



Why the Public Schools?

by

Laurent Lafforgue

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Introduction by Ralph A. Raimi, University of Rochester

What follows is the text, translated from the French by myself and therefore imperfect, of a lecture by Laurent Lafforgue, a French mathematician and Fields Medal recipient (2002), delivered at an open conference - like the talk itself, the conference was named Pourquoi l'Ecole? - held at the University of Lille on 30 September 2006 before an audience partly composed of schoolteachers from the elementary school at Roncq nearby, a school which was to host a later (August, 2007), national, meeting of the organization SLECC (see below).

I have described SLECC and its origins more fully on my web site at <https://web.archive.org/web/20160203183415/http://www.math.rochester.edu/people/faculty/rarm/slecc9.html>

As can be seen from its presence on Lafforgue's own web site, <http://www.ihes.fr/~lafforgue/education.html>, this lecture was intended for as large a public as possible. [Original French version](#)

Briefly, SLECC is an acronym for a voluntary movement of some teachers dissatisfied with the program set by the French EN (the Education Nationale), and who wish to make the national curriculum more coherent and more demanding than the current edition, handed down in 2002, which is the latest in a series of modifications gravely diminishing a program the nation once could take pride in, and a diminution paralleling the decline seen in the United States and many other countries, especially in Europe, in recent years.

The teachers who have subscribed to SLECC have undertaken in their own classes to adhere to the curriculum demands current in France fifty years ago, more or less, and to use textbooks one can find in used book stores to guide themselves.

Though with the help of the national organization they created, they have had, each individually, to obtain approval of the national bureaucracy and of the parents of their students.

So far the SLECC has only been fully organized for the grades K-2, but it is advancing year by year.

The leaders of SLECC are Marc Le Bris, author of a 2004 book, an attack on the philosophy of the EN, entitled And Your Children will Learn Neither to Read Nor to Calculate, and Michel Delord, a teacher of middle school mathematics.

Both Le Bris and Delord now have small grants from the EN (!) relieving them of some of their teaching duties and covering some office and travel expenses, with travel by members of SLECC to national conferences (the 'Summer Schools', for example) also covered to the degree possible.

That SLECC has received such a grant is remarkable in itself, and is mainly owing to the prestige of the members of a parent organization, GRIP (see below), a legally constituted advocacy group largely comprising university professors, which is by law entitled to apply for grants of the sort now assisting SLECC in its work. Lafforgue, though he is not formally a member of either organization, often contributes a comment to the SLECC or GRIP email lists.

SLECC's parent organization, the 'GRIP' (Groupe de Réflexion Interdisciplinaire sur les Programmes), is a small group of about 40 (membership by invitation) devoted to discussion of the national curricula in all subjects.

Led by Jean-Pierre Demailly, a noted mathematician, the GRIP is the legal recipient and administrator of the grant financing SLECC, and supervises its activities.

SLECC is officially an 'experiment' under a law permitting certain organizations (the GRIP in this case) to do such things outside the currently prescribed curricula. The national meetings of the GRIP and the summer (and other) schools for SLECC are very educational for the teachers who attend, and much appreciated by them, for they hear from some of the most learned people in France, with whom and with each other they discuss the problems of daily teaching.

Following these meetings the leaders publish (on the web) the Reports, which include papers prepared by the speakers; and both GRIP and SLECC operate very active (membership) email discussion lists.

This essay by Laurent Lafforgue is clearly intended as a foundational document for SLECC. Others may be found on or via the web page of Michel Delord, at <http://michel.delord.free.fr>.

A note on the title: Lafforgue writes Pourquoi l'Ecole?, which translates literally as 'Why The School?', an awkward rendition in English.

By l'Ecole is meant the institution of the school, and while we sometimes in English can say 'the school' in the way we say 'the government', this usage is not initially sensed by someone first reading this version of the title.

Furthermore, Lafforgue in his text makes it plain that he is speaking mainly of the public schools as an institution, for he regrets that the EN (his principal target) is driving some parents to create or patronize private schools.

However, most of his comments can apply to private schools as well.

