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## Real Needs of School Children

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Chancellor's Committee for the Improvement of Mathematics Education"*

*December 16, 1987*

*Hassler Whitney*

Here is a child, on the way to school in a large city. Where are his or her thoughts? "What's the use? Big brother is in the remedial class, and knows he will always be there. Teacher asked me a silly little question yesterday and praised me for answering. Teacher explains all the obvious things, but I have no idea what she is talking about. I just want to get out."

We are in a time of unrest, pressures, and sham. Budgets are balanced by manipulating figures and people are elected for uttering fine sounding phrases. "Help the minorities take part in the coming economy of the city," and the first demand is to throw out the principal if the school doesn't measure up (the test scores remain low). In the urge to show "accountability," the teachers are told to drill and monitor the children more. Isolated facts and processes are poured into the empty heads; connections among these splinters are missing and the whole has no relevance to the children's lives. The more the pressure, the worse the results.

With help and support, the teachers could aid the children towards true growth

for a decent future life. By letting the children bring in prices of all sorts of things, and discuss related questions among themselves and with the teacher, with much reading and writing, they will soon have a solid and extended sense of "place value," at present badly missing in the classroom. And, in groups, finding secure ways of subtracting one amount from another, subtraction becomes one topic, controlled by the child. (There is now way to "remediate" a morass of isolated notions, all mixed up with each other.) In such ways, true progress is made, tests are passed through control of the topic, and the next topic can be taken up similarly; the class is alive and flourishing.

How can one go after better ways with different groups talking in different directions, with very different objectives in mind? Under true leadership, a study group can be set up which will go deeply into the actual functioning of the schools, staying on basic goals and needs, and keeping constant contact with all groups concerned to resolve the basic issues so separating us at present.