

A Good Environment for Learning

GEORGE W. DENEMARK

"How can we, through our professional conferences, create a good environment for learning?" is the theme of this article based upon plans for the Ninth Annual Conference of the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, to be held in Los Angeles, March 7-12, 1954. The article is intended both as an orientation device for those who will attend the ASCD conference and as a stimulus to the thinking of those who plan to attend this or one of the many other meetings of educational groups across the nation.

THE THEME of this issue of *Educational Leadership* parallels that of ASCD's annual conference next month, as well as the title of the Association's 1954 yearbook—*Creating a Good Environment for Learning*. We shall not presume to state in this brief space what has already been said so well in the yearbook and on other pages of this journal. Of course, much more remains to be said at the time of our conference in Los Angeles.

It is about this meeting and its potentialities that we would like to think with you for a bit, since this issue of *Educational Leadership* has been designed primarily as a conference orientation issue. Our topic, therefore, really becomes "How can we, through our conference, create a good environment for learning?" At first glance the topic may seem narrow and perhaps over-specialized. Perhaps the reader will feel

that this is a subject of interest mainly to organization workers rather than to a broad cross section of educators. It is our belief, however, that careful attention to the principles around which conferences are built should be an immediate and important concern to many educators.

Greater care is needed in assessing values of participation in professional meetings.

One need only think for a moment about the amount of time, energy and money which goes into a conference such as ASCD's annual meeting to recognize that such an enterprise is indeed a significant one. We have actually never performed the arithmetic involved, but any calculation of travel and living expenses for 2,000 people when added to the amount representing the released time of all these individuals from their regular work, plus all of the expenses incurred by the Association in housing, arranging and managing such a conference can readily be seen to

George W. Denemark is executive secretary, Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, NEA. He is also editor of Educational Leadership.

amount to a tremendous sum. Obviously, the importance of professional meetings cannot be assessed only in terms of dollars and cents; yet, on the other hand, unless we look carefully at these conferences to satisfy ourselves and our public that such gatherings give returns at least commensurate to the expense involved, we may sooner or later find ourselves in a most awkward position regarding our participation in them.

Many of us speak with vigor and conviction about the need for careful planning, thoughtful experimentation and continuous evaluation in relation to schools' programs; yet all too often these elements are neglected or omitted entirely in relation to conferences and other meetings of professional groups.

It is our hope that this journal issue may help to make participation in our Los Angeles conference a stimulating and rewarding experience for those of you who find it possible to attend. We hope that it will emphasize your obligation to yourself and to other conference participants to set the same high standards for your learning experience at this meeting that you have accepted for the school programs with which you work daily. If this is done, we can indeed reject the definition of a conference which holds that it is "something at which, after all is said and done, more is said than done."

It is our feeling also that this problem should be one of interest to many of you who will not be at Los Angeles for the ASCD conference. Perhaps there are some fundamental principles of conference planning which are relevant to group meetings within your own state or community, or perhaps even within

your own school faculty. Perhaps it is time that we attempted to apply some of the growing body of knowledge in the fields of learning, group dynamics and human relations to the many meetings for which we have responsibility.

But now to the conference itself, and a consideration of some of the continuing elements characteristic of ASCD meetings each year, as well as a look at those activities which represent new ventures and experiments for us this year.

School programs can be no better than the shared understanding of all who work in them or are influenced by them.

ASCD has long believed that an adequate consideration of problems and issues in curricular and instructional matters requires an involvement of all whose behavior affects the school program. This means that parents, students, classroom teachers, superintendents, school board members, representatives of community agencies, along with supervisors, curriculum directors and professors of education must be brought together. Perhaps more than any other single thing, ASCD has felt this opportunity and responsibility—that is, the bringing together of representatives from different professional jobs and varying broad subject fields, as well as from different parts of the country, as its unique contribution to instructional improvement.

In accordance with this principle, we have for a number of years sought to involve as active participants representatives from each of the groups having a stake and an interest in the problems under discussion. This is more

than a public relations device, more than a membership promotion scheme. This is a reflection of the Association's fundamental belief that the school program can be no better than the shared understanding of all those who work with it or are influenced by it. This year, a special committee of California educators has had as its responsibility the selection of nearly 200 persons to serve in resource capacities for discussion groups, not primarily because of special competence in a given field but because of their experience and insight into the classroom and community applications of certain principles.

Study-discussion groups are key elements in ASCD conferences.

Careful evaluation of last year's meeting corroborated what many of us have long felt was true, namely, that the study and discussion groups are, for many participants, the key elements of the conference. These groups represent, in the last analysis, our Association's attempt to put into practice its principle of belief in people and the value of pooling and sharing their experience on problems of common interest and concern. Implementation of this principle in terms of conference organization has never been an easy task. Planning and organization of approximately 70 study-discussion groups of 25 persons each have involved a major segment of time of the professional and secretarial staff in ASCD's Washington office. In addition to this, such planning has involved securing and following through on recommendations from between four and five hundred people across the nation, both as to topics and as to leadership personnel. While the rewards from

such shared planning seem to have been considerable, we must recognize that we have only just begun and that we are still at the "ABC" level of insight and understanding into the most effective functioning of small groups.

Quality of leadership is an important factor in effective group discussion.

While recognizing that much remains to be learned we can, nonetheless, review several valuable insights into group work which we have gained from our experience to date. One of these insights emphasizes the importance of a high quality of leadership necessary for a truly active and rewarding group discussion. Another points to the value of such leadership experience for many persons because of its relevance to their back-home responsibilities.

