



Abba Hillel Silver Collection Digitization Project

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MS-4787: Abba Hillel Silver Papers, 1902-1989.

Series V: Writings, 1909-1963, undated.

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How can American education be improved?, circa 1950s.

HOW CAN AMERICAN EDUCATION BE IMPROVED?

Since Sputnik

The discontent with education ^{in our country} since Sputnik I, may contribute to a new climate in American education. It may help us to raise a new generation of men and women more reverent of learning and more devoted to the exacting disciplines of the mind -- not only in the sciences but in the humanities as well. It will undoubtedly send more of our young people into the scientific fields of study. Physics, chemistry and engineering are becoming more attractive subjects and careers. This is all to the good. The new age will require and will have more room, and will offer greater remuneration to the trained scientist in the various fields of pure and applied science, in research and technology.

^{however,}
In my judgment it would be a great loss to our people and to American civilization if our present discontent should catapult our entire educational system in an all-out scientific and technological direction and depreciate the importance of what we once called liberal education -- the humanities and the social sciences. Of course, civilization needs scientific researchers in all fields. It needs the physicist and the chemist, the mathematician, the engineer and the biologist -- there is no civilization without them. But if it is to be a wholesome civilization, it needs also the artist, the musician, the writer, the poet, the philosopher, the minister, the economist and the sociologist. Above all, it needs the cultured, well-rounded individual, whatever his profession. It needs men and women, trained in the art of living, who will contribute to the well-being of their communities and to the building of the good society. What a progressive civilization needs pre-eminently are wholesome, clean-living, high-thinking, socially minded human beings. The study of the sciences alone will not produce them.

Furthermore, it should be borne in mind that not all pupils are gifted enough to master abstract sciences, nor are all qualified for theoretic scientific research. We cannot train men for genius.

What is essential is that whatever is taught should be well taught -- whether in the field of science or in the humanities. What is learned should be thoroughly learned. *It is not good to have a smattering of everything, and a knowledge, nothing!* The disciplines of study and instruction must be high and exacting for teacher and pupil alike. Adequate facilities and financial support must be made available for the education of all our people, each according to his bent and capacities.

