

Report from the Center for

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Educating Our Children: Whose Responsibility?

To make its research readily available to a broad audience, the Center for Philosophy and Public Policy publishes a quarterly newsletter: *QQ—Report from the Center for Philosophy and Public Policy*. Named after the abbreviation for “questions,” *QQ* summarizes and supplements Center books and working papers and features other selected work on public policy questions. Articles in *QQ* are intended to advance philosophically informed debate on current policy choices; the views presented are not necessarily those of the Center or its sponsors.

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In this issue:

Everyone seems to agree that America’s schools are not doing their job, but disagreement is rampant over what should be done about it. Should responsibility for education devolve to families, as under proposed voucher plans? Or is increased state- and even federal-level centralization the answer? . . . p. 1

Can programs of preferential treatment for blacks, women, and ethnic minorities be justified? Wm. Bradford Reynolds and Richard Wasserstrom give two very different answers. . . . p. 6

A workable plan for imposing a mandatory pro bono requirement on lawyers — and it’s moral, too. . . . p. 10

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When the National Commission on Excellence in Education sounded the alarm two years ago that “the educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity,” most Americans felt vindicated rather than surprised. The commission’s report, “A Nation at Risk,” merely gave official voice to doubts long expressed by many, that America’s schools are not doing their job. As demand for highly skilled workers in technically challenging fields is accelerating, test scores are just now bottoming out of a two-decade decline. The average achievement of high school students on most standardized tests is lower today than it was when Sputnik was launched, nearly three decades ago. On many international comparisons of student achievement American students trail the rest of the industrial world. If the current state of affairs in education had been plotted by a hostile foreign power, the report concluded, we would call it an act of war.

The question is what to do about it, and critics of the Reagan administration charge that it is lavish with rhetoric decrying the problem, but sparing of any federal initiatives toward a solution. The administration counters that education is constitutionally the responsibility of the states. Far from heightening the federal government’s role in education, it proposes to retrench it still further, by reducing federal aid to public schools, loosening federally enforced anti-discrimination regulations, and questioning the need for a cabinet-level Department of Education.

Traditionally responsibility for education has belonged to each local community. With the demise of the little red