirty pages of eminent leaders who were dubbed failures by their teachers.

HONOR GRADUATES DO NOT ALWAYS LEAD

I do not understand that it has been proven that those who excel in our present high-school courses become leaders in any larger proportion than those who do not. In the two towns in which I have lived sufficiently long to observe who the leaders are among the men and women, I do not find that the high-raters or even the ordinary high-school graduates outnumber the non-graduates in leadership. This is remarkable because it has been the fashion for forty years for the children of "the best people" to attend the public high school in those towns. The leadership theory lacks support in that the managers of high schools omit to teach leadership. In order to lead, must not one be inspired with a consideration for those who are to be led? The yearly abandonment of so many high school students who withdraw from school makes a sorry lesson in leadership for those who remain. All leadership that I ever studied has a great deal of coaxing and winsomeness in it, whether manly or womanny. One could more easily learn driving than leading in high schools. If the high schools are teaching leadership, is it not in those parts of the boy's doings — his games and his clubs — which are not our chief business at all?

Another piece of cant we high-school people utter is prattle about a deep, a broad, and an accurate scholarship — as if we had it and our students were getting it from the college-made curriculum on which they are fed. This is one of our most sacred ideas. Our faith in this ideal is as dear as a good man's devotion to his mother. But if you put by your emotion and make a search for this scholarship, where is it? There was some in the teaching given James Freeman Clarke and the children with him, but the standard high-school curriculum to-day forbids the exercise of diversity, novelty, or enthusiasm. Without enthusiasm how are you going to have depth or breadth of scholarship? Only a man who is a product of our education would call by the name of scholarship the paradigms, grammatical rules, and lifeless drill that constitute so much of high-school courses now. To call it scholarship is cant of the most fragrant stripe.

These ideas — that the high school should continue to suckle at the college teat; that its purposes should reflect the aims of the university; that it should exclude the unfit; that maintaining high standards is better than educating the dull and the ordinary; that its business is to train the leaders and not the rank and file; that it is especially concerned with scholarship — seem to me the persistence of aristocratic ideas that were legally nullified when the courts established the right of the communities to tax all the people to maintain secondary education. These schools should be like the rivers and the roads, not maintained for private yachts and automobiles exclusively, but even for oarsmen and pedestrians. All the children who have finished the elementary schools should determine the studies and the management of the high schools. They should not be ignored in favor of a traditional, mediæval system. A living person, not a curriculum, should be the determining factor. Judge Draper believes that American high-school procedure is "wasting the lives of the children" and that "there is a sad lack of definite aim and purpose about it all, and that our educational plans do not rationally meet our conditions." If those were the words of an enemy of higher education they would be serious; but as the deliberate utterance of an ex-superintendent, a recent University president, and the present head of the educational system of New York state, including 665 public high schools, they are singularly
momentous and solemn. And they are not unique. They merely express more directly and forcibly what is current public opinion.

It would seem that we are again at a period when public opinion feels about us as Governor Adams felt regarding the academies a hundred years ago: that "our learning, instruction, and social feelings belong to the few." If this is correct, if it is a true diagnosis to attribute the snobbery of learning to these much berated institutions of ours, then the prescription is not very hard to write.

THE WAY OUT

The high school should abandon its idea of being an "institution" with traditions, cults, doctrines, and holier-than-thou proclamations; it should get down to a humble endeavor to serve all children. It should cease maintaining that its mental food, cut and dried by experts of unproved fitness for life here and now, is the only proper nourishment for growing boys and girls. It should study the real world about us and try to reproduce the best of it under the best conditions in the class room. There are thousands of teachers able and anxious to do this if the debilitating bonds of organization, uniformity, and system, which have been perfected by education in the past generation, be relaxed.

We see, now, an almost universal discontent with high-school education, simmering in the newspapers, in civic clubs, and among the laymen on boards of education. You never heard such frequent repetition of the old dictum that the schools belong to the people. Are the high-school men going to uphold "the aristocracy of learning," to declaim about the "maintenance of standards," "the survival of the fittest," "the training of leaders," and "the best interests of the school" (which means the master)? If so, these agitators will force from without their new reforms, with all the old familiar spreading of the notion that school teachers are opposed to progress, unable to fit themselves to circumstances, and in general worthy of contempt. If, on the other hand, the high-school men are wise, they will admit that times have changed since education was standardized; that all the children of all the people are worth some kind of training up to sixteen or eighteen years of age; and that no one in the world is more desirous than the high-school masters of serving those children with any kind of training that public sentiment desires to experiment with.