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ABSTRACT

Independent schools that are of viable size, well managed, and strategically located to meet competition will survive and prosper past the current financial crisis. We live in a complex technological society with insatiable demands for knowledgeable people to keep it running. The future will be marked by the orderly selection of qualified people, whatever their background, who will make the adaptations, invent the new technologies, and find the energy sources we need. The independent schools that face this fact and adjust their search and admissions policies accordingly are more likely to find the future less shocking than those that do not; they will also be more justified in their claims to training the leaders of the future. The price of survival for independent schools will probably be less independence because the judicial system is now hammering out procedures and due process for making decisions relating to the rights of teachers and to the rights of children. (Author/MLF)

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INDEPENDENCE AND SURVIVAL

by

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(A paper prepared for the 1975 Annual Meeting of the National Association of Independent Schools, March 6, 1975, Atlantic City, New Jersey)

When Cary Potter asked me on August 15 to come to Atlantic City for the NAIS meeting on March 6 he caught me in a moment of weakness that resulted in a prompt acceptance for two reasons. First, I was just back from the longest and pleasantest vacation my wife and I have had since our honeymoon 35 years ago (a vacation, incidentally, shared with a more professionalized taker of vacations who is the head of an oddly-named school that most people can't even pronounce, let alone spell, called Punahou) and was feeling guilty enough to do immediately whatever needed doing; and second, having safely avoided Atlantic City for quite a number of years, I was not on that hot August day remembering the discomforts and personal indignities associated with a visit to the playground of the East in the month of March.

As time passed and I began to face up to the need for preparing a paper, it gradually dawned on me that I was headed for trouble, a feeling much like one I felt when headed for Purdue many years ago to discuss "The Financing of Education for All of America's Children." Needless to say, the reactor to comment immediately after my paper was to be the Roman Catholic head of the local parochial school system; so I

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started out by saying that in this company I should let my biases be known, that I was a white, Anglo-Saxon, protestant with Masonic connections, that I had spent most of my life working in and for the public schools, that I had often been called pro-public education, and went on with my paper. When it came time for the reactor to speak, he started out by saying that he had no need to state his biases; his uniform stated them for him. Furthermore, he said, before agreeing to react, he had checked with some of Professor James' students at Stanford; and that as nearly as he could judge Professor James must be much like St. Francis talking to the birds: obviously he had expected no rebuttal! Needless to say, no one remembered what I had said after that, but I have never forgotten Jim Deneen; I'm sure many of you know him, and I continue to admire him greatly.

My personal experience with independent schools seemed small justification for inviting me to this platform, limited as it was to having my youngest son enrolled for one year as a junior in the Chicago Latin School, where he gave Ed Van Gorder more help than Ed probably wanted or needed that year in breaking the dress code. I remember attending a meeting of parents at one of the several crisis points that year, having to do, if I followed the arguments correctly, with dropping the requirement for boys to wear ties. I attended the meeting chaired by my son, one of several running simultaneously, and to my uncritical eyes it seemed to

go well; my son listened carefully, kept a low and pleasant tone to the whole thing, and then summed up the discussion in a way that left no doubt about the general consensus of that group in favor of dropping the tie requirement. In fact I was reminded of a remark Ralph Tyler once allegedly made, that he didn't mind what members of a group said during a discussion as long as he had five minutes at the end to summarize. Apparently things had not gone as well in other sessions, for as I rode down in the John Hancock elevator the next morning a lady who had been in another session was still in a fury; she said, "I'd like to keep them in uniform--I'd like to see them in stripes till they're 24 years old!" I couldn't think of a thing to say that would be helpful to her, so, unlike my usual self, I said nothing. Later that year my son took it as a great advantage and personal favor when Ed worked out a way for him to complete the requirements for his high school diploma by taking courses at Stanford during the summer following his junior year. I've often wondered if Ed hadn't seen other advantages in that arrangement.

Recognizing that my experience was deficient, I turned to reading. I noted that James B. Conant, speaking from a platform in this city in 1952, got headlines all over the country for calling private schools divisive. Even if I wanted headlines all over the country, I certainly wouldn't get them by restating that point. Someone has said that historical events occur twice, once to be perceived as tragedy and the

second time as farce! Not only are schools in the private sector generally accepted now as divisive, their claim to that effect has become their mainstay in recruitment, their main justification for existence, and indeed, in many cases the basis for advancing requests for government support. Witness the recent and influential book: American Nonpublic Schools by Otto F. Kraushaar¹; its subtitle is "Patterns of Diversity." This is a remarkable example of the kind of transformations that have occurred over time that have so fascinated Larry Cremin and other historians of education; 23 years ago the word "divisive" was pejorative, offended countless supporters of non-government-supported schooling, and touched off one of the recurrent uproars so common in the media covering education; today the word has a benign meaning--note "diversity by design," as a term used frequently, not only in the media, but in the halls of Congress and by Presidents as well, as an argument for public funding of nonpublic schools.

