

Friends and education: Vision and dilemmas

By William C. Kashatus

William Penn stands atop City Hall, seemingly surveying the "Holy Experiment" he nurtured out of the ideals of his Quaker faith. In a world conditioned by violence, religious intolerance and arbitrary authority, Penn founded a colony dedicated to pacifism, religious toleration and participatory government. Few realized, however, that the continuing success of this experiment would depend on a "virtuous education of youth."

For Penn, a "virtuous" education emphasized the rudiments of literacy, a "useful trade or skill" and an "unerring sense of duty to God and to fellow man." Such a universal education would cultivate the virtuous citizens he desired to people his colony. To this end, he established the "Friends Public School" — the predecessor of Philadelphia's public and Quaker schools — open to *all* of the city's children, regardless of wealth, race or creed.

Although Penn's vision of a tax-supported school system did not emerge until 1836 with the establishment of the state's Public School Law, his vision did inspire the Quaker philanthropists who helped to establish that system. For most Friends, however, public schooling triggered a dilemma: whether to support a private, Quaker education, or the city's public schools. It is a concern that still exists.

Today, when Philadelphia area Quakers gather at Arch Street Meetinghouse to convene the 316th session of their Yearly Meeting for Business, the concern over this mixed educational legacy will be one of the chief topics of discussion. There are many of us in public and Quaker education who hope that their ultimate decision will not be an either-or proposition. Philadelphia needs Quaker involvement in Friends' and public schools.

While there are only 12,181 Quakers in the Philadelphia area, they have the potential to make a tremendous contribution to the education of the city's youth. Some hold prominent positions in the city's

business community. The significance of their financial support for the school district's "Children Achieving Plan" should not be underestimated. Because public schools are expected to provide a competent workforce, these Friends would not only be contributing to the economic welfare of the city, but would also contribute to the legacy of stewardship that Philadelphia's Quaker merchants forged when they established the first public schools.

Cooperative learning partnerships between Friends schools and public schools would also offer a meaningful vehicle for reform. Friends schools are especially known for science and math education, as well as their commitment to social awareness. Quaker education is nationally recognized for such innovations as community service programs, interdisciplinary learning, inner-city computer, basketball and reading summer camps, and kindergarten for grownups.

At a time when the public schools are developing thoughtful strategies for dealing with violence, drug abuse, issues of student self-esteem and school-based management, Friends' experience in community-based learning, conflict resolution and progressive approaches to nurturing student self-esteem could be extremely helpful.

While such voluntarism may not be the answer to school reform, it certainly is a highly desirable adjunct.

Friends enjoy a fine reputation for a humanitarian and progressive approach to education. While they continue to struggle with a historical dilemma on where to invest themselves, their history also reveals a firm commitment to nurturing the intellectual abilities and moral character of *all* the city's children.

It is with the greatest respect and admiration for that legacy that this Friend prays for a constructive resolution to the dilemma and a renewal of the spirit that inspired William Penn's Holy Experiment in education more than 300 years ago.

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