McFarland 'Pitch' Refused

By RAY NEEDHAM

John W. McFarland is superintendent of the Houston Independent School District, the sixth largest school district in the country. He is an imposing man who completely dominates a room or a conversation.

I met him last week at the height of the controversy over Stephen Mackey and his celebrated hair. Mr. McFarland came to Rice to speak to an tiny room in the Fondren Library. It was the sort of room in which he is at his best.

His deep, booming voice reverberated from the walls and his wheeling, oratorical gestures reached out even to those who sought safety in the corners of the room.

Pitch Completed

When the medicine show was over, the pitch completed, it was apparent that the students were ready to buy, but not what the pitchman had tried to sell. Perhaps it is even almost tragic that they didn't want what he offered—a common sense, no foolishness approach to education which supplied an answer, a definite answer, for every question.

Instead they bought what was painfully apparent in his rhetoric—the essentially barren, simplistic, uncreative mind which so often, so tragically, seems to stumble into control of American secondary education.

Perhaps it is not fair to blame John McFarland for the plight of the Houston schools. The system is precisely what the residents of Houston desire it to be—plodding, noncreative, reactionary, and intolerant. Superintendent McFarland was hired, not because of his vision, but because his view of education corresponds to that of a majority of Houstonians as reflected through the school board.

Already Known

Without help, he could not possibly have gotten to the position that he holds today—Superintendent of the largest non-integrated school system in the country.

What then did this man say to a group of senior education students, future teachers? He said that the Houston schools were big. That they knew. He said that a great number of new teachers were hired last year. He didn't say that ten per cent of the old ones quit.

He said that high school choral groups were a wonderful activity "because they sing great songs and if the students would think about the words they sing they would find a great philosophy of life there." He said that the Houston schools have developed many nice mechanical gadgets to help "teach creatively." That is all he said.

No Quality

He did not speak of the quality of the teachers his district employs to "teach creativity." No wonder. The level of students going into secondary education is tragically low. Because of money? No, because of the persons by whom they must be trained and with whom they must work.

Rice University is fortunate. Our teacher training program is not the joke that such programs traditionally are. The two good, sometimes even brilliant minds that direct it do their best to protect us from the plague of second-rate minds in the field. They do not always succeed.

And that is why no one bought Mr. McFarland's pitch. They already knew. Education is not a noble calling. It is something you go into because you need the money.

How unspeakably sad.