Since French often uses the definite article in places where the proper English gets along without it, 'Why School?' could also serve as a title literally translating Lafforgue's. Indeed this version, which seems to ask the question of why schools - any kind of schools - should exist at all, is the major subject of Lafforgue's paper.

Unfortunately, the shortened version, 'Why School?', offers an ambiguity not possible in the French original, for 'school' in English can here be read as a verb, i.e., as asking why we should school our children. I'd rather avoid this possible misreading.

To account for all these considerations I decided to call this web page by the self-explanatory 'Why the Public Schools?' (as above) while using the unambiguous, even if awkward, version, 'Why the School?' (as below) in the translation of Lafforgue's own text.

Why the School?

Since my forced resignation from the High Council of Education, I have received hundreds of testimonials from teachers, parents, students and plain citizens of all social groups.

Among these messages I have been particularly struck by those parents who have written me, in substance, 'We have been so deceived, and we are so appalled, by what has become of the schools that we have decided to remove our children from there, and to teach them ourselves.' Or, 'We have joined

with other parents and are pooling our talents to form our own classes for our children'. Or, again, 'Despite the financial sacrifice it represents, we have placed our children into private schools.' And finally, those most numerous messages which say: 'Our children go to school, yes, but every evening we put them to work using old textbooks, and do what we can to give them the kind of rigorous instruction that is no longer given in their classes.' But what a labor for them, and what a responsibility for us!

That parents should go so far as to remove their children from school, to teach them themselves, at home, or to form parallel classes for them in which they, themselves, are the teachers, to prefer a school to which they must pay the fee to the free public school, or to impose on their children and themselves the burden of a night school added to the day school they consider to be nothing but a holding pen, all this became and remains for me a theme of profound dismay.

And I notice as well that these are surely the parents who enjoy a high level of education and, for those who can pay the fees of a private school, of income.

And then I think of the other children, who do not have the benefits of having been born into families similarly favored.

Students, all the students, are the primary victims of the destruction of the school.

This destruction has resulted from educational policies of all the governments of the last few decades.

It is not the teachers who are responsible for it, for they are victims themselves: firstly in that they have been prevented from teaching correctly, by the publication of national curricula which are increasingly disorganized, incoherent and emptied of content; then because the knowledge gaps accumulated by their students over the course of years have made the conditions of teaching ever more difficult, and have exposed them to incidents of increasing incivility and violence on the part of adolescents who have never been taught either the elementary understandings, the habits of work, or the self-control which are indispensable to the progress of their studies; and finally because the younger generation of teachers has suffered from an already degraded educational program, so that their own understanding is less certain than that of their elders, and, with the exception of some well tempered characters, has been disoriented by the absurd training so prodigally distributed by the teachers colleges.

Many are the teachers who, conscious of the gravity of the situation and suffering in silence, continue with what bravery can accomplish to exercise and nourish as much as possible the young spirits confided to them.

Numerous, too, are those who occasionally express their indignation - I have noticed for example that close to two thirds of the testimonials I received have been from teachers.

And they are increasingly issuing from organizations, associations, to denounce the progressive ruin of the schools and the educational policies which are responsible for it, and to consider the means by which the schools might be saved.

The program called SLECC "Savoir Lire Ecrire Compter Calculer [Knowing how to read, write, count and calculate]" for rehabilitation of primary schooling, which I have come to support, is the result of long thought and a thirst for action on the part of teachers in the schools.

If, as I hope with all my heart, the schools one day find the road to reconstruction, it will be upon the initiatives of ordinary practitioners, such as those joining the SLECC program, that it is built.

For such a reconstruction to become possible, for such courageous and exemplary initiatives as SLECC to develop and create models to be followed within our educational system, it is necessary that all of us, teachers, parents of students and ordinary citizens, must ourselves rediscover what, truly, is meant by 'the school'.

The direction changes it has known, the progressive deformations it has been made to suffer, the incoherent discussions of it which forever appear in the media, have obscured the clear sense of what we used to have of 'the school', even here in France where we once had the good fortune to enjoy a very good school system, one whose memory remains alive in most families.