I found much in the literature about the financial crisis facing the independent schools, so much in fact that I came to doubt that there has ever been a meeting in the history of NAIS where the current crisis in financing wasn't discussed; and I was reassured on this point when the

¹ Otto F. Kraushaar, American Nonpublic Schools. Patterns of Diversity. Baltimore, Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1972; 387 pp.

program arrived and I found not one, but three sessions in which people will sit around and scare each other about this current crisis! My guess is the independent schools will survive this crisis as they have survived through perennial crises: those that are of viable size, well managed, and strategically located to meet competition from all the varied sources will survive and prosper; those that are not will suffer grievously till times are better and some will close. One might comment at this point that over the long run the independent schools that do best will turn out the largest percentage of students who enter careers to which the labor market pays the highest rewards over the long run, for these are the kinds of alumni that help build the great endowments and best manage the assets of the school over the long run. One must fear for the future of many schools that have not learned this lesson. The highest rewards in our society go now to those who fight their way up the hard way to leadership of political, banking, technological, and material and service producing corporations and in popular entertainment. If I read Dr. Kraushaar's data correctly,² only one percent of the Protestant students, and only twelve percent of the independent school students aspire to these roles, with Catholic students falling in between. I'm not arguing that we don't need poets, philosophers, happy craftsmen, potters, and

²Ibid., pp. 121-30.

gardeners, for indeed I believe we do; I'm simply pointing out that they rarely help with building endowments. A recent article in Chicago, January 1975, on the private schools was titled "Keeping Kids Safe from Democracy" and subtitled "The Uniquely Privileged Are Different from You and Me," an obvious reference to a famous Fitzgerald quote. One might paraphrase Hemingway's tart reply to saying yes, they know less about how to survive in a democracy. The public schools continue to perform their traditional function of escalating children up through the socioeconomic classes, and few among the lower socioeconomic levels and deprived minorities are confused by either romantic talk or plausible research. The socioeconomic escalator runs two ways, and those among the children of the upper and middle class who choose to drop out provide the counterflow that makes room at the top for children of the lower socioeconomic groups who persist with their education. We live in a vastly complex technological society with insatiable demands for knowledgeable people to keep it running, and with an overwhelming majority dedicated to keeping it running. Out of this majority will come the inventions and adaptations and the energy to keep it running and improve it. If the reservoirs of middle- and upper-middle-class children who were expected to run it reject the discipline and refuse to achieve the knowledge necessary, another reservoir will be tapped and the hard-working children of blue-collar parents and less privileged ethnic groups

will be gathered into the roles of the new elite. Revolution we may have, but not the kind of violent revolution talked about by present-day romantics; rather its progress will be marked by the orderly selection of qualified people, whatever their background, who will make the adaptations, invent the new technologies, and find the energy sources we need. The independent schools that face this fact and adjust their search and admissions' policies accordingly are more likely to find the future less shocking than those that do not; they will also be more justified in their claims to training the leaders of the future.

The economic circumstances we are now in undoubtedly are more threatening to survival of the independent schools than better times, but I've already indicated my belief that it's no great threat, given good management, either in the short or the long run, for the percentages of both elementary and secondary students enrolled in private schools have remained fairly steady through good times and bad, ranging through most of this century from 7 to 13 percent of the total school population. This relative stability also indicates that while the private schools did not pick up a proportionate share of the great baby-booms following the two world wars, neither did they suffer much of a decline when the baby booms were over; nor did economic depressions either have much effect on enrollments in the private sector.

We haven't yet, of course, felt the full impact of the steady decline in annual live births which began fifteen years ago, the longest and deepest decline in our history with no end yet in sight. Some of you may recall that I pointed out in an article in Compact in 1968 that live births peaked in 1959 at 4.3 million per year, and then declined steadily to 3.5 million, indicating that if births stabilized at that point it would eventually mean a reduction in school enrollments of perhaps 20 percent. Live births have indeed stayed down, and dropped further in 1973 to 3.2 million. I haven't seen the 1974 figures yet but they are expected to be lower again. Not surprisingly, children who don't get born don't show up in school later! The figure I saw two years ago indicated that elementary enrollments were down by 460,000. This loss in enrollment will continue. Last year it exceeded 600,000 and this year will approach three-quarters of a million. More importantly, it is cumulative and cannot be turned around for at least five years. If live births stay relatively stable at below 3.3 million per year, as they have for the past five years, or decline further, as current estimates suggest they may, the loss of clientele from the schools will approximate more than the 20 percent I had foreseen by the mid-1980's. My plea in the Compact article was for planning wise use of the resources released by this decline for the improvement of education, for shifting resources among levels of education, and for extending educational services. I continue

