

# What Do Public Schools Need Most?

---

ROY E. LARSEN



Roy E. Larsen, president of Time Inc., discusses the role of laymen in meeting the crisis faced by our public schools. Mr. Larsen is chairman of the National Citizens Commission for the Public Schools, a group of twenty-eight prominent laymen which was formed last spring to study the problems confronting public education, and to help arouse the broad general interest necessary for solving them. The group has received initial financial support from the Carnegie Corporation and the General Education Board. Dr. James B. Conant, president of Harvard University, has referred to this new organization as "potentially the most important move for the advancement of public education taken in the last fifty years."

NOT LONG AGO a group of school superintendents came to New York to talk over their mutual problems. To facilitate the discussion each was asked to write down, in what he considered the order of their importance, the difficulties he faced in his community. When these lists were read it was found that almost all the superintendents present had the same number-one problem. This greatest problem of all was not how to get new schools constructed, not how to find more teachers, not how

to raise more money—the *problem most of these men considered most pressing was how to gain the active interest of laymen in the public schools.*

The reasons these school superintendents gave for listing this as their number-one problem are obvious. Without the interest and understanding of the laymen in their communities, they knew it would be impossible to get the other things they needed. They knew the job of creating really good public schools is so great that the co-

operation of all the people is necessary to do it.

### Need for Lay Participation

When, as an interested layman, I was asked by the editors of this journal to give my views on the problems and opportunities elementary schools will face in the future, I immediately thought of this meeting of school superintendents which impressed me so greatly. I found myself wondering whether these same school superintendents, if they should happen to meet five or ten years from now, would again agree on the prime importance of finding ways to interest the public in the public schools.

I don't think there's any doubt that the need for citizen participation in public school affairs will be at least as great in the future as it is now. As the census report, which tells us that seven million pupils will be added to present school enrollments during the next seven years, is translated from columns of figures to columns of children waiting outside classroom doors, it is obvious that a lot of new school buildings are going to be necessary, as well as a lot of new school equipment and many more teachers. According to our democratic procedures, the people will, in one way or another, be asked to vote either for or against great new school expenditures. The plain fact is that unless the public fully understands the need for them, it will vote against them.

### Cooperation Brings Results

It has been amply demonstrated to me, moreover, that just as the opposition of the public to the expansion and improvement of the public schools in

any community can be fatal, so can the cooperation of the public bring about the most tremendous achievements in an unbelievably short time. As chairman of the National Citizens Commission for the Public Schools, I have watched miracles worked by citizens in many different communities. As just two examples of many, I can name Great Neck, Long Island, where the school budget was more than doubled a few years after a citizens committee was formed to cooperate actively with the school superintendent and school board; and Arlington, Virginia, where the whole legal structure of the schools has been changed for the better, and much new school construction started.

It has been the success of local citizens committees such as these which have made me and the other members of the National Citizens Commission for the Public Schools so confident that real school improvement is a practical possibility, not just a dream, and it has been the achievements of local citizens committees such as these which have shaped the initial program adopted by our national group.

### Local Community— Center of Activity

The success of organizations such as those in Great Neck and Arlington has, for one thing, convinced us that *regardless of how much financial aid comes to the schools from the federal or state governments, the thought and energy necessary for improving any school must come from the community in which that particular school is located.* From local citizens groups, we have found, far more than the votes necessary for fund-raising flows to the

schools. In communities where citizens are active on behalf of the schools, it is our observation that the most capable persons are willing and anxious to serve on school boards, and school board elections, rather than attracting the attention of only a few persons in the community, often become burning local issues.

One of the most interesting sets of figures I have seen is one showing the percentage of citizens voting in school board elections before the formation of local citizens committees and after. The increase is frequently one of several hundred percent, and I have yet to see a community where this multiplication of concern for the schools has not resulted in tremendous improvement. This improvement often extends far beyond better physical resources for the schools. After the necessary buildings have been constructed and a sufficient number of qualified teachers employed, citizens with an aroused interest in the schools often direct their attention toward the goals and standards of education. Working with citizens committees of this kind, many school superintendents and school boards have found themselves enabled to raise their sights, to work toward far higher goals, and to maintain far higher standards than ever before.

#### **An Example of Lay Cooperation**

It is our observation, however, that citizens groups usually realize that there are certain basic physical requirements which must be met before high goals of education can be pursued, and they accordingly often begin by working for school improvements of a tangible kind. As an example of how a very

successful citizens group has functioned, it may be of interest to describe some of the methods used by the Council for Delaware Education, which Henry Toy, Jr., who is now full-time executive director of our Commission, started and headed in his spare time while he was a Du Pont Company executive.

Mr. Toy was one of a growing number of businessmen who, having attended a meeting of a parent-teacher association in a local school, soon found his interest broadening to the basic educational problems faced by his community and state. He established the Council for Delaware Education as a group made up of delegates from a great many fraternal orders, church clubs, parent-teacher associations, and organizations of many kinds. Much of the Council's work has been carried on by these member organizations.

One of the first projects undertaken by the Council was the summarizing in laymen's language of the state's school laws. This summary was printed in local newspapers, and contributed immeasurably to the popular understanding of school issues. The Delaware Council next secured the cooperation of the American Association of University Women, one of its member organizations, in publishing descriptions of every one of the 174 school buildings in Delaware. Pamphlets were published which stated the age and condition of each school plant, with many details concerning the school libraries and other facilities. These pamphlets brought to the public a realization of the need for better schools, and statistics which compared present school enrollments with those expected in the

future graphically portrayed the need for more schools. The result was the passage of legislation for more and better schools, including the allotment of \$19,000,000 for school construction, besides increases in teachers' salaries.

### **Arousing Public Interest**

As executive director of the National Citizens Commission for the Public Schools, Mr. Toy brings to his task of implementing the program planned by Commission members the experience he gained with the Council for Delaware Education, but he realizes as well as the rest of us that the methods which worked in Delaware cannot always be expected to work in other states. At the present time the Commission is far more concerned with arousing a broader public interest in the public schools, and in encouraging people to find their own methods of improving their local schools, than it is in urging the use of any particular methods.

For this reason the Commission has been cooperating with the advertising campaign which is being conducted by the Advertising Council—a campaign which is concentrating upon describing the problems which confront the public schools in the belief that once the problems are thoroughly appreciated by the public, solutions will be forth-

coming. The Commission supplies those who reply to these advertisements with materials to help them in their efforts to bring about school improvement. These materials include "case histories" describing the organization and programs of other citizens groups engaged in efforts to improve their public schools.

This work, of course, is to be only a part of our Commission's program. Embodied in everything we do, however, will be the realization that the job of making the best in education available to all American youth is too big for any single group of people, whether professional or lay.

### **Convert Interest Into Action**

The job belongs to all the people in their own communities. Here the people work and live; here are the children; here are the schools. It is here, then, where the people will have to decide whether their public schools are responsive to the changing times and needs of a free people in a democratic society. Our Commission is but one small group of citizens among many, but we, as each of them, evidence a determination of many citizens to convert interest in our public schools into action, intentions into performance, goals into everyday practice.

## ***Building Public Confidence in the Schools***

Have you a copy of this new ASCD pamphlet? *Building Public Confidence in the Schools* deals with desirable characteristics of the process of lay-professional study, planning, and action in providing better instructional programs. Descriptions of five planning and action programs illustrate, in specific detail, what is involved in such cooperation in building confidence in the schools. \$1.00—quantity discounts are available.

Copyright © 1949 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.