

The Jewish Community and the Public Schools

The Jewish community has a special stake in the American public school system. It is within this school system that a working American pluralism has been most effectively developed and tested. It is within this school system that the diverse population of any large community is brought into constant and healthful contact during their formative years. There is no other institution in our nation or community through which so many Americans normally pass, and which can provide this same opportunity.

It is within this school system that the very concept of religious pluralism has largely been forged. It is no accident that most of the church-state cases revolve around the schools. Throughout its history the American school system has struggled with the practical problems of balancing democracy and religious pluralism. The nature and protective needs of religious pluralism have been made most sharp to the American people through this struggle.

It is through this school system--public as it is, unified as it is in each community and subject as it is to the needs of interpreting the democratic way of life--that the most deliberate kind of education in intergroup relations has been able to take place.

The decline of the public school system would necessarily mean a fragmentation of the youth population, and would point in a direction opposite to that in which a religiously and ethnically integrated and democratic American life has flourished.

It is for this reason that the Jewish community, along with others, are especially concerned about the possibility of Federal support for religious schools, which might eventually mean an overwhelming fragmentation of the youth population.

But there is another danger on the horizon. The public school systems are in effect beginning to break up in many metropolitan areas for other reasons. In New York City more than half of the white children are now attending non-public schools, and the proportion is growing. This is happening in other cities, as a result of the racial situation in these cities, and the educational problems that accompany these situations.

This is not yet happening in the San Francisco area, but the same community racial situation is developing in this area. Eventually it will develop in the surrounding areas as well, as San Francisco to San Jose becomes a kind of continuous metropolitan growth. It is happening also in Los Angeles. There is a kind of double hazard involved in this potential development: the decline of the public schools themselves, and the possibility that under these conditions, religious denominational schools will be stimulated - as they already have been in some localities - resulting in a multiple religious fragmentation of our youth. (In Norfolk, Va., when the public schools were closed, this is exactly what happened in dramatic form. Jewish parents found themselves with the alternatives of setting up Jewish schools, or sending their children to denominational schools held in church facilities.)

Consequently it seems appropriate for the Jewish Community Relations Council to be alert to these developments, particularly insofar as the causative factors lie within the realm of intergroup relations generally.

For this reason it is felt that the JCRC should take particular interest in and be explicitly supportive of those activities in the community and those measures which might be remedial of this foreboding situation. In point are those programs which are designed to raise the educational and motivational levels of the culturally and racially disadvantaged segments of the school population, for this is at the heart of the "declining public school" problem in the cities mentioned earlier.