To help us recover this sense, I propose to refer not to the over 350 pages of the present official curriculum for the primary school, nor to the even more verbose curricula for the middle and high schools, but to a pocket dictionary.

Dictionaries, and especially pocket dictionaries, are constrained to be concise and plain; they must say only what is essential. Besides, what is more scholarly than a dictionary? 'The school' - is not that precisely the place where one learns the meaning of words and actions, with precision?

The pocket dictionary in my hand gives two definitions for the word 'school'. It says, 'establishment within which is given a collective teaching (general or specialized)' and, further, 'that which is needed to instruct and to train.' All these words are important and, one after the other, they will offer us the opportunity to reflect upon what the school really is and, I hope, to understand a bit better why we would not wish to lose it for anything in the world.

In this double definition of the school given us by this dictionary, I will begin with the last word, 'to train' [the French word here is 'former', which can also be translated as 'to form', but in English 'to train' is more accurate even if its etymology appears more distant. RAR]. Today, this verb and the associated noun, 'training', are most often used in the sense of preparation for some trade or craft. But if we read further in the dictionary, we will see that they have a much wider sense, which already clarifies the nature of the school. In fact, we read that 'to train' means 'to fashion, to give a definite form'.

The importance of this definition resides in this, that in considering ideas or social life as if they were material objects, that which has no form has no existence in our world. Two and a half thousand years ago, Aristotle wrote that 'the soul is the form of the body'. Similarly, language is the form of thought, culture is the form of intellectual life, the rules of good manners are the form of sociability, institutions are the form of political life. The most important form that school must offer to its students, and which conditions all the others, is the written and spoken language. Without mastery of the language, the spirit of a child will forever remain infirm, his wings folded within a space so narrow that he will not even be able to think, for he will be wanting the words to give form to his thought. When he becomes an adolescent, this child will carry within himself a mute suffering, heavier and heavier, which he will only be able to discharge through violence.

This is what the urban riots last year showed us. They were unrolled without words, in striking contrast with the events of May, 1968. If one listens to the recordings of the student dissidents of 1968, or reads the tracts and signs they wrote, one is struck by their mastery of the language I would even say their virtuosity. The events of 68 were not unrelated to the changing ideas on education which were developed beginning in the sixties and which powerfully contributed to the destruction of the schools. Which means that we defenders of 'the school' are critics of one part of the heritage of 68. But the fact remains that to the young students of 68 had been given all the means for intellectual liberty - in the first rank of which appears the language and the culture. One can be against at least one part of the use that the 'Sixty-eighters' made of this liberty, but one cannot regret that the means of liberty had been given them, and one must ardently hope that the same means of liberty will be accorded each generation. A large part of today's youth has not received these means, its spirit

is boiling, in search of a form which has not been given them, and can only manifest its misery in a silent violence, without issue. One last element of comparison at a distance of forty years: last year, the young demonstrators set fire to 200 educational establishments; in 1968 despite the very violent manifestos put out against the educational institutions, nobody burned any of them. Which shows that the student rebels of 68 were aware that they owed their liberty to the schools, whereas the students of the middle schools and high schools in today's disinherited suburbs had the confused feeling that the school had failed them, that it had not supplied what it owed them: a form to their spirit.

Returning now to the definition in the dictionary, we read that 'to train' is 'to give a determinate form'. The adjective 'determinate' seems to me very important since every form is determinate, that is, particular, specific. Our time has much difficulty in the making of choices: ideally, it prefers not to have to make any at all. However, to make no choice is to hinder the appearance of forms, and ultimately to prevent their existence altogether. Thus, we have stopped teaching history chronologically; for who is to say which dates are more important than others? We hesitate to teach the spelling of words, for why impose on children one manner of writing above another? The programs in French in today's high schools do not prescribe the works of any particular author or work, since in the name of what authority should we prescribe certain authors and certain books ahead of others? The result of this pusillanimity is that millions of students find themselves without a time scale, cut off from books, deprived of culture.

