

Teachers and People

NORMAN J. RUBIN

A journalist discusses the most urgent problem facing American public education today: that of making sure the people understand the work of the schools. This complex problem requires, according to the author, both an education of the public and a reorientation if not a re-education of school people.

MY TOPIC, "How Can We Make Sure the People Understand the Work of the Schools," could easily be discussed exclusively in terms of the relationship between the teacher and the newspaperman. I could lay down

a body of rules and regulations designed to stimulate an improved understanding between the educator, on one hand, and the newspaperman, the radioman or representatives of other media of communication on the other hand, all aimed at getting the teachers' point of view before the public.

But this approach, I think, would ignore the basic problem. The job of the public relations man, it seems to me, is twofold. First, he has to make sure that the product he wants the public to accept is properly packaged. Secondly, he has to convince the public to accept it. This is a singularly inept analogy because education should never be discussed in terms of a product, but if I may continue to make use of it I'd like to say that I will concern myself here with the packaging. Mind you, I say the packaging because there is no doubt in my mind about the value or the high quality of the education taught in our schools today.

As a matter of fact, education does not even require a public relations program, because the two terms are largely synonymous. Public relations, at its best, is education. Making sure the people understand the work of the schools is essentially an educational problem, and as such it eludes any simple solution. It is in fact perhaps the



most complex problem facing American public education today because it requires an education of the public and a reorientation if not a re-education of the educator as well.

Mixed Feelings about Schools

All of us are aware of the dichotomy which exists in the public's attitude toward the schools. The public, by and large, concedes the importance of education but also questions its practical value and has only a grudging respect for it. The mythical John Q. Public cannot repeat often enough that the schools are necessary, but he is seldom able to explain to himself just why. He repeats the platitude that no man can succeed without an education but all around him he sees men of undisputed financial success who never got beyond the second or third grade. In one breath he says that teachers are necessary and are members of a respected profession but in the next he expresses his contempt for them with the statement that "those that can, do, and those that can't, teach." He insists that his children go to school, mainly because of the law, but wonders what good it will do them and thinks of education in a generally disparaging fashion.

But while we recognize the ambiguity in the public's attitude toward education, I wonder how many of us recognize the corresponding dichotomy in the teacher's attitude toward the public. The teacher respects the public as the source of his bread and butter. The public provides both the money to run the schools and the pupils that occupy them. The teacher regards the public as his employer and provider. But the

This article is adapted from a talk given by Mr. Rubin during the Connecticut Citizens Conference on Education at Lakeville, while he was associate editor of The Meriden Journal of Meriden, Connecticut.



teacher also distrusts the public, regarding it as unsympathetic and actually hostile toward education. Moreover, the teacher tends to hold the public away at arm's length, and often gives the appearance of sneering at the public.

Getting the public to understand the

work of the schools requires a modification of both these attitudes—the teacher's and the public's. Since the educator can control his attitude more easily than the public's, I would say that the first step in promoting a better understanding of the schools requires a modification of the teacher's attitude toward the public.

In other words, the teacher must open the schools to the public. I don't mean making them available for PTA meetings, nor opening the doors for annual Business - Industry - Education days, nor making the gymnasiums available for neighborhood recreation programs. I mean that the teachers must be willing to meet the public on a common level, and must be willing to discuss their problems with the public honestly. They've got to rely on the ability of the public, whom they have educated, to understand their problems. Actually, such reliance is justified: whenever the public comes into the schools to survey and inspect them at firsthand, it rates them highly.

Need To Attack Basic Problems

Everyone knows that many phases of American public education are less than perfect. Certainly the public is aware of it, even if it can't put its fingers precisely on the trouble. Educators, however, are, on the whole, unwilling to discuss with the public the shortcomings of the school system. This attitude is unfortunate. Members of the community resent, even though they may try to understand, the teachers' stubborn refusal to discuss their problems and shortcomings outside the classroom, while the general public distrusts such refusal on their part.

There is nothing wrong with admitting occasional failures or lapses in any process—whether it be law, medicine, business or government—and fortunately the lapses in education are relatively few. Continued growth such as American public education has been and still is undergoing is almost invariably accompanied by occasional weaknesses. If the teacher would admit these weaknesses and seek the cooperation of the community at large in correcting or overcoming them, I think he would arouse a certain amount of sympathy and understanding in the public at large.

So long as PTA's are limited to discussing new school facilities, fluoridation of the water supplies, bacteria-killing lighting systems, or so long as their activities are confined to raising money for cafeteria equipment, phonograph machines, movie projectors, or what have you, this valuable movement which could provide a tremendously effective instrument in bridging the gap between the public and the educator is largely wasted. Certainly the PTA's should be enlisted in solving some of the basic problems which the educator encounters today—the problem of improving and expanding the curriculum so that it will more adequately fulfill the basic objectives of education, the problem of obtaining an improved guidance program, the problem of making the teaching profession more attractive to young people, the problem of persuading pupils of working age to remain in school despite the lucrative jobs available to them, etc.

