



CHRISTIAN CONCERN FOR GENERAL EDUCATION

(A statement of the Seventh General Convention of The American Lutheran Church adopted October 12, 1974, by action GC74.12.A7, as a statement of comment and counsel addressed to the members of the congregations of The American Lutheran Church to aid them in their decisions and actions.)

1. Issues affecting the general education of American children have arisen one after the other and converged to force public attention. These issues include, but are not limited to: (a) busing of children for educational and for racial considerations; (b) ways of achieving racial and ethnic balance in the schools; (c) merging of school districts across metropolitan areas so as to encompass racial, religious, social, and economic diversity; (d) difficulties in financing education and in deciding the tax sources from which funds for general education should come; (e) possible aids to parochial schools and/or to their pupils; (f) the place of religion and of religious rites and ceremonies in the public schools; (g) teacher organization and unionization of the teaching profession; (h) the kinds of influence and/or controls the people of a community can or should have over their schools; and (i) what is to be taught in the schools and the educational philosophy and methods which guide the schools in their operations.

2. These issues concern the members of our congregations. Christians regard children as a trust from God to their parents. Thus, parents have an important stake in the education of their children. Christians take seriously the charge to rear and nurture their children "in the discipline and instruction of the Lord" (Eph. 6:4). At the same time, the community has an important stake in the education of every child. It has the obligation to set standards for educational opportunity and achievement. Occasionally the interests and expectations of parents for the education of their children may clash with those of the community. The resultant tension affects the schools, which have the difficult task of mediating the differences.

3. In broad outline, general education which meets the needs both of parents and of the community aims at helping children and youth:

- acquire basic knowledge and skills, especially in the ability to communicate clearly and to relate to their own lives that which they learn;
- think and reason logically, developing an intellectual discipline and ability critically to weigh evidence, choices, and probable consequences;
- understand the customs, ideas, and beliefs which unite the community and undergird the responsibilities of citizenship;

—grow in their well-rounded development as individuals who are a unique combination of physical, social, emotional, and intellectual abilities and weaknesses;

—prepare themselves with skills and training for taking their places in the workaday world in accord with their own abilities and the community's needs;

—appreciate the excitement and the possibilities in human life and relationships so that they will wish to continue growing and sharing in life's opportunities and responsibilities; and

—build character and integrity, expressed in moral behavior which values such qualities as honesty, truthfulness, reliability, and respect for others.

4. For the most part, American parents gladly have trusted the public schools to provide the general education for their children. Specific religious education they felt was the responsibility of the family and the church or synagogue. Other parents, however, preferred that their children receive their general education within a framework of moral and religious values as provided in church-related schools. This choice constitutionally is open to them. Practically, however, it becomes a costly choice. Tax revenues are not available in support of private schools or of pupils enrolled in private elementary and secondary schools. Efforts to obtain tax-raised funds for either direct or indirect support of church-related schools raise serious church/state constitutional questions. These questions must be resolved, seeking the wisest possible course of public policy.

5. Some persons argue that the wisest course of public policy would build upon the fact of pluralism in American society. Pluralism recognizes and respects the heritage and the contributions of each of the many distinct ethnic, religious, and cultural groups which coexist on the American scene. Under a policy of pluralism such distinctive groups might operate their own general education programs for their children. Channels could be developed whereby tax-raised funds could support these educational programs. Government's concern would be that educational opportunity be available and that educational achievement along lines judged to be important for every child be demonstrated. No longer would it be essential for government to organize and operate its own schools. Under such a course of public policy church-related schools would compete with a variety of other schools for pupils and teachers on the basis of competence, aims and quality of educational achievement, and cost-effectiveness of the service received. Voucher systems, tax credits for tuition payments, and direct governmental grants to private schools are among the means toward this end.

6. Elementary and secondary education has, for economic and public policy considerations, become largely a public school monopoly. This near monopoly has generally been well-accepted as a valued means for meeting each child's potential, parental expectations, and the community's obligations for general education. Persons disenchanted with the public school system, however, look for viable alternatives. They allege that public schools: (a) neglect both the gifted and the disadvantaged children; (b) stress rules and regulations above learning and growth in personal and social development; (c) fail to develop the skills, competence, and sense of responsibility which life in a complex and interdependent society requires; (d) equate excellence of education with dollars

spent; (e) deny parents or pupils any meaningful freedom of choice; (f) perpetuate outmoded and inappropriate methods and curricula; and (g) ignore or deny the realities and expressions of biblical faith in the lives of its adherents. Christian citizens seek to sift out the truth which may inhere in these or other allegations. They try to provide a constructive critique of public schools, giving neither thoughtless condemnation nor thoughtless endorsement to whatever develops.

7. Public schools could be helped to handle wisely the influence of religion in American society. This can be done through teaching about religion as an appropriate academic subject. Such academic study of religion within public schools, particularly in grades 7-12 or their equivalent, can give a balanced educational perspective to the significance of religion in the lives of people in a pluralistic society. Constitutionally this is permissible. It would be proper for public schools to teach, for example, the history of religions, comparative religion, and the relationship of religion to such academic disciplines as literature, politics, the sciences, economics, art, architecture, music, history, and social studies. All such teaching about religion in public schools needs to be academically informed, socially responsible, and sensitive to religious faith and feelings.

8. We believe that presently our Christian concern for general education can best be advanced by maintaining, improving, and strengthening the public school system. It has made genuine contributions to the dynamism and the unity amid diversity of our nation. It currently represents our best hope for assuring all children educational opportunity, justice, and achievement in an environment of racial, religious, social, and economic pluralism. The public school system is our dominant means for providing a general education that serves children, parents and guardians, the community, the state, and the nation. It can provide whatever unequal opportunities are necessary to assure the optimum development of every child. Any measures that weaken or destroy the ability of the public school system to provide a general education for all American children could weaken or destroy the very fabric of American society.

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