

How Good Are Our Schools?— A Discussion

The issues of school-community cooperation with a view toward providing better educational programs for boys and girls are discussed by the following people from the Glencoe, Illinois public schools: Mrs. Louise Christopher, a parent, Miss Gretchen Collins and John Sternig, teachers, Miss Arden Rappaport, high school student, C. E. Snell, board of education member, and Paul J. Misner, superintendent of schools. Their discussion is based on experimentation being carried on in the Glencoe schools as well as issues of concern to the entire country.

Misner: We have been asked to discuss the topic, "How Good—or How Bad—Are Our Schools—and What Do We Need to Do about Them?"

The question suggests that each of us should react with complete frankness. Obviously many good things can be said about our schools. It is equally obvious that there are many ways in which they can be improved. The present wide-spread interest of the American people in their public school system will not be permanently sustained unless we are willing to face our limitations as well as our strengths. From such a representative group as we have participating in this symposium we should get some stimulating and provocative ideas.

Mr. Snell, I suspect you have something you'd like to say on this topic.

Snell: I agree with you, Paul, that the increased nation-wide interest in education is very encouraging. I believe, however, that before we can make real progress we must attack the fundamentals of the teacher problem. Fundamentally I think the traditional plan of employing teachers is wrong. I don't see how we can have a profession of teaching when actually it is merely a part-time, poorly paid job in most commu-

nities. There is no sound reason why teaching shouldn't be a full-time career or profession just the same as law, medicine, or engineering. I don't see how we can attract the best talent to the teaching profession unless we make it a full-time career, pay adequate salaries, provide for the in-service training that is going to lead to real professional growth, and offer encouragement and incentives for superior work and leadership.

Sternig: This whole question of teachers and the improvement of teaching is a vital one because teachers are the key to the entire situation. I agree with Mr. Snell completely, although being somewhat of an idealist I don't think that I would put salaries first. The point of recognition I think is essential. Human nature being what it is, a person will stay in a place where he is happy. If the job you're doing is one that gives you personal satisfaction and receives the recognition of the community and the children, then I suspect that pay in many cases will be secondary. Of course, the pay should be sufficient to keep body and soul together, plus a few luxuries.

Misner: Arden, you've been associ-

ated with teachers for several years. Do you think they should receive better pay and have wider opportunities for personal and professional growth?

Arden: Well, I believe that America is as great as it is today because its people have been more educated than any other people in the world. I don't see how America's young people are going to continue to be well educated if their teachers aren't all that they're supposed to be. If they don't get a good salary, the teaching profession isn't going to attract many teachers who are really good.

Misner: Mr. Snell, you believe that better salaries are necessary but you are insisting that better salaries alone will not insure adequate and superior teaching.

Snell: Such a program as I advocate would, of course, cost money—more money than most communities are now investing in the education of their boys and girls. I believe, however, that the American people are interested in spending money for the education of their children, provided they are sure that they are going to get results. For that reason it is vital that some merit plan, some means of evaluating the contributions made by teachers, be worked out so that those who are doing the most efficient jobs receive the largest rewards.

In most school systems in this country today teachers are paid on the basis of education, experience, and length of service. As a result, one teacher in one room can be coasting and the other one across the hall can be giving top-flight service and be making an outstanding contribution. Yet both teachers are paid the same. To me that seems unfair, and certainly it provides no money incen-

tive at least for real leadership and real contributions. I recognize that there are serious problems to be worked out in developing the means of evaluating a teacher's contribution. However, if the same thought were given to solving that problem and others in our school system that businesses give to attacking and solving their problems, I believe a satisfactory plan can be worked out.

Sternig: Mr. Snell also spoke about an improved in-service program. Along that line I think it might be well to point out that teachers, as they leave pre-service institutions, aren't always fully competent to step into teaching situations. From my point of view it is essential that any school system have a very vital, live, in-service training program, one that fills the gaps that pre-service training has left or one that reinforces the things that were given in pre-service training. Teachers are exposed to a great many ideas that don't "take" until they get into a situation where they see the applications.