You may say it is hardly feasible for the educator to admit weaknesses in the educational program in view of the

public's apparent hostility. I contend, however, that these weaknesses cannot be hidden and that by trying to ignore them in public the teacher only arouses new criticism, new misunderstanding and new antagonism. Besides, despite the loud criticism voiced by a minority among certain elements in the population whose motives are, to say the least, questionable, I think the American public is anything but the enemy of education. If this were not true, the future of education would be dreadfully bleak and hopeless, something which I cannot concede. Moreover, it is not necessary to shout these shortcomings from the rooftops. There is in every community a nucleus of the population genuinely interested in and sympathetic toward public education. Even if the educator would take this group into his confidence he would be making a very real contribution toward opening the schools to the public.

As Teachers Gain Confidence

It seems to me that one of the real barriers separating the educator from the public is the painful self-consciousness of the teacher. In effect, the teacher too often has accepted the role thrust upon him by the most critical elements of the public—the role of an ineffective person who has taken refuge in the schools from the competitive conditions in the world at large, the so-called business world. Ironically, this so-called business world is as much a figment of the imagination as the image of the teacher dwelling in an ivory tower. I grant that in almost all societies there is a gap between the teacher, the student or the man of contemplation, and the worker, the man of action.

What I object to is the self-conscious shame and embarrassment which the average teacher in this country feels about his profession.

Let me cite an example. Some time ago I sat next to a high school teacher at a banquet, and during the evening struck up a conversation with him. If any man ever embodied the appearance of the affable and successful salesman and athlete, it was he. Yet, during the course of the dinner he confided that wherever he went he always felt that people immediately recognized him as a teacher. He said that whether in the smoker of a train or the bleachers of Yankee Stadium he felt he could be spotted as a teacher. His attitude may sound extreme. Certainly it's ridiculous. But I think his attitude is fairly typical. Teachers do tend to feel marked and painfully self-conscious.

As a result, they tend to whine—about their salaries, about public hostility, and about other unfavorable aspects of their profession. In self defense they tend to adopt a rather patronizing attitude toward the public at large. They tend to use their college degrees as a wall insulating themselves from the "uneducated" public, including those people with equal or more extensive education than their own.

Most educators recognize that eventually the school year will be extended and that teachers will be employed on a year-round basis. But to listen to the individual teachers talk, one would think they expect an entire new staff will have to be hired for the summer so that they may continue to enjoy their vacations. I recognize that the five-hour school day is deceptive and

that teachers have to work as long and hard, if not longer and harder, than most people. I recognize that working with children is difficult and that teachers need relief from the strain. I also insist that having to turn out an entirely new newspaper every day is also a strain. The engineer, the dentist, the lawyer, the businessman and the factory worker feel the same way about their occupations. I cannot quite concede, therefore, that teachers need longer vacations than I or other people do. Every person feels that his job is difficult and wearing. I think teachers have got to stop feeling sorry for themselves and start realizing that any job, whether on a factory assembly line or in a retail business or in the professions, including teaching, is tiring and nerve-racking. Teachers must stop feeling self-conscious, abused and distinct from the public if they hope to win public understanding and support.

It may be true that in the 19th Century, when this nation was simultaneously engaged in pushing back the frontiers and building an industrial society, when it needed every ounce of available brute force and strength to clear the forests, build new cities and new factories, it had no other choice than to neglect education. While the nation raced ahead to open up all its new frontiers, education had to take a back seat. As a result, the schools were entrusted to women, the weaker sex, because they were of secondary importance. The figure of the "schoolmarm" grew up, and came to be associated with education. Because we haven't advanced too far in time from that era, an aura of femininity still clings to education.

But today education is of primary importance. Our technological society would disintegrate without education. The teacher must recognize and be convinced of this elemental fact before he or she can impress it on the public. So long as the teacher himself questions the value of education—and I think that many of them accept the predominant cultural attitude that education is of secondary importance—the public will never realize its primary importance.

When Citizens Study the Schools

The other side of the token involves a re-education of the public. Perhaps in reality the re-education of the teacher and the public cannot be separated and when one is reoriented the other will be. However, it seems to me that we have to start somewhere, and quickly, and since the teacher is close at hand, it might as well be in his direction.

Actually, the task of reorienting the layman is not so formidable or so impossible as it may seem. At least one community—and surely there have been others—recently managed to bring a great many laymen into its schools and in the process gave them a real understanding of what goes on in the classroom.