All transmission of culture is partly arbitrary. The refusal of the authorities in education to assume the responsibility for making these choices is a refusal to instruct, to educate. It is a crime against the younger generations whom we have left alone to face themselves and the void, whom we have chosen not to give any point of support, any structure from which, and finally against which, their intellectual and moral personalities would be able to form themselves. For fear that they might later rebel against what they had been taught, for fear that the liberty of future adults might one day build itself upon the base of choices imposed upon their developing spirits, the educational establishment have chosen not to choose, hence not to transmit anything at all. Fortunately, it hasn't entirely been successful, and despite the official curricula, despite the textbooks, some teachers have continued to transmit all they are able to. For this, they have made the choices their hierarchy did not wish to assume.

We have read that the school is 'that which is specifically devoted to instruction and training'. 'To instruct', the dictionary tells us, is 'to place in [someone's] possession [some] new knowledge'. We will ask ourselves, later on, just what

is that knowledge or understanding that must be chosen as objects for instruction.

But first let us examine the expression 'to place in possession'. 'To be in possession' is an expression of ownership which enjoys the security and independence associated with the possession of valuables that belong to one. In our schools one speaks a lot about giving students self confidence and giving them autonomy. From the earliest age they decree both the one and the other. The dictionary tells us otherwise: that the acquisition of a genuine self-confidence and autonomy must begin by a prior possession of knowledge. An adolescent to whom we have progressively provided the mastery of the language, whom one has nourished in the culture, to whom one has conferred the intellectual means of reasoning and of exercising his critical spirit, an adolescent who masters the techniques and tools both intellectual and manual - such a student has the means necessary to self-confidence and the means for autonomy. It is the adolescent, after all, who has the greatest need of those tangible understandings, for it is they which will come to support that small self-confidence he naturally possesses; for adolescence and youth are fragile and uncertain times.

When, to the contrary, one decrees autonomy for a child from his earliest age and when one constantly repeats to him that he must have confidence in himself, while giving him nothing to support that confidence, one places on his shoulders a crushing burden. Many parents observe that school makes their children nervous and uneasy. And what shall we think of the frightening number of attempts at suicide or other self-destructive behavior among the young? As to the autonomy that has been decreed rather than progressively constructed, the fact is that it is completely absent in the majority of today's universities and in the best and most selective of the high schools. Strange result for the reforms claiming justification in the name of autonomy.

In the first definition of 'the school' that was given us by the dictionary - 'establishment in which is given a collective teaching', the most important word is obviously 'teaching'. To teach, the same dictionary tells us, is 'to transmit knowledge to a student so that he understands and assimilates [it]'.

Since we have said that it is necessary for us to make choices, let us look for some hints or directions that would help us to choose what must be taught.'

But look, we already have them in the definition we have just read - a definition much more helpful, to tell the truth, than what one may read every year and every month, as penned by those who govern our national Education system.

For years now, these last have placed at the top of their page that the school must no longer teach 'knowledge', as the dictionary has it, but 'competencies' and 'skills'. Just a few days ago, a member of the Academy of Sciences who specializes in education wrote to me that in school 'one acquires abilities, such as thinking skills'. Well, yes, Mister Academician: 'in school one acquires, or rather ought to acquire, the ability to think.' But, contrary to what you prescribe, only knowledge, not thinking, should appear in the curriculum. For thinking cannot be taught.

What can be taught are the words, the vocabulary, the verbs, the conjugations which render thinking possible and which give it form.

What can be taught are the rules of grammar, which provide a considered mastery of the language, that open the way to the rich language of books and to the precise, structured and abstract language of the sciences, which are the introduction to logic - that basic logic which is today so lacking among the majority of today's university students.

