

## Letters to the Editor

To the Editor:

While I was delighted to see my book, *Democracy's High School*, reviewed in *History of Education Quarterly* (Summer 1995), I was disappointed to find that the reviewer, Robert Lowe, presented what is so clearly an inaccurate and intemperate discussion of it. By devoting the large part of his review to suggesting that the book is merely a defense of the *Cardinal Principles* report and then attacking this alleged defense, Mr. Lowe has performed a disservice to readers of *History of Education Quarterly* by misrepresenting both the express intent and the content of my book. In effect, Mr. Lowe's review only addresses one chapter and a few selected passages from elsewhere in the book. Mr. Lowe fails even to mention the vast majority of the principal findings, conclusions, and recommendations offered in the book, the latter of which include the suggestion to eliminate tracking from American high schools.

Even the portions of the book Lowe selects to discuss are misrepresented as he removes them from their context and ignores material that conflicts with his viewpoint. Lowe dismisses my critique of the social efficiency/tracking interpretation of *Cardinal Principles* report by stating that my strategy involved merely highlighting the report's democratic rhetoric and appealing to the authority of John Dewey. Lowe overlooks the historic fact that Dewey was one of the earliest advocates of the "cosmopolitan high school" and that he championed a unitary educational system over the European class-based dual system. Similarly, Lowe ignores the fact that democratic language outweighs wording that can be construed as smacking of social efficiency in the report and that the committee proposed provisions and procedures for unifying students with different backgrounds, abilities, and aspirations. Further, Lowe conveniently fails to mention a half dozen other issues I raise in the book that, I think, undermine the social efficiency interpretation of the 1918 report.

Lowe's implication that the comprehensive high school model inherently fosters anti-intellectualism and maintenance of the existing social order ignores several realities that suggest otherwise. Among these are the facts that the International Assessment for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) has demonstrated that the American comprehensive system enjoys the lowest class bias and the highest educational yield of all the nations participating in the IEA study, and that for the last half century European policy makers and educators have adopted the American comprehensive school in the name of egalitarianism and social mobility.

Lowe's commitment to the prevailing revisionist interpretation that perceives social efficiency in virtually every aspect of early-twentieth-century American education seems to have distracted him not only from the possibilities of the comprehensive high school model, but also from details

of the historical record. Although social efficiency and tracking undeniably existed in schools (and still do), such a blanket application of this interpretation seems to be a case of exalting a theory at the expense of evidence. As I have suggested elsewhere, it may be that the ubiquitous application of the social efficiency interpretation that Lowe celebrates belies a latent presentism in recent historical scholarship about education in the United States. The ramifications for policy and practice of this effect could be that viable solutions to current education problems, inaccurately discredited by overzealous application of contemporary historical interpretations, are overlooked by those in positions to improve educational experiences for children and youth.

I hope that readers interested in the comprehensive high school model and educational reform will judge my book in its entirety, not in part and not through such a narrow lens as Mr. Lowe employs.

William G. Wraga  
University of Georgia

To the Editor:

Wraga maintains that I misrepresented his book by focusing excessively on the *Cardinal Principles* and finding fault with his “alleged defense” of that document. Yet his letter legitimizes my position. He says practically nothing about matters of substance he believes I ignored, but instead once again rushes to defend the *Cardinal Principles* through the very means I criticized. Rather than directly disputing my evidence for the hardly controversial contention that the *Cardinal Principles* is an anti-intellectual document that is a blueprint for tracking, Wraga once more invokes its democratic language and John Dewey. He fails to recognize that educational leaders have long had a penchant for clothing all sorts of nonsense in the language of democracy and that Dewey’s opposition to a dual system of education hardly indicates he supported the sort of unitary system the *Cardinal Principles* outlined.

Wraga is correct that I neither referred to the common activities espoused by the *Cardinal Principles*, nor did I mention his declared opposition to tracking. If the *Cardinal Principles* did not support tracking, then it would not have had to recommend a few inclusive activities for students. It is difficult to take seriously Wraga’s opposition to tracking since his book demonstrates that he views the *Cardinal Principles* (“the definitive document for the comprehensive high school model” [p. 224]) as the statement against which all discourse on and developments in secondary education should be judged. In addition, his recommendations do not propose the abolition of distinct “vocational, handicapped, and gifted

and talented programs” but merely would require them to be “first rate” (p. 238).

Finally, Wraga complains that my review was intemperate. This is an odd posture for a querulous author who condemns as “revisionist” scholars across the political spectrum who have the temerity to criticize the *Cardinal Principles*.

Robert Lowe  
*National-Louis University*

*Editorial Note:* Letters to the editor are published verbatim.