

# VILLAGE VIEW

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Boston's public school system, the country's oldest, is bankrupt and about to close down for lack of another 30 million dollars, allegedly needed to finance the last six weeks of this school year. It's an outrage!

Is it? Perhaps it's a blessing in disguise. Simple arithmetic indicates it costs \$5,000,000 a week to operate the Boston schools. Furthermore, recent tests of competency among high school graduates (nationwide) reveal the trend toward lower scores in comprehension and general knowledge continues.

Although I've seen no figures to support the theory, it appears there may be a direct correlation between the reduction in learning imparted to students of public schools and (in inverse proportion) the amount of money spent to provide basic education to America's youth.

Perhaps the financial crisis faced by Boston schools comes at a time when other methods than traditional public education need serious consideration.

Educators claim the fault lies with socio-economic factors that affect the school environment. They cite break-downs in teacher-student relationships and in school-community relationships. "Latch-key" children, i.e., those from homes where both parents are employed, lack guidance and reinforcement of school lessons; furthermore, lack of supervision in such homes encourages anti-social behavior. Use and availability of illegal drugs and alcohol is reported commonplace in schools, not only in Boston, but nationwide.

Pupils complain they lack identity in school, receive little or no personal recognition or attention, are discouraged from seeking additional after-school help from teachers, and that their individual interests and abilities are largely ignored by faculty.

Faculties describe schoolrooms as "zoos" and "jungles," see themselves as "baby-sitters" for parents who care nothing about their children's good behavior or scholastic achievement, either in the classroom or the community. Many parents are, say teachers, primarily concerned with gratifying their own needs (economic, social, and emotional), and give little thought, energy, or effort to impressing upon their offspring the importance of obtaining a sound education, and pay little attention to what the youngsters are doing, in school or out of it. Additionally, teachers declare they find many parents defensive and protective rather than cooperative when their children misbehave, disrupt classes, or vandalize school property.

Educators also see communities for which they labor as disinterested in youth, unsupportive of school discipline and activities, and uncaring about problems the school community tries to solve.

Crime rates are highest among young people between the ages of 14 and 24 years. Sociologists are anticipating the maturing of the "baby boom" of the '40s and '50s segment of the population, believing fewer people in the crucial age-group that generates most of the crime will relieve that situation. As that group matures and is eventually absorbed into the labor force, it is anticipated that anti-social behavior will lessen, unemployment will drop, and certain problems will solve themselves.

These problems of crime, anti-social behavior, overcrowded schools, and unemployment will, however, be replaced with other problems. An increasing number of older, retired people eligible for, counting on, and dependent upon social security benefits, which must be financed from incomes of a rapidly declining number of people in the earning segment of the population, will put increasingly heavy burdens on people who are now students in our schools. They are going to need all the educational benefits they can cram into their heads in order to solve the problems they must face. The effects of the swing in the population balance are already visible; everyone presently employed in this country must face paying a higher percentage of income to forestall bankruptcy of the social security system.

With schools absorbing tax dollars at a rate of \$5,000,000 a week as in the City of Boston, it's apparent that even more taxes must somehow be levied to make up the deficit; if not

for this year, certainly for next and future years. Inflation (which shows no sign of abating) continues to promise imposition of higher taxes to meet contractual agreements for salaries paid to school and other municipal employees. Where are all those tax dollars coming from when the younger people are in shorter supply, and the elderly, who live longer than they used to, increase by large percentages?

There seems no foreseeable end to the vicious cycle; yet a solution must and will be found. The cycle cannot continue without total economic collapse.

A possible partial solution may be found in a system of communication already in place, a solution that could be operational by the time schools, in Boston for example, reopen next September.

Close the schools and educate via television. This may seem a radical step, but children now spend many hours each day glued to the tube. What they watch contributes little to their intellectual growth, not because it could not but because the material presented appeals primarily to the lowest common denominator.

Why not conduct classes via television? Why not one teacher conducting a class for several thousand 5th graders instead of only 25? Why not make education available to school-age children (and their elders as well) via the medium that has invaded virtually every American home? Why not let pupils obtain education without leaving home? Why not put responsibility for children's exposure to classroom information squarely upon the shoulders of those who now pay taxes to support a system costing Boston \$5,000,000 a week and failing to achieve the desired ends?

There would be objections. Kids wouldn't watch, listen, learn, or do homework. Apparently, according to parents, educators, and test results, they aren't doing those things in school, either. If it were the parents' responsibility to see children did participate, it's remotely possible youngsters would gain more educational benefit than they do now.

Parents could up-date their own educational levels, take part in the learning process, knowledgeably discuss subjects with their children, and give additional instruction or explanation about lessons.

What of situations where both parents work? It's possible that, relieved of the economic necessity to support public schools through taxation, two-income families could become a thing of the past, and at least one parent could be home, not only to ensure that children participated in televised school, but to supervise other activities as well, and perhaps control to some extent drug and alcohol use among school children.

What of physical education and sports programs? Communities freed from school administration and maintenance expenses, busing costs, and teacher salaries at the rate of one per each 25-or-less students, could afford to support excellent community-based social programs.

What of the children who "fall through the cracks," whose parents fail to insist the children participate? What of those children now? They are no better off in school not learning anything than they would be out of school not learning anything. Putting full responsibility for exposure to education where it belongs, on parents, could result in parents accepting responsibility to a far greater degree than many do today.

For \$50,000,000 a week, a lot of soap-box-operas could be replaced with programs worth watching. The educational level of the entire population might be appreciably raised. Is it really so far-fetched?