I'm referring to Pasadena, California, which recently completed a citizens' survey of its school system. The difficulties which the Pasadena school system encountered need not be recounted in any detail. Suffice it to say that a violent controversy developed there over the educational philosophy practiced in its schools. Provoked by some irresponsible groups, it reached such

proportions that the superintendent of schools, Willard E. Goslin, was forced to resign. To quell this controversy, a citizens' survey of education was launched in Pasadena.

A total of 1,101 persons, including professional educators and laymen, participated in this survey. These people were organized into 14 steering committees, 89 fact-finding committees and subcommittees, and 14 review committees. When the survey was completed a documented report of its findings was issued. This report concluded that the Pasadena school system is "fundamentally sound," a conclusion that I contend will be reached in almost every community where a similar survey is conducted.

Here, it seems to me, is a perfect vehicle for bringing the public into the schools and for making sure that the public understands the work of the schools. There is no need to wait for an attack on education before launching such a school survey. It could be launched profitably in any community.

During the administration of ex-Governor Chester Bowles an attempt was made to launch such a survey on a statewide basis in Connecticut. From what I saw of it this admirable project floundered mainly because it was too big and because it lacked constant professional guidance and direction on the local level. Such guidance and supervision as was afforded the laymen conducting the survey on the local level was intermittent. The guidance of a professional educator working on the scene is indispensable for such a survey.

The survey committee itself should embrace as wide a cross-section of the community as possible to avoid charges

that it is weighted in favor of any one group or that it is silk-stocking or anything else. It should include representatives of labor as well as representatives of the manufacturers' association and the chamber of commerce. It should include representatives of the American Legion, the Parent-Teacher Associations, the churches, the professions and just plain, ordinary people—factory employees, mechanics, store clerks, secretaries, etc.

If such a survey as this is to succeed, it must be honest. It should not be launched as a publicity stunt or as a means of drumming up support for a building program, salary increases or anything else. Furthermore, every aspect of the school system, the excellent as well as the weak, must be opened to its scrutiny, or it will fail. Many superintendents and many teachers would welcome such a survey in theory, but would be timid about allowing it in their own systems, or else they would want to limit its field of investigation. These are the very people who are now keeping the public out of the schools. They are the timid, who act as if they were hiding something disgraceful, something un-American, behind their school doors. They are among those who would profit most from a citizens' survey, which is a perfect instrument for arousing the public's faith in the schools, for arousing its support of the schools and for arousing its interest in the schools. Just imagine having a thousand citizens in your community interested in improving the schools. The people who form a survey committee would fight to have its recommendations carried out. They would form a powerful ally in helping the schools

get everything that is necessary for fulfilling their task, whether increased pay for teachers, new schools, expanded guidance programs or what have you.

A survey like this will help bring a lot of people into the schools who haven't set foot into them since they were kicked out or handed their diplomas—the newspaper editor, for instance. We've learned this in Meriden: we know that our readers like to see pictures of school activities and like to read stories about what's going on in the individual classrooms. Even in Meriden, where we devote a minimum of one full page of news and pictures to the schools each week, I'm not sure the

public understands the work of the schools. They've got to learn at first-hand that the schools today are different from what they were 20 or more years ago, just as the world is different, and that the schools are better than they were 20 years ago, even if the world is not.

Citizen participation in education is essentially our goal. It seems to me that a citizens' survey is a primary step that must be taken to obtain it. At the very least it would be an instrument for introducing the teacher to the citizen, and for allaying the misapprehensions that each has about the other.

An Appeal for Common Sense

AGNES E. MEYER

Are current unjustified attacks on schools a modern outbreak of "vigilantism"? A keen observer of the American social scene analyzes these attacks and suggests positive means of meeting them.

IT IS a great relief these days to get away from the tensions of the nation's capital and to look at our many problems from the sane vantage point of life in a local community. It is especially heartening to discuss some of these problems in a county which is justly famous throughout the land as an independent, courageous community singularly competent to turn its ideals into a working reality. I am grateful to the American Association of University Women for inviting me and giving me this opportunity to recall the lasting contributions that have been made to the preservation of some of our noblest traditions.

I am all the happier to do this be-

cause the shrill voices which have been getting the headlines of late have disturbed the even tenor of our ways and tempted us to answer the violent people with equal violence. Yet the natural fears and conflicts of an endangered society can only be assuaged by the application of self-control, intelligence and native American common sense which characterize the highly literate population of Arlington and Americans as a whole. This American common sense is derived from the daily necessity of solving dilemmas, annoyances and defeats; it teaches us to accept difficulties without too much fear or anxiety. If we are more than usually disturbed today, it is because in the past we have

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