THE POSITION of school principal first arose out of the need for coordination in the operation of the school. One teacher was designated the principal teacher, and additional duties in administration and discipline were assigned to him. Probably the first principals in the United States were named by the school board in Cincinnati prior to 1838; and special duties for making reports, for care of the school building and grounds, and for the management of unruly pupils were given to them.

The duties of the principal have increased as education and its organization have become more complex until they occupy, not only the full time of most principals, but of additional workers as well. Even a casual examination of the duties of the principal reveals a wide variety and assortment of things he has to do. He is responsible for the care and maintenance of the building, has certain responsibilities in the transportation of pupils, is responsible for the administration of health, lunchroom, and other welfare programs, and for administering textbooks, supplies, records, and many other auxiliary activities. In addition to these administrative duties, the principal is sometimes charged with responsibility in the selection, assignment, and promotion of teachers, as well as with certain responsibilities for the curriculum of the school.

In some cases the principal is the key person in the planning and execution of the school program. In others his role is limited to that of clerk and caretaker, with the leadership in the development of the instructional program and other professional matters resting in the hands of other workers in the system. The writers of this article believe that the principal should have responsibility in regard to the curriculum and other professional matters. If this is not true, there is little point in talking about the principal as supervisor.

Supervision, unlike the principalship, arose outside the school. In the Colonies clergymen supervised the school to see that the school performed its religious purposes. Lay supervisors inspected the schools to observe the diligence of the teacher and the progress of the pupils. Later superintendents were selected to see that public funds for education were spent properly. The first professional superintendents were developed in the city school systems as the supervisory functions became too complex for laymen. City superintendents were early active in the development of courses of study and in the supervision of their use by the teachers. When the practice of grading the children into classes was being developed, many superintendents of larger systems found it impossible to grade all their schools and perform other duties. In the reorganization of the school structure, the superintendent looked to the principal for assistance and delegated to him additional responsibilities for the supervision of instruction.

Through this delegation of supervisory responsibilities within the school, the position of school principal began to assume professional characteristics differing from those of the teacher. Teachers began to look to principals as sources of consent and inspiration. The principal in turn planned the program for the school within the framework of the regulations of the central office and inspected the efficiency of the teachers in following the prescribed courses and methods.
A “Grass Roots” Policy

Can the attitudes and qualifications for effective citizenship in a democracy develop naturally in such an autocratic climate? Can a system founded upon such relationships furnish the best conditions for the nourishment of the democratic ideal?

As the relationships between a free and democratic society and its system of schools are studied more and more, it is becoming evident that the attitudes and atmosphere engendered by such rigid delegation and execution of authority raises serious questions concerning its compatibility with the ideals of a democratic society. The system has been defended on the basis of practicality and efficiency. However, practicality and efficiency, themselves, can be measured only in terms of the goals set for a society. As this process of study continues, a new conception of the principal’s role in supervision is emerging. It might be called the application of the “grass roots” policy in operation in school supervision. While the ideals are not new, their actual application is just beginning to be effected in schools. This policy points to the development of a liberal conception of school supervision, a conception which more nearly reconciles the patterns of a free democratic society and the role of supervision in the school.

The growing acceptance of this liberal type of supervision is not limited to schools. Some industries have initiated supervisors’ training courses in which the accent is placed upon democratic human relationship, job instruction, and the freeing of workers to exercise initiative. As an ideal, such a conception of the function of supervision is no newer than any other facet of man’s aspiration for liberty and freedom. The recognition of the fact that “grass roots” policy is practical and efficient is new and its emergence into actual practice constitutes a new trend. President Truman stated to the nation on his return from Potsdam, August 9, 1945:

“The war has shown us that we have tremendous resources to make the materials for war. It has shown us that we have skillful workers and managers and able generals, and a brave people capable of bearing arms. All these things we knew before.

“The new thing—the thing that we had not known—the thing that we have learned now, and should never forget, is this: that a society of self-governing men is more powerful, more enduring, more creative than any other kind of society however disciplined, however centralized. We know now that the basic proposition of worth and dignity of men is not a sentimental aspiration, nor a vain hope, nor a piece of rhetoric. It is the strongest, the most creative force in the world.”

The very new thing about supervision is that school administrators and school supervisors are ceasing to function in situations where the word is passed down from the superintendent to the principal, from the principal to the teacher, and from the teacher to the pupils. The school administrator, with the acceptance of the community, is gaining the courage to utilize the creative force to be gained in freeing the human beings who comprise the school situation to participate in the making of policies and plans for their execution; and, hence, to utilize the force and creativity inherent in the democratic process. The participation of the patrons of the school and other citizens in the community through the PTA and other cooperating groups materially adds to the aliveness and resources of the school. The democratic leadership of the principal in the coordination of school and community activities is an important phase of the supervisory responsibilities.

Barriers Along the Way

The principal who would so direct the full capacity of the school personnel through this type of supervision will have many barriers to overcome. These barriers begin with the habits of the principal, or supervisor, which have become ingrained in his personality through his past experience and training. There may be barriers to overcome as a result of the overall planning and routine of the central office. The principal and the staff in such an event must explain and interpret the desired program so that it is generally understood and accepted. The principal will be responsible for winning the approval and cooperation of other supervisors who function in his school. Their contribution depends upon the success of the principal in setting the stage for the friendly cooperation of teachers and the supervisors in solving school problems.
The attitude of the community may present difficulties. Leaders and key men in the community are themselves imbued with the idea that it is the function of the supervisor—"the boss," "the foreman"—to get the job done, to keep the teachers, or men, in line, and to see that the children are "well drilled and disciplined." It may be that leaders in the community will defend this conception as the only one that is practical and the only one in which an efficient school can be operated.

