

■ Everybody talks of a 'school crisis,' but everybody wants to go to school.

FAITH IN PHILIPPINE EDUCATION

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"School crisis? There is no school crisis," proclaims Alejandro R. Roces, leaning back in his chair with the confidence of a man who has quietly averted one.

Which indeed he has.

One year and six months after assuming office as Secretary of Education, Roces has packed an impressive list of a achievement into his job of achievement into his job, notably resolving what all newspapers and school officials lovingly refer to as "perennial school crisis."

"Let me tell you what this school crisis is supposed to be about," Roces says, bringing his swivel chair sharply back to his upright position. (Visitors to Roces' Filipiniana-decked office in the Department of Education in Arroceros will be clearly intrigued by the contrivances of one swivel chair: it is the barometer to its occupant's moods.)

"Every year, without fail, you read about the school crisis. So many students will be left out of school, the headlines announce. That's usually in April or May. Then suddenly, by the middle of July you notice from the silence of usually noisy quarters that the critical period has been passed. You wonder why. Well, I'll tell you. That's because the crisis is nothing more than an artificial one.

"In July the funds earmarked for education have already been released by the appropriation committee. The National Budget has averted a crisis which never existed. It's as simple as that.

"And speaking of the budget, do you know it has been an instrument for silencing critics of my new school plan?" He smiles sweetly, contentedly.

"You know all the arguments I advanced for changing the opening of classes from June to September? Well, everybody still griped about that. I said the children would get wet and contract respiratory ailments, plodding on to school in the rainy months. I said think about the rural youth who should be helping their parents with planting. They said, but June July and August are hardly months for vacation. Everyone's vacation will be spoiled.

"Well" says the man almost everybody calls Anding. "I told them, I'm sorry. I'm not a secretary of vacation. I'm the secretary of education and I should concern myself primarily with education, not the period of vacation.

"And then I told them, you have to consider the budget." (Although many readers will not remember seeing anything about this in the arguments of the Secretary for the passage and popularity of his school calendar change, one must speculate that this must have been an ace up his sleeve. Or else a master stroke of good luck. Either

way, the indefatigable educator stands to lose nothing.) "Suppose, I said, they do not approve the budget on time? How can we open classes in June? They said no, that won't happen. Well, it did. Now, how could we have opened classes in June if the school calendar had remained the same? There would have been a 'crisis.'"

The man behind the job

Secretary Roces is a fast-talking, fast-moving, quick-witted individual who does not confine the activities of his job to his desk. He looks as comfortable retracing the Antipolo trail on foot or tramping into the mud of a Palawan cave, as he does signing directives. He has been described by one who works with him as an outspoken, outgoing whirlwind. Certainly he does not mince words when he feels very strongly against something. Like all New Era men (either you like them or you dislike them, but you can't help but admire their dynamism) "Anding" Roces projects an image of speed, spunk and spontaneity. He

gets things done. And probably no other secretary of education in the past has cleared the cobwebs from his office as fast as Roces has, and consequently antagonized so many in the process as well.

Roces and thorns

For Roces has as many critics as he has change-implementing directives. There are the old guard educators who wince at shafts that topple their swivels, teachers, superintendents and principals disgruntled at raps against their inefficiency, and politicians who, long accustomed to sticking their fingers into the education pie, draw them out in burning haste at lashes from the well-known Roces pen and tongue.

Roces, the man of action, has crammed many achievements into the space of a year and a half.

He has done something about the shortage of textbooks in public schools, ordering the printing and distribution of 8,307,972 textbooks to elementary and secondary grades.

He has ordered private (particularly medical schools) to cut down on the size of their classes or else. With schools having grudgingly complied, both teacher and student are now assured of more study advantages.

He has issued directives curbing the bad habits of teachers, officials and students. To teachers: no mah-jong, no improper dressing. He has told officials to stop allowing their wives to sell cloth, jewelry and other items to their poor, high-pressured teachers. Students, on the other hand, have been sternly warned against the consequences of cheating.

Last year he opened 13,000 extension classes to accommodate an expanding school population, directed the holding of teachers' institutes instead of socially-clogged workshops, cracked down on the requisitioning of school supplies, and in general, gave the department organization a good face-saving face-lifting.

"Instant schoolhouses"

He also outlined a plan (soon to be carried out) on "instant schoolhouses."

This involves the production of a certain kind of hollowblock materials from a semi-portable machine, which can be carried to barrios and used to construct a schoolhouse, strong and serviceable, within a short time. "I got this idea from President Mateos of Mexico," Rocés says.

"And I'm happy for this, because it will save many students from the embarrassment, years later, of having to point to a mango tree in some dilapidated schoolhouse and saying: 'That is my alma mater.'"

Many left to tackle

On the whole, his administration has been a fruitful one. And he is optimistic about it.

This despite all the problems.