What can be taught are the organized forms of reasoning such as: in mathematics, the careful writing out of the solution of prosaic problems in arithmetic, and later of proofs; and in French, the preparation of polished simple texts, and later of more extended essays. All, exercises that have been perverted or abolished in the modern school, in such degree that the elementary arithmetic problems set for the old Certificate of Elementary Studies [given after Grade 7 - RAR] have more mathematical substance, in my eyes - those of a mathematician - than have the problems in today's famous 'baccalaureat S' [the 'scientific' high school diploma examination -RAR]. For at least those old problems required one to find for oneself the needed steps in reasoning, and to organize them and write them out as if one were writing a letter, that is, to learn discursive reasoning by giving it form in the writing; nothing of this remains in our education system, all the way up to the baccalaureat - or, rather, all that remains is what is included in the teaching of those rebellious teachers who are still with us.

What teaches is still the culture, the knowledge of those great works which will become the material for thought.

What teaches is still and forever that well defined knowledge that is the means and the conditions of thought, but not thought itself.

Mister Academician, Ladies and Gentlemen who have brought our school to where it now is, have you ever asked yourselves if it is possible for a teacher to say to his students, 'For tomorrow, you will learn how to think'? Thinking, like all other aptitudes, is only cultivated laterally, indirectly; one doesn't teach in the hope of developing it except in looking at it from the side while speaking of other things infinitely more modest and infinitely more precise.

In the definition of the verb 'to teach' given us by the dictionary, one must presume that the student 'assimilates' the transmitted knowledge. The student must assimilate the knowledge as an organism assimilates food, and not at all the way a computer receives a program. What the verb 'assimilate', with its underlying metaphor of nourishment, is saying is that a student is not a machine but a living being.

This is an extremely important point, one too much forgotten by the technocrats of education imbued with a scientific vision of man, something they reduce to a mechanism whose functioning is something that needs governing. It is this vision that has made possible the domination of the schools of education by the so-called 'sciences of education'. It is also what leads to the incessant questioning of whether what is taught in school will be useful in later life.

Let us take the example of the four operations: addition, subtraction, multiplication and division. Their teaching has been considerably retarded and neglected in recent decades, to where the majority of middle school children do not know the multiplication tables and many high school students are unable to add two fractions. These operations have been neglected because of the emergence of calculators, and the belief that an operation carried out by a machine can be the same thing as an operation carried out by a human spirit. It is the same thing as to result - supposing that one has calculated correctly and not made an error of fingering, and with the reservation that there are, just the same, many occasions where the calculator doesn't replace a mental calculation: I recently received a letter from a grandfather whose granddaughter had been fired after several hours as a salesgirl in a market because she was unable to make change. . . But above all, a calculator which one has programmed to perform certain operations knows only those operations for which it has been programmed. Whereas those same operations acquired and mastered by a student becomes nourishment for his spirit, empowers him, is digested by him, is made his own, enlarges and awakens his mathematical faculties and power. A familiarity with numbers, and similarly as to geometric objects, that permits the life that has been given him to enter, little by little, into the world of mathematics.

Are you aware that each year there are written in this world millions of pages of new mathematics? And that they are the result of the direction to the human spirit given by something so simple as the four operations of arithmetic? Do you know that after all these millions of investigations, mathematicians still have not finished with addition and multiplication, that probably they will never be done with them, that the creative power of human beings still finds nourishment in them, and something to transform in the same way that our organism digests

food - changing it into bone, flesh, muscles and nerves, then into movements, and so on into the profusion of human actions?

Since the knowledge and understandings to be taught to children are not programs but are nourishment, we must ask ourselves - so that we might choose - what part of it is most authentically nourishment, that which permits each child's spirit to find a rich and harmonious form, to grow and to develop like an organism.

First of all, these nourishments are not the same across all ages. One must begin with the simplest, those easiest to digest and assimilate; these give the spirit its first structures. What parent gives a baby the same food as an adult instead of the milk it needs and which its stomach can digest? Yet this is what the Ministry of Education has encouraged for years: schools of philosophy in the kindergarten, drills in Socratic questioning of the student by the master, turning the students into little researchers, whereas in the later years one sees a profusion of [childish RAR] dictées, lessons at the level of spelling and the syntax of simple sentences, or, for scientific students, visits to the science museum.