Other types of barriers may be presented by the faculty. Because of their training and because of tradition, teachers may be confused and appalled by an enlarged responsibility for original thinking. They may be so accustomed to a principal who knows just what he wants done that they are at a loss when he does not give them a categorical answer to every question. They may feel insecure without specific instruction and direction. These teachers actually train the principal to decide for them.

Supervision With Vision

Any principal who would take leadership in building a school system consistent with the highest ideals of our culture and make it work must begin with a sound appraisal of the situation as it actually exists and work toward the desired goals. He should make clear his position as a specialist working cooperatively with other specialists. By following decisions determined cooperatively, he must demonstrate to all workers that their opinions are respected. He and the other members of the staff must work as a functioning unit and develop an expanding group philosophy of education. Through his fundamental honesty, sincerity, and the earned respect of members of the staff, he must free them from any fear that might exist of working forcefully for their ideas and from the frustration of having their planning ignored.

It should be the supervisory function of the principal to find every possible means for freeing teachers and pupils for fullest participation and cooperation in formulating the purposes and policies of the school program. This will mean protecting in every possible way their security. It will mean recognizing the worth of each individual and his contribution. It will mean the development of a group spirit which stimulates and draws out of its members their best contributions. It may mean instructing individuals and helping them in self-activated growth. It may mean protecting some individuals from criticism of others. It may mean the development of techniques for the suppression of those individuals who would take more than their share of the time or veer from the common objectives. This emphatically means that the principal must not let the routine and details manage his job. Routine and detail, in large part, must be delegated to people trained for these tasks in order that the principal may have time for improvement of instruction.

As a philosophy of education emerges there should be parallel study, research, and experimentation to obtain the facts needed in developing an enlarged view of education. This study should be centered upon the status, growth, and development of the school children and their needs in our society. In short, the principal and the staff need to think very seriously and clearly about what they are going to do and why. All those activities which do not bear upon the achievement of the ultimate purposes of education should be questioned. The purposes themselves should be questioned in light of the present situation and continually adapted to it.

The principal certainly carries out part of his responsibility for supervision through directing the things which comprise the school environment. He must manage the school plant and its facilities in such a way that the educational process can take place under good conditions. The pupils and teachers should be protected from all possible useless routine and annoyance. Every possible provision for enriching the environment of the learning situation should be provided.

It is a part of supervision for the organization to be so flexible that all parts of the school function together organically with the proper emphasis on the important objectives and a suitable background for harmonious relationship. Again, the principal, through continuous critical examination of routine administrative practices, sees that they are continuously adapted to needs of the school program in contributing to the ultimate objectives. All administrative practices should be continually assessed for the purpose of weighing good effects against the creation of...
harmful attitudes or the wasting of time. Unless the principal continually keeps his attention centered upon the ultimate purpose of the educative process—the growth and development of the children—administrative practices may forget their purposes and themselves become ends. Without constant critical analysis by all concerned, certain aspects of the administration may be enlarged beyond desirable proportions and compromise the true purposes of the school program.

Principles for Principals

The following principles are suggested as a guide to the principal who would draw out the creative possibilities of those associated with him in a school program. Supervisory and administrative practices and procedures should be continually evaluated in terms of these or other principles which express the educational philosophy of the school. If his activities are consistent with such principles, the supervisor will not relapse into the role of the benevolent ruler or the stern autocrat.

Principles for the guidance of the supervisor.

The principle of democracy. School functions should be carried out in keeping with the fundamental tenets of democracy which include respect for human personality, shared decisions, and appeal to reason.

The principle of initiative. Specific plans within the framework of the total school program should be made by the workers who execute them.

The principle of human limitations. Responsibilities assigned should be within the means and the powers of the workers to whom they are delegated.

The principle of shared decision. In the formulation of the policies and plans for the operation of the school program everyone concerned should have an opportunity to participate. All workers should have part in determining policies and making decisions which affect them.

The principle of the delegation of responsibility. The people delegate responsibility for the schools to a school board. These representatives of the people formulate policies and make general plans for the development of a school system. The school board in turn delegates the execution of their policies and plans to the professional workers and holds them responsible for effecting an educational program within the framework of general plan.

The principle of the delegation of means. In the assignment of duties and responsibilities ample means must be provided to enable the worker to obtain the results expected.

The principle of training. Efficiency in procedures and means is unimportant unless it contributes to the education and development of the children.

The principle of clarity. The functions and the responsibilities of the workers should be clearly defined and understood. There should be no overlapping of duties and responsibilities.

The principle of utility. The special capacity of every worker and resource should be utilized.

The principle of organic unity. Organization and supervision have as a purpose the provision of balance and integration of the several parts of the system.

The principle of relative values. Decisions should always be made in such a way that the ultimate purposes of school are realized. The common good based upon standards of value and ultimate purposes should govern these decisions.

The principle of continuity of service and membership. The rights of the members of the school to continue in the system as long as they perform their functions should be respected.

Through honesty and sincerity in living by the spirit of principles such as those enumerated above, the whole tone of the school organization becomes more healthy and happy. Through integrity, common purposes, and mutual respect, empathy between all members of the staff is fostered. In common understanding and functional organization many barriers to the developmental process in the classroom are removed. The courageous principal who frees a school to work wholeheartedly with him, rather than under him, will prove the practicality and efficiency of democracy in attaining the ultimate goals of education.

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