the plea, and hope it will be heard more widely than it was in 1968. The dislocations we have already experienced, such as cuts in school staff, a growing oversupply of new teachers, and building shutdowns, are only the leading edge of more massive dislocations to come as schools enter a period of decline in enrollments that will persist certainly through this decade, probably through the next, and perhaps through the turn of the century. I have been utterly astounded on the one hand at the surprise expressed from time to time as these perfectly predictable consequences flowing from data available for more than a decade continue to surface. For instance, a front-page article in a Chicago paper as late as this week noted that the baby boom was over! It pointed out that some schools were closing, that one suburban district had lost 25 percent of its elementary school enrollment, and that the situation was so dire that even tenured teachers might lose their jobs. On the other hand I am appalled at the continued tendency of the educational establishment to ignore things they can't do anything about. Not until last month did the AASA get out a monograph discussing for the first time the ways and means of dealing with a problem virtually unknown in this century--how to cut back an institution attuned from its creation to growth. And again in the Chicago papers this week a front-page story--how budget-makers in the Chicago public schools keep people on the job in spite of the loss of the clientele they serve--they were entered in the budget at

one dollar per year, though paid full salaries, which has resulted in a deficit approaching ten million dollars. The explanation seems to be that they are betting on an increase in state aids to cover the deficit! Covered or not, the strategem raises serious questions of the kind not infrequently raised in other governmental agencies in recent years.

As the independent schools did not take up their proportionate share of the postwar baby boom, so they are not likely to suffer greatly from the sharp reductions in total enrollments ahead. There is something about the best of the private schools that is reminiscent of an oft-quoted comment on the Mormon migration; to paraphrase, cowards never start them, and the weak ones die off quickly. The survivors, tested now through two world wars, several great disruptions of the economic and social systems, and still faced in most cases with great surpluses of applicants, are not likely to find the current crisis any more formidable than those of the past.

Along with the passing of the postwar wave of children will come other reductions in the costs of social services, for at the same time that this wave was creating problems for schools it was also accelerating our needs for housing and hospitals, doubling the rate of juvenile delinquencies, swamping our custodial institutions, multiplying accidents of all kinds, and in general multiplying the costs of other local government agencies as well as schools. These statistics, too, will soon begin to

decline, with predictable stabilization and perhaps reduction ahead for other governmental costs other than schools. In spite of the dire predictions in the late 1960's about countercultures and revolution, the young people in the leading edge of the wave are now moving into solid and productive adulthood, surprisingly conservative in their views, better educated than the generation they follow, and in general startlingly attractive to their older colleagues who a few years ago were inclined to fear them. I am inclined to conclude that the changing age structure of our population makes the future look much brighter than it seemed only a few years ago.

Lest you think I'm too cheerful and optimistic for this time of general gloom with whole armies of Jeremiahs stalking the land, let me close with the comment that the price of survival will probably be less independence. The one big cloud I see forming on the horizon that will be a larger threat to the independence of schools in the private sector than all the others we talk about is the looming presence of the judicial system as we begin the long task of hammering out procedures and due process for making decisions traditionally made on an ad hoc basis, particularly those decisions relating to the rights of teachers and to the rights of children. As to teachers, just last week the National Labor Relations Board, under the lash of organized labor, changed its mind about withdrawing its jurisdiction over private schools. The AFL-CIO

brief argued that the more than 216,000 teachers in the elementary and secondary private schools want and need protection of the right to organize, and NLRB agreed to maintain jurisdiction over schools with at least one million dollars in annual revenue. I doubt that that line at one million nor that it matters much if it does; discussions about teachers' rights will increase. And as to pupils, the burgeoning efforts of students' rights groups are getting court decisions affirming rights seldom if ever before asserted to exist for children, and again the steady pressure for specifying procedures and due process for dealing with the rights of children are likely to transform the school, historically one of the most authoritarian institutions in our society. The handbook has been written: the two-volume report by Nicholas Hobbs, Issues in the Classification of Children, just published by Jossey-Bass; the issues are being refined and the troops trained by groups of action-oriented lawyers in Washington, Berkeley, and elsewhere. Again, anyone who thinks the private sector will escape this movement is a dreamer. If any of you still haven't said goodbye to Mr. Chips, these events offer an appropriate occasion to do so.

I wish you well in the discussions that lie ahead for the next few days and regret I cannot stay to share them. My hope, on leaving your annual meeting, is that I may have shifted one or two premises on which these conferences traditionally are based, and started one or two new arguments.

March 5, 1975cn