

No Monopoly on Leadership

ALICE V. KELIHER

We believe that the ASCD platform is meaningful for the present day. That this is true, is illustrated in this article by Alice V. Keliher, professor of education, New York University, and director of the Walden School, which sets in bold relief the cogency of this statement concerning our schools in our time.

"WE BELIEVE modern schools can do their jobs only if there is mutual respect and confidence as we work to improve our schools."

* * *

So reads one of the statements in the platform of the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. It is a sentence that merits profound study. Try substituting "nations" for the word "schools" in the first line and "world" in the last and we have a statement about the core problem the United Nations are facing today. In every nation today the everyday people want peace. They dread war for they know how terrible and devastating a new one would be. They sense the fact that the tenuous threads of human decency, now stretched taut, would be rent apart and destroyed by an atomic war. These everyday people of every nation do not want war but they are puzzled and worried about how a tough and durable peace can be built.

Evan Davies, British educator, visiting us during the war declared, "When the everyday people of all the nations have the opportunity to live and to make their decisions democratically they will hold the key to peace—and *there will be peace.*"

G. B. Chisholm, Canadian psychiatrist, contends that the peace will be de-

signed and maintained by the "mature" people of every nation—people who, being mature, have no need to attack others, make scapegoats of them, or gain power at their expense. The immature, those with "neurotic necessities" as he puts it, are the ones who violate the dignity of others and welcome war as an instrument of power.

Putting these ideas together we must conclude that it is essential to spread the experience and practice of democratic living in such a way that more and more people grow into mature personalities free of the "neurotic necessities" that are damaging to themselves and others. Some scientists tell us time may be short. We have a stockpile of atom bombs and we may not be the only ones who have. According to Dr. Edward Strecher we rejected 1,825,000 men for military service for psychiatric reasons—men, certainly, with "neurotic necessities." We must be *very sure* that neuroses and atom bombs do not mix. We must see to it that those in control of such vast power be sane, just persons, aware of their tremendous responsibility for the very preservation of civilization.

Are there enough mature people, heedful of the needs of their fellow men, to hold the peace while we build a firmer base of democratic living the

world over, so that more and more, the everyday people will move in solid ranks toward world sanity? We must believe that there are—we must find and support the mature—reliable people who have consistently demonstrated their devotion—beyond what is expected of them—to the good of humanity. We must educate ourselves to elect to high places only those who have proved these qualities in their living. We must work through all the channels we reach; our churches, press, radio, movies, community agencies, and schools, to help each other as adults to realize what the issues before us are and to see that all are guaranteed the democratic right of the choice of their leaders. It is unbecoming for us in America to complain about the violation of the freedom of the ballot abroad, unless at the same time, the same protesters are applying themselves vigorously to correct the notorious abridgements of freedom of the ballot in America. The freer the debate, the broader the knowledge of the issues involved. The wider the responsible participation in voting, the surer we are to elect to high office mature and responsible people devoted to the ethical and religious principle of the dignity of all men—all “made in the image and likeness of God.”

* * *

I had to say the foregoing things before I could write down some ideas about building mutual respect and confidence as we work together to improve our schools. There was a school in session in England one day. Much thought had gone into making it a better school. Somewhere in the air, or on a lonely field in Belgium, or on a ship at

sea, a catapult shot into space a V-2 rocket bomb. It moved with the speed of sound and so, with no warning, it blew up the school and everyone in it.

* * *

What is effective educational leadership in these times?

... *It is, first, distributed responsibility.* The expression “safety in numbers” can be turned to this meaning. Only as people share a feeling of personal responsibility for a program—a sense that to some degree *it depends on them*—can we be assured the program will go on regardless of the comings and goings of individuals. One of the most dramatic illustrations of this occurred the day of the “false alarm air raid” shortly after Pearl Harbor. In one school where the principal had assumed *all* the responsibility for *all* discussions, he lost his head, tore through the halls and shouted, “We are being bombed! Run to the woods!” Pandemonium broke loose.

In a nearby school system, democratic organization had prevailed. The superintendent had a “panel” of administrative and teaching staff, parents and non-parent community members, as well as representatives of the students. In one hour from the time of the first false alarm his panel was meeting, drawing up plans for the orderly evacuation of the schools and the division of responsibility for the job. This vital plan did not depend on whether one man kept his head under stress. The principle of “safety in numbers” was at work. All groups who would eventually be involved in carrying out action were included in responsible planning. That is the way this superintendent works. He distributes responsibility according to his firm conviction that responsible

people grow. One suspects, also, that he enjoys the realization that he is *not indispensable*. The plan will go on, if it must, without him. This is the man whose Board broke all precedents and gave him a ten-year contract.

