

Citizens and Their Schools

IT IS THE DUTY of American citizens to concern themselves with public schools, for public education is the public's business. The educational profession and the elected officials cannot protect the schools and provide the facilities without help. State educational authorities, legislatures, and state and county tax and finance officers have specific professional and legal services to perform for public schools. They, however, leave much room for important services by other citizens' groups to assist in the determination of school policy, to promote better school facilities, and to improve coordination of schools with other education and public information agencies. The parent-teachers' associations, business, civic, religious, political, labor, agricultural, and other professional and voluntary organizations seek to affect the policies and practices of the public schools. They are publicly known to be sincere and representative of some proper phase of community interest.

Some programs directed to influence public education, however, operate through organizations which have misleading names and hidden financial and membership support. With the equal access to devices available for influencing public school policy and action, selfish special interests are tempted to work through little known, easily controlled "front" organizations. They have demanded a voice in the censorship of textbooks, in the selection of teachers, in the determination of tax levies and bond issues.

Mounting tensions stimulate pressures from all groups which influence financial support and special instruction for favored political, economic, and religious ideas. These influences have not been unmixed blessings. They have curtailed needed expansion of school facilities. They have prevented professional adjustments to modern educational needs. They have operated to intimidate the educational profession by attacking leaders. They have proposed prejudicial loyalty oaths, and attempted to discredit "academic freedom" and "progressive education" as traditions of American public schools.

On the other hand, damage caused in Pasadena, California; Minneapolis, Minnesota; and other areas has been recognized, resisted, and partially remedied by aroused representative citizens' groups. An even more valuable service is rendered by the groups working consistently and forcefully for improvement of the public schools where insufficient and unprepared teachers are using inadequate books and supplies in half-day sessions, and where schools are housed in unsafe and outmoded buildings.

The National Citizens Commission for the Public Schools recommends that citizens' committees (a) obtain wide representation of public interests, (b) obtain and work with facts, not prejudices or preconceived opinions, and (c) cooperate with constituted authorities wherever that is possible.

If citizens' committees would give appropriate expression to community desires, the pressures of selfish, narrow-interest groups would be counteracted or fused into a resultant which could serve the best good of public schools and the community. Effective techniques for broad community expression are being developed slowly in a number of states. They should be adapted and made available to others. Progress in the solution of public school problems is possible without exploitation of children and youth, and without curtailing their educational opportunities.

The public school system is a basic democratic institution devoted to making all Americans superior citizens. The educational profession, and citizens generally, must recognize fully that America's power, wealth, justice, and democracy itself, depend upon developing superior citizens. Such recognition will insure a proper place and adequate support for public schools.—*Glenn E. Snow*, assistant secretary for lay relations, The National Education Association of the United States, 1201—16th Street, N.W., Washington 6, D. C.

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