The primary and richest nourishments needed by the young student are the elementary understandings, that is to say the knowledge of the elements, decomposed knowledge whose structure is made apparent: the letters, the syllables, then their linking to form words; the motions, slow at first, then increasingly rapid, by which the hand can write letters on the page, then the linking of letters to trace out the words; the elements of the sentence and their function, that is, their nature and the functions of words, the rules that dictate their relationships and their variation, their agreement, the conjugations. What a marvel, when one thinks of it! And similarly, the ten digits and their combination to form numbers, the operations which, beginning with two numbers, lets us obtain a third, the use of these operations, at once simpler and yet more profound than one can in any sense attempt to reduce them to. And so it goes on, always from the simple to the less simple, from the most elementary towards the most elaborated.

The teachings of the elementary school must nourish. They don't adapt themselves to the present day any more than does the digestion of food. They are forever new, not to the instructors who each year teach them in the same manner, but to the generations of children who succeed each other, each receiving them in its turn.

These teachings must not be conceived in terms of the supposed needs of the economy or society ten years from now, or twenty or fifty. Who can say, after

all, what those needs will be, even after ten years? A child whose education was conceived, not as the nourishment of the spirit and the training of the character, but as a programming to perform some particular task, will not in fact find his place in society because, once he has grown up, the function for which his education had been configured will have disappeared. Of course what I speak of here concerns the elementary school and in large part the middle schools and the 'general' high school programs. Things are not the same in the technical and professional schools, which must prepare young people - already instructed! - for specific trades, and in higher education, schools which must evolve as rapidly as the specialties they are linked with.

The elementary and almost timeless teachings of the primary school, and the well established, perennial teachings of the middle schools, however, in that they are nourishment, permit those who enjoy them to confront the coming era as living persons and not as its barometers.

According to our dictionary, it is required that the student not only 'assimilate' what he learns, but that he 'understand' it.

What is the meaning of 'understand'? According to the same dictionary, it is, as a first definition, 'to contain within itself', that is, to comprehend in the sense of assimilation, which is again to 'cause it to enter into a larger whole'.

We discover here another essential feature that teaching must have, that of coherence, of harmony, of the reciprocal connection of different elements. This means that the teachings must have a structure, and to build from one material to another, and from one year to another - what we call its progressivity. It is ordinarily the function of the national standards [the 'programme' decreed by the ministry of education -RAR] to assure this coherence.

But it is exactly this structure which is most lacking in today's programs and textbooks. They are a hodge-podge. Even an educated adult cannot find order in them. It is this that explains why, after thousands of hours spent on classroom benches, and enormous labor on the part of the teachers, and of most of the students and even their parents, that so little trace of all this effort remains. The absence of structure, which should link together all the activities by which one intends to instruct the students, and which should coalesce, or eventuate, in a systematic recapitulation of its parts, creates only a bunch of disorderly bits of knowledge sliding over the spirits of the students as water off a duck's back and upon which, for the majority of whom, after ten or fifteen years spent on the benches, so little remains. It makes the process of teaching extremely difficult for all teachers, even those in a position to free themselves from the official directives decreed for them. How could a middle school teacher of French, for

example, effectively teach a class made up partly of students with a good background in grammar and partly of those with none? A school that has lost its coherence is like an army without a commander; the heroism of many will still not stave off defeat.

We have listed several features of those learnings that must be the object of the teachings of the school, but the most important problem in this connection is yet to come: to choose them. It is on this point that the debate on the schools takes place. The heart of the school question is the curriculum. Michel Delord and Mireille Grange, who will speak to you after me, will talk more particularly about mathematics - or arithmetic - and about French. What they have to say is much more important than my general considerations. Indeed, it is in the detailing and application of new programs, richer, better structured and progressive, which always begin with the elements, that resides the specificity and the immense interest of the SLECC experiment.

For my part, I would like to end this reflection by revisiting some striking words that appeared in the definitions in this dictionary.

We have read that a school is 'an establishment within which is given a collective teaching'.

If we pay attention to the word 'given', we feel surprise: Doesn't the budget of the national educational system represent one fourth of the national government expenditures, and one third of total national resources? Are not the teachers paid for their services? In what sense can this 'collective teaching' be a gift, something 'given'?