Collins: It seems to me that such opportunities are offered in the twelve-month plan under which Glencoe has been working during the past two years. In addition to increased salaries, we have had extra time during the summer months to augment our in-service program. Our local workshop groups in art, shop, science, children's literature, and audio-visual aids have stimulated faculty members to develop new ideas and skills. Curriculum problems that are ordinarily faced during the school year have been thought through by interested groups released from the pressure of regular school responsibilities. Some of us have used this time for college and university study. Then under the

twelve-month plan we have the opportunity of extending our recreational program for children.

Snell: Certainly most of our current educational programs for children are archaic. They hark back to the pioneer days when children went to school during those months of the year when they weren't needed in the fields. There's no good reason, as I see it, why we should stop the education and training of children just because summer comes along. In fact, I think if we are going to educate children from all points of view to be able to meet the responsibilities in the years ahead, we're going to have to give more thought to year-round programs which embrace education as we see it and also a sound recreation program for all-round development.

Christopher: Speaking as a parent, I think that parents see the whole nationwide situation without reference to in-service programs about which they know very little. But they do realize now that we must have greater cooperation between the citizen-parent and the teacher, and a recognition of the teacher in the community. Because of the articles in the press and the articles in every magazine that we read, we realize that the problem is not so much the salary situation as it is the evaluation of the teacher as a professional person. Parents have been knocked out of their lethargy by three things: first, the teacher salary situation, second, the shortage of teachers, and third, by the growing conviction that only through proper education can our very existence as a democracy be saved. Our children's education must be better than ours; we have been too prone to think that, "What was good enough for me is

good enough for my child." Parents are beginning to realize that education means more than the three R's, and should include training which will better fit the child to see the necessity of the democratic way of life.

Arden: I think that book learning isn't the only thing that makes a good citizen. After all, when you've finished your schooling you have to go out into life without a teacher to tell you what to do. I think that our schools must teach us to be independent and able to assume important responsibilities. They should make us well-rounded people. All kinds of things enter into schooling, not just the actual book work that you do.

Sternig: Arden, may I ask you a question? Do you mean that the things we are trying to do for you in school should be things for which you see a direct application in your life outside of school, not only in the future but here and now?

Arden: Yes, I do, Mr. Sternig. One thing that helped me so much besides just my schooling was this—in the sixth grade I had a teacher who taught me how to think and how to reason out a problem. She taught me to think about it, to look at it straight in the face, and not to run around it or answer it the way I would have liked to have had it answered. I think that teaching a child how to think is almost more important than the actual learning of facts, because you can always look up a fact. When you are grown up you can't learn all at once how to think and how to reason out a problem for yourself.

Misner: We seem to be saying that schools have something to do other than just teach reading, writing, and arithmetic. Mrs. Christopher has suggested

that parents have perhaps an equal responsibility with the schools in this whole matter.

Sternig: This subject of the school and the home I think is another one that needs to be pointed up very definitely. Although it is very true that the school needs to do a great many more things than it used to do, nevertheless, I have a feeling that the school needs to be careful not to intrude upon the parents' province. In the modern set-up students do spend more time in school. If the school is going to take this responsibility, it becomes increasingly important that the home and the school both know what each agency is doing; that they don't work alone, and as would often be the case, against each other. Perhaps what is indicated is a very vital and active P.T.A., where the teachers and parents really have a chance to get together, not for formal lectures but in a real give and take situation; where they get right down to brass tacks and discuss what parents want for their children; and where the teachers have a chance to say what they feel about the training of children. In that way, by discussing mutual problems, they can work out techniques that can be useful in both places. What I am simply trying to say is that we need real community schools and more of them.

Snell: I think, John, that you are dead right. Unless the parents have a clear and complete understanding of what the school is trying to do, the parent can undo in a few minutes at home everything that the school has worked all day to accomplish in the line of right attitudes, right work habits, and right character traits.

