

Excerpt from “The Great Anti-School Campaign”
by Robert M. Hutchins
on pages 210-211 of *The Great Ideas Today 1972*

The most elementary truth about education is the one most often disregarded. It takes time. The educator must therefore remember that unless he wants to be a custodian, or a sitter, or a playmate, he must ask himself whether what he and his pupils are doing will have any relevance ten years from now. It does not seem an adequate reply that they are having fun, any more than it would be to say they were learning at trade. Nor would it be much more adequate to say they were learning what their parents wanted. The community includes parents but is not confined to them. Taxes for the support of schools are paid by bachelors, spinsters, childless couples, and the elderly on the theory that the whole community is interested in and benefits from its common schools.

The barbarism, “communication skill,” is the contemporary jargon for reading, writing, figuring, speaking, and listening—arts that appear to have permanent relevance. These arts are important in any society at any time. They are more important in a democratic society than in any other, because the citizens of a democratic society have to understand one another. They are indispensable in a world community; they are arts shared by people everywhere. Without them the individual is deprived, and the community is too. In a technical age these are the only techniques that are universally valuable; they supply the only kind of vocational training a school can offer that can contribute to vocational success. They are the indispensable means to learning anything. They have to be learned if the individual hopes to expand his individuality, or if he proposes to become a self-governing member of a self-governing community. Learning these arts cannot be left to the choices of children or their parents.

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The first object of any school must be to equip the student with the tools of learning. These are the arts to which I have referred. With these arts at this command the citizen can learn all his life.

The second object of any school—and this is vital to a democratic community—should be to open new worlds to the young, to get them out of the rut of the place and time in which they were born. Whatever the charms of the neighborhood school, whatever the pleasures of touring one’s native city, whatever the allure of presentism, emphasis upon the immediate environment and its current condition must narrow the mind and prevent understanding of the wider national or world community and any real comprehension of the present itself. Hence those who would center education on the interests of children and on their surroundings, though these critics may seem up-to-date, are working contrary to the demands contemporary society is making upon any education system.

The third object of any educational institution must be to get the young to understand their cultural heritage. This, too, is in the interest of the individual and the community.⁸⁰ The individual ought to see himself in the community, a community having a tradition, which perhaps ought to be rejected, but not unless it is first understood. Comprehension of the cultural heritage is the means by which the bonds uniting the community are strengthened. The public school is the only agency that can be entrusted with this obligation. Its performance cannot be left to chance.

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These obligations, teaching the arts of communication, opening new worlds, helping children learn how to learn, and transmitting the cultural heritage, rest upon the public schools, but I cannot be said that the American public schools are discharging them—or any one of them. In many American public schools the children are simply in custody. IN many, boredom and frustration are the characteristics of school life. In many, the pupils are simply waiting out their time. It is sometimes said that this must happen in any institution.