To answer this question let me cite once more those teachers who are members of SLECC, who began by feeling uneasy about the evolution of the school as it was imposed on them, who, not satisfied with it, then shared with those about them their doubts and revulsion, who ended by organizing themselves into a legally recognized federation, who have given of their time and their money to hold meetings, to organize summer schools for themselves to share one another's experiences, and to envision the roads towards a reconstruction of the school. But one might reply that the teachers in the SLECC network are exceptional, that they constitute an avant-garde.

Let me then describe a long account I received last June from a group of middle school teachers, a 24 page report citing serious incidents - the throwing of projectiles, blows, menaces, insults against the teachers, etc. - interrupting the progress of four 9th grade classes in one Paris school during the 2005-2006 school year. Such an incident occurred on average once every two days. These teachers sent their account to some sixty personages, politicians, union officials, well-known intellectuals, journalists, but received only two replies, my own

included. And yet, they continue to teach, ignored by society and by everyone else. Their school did not close its doors. Its teachers are still there, each day giving part of their lives to students who have been rendered incapable of receiving or appreciating the gift being made to them. Yet I am told this is not the normal state of the schools - even if this sort of situation is becoming ever more common.

Finally, I will cite a passage from a recent book of testimony of a young second-grade teacher. In his class, one student - the best student - wrote from the beginning of the year with a magnificent handwriting. Of course the instructor encouraged his students to write with care, and he was delighted to see this student possessed of so beautiful a handwriting. But he observed month after month that his handwriting of this student was deteriorating. He was saddened by this phenomenon without understanding the cause. Until one day he realized that his best student had let himself go because he, the teacher, wasn't writing with sufficient care. He understood thus that a teacher does not only teach understandings that exist outside his own self, but that in some way he teaches primarily what he is, and what the children see and imitate. For children to assimilate those understandings transmitted by the teacher, is necessary that they already be part of his own person, and that there be no discontinuity between what he is and what he says. It is this that no budget can contain, and that no salary can compensate. It is of the nature of a gift.

Our dictionary tells us finally that the school is an 'establishment' and that it is where a 'collective' teaching is given. This is to say that the institutional and the social dimensions of the school go together. The school must offer intellectual structures, as we recall, but also the moral structures indispensable to study - the taste for work and for effort, self-control, moderation in personal desires, attention paid to the teacher, to the other students and to things.

However, to give children such structures, the school, like its teachers, must first be what it is charged with bestowing, a structure. The organization of knowledge and the regulation of behavior suppose a well ordered organization of the school itself. In the primary school there are the instructors. These, as their titles indicate, instruct. They instruct the children as thinking beings, in transmitting knowledge to them. They teach them as small adults, in imposing upon them a discipline of work and of behavior which will give form to their character and clothe them with the dignity of human beings. They teach them as social beings and submit their mutual relations to common rules that will accompany them all their lives.

We have here, in fact, in the discipline imposed on children, one education specific to the school, different from that of the home which it doesn't intend to replace. This education is not in opposition to the mission of instruction which is the reason for its existence: it is legitimated by this mission which would not be realizable without it. It is subordinated to instruction, but its

benefit extends to the entire moral field. That is, in order for the instructors to be able to teach, it is necessary for the school itself to be instituted, for it to be an institution, which is to say that it be founded, established in its purpose, installed and legitimated by the public power.

It is not sufficient that the school be instituted one day so that, established once and for all, it be indefinitely faithful to its nature by force of inertia and the magic of its name. For several decades now we have let the school deviate from its true course; we have abandoned its direction to persons who are not interested in instruction, knowledge and culture. These people have transformed the school into something that is no longer the school. This is why, in parallel with concrete and constructive initiatives such as SLECC, we call on the public powers, thus the responsible political authorities, to reconstitute the school. And we invite all the teachers, parents of students and ordinary citizens to cry out for the reformation of the school. 'Give us back our school!' Render to the people of this land schools dedicated to instruction and to knowledge!

Translated by R.A. Raimi
2 January 2008