

Parents Are Partners

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HISTORICALLY, public education in a democracy has been conceived as a partnership between home and school. Too frequently, however, the parent has been a negative and passive partner. His role has consisted too much in objecting to changes in educational practice and to increases in taxes. If our schools are to receive the full appreciation and support of parents, we must seek to make them active and responsible members of the partnership.

In this article we are trying to suggest why parents should participate in educational planning and some ways in which they may do it.

Any school that seeks constantly to improve its services to children finds need to change some of its accepted educational practices. Like most other people, including teachers, parents often resist these changes unless they know why they are being made. For instance, research clearly indicates that every child has a unique pattern of growth and development; our parents still attach great importance to grade organization, annual or semi-annual promotional practices, and the classification of pupils based mainly on academic achievement. As we have sought to serve better the needs of the whole child, taking into account his social and emotional development as well as his intellectual growth, we have seen possibilities for more intelligent ways of grouping children. When attempts in this direction are made, parents have often assumed that it is at the expense of what they call the fundamentals. Certainly the parents' need for a better understanding of why changes of this kind are made is one reason for their participation in planning.

Perspective Is Needed

We are increasingly aware that schools are but one agency in the education of children and youth. As parents and as members of church, social, civic, and youth-welfare groups, nearly all citizens of the community directly or indirectly contribute to the total program of children's education. Unless

provision is made consciously for the coordination of all phases of community education, confusion and conflict are inevitable.

It has been said repeatedly that the American people have profound faith in their schools. There is little evidence to support this assumption. A recent report reveals that we spend fifteen times as much each year for juvenile crimes and delinquency, three times as much for liquor, and four times as much in betting on horse races, as we do on the support of elementary and secondary schools. This condition suggests either that the faith of people in their schools is vastly exaggerated, or that we have failed to translate their faith into constructive deeds. Participation of parents in the educational program will greatly increase their awareness of the need for better financial support of their schools.

It is easier to see the need for an active parent partnership in education than it is to achieve such a partnership. The remainder of this article will suggest some of the techniques that may be useful in bringing it about.

Let's Plan With Parents

We often think that the answer to parent participation is parent education. We embark upon an ambitious program of interpretation, only to find that it meets with little response from the parents. If we proceed in this way, we deserve to fail, for we are violating a fundamental educational principle. We have come to recognize the value of pupil participation in educational planning. Equally, we must recognize the value of cooperative planning by parents and teachers in a program of parent education. Not only do we gain all the advantages of parents' acceptance of goals which they have helped to set up, but those goals are very likely to be much less theoretical than we alone would have chosen. They will probably deal with grass-roots problems which we overlook, but which are of great importance to parents. We have found that parents are likely to be

intensely interested in becoming literate about their schools when the program is initiated and selected by them, through their parent-teacher organization. They are eager to hear interpretations of everyday practice by members of the staff, as well as to listen to outside experts who can give help with problems which the parents themselves recognize.

As parents become better acquainted with our educational program it is both logical and politic to make them truly working partners. We have noted that resistance to change is a human characteristic; it springs from lack of knowledge of reasons for change or from lack of voice in determining the direction of the change. A vital program of parent education will overcome lack of knowledge. It should be followed by a sincere invitation to participate in planning changes. Experience has shown that parents are often more ready to change than teachers, when they are included in planning.

We also have negative evidence of the value of parent participation in planning changes. Recently we decided to add a half year of junior kindergarten to our program, which meant changing the present kindergarten session to the afternoon. We thought that the advantages of the step were obvious and that it would disturb nobody. We soon found that we had taken too much for granted. There was a great deal of misunderstanding and some dissatisfaction with the plan. So we went back and did what we should have done in the first place. We discussed the pros and cons in open meetings—then gave parents a chance to vote on the question. The plan was approved and everyone felt better about it. But we could have saved ourselves much grief if we had followed the good advice which we are so freely giving here.