Christopher: I believe parents have

forgotten just what their responsibility is. In the past we have paid our school taxes and let well enough alone. We sent our children to school "to be taught." If they passed the required subjects we were satisfied. Where education has had difficulty in keeping step in our fast moving world, parent education has lagged behind. We must demand better education which, in turn, demands better equipped and adequately paid teachers. We are now coming to realize that besides academic knowledge, social and psychological integration makes for a truly educated individual.

Collins: I think our schools have made great progress in using the services of community leaders as well as parents. Our doctors, our ministers, our civic leaders, and many other citizens of the community have made great contributions to our schools. We are getting our parents into the schools—are we getting our children into the community? During the war we adequately met this need by having our children participate in the services for the war effort. Right now we are finding it difficult, particularly in city areas, to find challenging jobs for our children to do—services for our community.

Snell: To achieve what we are all working for in education, it seems to me that the community must not only be keenly interested in the activities of the school and in close touch with them, but it must also carefully select members of the board of education who have a vital interest in education. Boards of education should be boards of education and not boards of bill checkers. Some means must be provided, too, for boards of education to get a keen insight into educational problems. In other words,

I believe that there should be an educational program for board members, an in-service program so to speak, just the same as for the teachers.

Sternig: I'd like to ask Mr. Snell to react to this now, since he brought the subject up. So far as educating board members is concerned, I suspect they probably do need it, and I wonder if you would give your reactions to the techniques that we are using here in Glencoe. It isn't that we are trying to educate you in the usual sense of the word, but to keep you up-to-date on what is going on around here and to give you a chance to meet teachers first-hand; to get their thoughts in an uninhibited situation, where you can sit down and talk with them normally and naturally. Do you feel that the technique we have here is a step in the right direction?

Snell: Absolutely, John. I am particularly impressed and strongly in favor of the technique we use in Glencoe of having all-day Sunday meetings four or five times a year. The faculty, by presenting phases of the educational program to the board, not only educates the board members, but gives them a full understanding of the problems and how the faculty is solving them. This keeps the faculty on its toes; it also keeps the board on its toes, and more than one good suggestion for the improvement of the program has resulted.

Christopher: I have found it very valuable, John, to attend the teachers' in-service meetings on Thursday. I feel that I have learned more from these meetings about what goes on inside the system than I could have learned as a parent visiting the school. I found out what the plans are and what the program is going to be and why. I also

think that the P.T.A. plan for this year in parent education is excellent because, instead of having speakers on unrelated subjects, we have a program outlined for parent education study groups.

Misner: We have been saying some significant things concerning teachers, parents, and school board members. What should we be doing to improve our services to children?

Collins: Too much of our education has been mass production. A weakness of our educational system is the continuation of large classes. In many of our schools we have not actually considered individual differences. How adequately do we study children to learn their needs, interests, and abilities? Too many of us judge children on the basis of academic success alone. We cannot study the whole child and evaluate him merely by his academic progress. We must consider his emotional, physical, and social development as important as his mental growth? Having learned all we can about each individual we should adjust programs and make curriculum changes to meet individual needs.

Snell: The point you've made is very important in my mind, Gretchen, and it again calls for a very high type, highly skilled teacher, who understands individual differences in children. It calls also, it seems to me, for an in-service training program in which teachers may have the benefit of the services of psychologists and guidance experts.

Christopher: I think most parents don't realize the value of a guidance program. They feel that the psychologist or the guidance counselor is employed only for the maladjusted child, whereas in a school of our kind a guidance counselor is also a guidance helper

to the teacher in dealing with individual differences.

