

A POLICY STATEMENT *of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America*

Elementary and Secondary Public Education in the Society

(Adopted by the Governing Board May 22, 1986)

Education is a process by which persons have opportunity to mature in their thinking and learning and to develop skills and abilities necessary for shaping and participating in the social, political, economic, and spiritual life of the world. Facilitating the unique development of each learner as a responsible member of the human community should be the goal of our educational processes and systems.

Education in the United States of America takes place through a variety of interrelated institutions and educating forces, both formal and informal. Education continues throughout life and in many contexts. Education is conducted under both public and private sponsorship. However, the public elementary and secondary schools are the major arena provided for purposeful learning for nine-tenths of the young people in the United States of America. While maintaining the right of parents to choose to educate their children privately at their own expense, the special concern of the churches addressed in this policy statement is for learners in the public elementary and secondary school systems in the United States of America.

As Christians, we assert that so central and crucial an institution as the public schools must be based upon and should promote those values in education which work for the common good. For Christians, these values are rooted deeply and powerfully in the Biblical and historical tradition. Among these values are the following:

1. that all people are created by God and are therefore to be highly valued;
2. that persons are nurtured to maturity in community with God and one another;
3. that wisdom and knowledge are among the ways God empowers people for freedom and promotes their growth toward full humanity;
4. that the justice proclaimed by the prophets and springing from the righteousness of God must undergird and permeate education; and
5. that teachers are central to the development of persons.

We believe these values should be expressed in public school education in the following ways:

All People Are Highly Valued

Education provides a wide variety of social and economic benefits to the public, and schools are social institutions which provide many para-educational services, such as health and nutrition, to children and youth. However, the first priority of schools should be to meet the learning needs of students. There must be recognition and appreciation for differing physical and psychological needs, as well as socio-economic circumstances and cultural diversity, which influence the teaching/learning process. We are particularly concerned that in recognizing equal worth, schools must go beyond simply offering equal educational opportunity. By its very nature, education is compensatory and requires that the public must provide greater resources to those in greater need. A disproportionate share of the need is carried by urban schools.

People Need Community to Grow

Individuals do not achieve personhood in isolation; persons grow and mature in relationship with others. Schools are social arenas, and as such, form a primary community for growth. All school personnel influence the lives of students. Schools must be well ordered in ways which foster co-operation and embody respect for the rights and dignity of all persons.

Parents, students, educators (including administrators), and other citizens must together establish the values, set the goals and determine the direction of educational activity. It is the responsibility of the entire society, through equitable systems of generating revenue, to provide adequate funding and other resources for public schools. While primary responsibility lies with the local governing body in many communities, education of the quality described in this policy must be enhanced and sustained by state and federal support and leadership.

The conduct of education is a shared responsibility of many segments of society. We urge institutions, voluntary associations, business and industry to form partnerships with educational systems for supporting and carrying on the work of education. All those who make an impact on the education and attitudes of the young should be held accountable.

People Are Empowered Through Learning

Adequate information and the skills to acquire it are basic rights of free people. Minds of learners must be opened, not constricted. The schools must offer not only a body of knowledge, but also the tools of thinking and interpretation which allow learners to reflect on their values and the values of the larger society and to bring those values to bear in the quest for knowledge.

The quality of learning depends not only on instructional efficiency but also on learning environments sensitively created to recognize participant needs and contributions. Students must be actively involved in the learning process.

Just as the community is to be held accountable for support of education, so parents, students, educators and citizens who have established the direction of and who carry responsibility for educational activity must be accountable for its quality. Testing and other evaluation instruments for use in the schools should be developed which equitably measure progress toward goals and objectives. The primary focus of evaluation ought to clarify educational purposes and to develop strategies for continuing improvements in the quality of the teaching and learning process.

People Must Learn Justice

In our society racism, sexism, classism, excessive nationalism, and various other forms of prejudice and discrimination do exist. In order for new understandings, attitudes, and behavior to be learned, the learning system must embody global consciousness, provide for multi-cultural experience, develop mutual responsibility for the integrity of the environment, practice justice and equity, and teach peace.

Teachers Change Lives

Teachers have a profound influence on students as they prepare persons for independence and responsibility. Because of the critically important role they play in the community, they must be both highly regarded and highly accountable for the effectiveness of their work. A teacher's technical knowledge, ability to inspire creativity and imagination, integrity of personhood and caring for pupils are all important to sound teaching and learning and should be nurtured and supported through recognition and adequate compensation.

As a "community of communions", we re-affirm our commitment to the fundamental importance and availability of education to all citizens. The churches, guided by the qualities and characteristics of education as expressed in this and previous Policy Statements, are called to engage the significant issues in elementary and secondary education.