

Editorial

Let's not sell our children short

The influence of John Dewey and his followers on educational standards unquestionably caused a decline in American schools over the first half of this century. Basket-weaving courses in sociology tended to replace history; classical language became an optional choice in the academic curriculum only to be virtually phased out completely; the science curriculum fared little better.

Whereas in the last century the academic curriculum in secondary schools in the United States was comparable to that of Germany and elsewhere on the European continent, in this century, this ceased to be so. As harmful as the watering-down of subject matter was, the introduction of group-think, especially at the upper elementary and junior high school level, was even more so.

Under the influence of Deweyite reforms, individual intensive study of a more advanced topic was replaced by projects assigned to a group of children to work on jointly. Concomitant with this was the parallel judgment made on students, along with academic performance, typified on report cards by evaluations of whether a student "worked and played well with others."

In the 1960s, under the impetus of the Sputnik shock, there was a salutary effort to upgrade the quality of science teaching in the schools, most notably by making well-stocked laboratory facilities available. Under the Kennedy administration, science and foreign language training were emphasized, and backed by a federal grant system.

Over time these gains were eroded. While the grant system remained, the emphasis shifted to federal subsidy for various Deweyite programs which were infiltrated into the schools as curriculum, even including driver education. Educational standards were again diluted, and electives were allowed to substitute for hard-core academic subjects. Still there was a good deal of variability in the quality of available education. It was not all that bad.

Now, however, it looks as if the United States may be on the point of countenancing the absolute destruc-

tion of education, in the name of setting a national standard which all schools must meet. The problem is not in having such a standard. Indeed, if moves to privatize schools continue, it will be essential to monitor the quality of education, since the aim of private management will be to make a profit from administering a school, and what happens to the child will be of secondary importance to school administrators. Similar problems will emerge under circumstances of widespread home education by parents, or a new category of private schools which would be poorly funded by some variant of the voucher system.

It is rare that we agree with the *Wall Street Journal*, but in their Dec. 30 issue they ran an editorial calling for an alert on the American History Standards being put forth as a guide for primary and secondary schools. They reported on a critique offered by Lynne Cheney, former head of the National Endowment for the Humanities. For example, for American History, students learn about a feminist convention held in 1848, but there is no mention of the first session of the United States Congress in 1789.

Not only is George Washington virtually eliminated from the curriculum, but a course of study on World History is positively grotesque in its focus on the so-called woman question. For example, students are asked to evaluate which among Maya, Inca, and Aztec societies seem the most positive and which seemed the most negative for women. That the Aztecs practiced human sacrifice is apparently considered less relevant in judging the merits of their society. China is unfavorably compared to the Mongol empire—based upon the fact that women's feet were bound—and the papacy is taken to task for a report by a papal emissary to the Vatican, on the Mongol *threat*. Western civilization as a whole is considered inferior to Native American beliefs, because American Indians held land in common.

American schools were deficient in many ways in the 1950s and early 1960s, yet they gave young people a basis upon which they might continue to educate themselves. To the extent it is accepted, this proposed new curriculum can only produce ignorant ideologues.