

Moving Five Steps Ahead

RALPH G. ECKERT

Oftentimes educators fail to realize the potential strength for building better schools that accompanies understanding on the part of parents of what the schools are trying to do. In an earlier article in this issue parent-teacher cooperation was stressed. We give you here five types of emphasis which may make for closer cooperation, with examples taken from California schools that experimented in this field. This article is adapted from an address delivered to the Conference of Elementary School Principals of California in San Diego, April 1, 1947 by Ralph G. Eckert, chief, Bureau of Parent Education in the State Department of Education, Los Angeles.

MARK TWAIN recounts the story of how on one occasion, while traveling West, on three successive evenings following hard days of stage coach travel, he received the same reply to this question, "How far do you call it to Kansas City?" The answer on each occasion was, "Oh, about five hundred miles." On the third evening Mark Twain had

replied, "Well, thank goodness we are holding our own." Such is the situation in which our schools often find themselves today. The constant influx of population and building problems, probably leave us very well satisfied if we can hold our own.

But we must begin to look ahead to the development of a more complete environment for children. We know, of



Courtesy Long Beach California Schools

course, that the "whole child comes to school" bringing with him his emotional problems, sufficiently severe at times to block the learning processes. We know that parents, who would become very excited if the child broke his arm and would spare no expense in seeing that he had the best treatment will, nevertheless, allow a child with a "broken spirit" to go along without special

help until his entire personality has become warped.

He's Doing the Best He Can

A new and dynamic theory of personality is emerging as a result of accumulated psychiatric case work. The basic assumption now underlying psychotherapy is that the individual, regardless of what he has done, has done the best that he could. He cannot do better because someone has failed to give him the affection, praise, or the experiences in democratic living which would have given him the emotional stability to have developed a more constructive pattern of behavior, and to have made "better choices."

We have, for some time, been willing to recognize that the child was not entirely responsible for his behavior. So we began pointing our finger at the family. The analysis of the war increases in delinquency and the psychoneurotic rejectees and ejectees from military service have now made it popular to blame the parents for whatever is wrong with the child. In the long run, this is no more sensible than blaming the child. For the parent, too, "is doing the best he can."

Society must somehow break through the vicious cycle by which a generation of emotionally immature and unstable individuals marry and produce a generation of emotionally immature and unstable individuals, ad infinitum. That the sins of the fathers were passed on from generation unto generation was a Biblical observation of a fact. At first, attributed to supernatural punishment, later to the effect of heredity, and still later to the environment, we are now ready to strike a balance between the

last two. The science of psychology now forces us to say very humbly regarding any human being, "Were I that individual, born to that heredity, raised in that environment, influenced by those social pressures, I should be doing exactly what he is doing."

Five possible types of parent education which can be carried on at the elementary school level offer opportunities for improving the quality of parenthood and the parent-child and parent-teacher relationships. Working together understandingly, with specialized assistance, there are few problems that cannot be solved by parent and teacher.

An Extended Kindergarten Program

First, let us take the long range look ahead and begin to plan for the development of a new type of kindergarten-primary program which would provide for close cooperation between parents and teachers. We know that parents are most anxious to cooperate at this period and if we can, with careful selection of kindergarten teachers and by professional in-service training in the area of mental hygiene and parent education, develop a corps of teachers highly skilled in recognizing the early symptoms of maladjustment—and then give them time to follow through with parents—we can make a tremendous contribution to the emotional stability of *that* child in *that* family.

Increased staff and services

It may well prove to be advantageous to many schools to hire two kindergarten teachers, giving each a half day free for organized and individual parent education. The teacher might meet

weekly with kindergarten parents, and follow them on through the next year, meeting with them weekly as first grade parents. In the next two years she might meet with them every other week, maintaining some contact with them throughout the elementary school experience of their youngsters. Such a teacher, having had this extended contact with parents and having contacted individually those unable or unwilling to participate in the group meetings, would be the natural person in the school to contact the home in all types of guidance or discipline problems.

The kindergarten teacher would be aided in this by the development of a more complete kindergarten unit, with two or more rooms available, and a place for parents to meet. It should be possible to organize so that the teacher best qualified to work with parents could give a large portion of her time to them, and the one most capable of working with children could work more directly with them. If and when we develop an ungraded kindergarten-primary unit, taking each child where he is and individualizing his experiences and progress throughout a two, two-and-a-half, three-year period, this sort of program should become not only increasingly feasible, but also increasingly necessary.

Early sex education

This would be a very appropriate time also for the school to help parents with the problems of sex education. Evidence seems to indicate that there is probably little danger in presenting wholesome sex information too early, but that there is great danger of presenting it too late. In such cases, it is usually found that someone has mis-

educated the child and done so in an atmosphere of unwholesome emotional overtones. The use of animals and pets and all sorts of visual aid material can greatly help parents with this problem. Most people agree that the home is the ideal place for the giving of sex information, but there is no denying the fact that a vast majority of homes are not doing an adequate job. Only thirty percent of the P.T.A. members in Los Angeles polled considered themselves sufficiently informed to give their children an adequate sex education. Ninety-seven percent of them believe that it is desirable for the public schools to develop a program of sex education which would give the youngster the information he needed at the time he needed it.