Education Is Continuous

One of the best approaches to making parents real partners in the education of their children is offered by the problem of homework. Traditionally, homework has been thought to be additional drill or preparation for school-time academic activities. Schools which insisted upon this type of extra study have been criticized for taking too much of pupils' recreation time. Schools which aban-

In any partnership none can carry the full load by himself. Every member of the group must share actively in the work at hand. In their appeal for full cooperation between the teacher and parent, the authors, Paul J. Misner, superintendent of schools, Glencoe, Ill., and Robert LaCosse, member of the Glencoe school faculty, offer relevant suggestions for the achievement of improved educational planning.

doned it altogether have sometimes been accused of neglecting fundamentals or lowering standards.

The best solution seems to lie in developing with parents a new concept of homework. If our educational program is really geared to everyday living, there are myriad opportunities in the home and community for extending and enriching and reinforcing a child's school-time experiences. These may range from simple things such as the handling of money in the home to trips taken by the family.

To make people of our community more aware of the possibilities of this kind of extended education, we undertook the publication of a handbook which describes general areas and specific ways of providing out-of-school experiences for children. The preparation of this book was in itself an interesting venture in home-school partnership. It was written by a committee of parents and teachers, and the result is probably better than either alone could have achieved. It is our best answer to the problem of homework, being predicated upon the idea that education is a continuous experience in which all people of a community share, but particularly the parents of children.

In communities where there is a strong civic spirit there are likely to be many groups working with and for the children and adults of the community. Usually their efforts are totally unrelated to each other, with the result that there is duplication in some areas and neglect of others. If we really believe that the home and community, as well as the school, share in the education of children, we should consider this situation a fertile field for educational leadership and cooperative planning. We have organized a community council composed of representatives of civic, educational, and religious

groups, whose function is to coordinate the purposes and activities of the various groups. In this way parents and other members of the community can plan and direct experiences which, though they may occur out of school, are nevertheless part of the education of children.

To Summarize

In this article we have tried to show the need for parent participation in educational planning: less blind resistance to desirable educational changes; coordination of educational effort, broadly conceived as a com-

munity function; better financial support.

We have also suggested some techniques for implementing this participation: a program of parent education sponsored by parents; open discussions of proposed changes with opportunity to direct their course; a broadened concept of homework in which parents and others direct the total educational possibilities of a community.

Parent participation in educational planning is not a nuisance which ought to be tolerated, but a real opportunity to solve persistent problems and to improve our educational service to children.

Do We KNOW Our Veterans?

MUCH IS BEING WRITTEN about provisions for the educational needs of veterans. Secondary schools, colleges, and, in many cases, elementary schools are experimenting in the development of educational experiences to meet the needs of these young men and women. They are returning to our classrooms and campuses with new insights which they can share with us, as well as personal problems calling for our help and understanding. Certainly, no realistic postwar educational planning can afford to overlook these "new" students. Nor can such planning, if it is truly realistic, neglect to give primary consideration to the individuals with whom it is concerned.

It is with this point of view in mind that we present the following quotation. Its challenge to educational planning speaks for itself.

I HAVE ONE CLASS of Navy men only and my other two classes are chiefly veterans. Work with them is very interesting, but at times a bit depressing, and yet I feel so very fortunate for all of the good luck I have had in this world. If only one could know what these men have been through in order to work with them accordingly. Most of them are so very nice about it all and expect no favors. It is only by little remarks now and then that one learns of their experiences. At times I truly feel like a hard-boiled teacher, especially when I find myself being hard on some veteran who is working hard to get back into life and school. I think these men have a bigger adjustment to make than many folk realize. The war has done something to them that makes it difficult for them to get back to such things as mathematics.

I have one veteran who certainly gave me a surprise. The first day in class he appeared

on crutches with one leg off ten or twelve inches above the knee. The next day he appeared walking on two feet. Since then I have learned in talking with him that the limb is one of the government jobs which isn't too good a fit, and that it rubs sores, so that he must stay off of it until they heal. He takes it slow and easy, but I marvel at the way he gets around on it.

Only yesterday I learned that he had spent more than a year in a German prison camp. Can you imagine a chap who had gone through all that say of the man who had shot him down, "I'd shake his hand if I met him, for he was a better man than I was." That afternoon as we worked, he opened up and told a bit more about himself. He crashed on his seventh mission. It was a Serbian doctor who removed his leg and as he was about to amputate, he asked the patient by means of an interpreter, what he would do to the

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