

Johannes Sturm, *The Correct Opening of Elementary Schools of Letters* (1538)

Abstract

Johannes Sturm (1507–1589), an educational reformer in Strasbourg, introduced classical humanistic pedagogy to Protestant education. This text outlines the usefulness of letters, the goal of studies, the duties of teachers, students, and parents, “the kind and amount of stipends,” and how they were to be paid out.

Source

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People by nature possess many common vices. We are born with a large measure of barbarity. Historic periods, peoples, undertakings have, as well, their own characteristic false morality and each individual man is fashioned by his own peculiar nature. Finally, we imprudent men have lapsed into the worst habits through this very morality. And unless a remedy is found for these evils, what, in the future, can be uncorrupted or enduring in the state? Therefore I regard it absolutely necessary to restore to the states the ancient education which will then destroy, group by group, whatever is evil in morals, nature, habit, age, opinion, or ability. For just as lawfully constituted states must have different kinds of artisans and artists, so they must have separate kinds of education. There remain to this day in most states examples of the ancient custom which though corrupted, nevertheless proclaim what those famous men accomplished who prior to us administered the state justly.

While honorable acts are in the purview of all men and there is no one who should not live according to nature and virtue, there is no class of men who should establish and preserve a holier and stricter discipline than the class of men of letters. For there is nothing in the nature of the universe that cultivates morality as does the study of letters. Nothing has advantages so widely spread as humanity and learning. For as it was almost always useful for individual private citizens to have their children conversant with the discipline of the liberal arts, so in the public realm it was essential for all for the preservation of the state that some persons stand forth who, in periods of crisis and danger, would look after the needs of state not only advantageously, but also wisely. But if there have ever been times when the state has seen a change of fortune and many great perils stirred up because of the scarcity of good and wise men and the plethora of evil and inexperienced men, ours surely are such times. In our times, there are more traces of foolishness and greed than of prudence and probity. Not only in peaceful times but also in wretched circumstances, the most ancient and mightiest peoples desired that room be left for wisdom—a thing which we rarely do. Indeed as tempests arise and leisure is disturbed, the pursuit of letters and of wisdom must be cultivated. Amidst the storm waves they should not be suppressed and cast away so that even in dangers, we can foresee evil and in the midst of difficulties, if they are of long duration, we may not be deprived of rational judgment. Yet it often happens that we do not even avoid the very things that are foreseen, because they are joined with infamy and danger. [...]

The Goal of Studies

The Office of Teachers of Letters

The best kind of school, therefore, is one in which a system of teaching and of morality is scrupulously observed. For although the goal of our studies is a knowledge of the physical world, still, as we said before, if life is separated

from teaching and letters, what usefulness does elegant and liberal education have? Accordingly, let piety and religion be set forth in schools and let the youthful spirit be trained for this through the cultivation of letters.

But the knowledge of the physical world without elegant speech is usually base and barbarous and along with the decay of speech we see that a certain captious conviction of what wisdom is insinuates itself in men. Therefore we must see to it that the early period of children's lives be given over to the formation of their speech. For men are naturally more ready to speak than to think or to make judgments and in education we ought to begin with what is appropriate for each individual. As with speaking, so too young boys are most easily habituated to behaving properly. For up to this point, poor behavior has not yet taken root firmly and those very faults in the beginning when they are not yet implanted can be rooted out more easily than they can be put aside once they have been implanted a long while. Thus, in the first years, let the control of speech and of life be joined together so that they may more easily achieve excellent education and religion—things which must be acquired afterwards. Of these, the one is necessary to mankind, while the other adds just and due ornamentation to what is necessary.

But whatever we want planted in our children's minds ought also to be clear in their teachers', so that teachers surpass the rest of mankind in education and piety. For nobody willingly follows an inexperienced man, and more people have greater confidence in a good man than in an evil man. Although the first hope rests in the innate capacity for virtue and talent with which the boys of necessity are endowed, and the second hope is in teachers, without the magistracy and parental effort too, the conscientiousness of instructors is frequently abated, and the pleasure of industriousness extinguished in adolescents' spirits. The well-being of the state obliges the magistracy to practice liberality toward those in charge of the education of youth, while privately in domestic affairs, it is useful for the father to want his boys to excel and for this purpose to study with teachers of letters.

But in those teachers who are to be selected, three kinds of zeal should be observed: for the humanities, for virtue, and for teaching. For many may bear certain marks of distinction in teaching, but nonetheless possess faulty habits that make them unfit role models. There are not a few from the noble class who prefer private, domestic leisure to public employment. All the more reason then why one should see to it that the conscientiousness of teachers is not roused by money more than it is valued as a result of consideration of their talents and an examination of the lives they have led. For steadfastness and a mature disposition are rarely found in men excited by zeal for money. Those whose motivation is above that and who flee from moral dishonor deserve greater trust. Thus the teachers of letters should be not only learned but also endowed with virtue and be most avid for the fatherland and for public service. Although there are three things that customarily stimulate men's minds toward distinguished acts—love of the honorable, desire for peace, and zeal for money—nevertheless wise men discriminate not only among dissimilar objects, but also among objects of nearly the same nature. Furthermore, as to this point, care must be taken that, once the talent of those who are the best qualified is established, we always prefer those who combine ability to achieve with determination and zeal. For though the desire for praise has often been lauded, in most instances it is combined with the corruption that ambitious men have. Avarice and inexhaustible ardor in acquiring riches cannot but be condemned by good men. The enthusiasm of the mind by which men of their own will are inflamed to acquire virtue always retains the approval of the greatest men.