Sternig: To elaborate Mrs. Christopher's point on guidance a bit I might say that each teacher needs to be somewhat of a guidance expert. Teachers must study each child as an individual before we can claim to be dealing with individual differences. Obviously, large classes will handicap this study. Records need to be studied, tests administered, conferences held, children studied to learn not only their weak spots but also their strengths. Too often schools educate for mediocrity by setting standards for the so-called average without considering opportunities for accelerated students. Standards need to be concerned with individual children at least as much as with groups. Each child needs to be so guided and motivated that he works at his peak capacity, or near it. I feel we do children a serious injustice in permitting them to get by with slipshod, careless, mediocre work. Obviously no two children will have the same ability. This merely emphasizes the need for concern with individual differences.

Collins: The points that you have just suggested are evidences that a good guidance program can exist regardless of limiting factors. Perhaps we are wrong in saying that we must first limit our class size before we can put into effect a guidance program which will help children succeed. I think we should start with the situation with which we are faced; any school can make every teacher a guidance worker if there is a cooperative, democratic faculty interested in the welfare of children.

Sternig: Evaluation is another impor-

tant factor in guidance. Some kind of evaluation goes on in all schools but it is not always as helpful as it should be. For useful evaluation we need to consider it as an on-going process. It involves pre-planning by pupils and teachers—evaluation all through the activity—re-planning to remedy weaknesses which show up in the evaluation. Evaluation at the conclusion of an activity alone does not help the process much. It only tells what was wrong after the chance for remedy is gone. Evaluation on a system-wide basis of curriculum—policy, procedure, and so on—also enters into the picture. Here recording becomes vital. Some form of recording which will give the information needed for continuous self-improvement needs to be worked out and used consistently.

Collins: We are faced with evaluating those things which are most difficult. Our world is demanding that we improve human relationships. We haven't adequately taught people to live together. If we are going to attempt to teach these things we must evaluate our results. Our testing programs have only begun to make attempts to test personal adjustment and group relationships. We in schools must be ready for experimentation along the lines of teaching and evaluating human relations.

Arden: If you are going to give all this attention to your pupils in the future you will have me wishing that I could start all over again. I confess that at times I have felt that I was simply a seat number or an entry in the teacher's classbook.

Misner: John has something on his chest that he says isn't too closely related to our immediate discussion but I

think we should let him say it anyway.

Sternig: There is nothing wrong with our schools that is not wrong with our society. Schools generally reflect the social order of which they are a part—even when they try to lead society. One fault of society, in my opinion, is an excess of materialism and pragmatism. This seems to have led to a loss of ideals. Such ideals as are put forth are too often mere propaganda, used as a matter of expediency and discarded when the need for them is gone. The war just finished furnished beautiful—or shall I say “ugly”—examples of this. Schools, in my opinion, need to help children develop honest ideals which can become part of their lives and will guide their conduct in all things.

Another fault of our world is the perversion of technological advances for selfish individual or group gain, with little sincere regard for the good of humanity. We verbalize very well about the lag between technological progress and social good, but we do very little about it. Here again schools could help if we assumed our responsibilities for training children to improve the world.

Still another fault, in my opinion, is the false standard of values which the world uses as to the value of things. So long as success is measured by material wealth and social prestige rather than by more basic values there is little

hope of getting children to consider the latter important.

All these remarks would constitute a vicious circle if it were assumed that society has faults which are permanent. Our best hope is to educate children in such a way that they will make a better world when they grow up. Is this foolish idealism? I hope not. It's like religion which has never been really tried and found wanting—but rather has been tried and found difficult. Let's try it some more.

Misner: On this idealistic note we shall end our discussion. You have covered some interesting and significant problems. We seem to agree that the improvement of teachers and teaching constitutes one of the major issues with which our schools are faced. You have indicated that the responsibility for the improvement of our schools is one that must be shared by the entire community and that we need increased understanding and cooperation between home, school, and related community agencies. You have frowned upon mass education and stressed the fact that much greater emphasis needs to be placed upon the intensive study and guidance of individual learners. And finally, you have said that what we do should be done in a spirit of high idealism if our nation is to exercise a high quality of democratic leadership in a sorely distressed world.

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