A New Kind of Report

The second field in which new opportunities for parent education are developing is in the area of report cards. Guidance people in the state of California seem to be moving toward more of a personality growth report than a comparative academic evaluation. This type of report tends to emphasize emotional development, social skills, and special skills, as well as skills in fundamentals. In the past, our program has tended to be geared almost entirely to the child with verbal ability, almost completely ignoring the socially useful mechanical, social, artistic, musical, and clerical abilities. Too often the grade report has been used as a sort of psychological whip, held over the child to insure greater and greater effort. The psychiatric workers and the specialists in speech correction or reading problems can well attest to the serious emotional damage frequently done by parents attempting to force a child with C ability

to do A work—whatever those terms may mean.

A growth report which reflects the child's achievement in relation to his abilities seems much more wholesome for the younger child. Because of the need for competence and ability to succeed in the higher and higher level in our educational structure, a thorough guidance program should be developed which will gradually lead the parent and the youngster to an honest evaluation of his abilities. It is upon an intelligent understanding of these general and special abilities and disabilities that vocational guidance and competence must be built.

Parents choose to talk it over

The most desirable approach seems to be a combination of growth report and parental conference during which, over a period of years, a thorough evaluation of the child's potentialities can be discovered and assessed by parents and teachers working together. One school, some five years ago, initiated a program of such parental conferences. Approximately one month after the beginning of school when the teacher has had a chance to get acquainted with the child and his previous record, the school goes on a minimum day session and individual conferences are scheduled with parents during the balance of the afternoon for as long as is necessary to contact all parents. A manual of instruction, which has been prepared for new teachers, indicates clearly that this is a joint enterprise between parent and teacher, with each attempting to help the other develop a clearer understanding of the child and jointly developing goals for the coming year. The

parent is then given a choice of returning for a second interview about three-fourths of the way through the year, or of receiving, at that time, a descriptive evaluation in essay form of the progress toward the goals previously agreed upon. In the beginning, about fifty percent chose a second interview. Today about eighty-five percent of the parents choose to return for a second interview. At the end of the year, a detailed check sheet summarizes the progress already largely evaluated and understood by both parent and child.

Teachers learn by doing

Some administrators fear the consequences of "allowing untrained people to counsel parents regarding the emotional problems of their child." If the approach, however, is not one of giving advice, but of seeking information and asking good questions to help the parent discover wholesome sets of values and be reassured in the process, then there seems to be little danger involved. At the same time, this will be a highly educational experience for the teachers. We talk a great deal about learning by doing; certainly few people will become expert in working with parents except by doing so.

Demonstration Accompanied by Research

A third method by which education of parents can be carried on in the elementary schools is by the organized demonstration method. In a Fresno elementary school last year, a demonstration in reading at all levels was arranged with parents observing during the last period of the day. The children were then dismissed and the teacher attempted to help the parent see what

the objectives were and to indicate how they were attempting to reach them. The demonstration was so successful that it was followed later by demonstrations in arithmetic and in spelling.

San Diego has carried on a demonstration program accompanied by a collection of research data which would indicate that children whose parents understood what the school was attempting in each subject and how they could assist (not by helping the child with his reading but by discussing things with him and thus developing a vocabulary and enlarging his interests) made substantially greater progress than the ordinary group. Such demonstration constitutes probably one of the best jobs in public relations that the average school can undertake.

An Enlarged Guidance Program

The fourth area in which the elementary school can advance parent education is through the employment of specialized parent education and guidance personnel. Many schools would like to hire a guidance person especially trained in the field of clinical psychology, but do not feel that they can justify the expense. If such a person is hired, charged jointly against guidance and parent education and is given freedom in working with parents in groups and time to work with both individual parents and children, the school may be very sure that such a person will be kept busy and that it will get its money's worth.

A "problem child" is a child with *unsolved problems*. To allow the child to continue in that state, ultimately in adolescence becoming a delinquent or in adulthood experiencing emotional

breakdown, is little short of criminal—to say nothing of being a poor social investment. The chief problem of such a child is frequently his parents. In many instances, little can be done with the child until the basic emotional relationships in the home, which are producing the emotional symptoms we observe in the child, can be dealt with. Research in the field of speech correction indicates that the improvement is twice as great when the mother as well as the child is involved in the therapy. On the other hand, it may even be destructive to single children out and work with them on their special problems without doing anything to change the environment which has produced the tensions and emotional instability which is causing the speech defect. Our goal must be that, regardless of how he enters school, every child should leave the elementary school a well-adjusted personality.