But no one is good who does not rejoice at the signs of virtue in other people, and with many men the ingratitude of the wicked often lessens their enthusiasm. Pre-eminent talents desire both to practice and to experience liberality. No one at all can always help the unwilling and the ungrateful. Virtue is moved with profound sorrow when it sees itself overcome by vice. But although virtue desires to expand even after it has been reduced, it has something with which to be comforted. Whoever wishes, whoever desires virtues, for him it is always present. Whoever rejects or disdains virtue is not abandoned by that by which he should be saved—rather he avoids or

does not embrace that by which he could remain unharmed.

The studious not only merit our good will but also should be favored with rewards and stipends and honored by benevolent decrees that are customarily regarded as a sign of outstanding good will. Therefore we require discrimination and liberality in the magistracy. Liberality must be extended so that the teachers do not lack what they need and so that as many teachers as possible, as well as parents and adolescents, may be stirred to action. For things that are honored are usually attended by crowds, but those which lie despised or neglected, even when they are very good, have only a few followers. But as has been said, those teachers must be selected who have as much learning as possible and to whom heaven has given such a nature that they desire to benefit the community.

The Kind and Amount of Stipends and from Whom They are to be Sought

A fixed amount and specific system in reckoning and granting stipends must also be maintained. First, the basic needs must be determined. Then one must proceed to those rewards which are conferred for intellectual breadth and dignity. I shall call these stipends designated for grammarians “basic needs.” There should not be any place, especially among Christian communities, where there is no one who can teach the elements of Latin and Greek. The states that can do more should also provide those who teach the arts of divisions and of speaking. The dignity of the greater states demands that they provide professors of the major arts and supply theologians, physicians, and lawyers for states less able to provide them. The method of payment should, however, be so determined that the guiding principle of liberality is not violated, namely that what one man lacks, another man should not have in excess and allow to flow away. For that is an important sign of an unjustly constituted state. Therefore those who are deprived of the basic needs without which a suitable leisure for letters is not possible, are often constrained by poverty to ignore duty and undertake work casually, even greedily, in ways unbecoming and unsuitable. The amount of the stipend should be established first of all with reference to the state’s resources and the usefulness of the studies. After this, the calculation should be made with regard to honor and dignity. I shall maintain, therefore, that a state flourishes by the teaching of letters where there is no lack of men who are closely connected and who can bring honor to the citizenry and where no one goes away or causes an interruption without leaving behind a successor or an assistant in place of himself. For states that are able should, from the very beginning, provide two teachers in each category. As long as they can, states should work so that they appear developed by their own resources and content with their powers; and they should not seek elsewhere what they can find at home.

There should be sufficient resources for what we have proposed if the wealth of the church is rightly disbursed. If only other states would follow the example of our republic! And if they cannot carry out all that should be done, yet will still want to do as much as they can, however little that may be! Three elements are necessary in every great and arduous matter: first that states have the desire; second that they are able to do what they desire; and third that after the work has been undertaken, they carry out what they can. The middle element is characteristic of only a few great states. Where the other two elements do not exist, censure and reproof are really in order. You must strive and sensibly try to bring about for the citizenry whatever you decide upon as most useful. Our forefathers provided the wealth of the church so that, with the highest reverence and devotion of life, worship and service might be rendered to God and Christ. However, that service is discharged in the midst of a dearth of things of which the body and soul cannot be deprived—namely teaching and beneficence. Times are terrible indeed when Christ’s gifts are bestowed on men who do not wish to practice charity and who are not able to teach and who are incompetent to undertake their duties in Christian assemblies and, so as not to say something worse, who have a talent more suited to dishonoring than to adorning religion. I say these things about evil men whose number in our times is altogether too large. If only good people might be stirred by a mutual desire to drive out the men who brand with a shameful stigma a most honorable class of people! Let this suffice, if it is now agreed that

the resources of the church have been provided first for teaching and poverty, then for letters with which teaching is helped most and, in our time, are necessary. If we maintain this policy, the ancient custom and discipline of our forefathers will sometime be restored. But these are my reflections up to this point regarding the duty of the magistracy and the payment of teachers.

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Source of original Latin text: *De literarum ludis recte aperiendis, liber Joannis Sturmii, ad Prudentissimos Viros, ornatissimos homines, optimos cives, Jacobum Sturmium, Nicolaum Cnipsium, Jacobum Meierum*, 1538, in Reinhold Vormbaum, ed., *Evangelische Schulordnungen*. Gütersloh: C. Bertelsmann, 1860, vol. 1, pp. 653–55. Available online at: <http://www.mdz-nbn-resolving.de/urn/resolver.pl?urn=urn:nbn:de:bvb:12-bsb10764272-0>

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