... *It is, second, faith in the democratic process.* So often the best results come where some person serves as a catalytic agent—like the chemical that does not enter a reaction itself but whose presence is necessary to the reaction of other chemicals. The good supervisor is a good catalyser. Because of something he does, or the way he plans, or some materials he has provided, a desirable thing happens. If he is a mature person his inner satisfaction comes from seeing the process at work—not in taking credit for what happens, nor even in feeling that he was responsible for the *way* it happened. This mature supervisor knows that people assume differing responsibilities in quite different ways.

We all know the “compulsive” mother, teacher, or supervisor who can let others take responsibility only if they do things “their way.” The wise leader knows that much that is creative occurs not only because people rise to meet their responsibilities but also because they invent their own ways of meeting them. This is part of the greatness of the democratic process. The product of many minds, each free to create at his highest level, it brings to the fore and merges with others the best everyone has to offer.

A teacher was once laboriously mixing paints. When asked about having children do it, she replied, “It’s easier to do it myself than to stand over them while they do it.” This teacher had yet to learn the art of *standing beside* in-

stead of *standing over*. Even for such a simple responsibility as mixing paints, boys and girls can invent their own ways of doing it and get the pleasure that comes both from creating the ways and carrying through a responsibility.

... *It is, third, clearing the way for democratic action.* A superintendent once said, “You can’t have teachers and children share in choosing their own books. The purchasing department of a big city can’t run that way.” Later, the same superintendent declared, “You can’t trust teachers with petty cash accounts.” This man, no longer a superintendent, revealed, in these two statements, his unfitness for democratic leadership. In the first place, he had no right to trust the development of boys and girls with teachers who couldn’t be trusted with money. The probable truth is that ninety-nine per cent of his staff could be trusted with both if their leadership believed they could. In the second place, he needed to put the learning process *ahead* of the purchasing department in value. Administrative departments exist to expedite the best possible learning. If boys and girls, and their teachers, learn best by helping to choose and order their own learning materials, the purchasing department must be designed to make this possible. Surely, the taxpayer has a stake in this. Materials which children and teachers have helped to choose are sure to be used to their fullest value.

The petty-cash point is important not only because the person worthy of being called “teacher” is worthy of deep trust and confidence, but also because it is a small measure of the administration’s concern about expediting the

best learning experiences. In a modern program of education, long delays between the awareness of a need and meeting that need—such as occurs when yards of red tape and quadruplicate forms stand in the way of a can of paint—are discouraging and a cause for poor morale. The good teacher will spend her own money for the can of paint and suffer still further from the cost of living. And when she can, she will find a teaching post in a school system that is set up to expedite the program she believes in. It is no accident that good teachers gravitate toward the school systems that operate on the belief that teachers should share in policy making. The probabilities are that a school system has the teachers it deserves! When they are caught up in a truly democratic process, teachers, children, and parents, give the best they have and that best grows better. Administration has the *moral obligation* to clear the way for democratic action.

... *It is, fourth, profound optimism about the capacity of human beings to grow and change for the better.* While we have used homely examples like mixing paint, ordering books, and petty-cash accounts, these are only symbols of the deeper problems in creating a program of *education for human growth*.

We could have mentioned the teacher who would rather have books used and dog-eared than clean and on display. Or the school of 250 families in which more than 100 are active on functioning committees ranging from food service

to escorting visitors. Or the public school system in which the superintendent has placed the screening and proposing of new teachers in the hands of a professional committee of teachers and administrators. Or the high school in which principal, staff, and parents share joy in the growing power of the student government to deal effectively with really important issues. Kahlil Gibran spoke of these in *The Prophet*¹ when he said, "These are the believers in life and the bounty of life, and their coffer is never empty."

* * *

Isn't this the deepest asset of good educational leaders—that they are "the believers in life." Don't they show it by:

- ... liking people?
- ... enjoying evidences of growth in others?
- ... having patience enough to let democratic growth processes work?
- ... sharing responsibilities and rewards?
- ... putting human values first?
- ... maintaining optimism?

Education is, after all, "optimism institutionalized." It is the faith of a people that there can be change for the better. Leadership, fitted for this faith, is essentially optimistic while sternly realistic. While leaders in education join hands with the adults to build a firm and binding structure for peace, they are building in the children of America, through love, patience, and conviction—the ways of democracy.

¹ Kahlil Gibran, *The Prophet*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1923. p. 24.

SEE WHAT OUR teachers think in Our Readers Say.

Copyright © 1947 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.