

The Importance of People

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GOOD RETURN ON THE INVESTMENT

DEAR MARY: I have something exciting to tell you. Remember the times we have pointed to schools where the staff seemed to be more concerned with keeping the buildings and grounds beautiful and in running the school as an efficient business than they were in running it for children? We have often discussed the strange contradictions that seemed to be involved. How can a school be run as an efficient business, run with the greatest expectation of *Return on the Investment* unless the returns are in terms of the greatest return to children? Some of the best returns for the expenditure of vast sums on the physical plant of the school would seem to be the assurance that the school environment is positively contributing to the learning experiences of the children and that the attitudes being formed by the children are those that are most conducive to learning continuously to be a good citizen.

The thing I'm excited about is this: I've recently seen a school—a large public school—where children of all ages seem to love to come and where many cannot understand why there need be any vacation from school. The school is in a setting that is almost breath-taking it is so beautiful. There is a wide expanse of lawn surrounding the school, and as I stood near the front entrance looking it over I had a nostalgic feeling: "I'd like to be a child again and have a chance to come to this school!" Then came the usual questioning thoughts that come to me as I look at beautiful schools: "Do the children who come here love and appreciate these surroundings? Is this *their* school? Can these beautiful lawns be used by the children, or is there a constant reminder to Keep Off the Grass? Are children permitted to enter these beautiful portals, or are there special side and back

doors for them—with the front doors reserved for teachers and visitors?" (I suppose I was remembering the time I went to school with one of our children and in astonishment heard him say, "You go in the front door, Mom, and see how pretty it is. I have to use the side door.")

Well, after awhile I went in and talked with the principal of the large centralized school. He was amused at my questions and said, "Forbid the children from using any door of the school? How absurd! We want the children to come 'eagerly to school' and the front doors will get them in fastest. If we ever reach the point where the school seems to be run more for outer appearances or for the convenience of teachers and visitors, I hope we decide not 'to keep school' any longer. The board, the teachers, and I—and, yes, the children themselves—have decided that this school is the children's school and the rules that are made must be justified in terms of the greatest benefits to children. Their associations with school must be happy ones, and these happy associations must be built from early childhood."

And he really meant from early childhood, for he went on to say, "Thank goodness our teachers like children well enough to be interested in having young children of the community come to school. We especially invite children younger than those of school age to join us at school parties and children's assemblies, or just to come and spend an afternoon in the classroom. So far the presence of these younger children has not only not hindered our program—it has actually contributed to it. We are quite certain that these younger children are developing attitudes toward school that will be an important ingredient of readiness to learn. Surely, we are conditioning them early,

but conditioning them to like school, to think of it as a friendly and happy place."

This principal recognized the fact that entrance into school may actually be a traumatic experience for a young child if the change from home to school is too abrupt or if his only previous association with the school has been attendance at a health clinic held in the school, where he may have received an injection with a hypodermic needle, and where there may not have been time for the attending doctor or nurse to get acquainted with the child as a person.

"Further," he noted, "you cannot assume that just because a child doesn't cry in school the first day he attends that he is well adjusted to the new situation." He then went on to describe a plan on which he is working—a plan designed to give very young children pleasurable experiences with the school and to plan cooperatively with parents for activities geared to children's needs. I agreed with him that the greatest benefits come to the child and to the community when the home and school work together, and the earlier this relationship begins the greater are the benefits.

I know what you're thinking—that this principal is suggesting that the school have meetings of parents of pre-school children and that interesting activities be provided for the children while the parents are participating in child study groups or just getting acquainted with each other. Precisely, that's part of the picture, but I'll wager that you'll never guess how young some people think the child should be

when the school first reaches the home!

The principal is proposing that the school search for ways to get every pregnant woman in the community interested in the school, and to let her understand beyond any doubt that this is a school *for children*. "I consider it an important function of the school," he said, "to share our present-day knowledge of child development with every mother and father just as early as possible. There would be fewer 'rejected children' if parents could be helped before the child even comes into the world to expect to accept him as an individual and, while guiding him toward independence as a person, to learn to enjoy him and to love him steadfastly and consistently."

"But, won't this require an increase in school personnel and perhaps further training for some of your present staff?" I asked.

"Of course," he said, "that's a further investment we must make to assure a good return on our total investment. We need an increase in staff members who are especially trained to work with the parents of young children, people who understand children *and* their parents, and who are capable of learning from parents ways of cementing the relationships of home and school. It is too late to wait until the child is five or six to begin to be concerned. By that time we have already lost the possibility of contact with many homes."

This is all I have time for tonight.

Dorothy

Curriculum Research

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areas in which research has implications for supervision and curriculum.

One further aim of the Research Board is to help promote in individuals a conception of themselves as persons who are or could be doing research on varying levels of expertness. By seeing what others

are doing, some people may be encouraged to make similar attempts. Readers are invited to describe any informal ideas being tested as well as more formal experiments. Through all of these channels school people may help one another solve the perennial problem of "keeping up."

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