

Letters to the Editor

To the Editor:

In his article, “A Progressive Legacy Squandered: The *Cardinal Principles Report* Reconsidered,” William G. Wraga takes something I once said and turns it on its head. As part of his attack on Edward A. Krug’s interpretation of the 1918 report of the Commission on the Reorganization of Secondary Education (CRSE), Wraga says that, following Krug, “For the last forty years, virtually all historians of American education have subscribed to the contention that the comprehensive high school is best understood as a manifestation of social efficiency-social control ideology.” I am not sure what Professor Wraga has been reading, but, as for myself, I do not know of a single such instance. It is unquestionably true that the CRSE has come under fire by some historians, but it is assuredly not because the *Cardinal Principles* report endorsed the comprehensive high school. At this juncture, Wraga cites the first edition of my *Struggle for the American Curriculum* as his prime (and as it turns out only) exhibit: “Herbert Kliebard, for example, characterized the CRSE’s ‘unequivocal’ support of the comprehensive high school model as a triumph of the ‘social efficiency educators’” (pp. 497-498).

Let us turn to that passage in *Struggle*. It comes during a discussion where I try to show that, although *Cardinal Principles* exhibits a distinct bias toward social efficiency ideology, the report is balanced by a certain moderation, and I do this by contrasting the position of David Snedden, the doyen of social efficiency, with the CRSE’s recommendations. In the paragraph from which Wraga draws his astonishing conclusion, I say about the report that “there was more than a passing reference to the need in a democracy for the school to perform a unifying function through common experiences in the school. . .” and, “[i]n that regard,” I go on to cite the fact that “the Commission was unequivocal in its support of the comprehensive high school, a position that in 1918 was being widely debated, *with social efficiency educators leading the way in calling for different forms of secondary education for different kinds of youth*” (emphasis added, 1986, p. 115). In other words, I am indicating that when it came to the comprehensive high school, the CRSE was recommending a policy *contrary* to the established position of social efficiency advocates who tended to be partial to specialized (e.g. vocational) high schools rather than to comprehensive ones. Wraga picks the words “unequivocal” and “social efficiency educators” out of the sentence and perversely reports me as claiming that the CRSE’s endorsement of the comprehensive high school somehow illustrates the “triumph” of social efficiency, when it is obvious that I was showing how the CRSE actually departed from that ideology. This is not an inconsequential part of Wraga’s thesis. Later in his article, Wraga returns to the selfsame contention: “As noted, subsequent historical scholarship has cast the *Cardinal Principles* report in

particular, and the comprehensive high school model in general, as archetypal manifestations of social efficiency-social control ideology” (pp. 510-11). In the very last paragraph, Wraga again contends that the “comprehensive high school model [has fallen] into disrepute among academics in the United States” (p. 518). Leaving aside Wraga’s topsy-turvy example just discussed, we are left, however, without a single shred of evidence for that bewildering claim. (The quotations that follow the one from *Struggle* say nothing at all about the comprehensive high school.)

My own conviction is that the leading opponents of the comprehensive high school before 1918 were extreme social efficiency educators like Snedden and certain interest groups such as the National Association of Manufacturers. After the CRSE report, there was not much by way of opposition to the comprehensive high school except, perhaps, for a few diehard vocationalists. Antagonism to the comprehensive high school by contemporary historians who follow Krug’s lead is, as I see it, a figment of Wraga’s fervid imagination.

In what is probably his single most representative characterization, Krug describes the CRSE report as “a masterly summary of doctrines current at the time, and it worked them out in a somewhat original combination.” It is for this reason that he was able to portray the report, aptly and concisely, as “an archeological deposit.” Wraga seems to feel that this metaphor is somehow inconsistent with Krug’s overall interpretation, but what Wraga cites as “Krug’s equivocation” (p. 510) is simply indicative of the fact that Krug wisely recognized other influences on the report besides social efficiency. Why does something have to be all one thing or the other?

Finally, something needs to be said about Wraga’s contention that John Dewey somehow influenced the report. Here, however, Wraga has a formidable task because there is no citation to Dewey in the entire report and no mention of him, even though his *Democracy and Education* appeared only two years before the report was issued. The evidence that Wraga cites, however, is far too ethereal to be even remotely convincing alluding to the report’s endorsement of positions “[f]rom the emphasis on the application of subject matter, to the moral implications of democracy, to the role of the secondary school in unifying a diverse population, to advocacy of the comprehensive high school over a dual system of secondary education. . .” (p. 510). In what way actually was this application of subject matter to be effected? How indeed are the moral implications of democracy to be derived? Why specifically should a dual system of secondary education be rejected? Now tell us precisely the points at which Dewey’s own ideas on those issues and those of the CRSE report intersected. Even if a concrete similarity could be demonstrated, it would only show a congruence of ideas here and there and not that Dewey in fact influenced the CRSE report. I, for one, would not be devastated if it turned out that a couple of Dewey’s ideas

turned up as tiny pottery shards in Krug's "archeological deposit," but tracing influence is a notoriously difficult task, and merely alluding to a few real or alleged similarities with respect to nebulous concerns and questions plainly will not cut it.

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To the Editor:

I am pleased to reply to the points that Herbert M. Kliebard advances to defend Edward A. Krug's social efficiency interpretation in the order in which he presents them. First, if I may correct that problematic sentence on page 497 (there is always at least one!), it should read, "For the last forty years, virtually all historians of education have subscribed to the contention that the *Cardinal Principles* report is best understood as a manifestation of social efficiency-social control ideology." This revision would make that sentence congruent with the context of that paragraph and would focus the reader on the main topic of my article. Second, Kliebard's allegation that I claimed that "the CRSE has come under fire by some historians" because it "endorsed the comprehensive high school," misrepresents my line of argument. Rather, I suggested that historians and other educational researchers dismiss the comprehensive high school in part based upon Krug's association of the CRSE's *Cardinal Principles* report and the comprehensive high school with social efficiency-social control ideology (see pp. 495, 511, 514, 515, 516, and 517 of the article).

Third, upon revisiting Kliebard's sentence from page 115 of *Struggle*, I was momentarily astonished myself that I could have misconstrued the meaning that Kliebard attributes to it in hindsight. When I reexamined the paragraph and chapter section in which that sentence appeared, however, its meaning became less obvious. Kliebard's interweaving discussion of the comprehensive high school, differentiated curriculums, and the commitment of social efficiency advocates to "different forms of secondary education for different kinds of youth" conflates these concepts sufficiently to mislead the reader. If I misread that single sentence, I stand corrected. Yet, Kliebard, in passing in his response and in other works, allows that the CRSE departed from social efficiency-social control ideology only in its rejection of a dual system of secondary education. Kliebard insists that, nevertheless, social efficiency ideology appears as, for example, the "dominant refrain" (*Schooled to Work*, p. 143) in the CRSE report. Thus, the connection of social efficiency with the CRSE report that I sought to represent, in fact, appears as a recurring theme in Kliebard's work.

Fourth, evidence of dismissal of the comprehensive high school model by contemporary academics, which Kliebard characterizes as "a figment of