

Education's 'Mothball Fleet'

*An Editorial**

After the war began in Korea last summer a great many people wanted to know why America's armed forces were so slow in building up strength. One of the answers supplied by commentators and news magazines indicated that many of the billions appropriated for the Armed Services during 1946-1950 went for custodial care. The Navy, for example, had ships fit for service on short notice, but they were deactivated. These vessels were dubbed "the Mothball Fleet." Their gun turrets were coated with protective plastic and carrier fighters, with wings folded, were immobilized in similar sheathings.

When it became generally known that America's 1950 military "might" had become largely a military *potential*, considerable criticism was directed at convenient targets in public positions. The outspoken critics came from every walk of life and included educators who deplored the fact the striking power of the Unified Services had been so severely curtailed.

The present issue of *Educational Leadership* is concerned with "The Schools and World Affairs." With this theme it seems especially fitting to point to a parallel between the custodial character of our military preparedness and *education's* "Mothball Fleet."

Like the military, public education has a tremendous potential preserved beneath an immobile mothball coating—and it is as desperately needed. For effective "educational preparedness" the wraps must be stripped from the excellent ideas and promising programs which heretofore usually have been discussed rather than acted upon. Such programs must be used to confront more effectively the pressure of socio-cultural problems which in mid-century are challenging education and all of society with increasing boldness.

Nearly all of the weapons in our professional "Mothball Fleet" were given successful trial runs in schools with educationally interesting programs, but they were either stored away before the battle was won, or neglected from the start in over half of our schools. As public education moves into what may be recorded as its most critical decade, all of its resources need to go back on active duty.

Let us examine a few concepts and practices, chosen at random, which need to be revitalized and more widely used:

- Better reporting practices (in a recent state survey only one of the fifteen largest cities canvassed had moved away from formal report cards)
- An extended school year serving children directly (the Office of Education, in 1949, reported only a tiny minority of schools actually moving in this direction)
- Socially useful work (there has been relatively little done in this field since the pioneering of the 1930's)

*HAROLD G. SHANE, *Professor of Education*, Northwestern University, and newly appointed Publications Committee Chairman for *Educational Leadership*.

- Closer community-school relationships (still embryonic despite advocacy by the National Society for the Study of Education as long ago as 1911)
- Adoption of a more functional core curriculum in the junior and senior high school years
- Direct school action regarding better human relations (Detroit, Chicago, Philadelphia, Springfield, Massachusetts, Winnetka, and Gary are among school systems exercising leadership but emulators are few)
- Restoration of nursery schools closed since 1946 with additional units to be added (most communities terminated their programs when Lanham Act funds expired)
- Creating new, fresh designs for school buildings (one large city continues to use floor plans originally blue-printed in 1919)
- Curricula more frequently based upon subject matter found in children's immediate environments (as urged by J. L. Meriam back in 1904)
- Use of newer developments of interest: play therapy, sociodrama, and psychodrama, for example
- Introduction of ungraded primary rooms and experimentation with the same idea at higher grade levels
- More functional experience curricula in teacher education and more interne programs for the inexperienced beginner
- Effective use of teaching aids (an urban Illinois superintendent reported last summer that, in the absence of administrative urging, his entire staff drew less than \$15.00 from the \$250.00 teaching aids budget)
- Research and action in the field of international education with which this issue of *Educational Leadership* concerns itself

The list might be expanded to cover page after page, but the sampling given should suffice to suggest that a large number of schools are not making full use of tools already in the educational storehouse.

Readers may question this editorial emphasis upon "mothballed" ideas, but the stress seems justifiable because the ideas certainly are not moth-eaten! Many are as fresh as they were 5 to 50 years ago when one school after another stored them away in the idea storage-loft.

New proposals for improved practices have been the life-blood of the profession, but the schools would profit from a ten-year moratorium on new ideas if during that period the good ideas of the last half-century were put into effect. And one of the great tasks, perhaps the greatest, facing educational leadership is the undramatic and not always professionally recognized toil of making the schools as good as we already know how to make them.

It is past time to peel the plastic covering from education's Mothball Fleet.

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