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Greenville, South Carolina
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May 14, 1993

Brian Lamb, C-SPAN and
Secretary of Education Richard Riley

Brian, a couple of years ago I offered a guest to you, and you used him--Mortimer Adler, Editorial Chairman of Encyclopaedia Britannica and creator of the Britannica Great Books. I had then been called out of retirement and was again working for EB.

I do not work for Dick Riley or the Department of Education. Indeed, he knows nothing until now of the following suggestion and may well not remember me. Dick, I'm the Tryon cousin of the Bellew family on Sunset, and recently moved from Tryon to an address you'll find familiar-- Seminole Drive in Greenville.

I watched Secretary Riley's committee appearance last week, and understood his points from personal experience. He spelled out a distinction I failed to make 36 years ago, in a venture involving Adlai Stevenson, the Presidential candidate, and the New York Times. Though you've covered Dick Riley at the committee hearings and the National Press Club, I'm still moved to suggest him as a guest on your call-in show on the subject:

WHAT IS EDUCATION FOR?

It was the Sputnik panic, in 1957, that brought me up sharp against this question. Panic: The enemy had an ICBM and we didn't. Violent recriminations-- pillorying industry... research... above all E D U C A T I O N ! They'd all let America down.

Enormous pressures to reform education emerged; the present doesn't compare, for that then seemed life-or-death. Money galore emerged for educational "machinery"-- books, films, overhead projectors, lab equipment; today we'd add PCs, VCRs, videotapes. EB, then, for instance, filmed year-long courses in both chemistry and physics-- 195 hour-long lectures and lab demonstrations, each. But it struck me that educators and critics alike ought to address three components-- "Machinery"... "content"... and "Goals." I ended up misaddressing the latter two. Ditto almost everyone.

Schools wallowed in purchasing orders for "machinery," giving scant attention to the "content" to be used on the machines, and almost none to "goals"-- to what end was this new attention to education to be directed?

Adlai was on EB's Board of Editors. With his approval, I got a commitment from the NYTimes to run an article--his byline, my research and first draft, on "What Should Americans Study?" -i.e., the optimum curriculum, K-12. It never got written.

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2- [REDACTED] of May 14 to Brian Lamb and Dick Riley

Nowhere could I get agreement on what courses should be studied-- and precious little on what schooling is FOR! And with EB's resources, be assured I canvassed a dozen, maybe a score, big-name and no-name educators, of all stripes. And obviously Dick Riley has found that no such curriculum could be designed today. Nor should one be. Course content should NOT be imposed from above. Yet in the House committee hearing, just about no congressmen showed any understanding about the distinction between "content" and "goals," even though...

In his testimony Secretary Riley repeatedly disclaimed any intention to impose curriculum CONTENT upon local school boards. He does, however, stand for GOALS, by which locals can measure themselves against nationally-designed desirable ones. The locals choose the content leading to those goals, balancing among many claimants, all certain that they do know what education is for:

Entry-level employers: "Teach literacy". Moralists: "Teach right from wrong." NAM types: "Teach skills our employees need to keep us abreast of a competitive world." Tech-school types: "Train 'em for where the jobs will be." Great Bookies: "Prepare them for responsible citizenship in a democracy." Religious Right: "Direct them toward God." Various Professionals: "Emphasize pre-law or medicine, engineering, architecture." And what say art-lovers, environmentalists, feminists, superpatriots, multiculturalists, and so on... and on...?

And yet, at some level, all must agree, Education should deliver some results-- GOALS-- desired by all.

I don't presume to respond for the Department of Education. But Dick Riley's TV appearances show that he and his people have addressed all of this and drawn conclusions. These should make for a challenging, profitable, and fascinating call-in program. And so I drop this in your respective laps, bow, and back away.

Cordially to both.
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