Activate the Parent-Teacher Group

Finally, we can do a great deal more in parent education at the elementary school level if we can strengthen the work of our P.T.A.'s. We must begin to think of P.T.A. as parents, teachers, and administrators. Parent-teacher leaders now have a saying, "as goes the administrator, so goes the P.T.A." If the administrator is not enthusiastic, his faculty reflects that. If he tries to keep them busy in mere money raising activity so that they do not "attempt to interfere in the administration of the school" that, too, is reflected. But if he will recognize in the P.T.A. one of the most powerful friends of education and a tremendous potential force for good, not only in the school but in the com-

munity, then we can begin to realize the full possibilities of home and school cooperation.

Leadership is crucial

The P.T.A. is only as strong as its leaders. Because of the rapid turnover of local leadership, frequently with lack of preparation for the job; because of the tendency to quickly siphon off outstanding leadership into council, district, and state organizations, it becomes incumbent upon teachers and principals who remain with the program year after year to furnish a kind of stabilizing and vital leadership. We recognize increasingly that real leadership comes not so much in "knowing the answers" but in asking vital questions. What are the most important needs of the youngster in this school which are not being met? What can we do about it? How can we do it? What other agencies and organizations can we enlist?

Attention on the child

Another way in which the P.T.A. can be strengthened is by increasing the trend toward the grade level type of organization. Almost inevitably in a P.T.A. program in which there is a wide range of children, the program becomes geared to the interests and needs of the newcomers each year. They turn out in the largest numbers and show the greatest interests. After several indoctrinations, repeated at yearly intervals, they lose interest. Can't we experiment with the development of a type of organization and program which would provide:

... for shorter business meetings with more of the committee reports made to

the executive committee and plans of action developed there. The reading of the actions of the executive committee, which is small, could then be presented to the group to keep them informed and in touch with the association's activity. Democracy does not require us to bore our constituents with every detail.

... for all parents to meet in one large group during the last hour of the school day for the program, including perhaps musical numbers by the orchestra, followed by a speaker who might, in a half hour, deal with the basic principles underlying sound discipline. The group might then break up into grade groups, meeting with the teacher. Thus a group of parents with children at a similar stage of development and probably facing similar problems could discuss discipline much more specifically. The same type of program would apply to such things as allowances, use of freedoms, or assuming responsibilities. In other words, can we really develop P.T.A. programs of genuine parent education?

... for enlisting the cooperation of parents in assisting the teacher in a great many ways, relieving her for more important things and, at the same time, giving parents a new and ready appreciation of the types of materials which are used and many other aspects of class procedure. Could it not also be a valuable vehicle for improved parent-teacher relationships and greater appreciation on the part of each for the other?

Welcome the newcomer

And can we not also use our Home Service Committee of the P.T.A. to welcome and orient new parents into the community and school. Would it not be a good idea for the P.T.A. Home Service Committee, working very closely with the Parent Education Committee perhaps, to call upon the parents of the new child in the

school to tell them about the P.T.A. and its work in the school? They could perhaps leave a book or two from the P.T.A. library in which the newcomer might indicate an interest, with the suggestion that she bring it to the next P.T.A. meeting. Don't all normal human beings respond to this kind of neighborliness?

Elementary Schools Have the Chance

For those who work with boys and girls in the elementary schools there is a great challenge and a great opportunity. We get all of the children, we get them young, and we can meet, with affection and understanding, the needs of children whose homes do not give them the affection and emotional sup-

port they need. Particularly will this be true in the days ahead as the "purple heart battalion" enters our school. Beginning this coming year, we will get our first crop of war babies; those youngsters whose homes, in too many cases, have never given them the kind of emotional stability to which every child is entitled. Their young mothers have followed husbands from camp to camp and then have experienced long periods of separation during which they were forced to face grave apprehensions, while perhaps living in crowded and unsatisfactory quarters. These, along with parents of children who have long been coming to our schools, rightfully look to us for cooperation in the total educational job for children.



Tearing Down the Barriers ---

MAURICE F. SEAY

A mountain of problems can be moved when an entire state gives its total effort to the attack. Such was the case when Kentucky considered education a major field of progress, and united toward that end. Leads to action for citizens' groups figure prominently in this outline by Maurice F. Seay, dean of the University of Kentucky, Lexington, of how to begin, sustain, and carry through on a large scale.

How It Began

The idea originated in the minds of several members of the Kentucky Merchant's Association. These men, realizing the state's great potentialities, were disturbed to see Kentucky lagging behind her neighboring states in health, wealth, and education. So the Committee for Kentucky was organized in 1944

to discover the barriers which were impeding Kentucky's progress—and to tear down those barriers.

Behind the plan of organization of the Committee for Kentucky is the idea that the people themselves, if informed and interested, can and will work out solutions to their problems. The orig-

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