A three-year old NEC-AID survey on the state of Philippine education came up with a lot of discouraging, and to some extent, alarming, facts:

School programs are not related to the needs of the community. There is no adequate support from Congress of the public school system. Classes are overcrowded, text-

books obsolete, laboratory equipment limited. At normal level teachers with diplomas cannot pass the exams for teachers. Buildings are poor. The situation of agricultural schools is disheartening, in view of the fact that the Philippines is an agricultural country.

In brief, these were the findings of the team. And Rocés admits that many of these conditions are still present today.

"It is true that many times school programs are not related to the needs of the community. As a corollary of this, you can add that a large number of youth enter adult life without vocational competence."

To some extent this is a case of politics.

Going to a Philippine map tacked onto his wall and encircling the province of Camarines Sur, Rocés continues excitedly.

"Take this province. Where would you say its major income comes from? The government pours two million pesos annually into this place for the elementary education of its students. (The

provincial government pays high school teachers.)

"By the same token, you take the case of Marinduque. There is a trade school there. Well and good. Some congressman proposed a bill creating not a high school, mind you, but a vocational school (which will draw funds from the national government). This is still fine, many will be employed. But do you know what this school teaches? *Auto mechanics*. This is a town which has about five or six cars.

"This is what happens when schools are opened not for education but for employment."

Thirty three centavos out of every peso

"As for Congress support, education receives no less than 33% of the national budget every year. The figures should speak for themselves."

As for agricultural schools, the Secretary says that the ones we have are outstanding. Perhaps it is just that we do not have enough.

"Inferior teachers? It is not true that we do not

screen them properly. But how thorough can you get when the teacher shortage is always keen? (For the schoolyear '61-'63, there were close to half a million public elementary school-children under the care of not more than 120,788 teachers. The figures for secondary public schools were no better: 10,900 teachers for 232,168 students. "This year alone, we need 15,000 new teachers." However, a comprehensive teacher training program introduced by the Secretary promises to remedy the situation.

As for the textbook shortage, Roces is working to achieve the ideal ratio of one textbook to every student. The present figure (one textbook for every three students' is not too bad compared to the 1:20 ration of several years ago.

Is our education sub-standard?

The conclusion of the NEC-AID survey was dramatically disconcerting: the state of Philippine education is deplorable.

Says Anding Roces emphatically in answer to the asser-

tion, "We are a nation of self flagellants.

"We constantly hear of criticisms levelled against our system, mostly from our own leaders. Before the war, many heads of families tell their offspring, our schools were better. We received better education.

"This before-the-war mentality is unfair. Before the war, the most beautiful home to me and to many people was this old structure right across from where I lived in Remedios. But today this would be just an ordinary residence.

"We must not go into unfair comparisons. We are an underdeveloped country: compare our education then to countries like ours. If there is any competition, we must be allowed to compete equally."

Morals and morons

"But these educators — the people who decry the poor quality of our students — the loudest — are the most to blame. Many students are morons, they say. To which I agree. I remember a student I had when I was dean of FEU's Art and Sciences.

He came to me asking for an excuse from classes because "I have to have two tooth pulled," he said. "What! I said. 'Oh, excuse me, Sir, I meant two teeth pulled.'

"Of course we have these students. But the point is, *why do we have to accept them?*

"If the Philippines has in fact an inferior quality of education, it is because we do not have such a thing as selective higher education. We are just about the only country in the world which does not screen its college students before admission.

"A high school graduate with an IQ of 12 can enter college, provided he can afford the tuition.

"We even have such universities which go to the extent of boasting about their enrollment figures — why, a university should be ashamed of a mammoth population, not proud of it. It should be a center of education, not population.

"Yes, many of our educators, and many of our private schools are to blame.

"Here, an educator is no more than a man or a woman who has invested money

in education. And it is unfortunate that private schools (the profit, as differentiated from the non-profit one) have attracted a bad type of businessman, one interested in money more than in education.

"What is more, the peculiarly Filipino custom of close family ties has bred an evil: that of the family-type school.

"Many colleges, as you know, are owned by families. Started out by men with sincere and meritorious motives, they are eventually passed on to the children. Some of them, fortunately, are good educators, but this is the exception rather than the rule.

Faith in education

But Roces has a lot of faith in the future of education in this country.

"You know why? Because of our people. I think this is the only country in the world where parents sell everything they have just to send their children to school. Not all people have that much interest in learning. Put up a school in some re-

mote town in Africa. Do you think many will go? No, but here, even rural schools are crowded.

"Education will work. We have good students, and we have good teachers. Do you know that the British educator James Dunnill who visited us in 1954 said the Filipino teacher is the most devoted class of individual in the world? I am inclined to agree with him.

"We underestimate ourselves. He are all prophets of doom, as I recall myself and members of my tribe to be when I was still writing a newspaper column..

"But have you heard of that line circulating in Broadway about the future of the stage? 'The theater,' they say, 'is dying, but, tickets are harder to get. That's the same thing we have here. The education system is being lambasted, but everyone wants to go to school.

"Filipinos have faith in education. With that as basis, there is no reason why we should fail." — *The Sunday Times Magazine*.