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Educational Equality

A new report* by James B. Conant reviews changes in the American high schools since the publication in 1959 of his influential *The American High School Today*. This time he concentrated on "widely comprehensive" high schools, those which provide both academic and vocational education for from 750 to 2000 students and which send from 25 to 75 percent of their graduates on to college. Among such schools, which enroll about half of all public high school students, Conant rated only a few as highly satisfactory. Nevertheless, he reports, there has been substantial progress in teaching modern foreign languages, science, and mathematics. (Another recent study shows, however, that the U.S. lags behind several other countries in effectiveness of teaching mathematics.)

The most striking finding was the great variability on all standards of quality. In terms of what a high school offers its students, there are inequalities both among the states and within individual states. These inequalities will persist so long as school budgets—and hence staffing ratios, course offerings, libraries, shops, laboratories, and other aspects of school quality—are determined by local attitudes and financial resources. Conant's conclusion—he calls it a prejudice—is that states rather than local communities must become responsible for school support and that large amounts of federal money will be needed before we can approach equality of opportunity in what is offered to high school students.

What is offered, however, only partly determines what is learned. James S. Coleman, in his *Equality of Educational Opportunity* (reviewed in *Science*, 9 December 1966), presents massive support for the generalization that differences in school achievement are so closely related to differences in family background that changes in school facilities and curricula have little effect in overcoming deep-seated environmental handicaps. He reaches the dismal conclusion that "schools bring little influence to bear on a child's achievement that is independent of his background and general social context; and that . . . the inequalities imposed on children by their home, neighborhood, and peer environments are carried along to become the inequalities with which they confront adult life at the end of school."

Studies of children and young animals are producing increasingly strong evidence that early environment is crucial in determining the course of development. However good an infant's genetic potentialities may be, a stimulating early environment is essential for satisfactory intellectual development through childhood and adolescence. We have started to recognize this principle in the Head Start program. But that effort is too small to be more than a demonstration. It probably starts too late in life. And it is surely supported by too little understanding of how children learn and are motivated.

Equality of educational opportunity is one of our fundamental national ideals. The deeply entrenched principles of parental responsibility for the preschool years and local responsibility for the schools perpetuate so much bad practice as to make attainment of the ideal impossible. Only when we acquire and disseminate widely a much better understanding of how young children learn and how one may help them learn can we hope to approach the ideal. At best, this will require more than a generation. For the immediate future, Conant's book, like his 1959 report, is a plea to interested citizens to bring about improvements we already know how to make.—DAEL WOLFLE

*James B. Conant, *The Comprehensive High School* (McGraw-Hill, New York, 1967), vi + 95 pages; \$3.95 (\$1.95 in paper covers).