

LETTER TO LUCY

Dear Lucy:

The summer of '80 will doubtless go down in history as one of Cape Cod's best. We enjoyed our visit and thank you for making it so pleasant for us all.

Now it's back-to-school time, although not as many children are entering this year in most parts of the country. The baby-bust is showing up in school enrollments. Some teachers will be out of jobs. But before you shed too many tears for them, consider the inventiveness and resiliency of the educational establishment. Already there are in operation special programs (and special teachers to carry them out) for "gifted students." And I do mean gifted, not "exceptional" (an educational euphemism for the less-flattering but more-honest terminology used in the past).

Since any new educational program is a direct assault on taxpayers, justification by proponents of such programs is in order. Academically-gifted students, we're told, are an asset to society; it's in the public interest to assure that such youngsters make maximum use of all educational opportunities available or made available. Formerly, unfortunately, these gifted students were, perforce, plodding along in lock-step at the pace set by their less academically-oriented contemporaries. Studies (within and by the educational establishment) reveal that some gifted children lose interest in learning and fail to achieve their potential when shackled to the progress rate suited to slower learners.

It's only fair, educator's argue, to give brighter students opportunities to realize their full academic potential and encourage them with special learning programs and specially-trained teachers to stimulate them to maximum capacity. According to the theory now being espoused, if the eager-to-learn and more intelligent children are encouraged to make greater efforts, the whole nation will benefit from boot-straping; therefore, we should be more than willing, in our own self-interest, to shoulder the additional tax burden and support these programs. That's what public schools are for, right?

Wrong. Absolutely unequivocally wrong. It can be clearly demonstrated that the fundamental purpose of public schools is to direct effort and energy toward and for the benefit of the least academically-oriented student. If this sounds radical or soft-headed, bear with me while I explain the logic.

To go back to Genesis, why do we have public schools at all? What is the real basis for their existence? Why does everyone have to pay school taxes whether or not they have children, and whether or not their children are in school or have finished school? Why do single people and the elderly have to pay school taxes?

Theoretically, there should be no need for public schools. Private schools should suffice. If the general public was even marginally responsible, people wouldn't produce offspring until reasonably certain they can afford to raise and educate the children. In such an ideal society, children would either be tutored or attend private schools, their parents paying the expenses. This isn't the financial burden it may appear to be since it would be a short-term cost. Before their children entered school they would pay no school taxes and, since the income tax structure grants a dependency allowance for each child from birth until completion of education or attaining the age of 26, there is a substantial subsidy available. Eliminating school taxes would amount to a lot of money that property-owners now pay over a lifetime.

Of course, a few of us are foolish enough to imagine the general public will ever act this responsibly or that such an idealistic scheme would work. People inevitably assume more responsibility than they can handle and have too many children too soon; parents divorce; and there will always be fatherless children of indigent mothers who are unconcerned about their children's educational opportunities.

Unfortunately, and through no fault of their own, these unwanted and uncared for children, unless successfully herded into an institution such as public school, may grow up to become illiterate, practically unemployable and dangerous adults. This presents a frightening situation.

Society, in self-defense and in a relatively rare display of intelligent self-interest, therefore has enacted laws mandating school attendance for all children to age 16 or completion of grade 12. This, at least, exposes such children to what is supposed to be an education; it also exposes them to their more fortunate peers and what passes for middle-class societal values.

It should be emphasized that these laws are motivated by a collective need for self-protection and not altruism. We aren't interested in "helping underprivileged children." We're afraid of the consequences if we don't! The laws governing public education are rooted in the same ground as are laws establishing police, fire and public health protection. Everyone benefits from such laws. That's the reason everyone pays. School taxes are not "use" taxes.

Taxes which support the police or fire departments are not assessed exclusively on the criminal element or their victims. For the same reason, everyone pays for public education. It helps protect everyone from an inherently irresponsible element with which we all are burdened.

If you can accept these premises, it's then a logical extension that the major responsibility of public education is to concentrate its efforts on those students who have the furthest to go to achieve both academic and societal norms.

I am unconcerned, and society should be unconcerned and should not be required to pay additional taxes for the exclusive edification of the academically precocious. These eager little beavers will soon enough be telling us what to do and, in the process, be extracting a superior standard of living from ordinary people like ourselves in the practice of their professions as doctors, dentists, lawyers, and educators. The acceleration of this "gifted student" into professional orbit is not what I, or society in general, should be required to pay taxes for.

The argument is sometimes advanced "these academic wunderkind will become the nation's future professionals; if they aren't encouraged with special attention, there may be, say, a doctor shortage." Such talk is unmitigated rubbish. There are far more applicants to medical schools than openings.

My neighbor's son told me of his experience at a southern university he attends and where he took a chemistry course. He was the only non-pre-med student in the class. He said the competition for grades was animalistic. If one turns away from his lab experiment for a moment, it is sabotaged by a pre-med student.

How would you like to ask one of them (male or female) in a few years, "Doctor, do I really need this operation?" If you think I'm exaggerating, consider that a congressional subcommittee estimated that in 1974 there were more than two million unnecessary surgical operations performed in the United States, costing over a billion dollars and causing over 11,000 unnecessary deaths. This was the estimate for but one year, 1974, alone. You may draw your own conclusions about the ethics of highly-motivated students entering other professions.

It is, therefore, my opinion that there's no need nor any hard-headed justification for providing special help, at taxpayer's expense, to the academically adept. They'll make out very well, never fear.

Without question, the academic community will fiercely defend its turf and support these new programs since they mean teacher jobs, administrative status, favors from textbook publishing companies, the gratitude of parents of academic whiz-kids, themselves, in most instances, articulate and influential community members.

It means higher taxes for us all. To be forced to pay taxes for such programs is an outrage. I believe this country's taxpayers are approaching the limit of tolerance. I hope so.

Best regards,
OLIVER