Accordingly we have tried to strike a balance between using seasoned leadership personnel and involving many others who have been recommended as having excellent potentialities in this respect but who perhaps have not previously functioned in such a role at ASCD meetings.

A departure from our practice of the past several years may be found in the fact that we have not designated any special persons in the group to serve as observers. Motivation for this change stems not from any feeling that the way in which a group functions is unimportant, but rather from our belief that our membership has matured and grown experienced in matters of group discussion and that, as should be the case with mature groups, such matters as observation of process can be attended to by the group as a whole without making this a special assignment.

Group observation of school or community field situations may help establish a common denominator for discussion.

For a number of years ASCD conferences have provided opportunities for individuals to visit a number of school and community places of interest. Usually, however, these school visits and excursions tended to be rather separate and discrete from the regular activities of the study-discussion group. This year, an attempt has been made to tie together the use of a field situation with the on-going experience of the study-discussion group. Plans call for nearly half of the discussion groups to be related in some way to a specific classroom or community field situation relevant to the discussion topic. Over 250 classroom teachers from the Los Angeles area have been involved in planning use of school-field situations.

It is our hope that the use of field situations in this manner can help to facilitate and maintain the reality of classroom problems in the group discussion. One difficulty which so many such conference groups encounter is that of finding common ground upon which communication between persons can proceed. A hypothesis which we are anxious to test in the Los Angeles conference is that the group's observation of a field situation will help to provide this necessary common ground for persons of widely diverse backgrounds and experience.

We recognize at the same time that all topics cannot be most effectively handled by assigning discussion groups to field situations. The nature of the resources may be such that they are

better brought to the group meeting in a hotel situation. We have not attempted to force any such correlation, but have planned rather to use those opportunities which are readily available and seem particularly good.

Pre-conference problems-exploration helps make better use of meeting time.

This year we are attempting more than ever to encourage and emphasize the communication between group members registered in advance in order that this substantial segment of the final study group population will have had an opportunity to react to the topic and its various facets of interest to them. The pre-conference registration form was revised considerably this year. It now includes a series of questions about the registrant and his interests and expectations for the group. Copies of these forms are sent to the study group leaders, who are encouraged to use them in pre-planning and to communicate further with group members, where this seems appropriate. Our hope is not that some portion of the total group will come to the conference with a rigid set of plans regarding the course of the discussion, but rather that early in the group sessions a tentative framework for discussion can be suggested arising out of these preliminary comments and that this framework may then be considered, accepted, modified or rejected as the total group sees fit. This, of course, means work. It means work for group leadership personnel and also careful thought and effort given to the registration form and to any follow-up communications received by the group participants. We believe, however, that this effort is well worth while, in terms

of using more effectively the limited amount of time these persons have for work and study together.

Section meetings serve as content orientation.

This issue of *Educational Leadership*, divided as it is into the four major sections or facets of the conference theme, is also intended to set the general stage for the groups' discussions. All of the study groups have been placed in one of the four major categories which follow:

I. A Better Understanding of Children and Youth

II. An Improved Physical Setting

III. Effective Use of Forces in Community and Society

IV. Cooperation Within the Professional Staff.

We have asked the chairman of each of these section meetings to assume responsibility for developing an article for this issue. The article is designed in each case to point up some of the fundamental problems and questions in its related area. Since the journal is published about a month prior to the time of the conference, it is hoped that these articles may stimulate your thinking on one or more of the issues and encourage a substantial amount of "homework" in advance of your departure for the conference. At the time of the meeting we have set aside Monday evening for these same individuals to provide a further content orientation for the persons assigned to groups related to their section topic. The keynote address and the contributions of the panel members should help to bring each person to his discussion group on the following morning with a broader perspective as to the issues involved in his area of interest.

Orientation meetings for "newcomers" and for leadership personnel make discussion groups more effective for all.

Again this year, we have planned orientation meetings for newcomers and for the leadership personnel of the various study groups. These meetings are scheduled on Monday morning, the day prior to the beginning of the discussion groups. Their purpose is to help special personnel and regular participants function more effectively in their group roles—both in terms of their own objectives and those of other group members. Of course, there is no magic in group process but there is much to be learned by each of us about working effectively in groups.

The chance for leaders and other group special personnel to meet one another and talk through plans for the next two days' meetings, is time well spent. For the "newcomers," those attending their first ASCD conference, much help can be given in understanding their part in the conference and learning more about what opportunities there are for them. "First-timers" will need to know that an ASCD conference is not just a parade of "name" speakers, a series of activities which we watch from the outside; rather, the conference is based on the assumption that each person has had many valuable experiences which can be shared with others to mutual advantage. Perhaps more than any other, this activity expresses ASCD's fundamental belief in people and in their capacity to help one another.

Thoughtful listening to major speakers is an important conference experience.

We have developed at some length but one facet of the whole conference. We have done this deliberately because, as was mentioned earlier, this discussion group experience is a central one for many who attend our meetings. However, many other extremely significant activities are also planned. A series of stimulating addresses and panel discussions on important educational or social problem topics has been planned which we believe will be of interest to all of the conference participants. We must not forget as we build upon our skills in group discussion that there is also a place for sitting back thoughtfully and listening to someone who has time enough to present his point of view or interpretation of a problem of broad general concern.

Clinic sessions provide opportunities for asking advice of persons especially experienced in a given problem area.

Still another kind of experience is awaiting those who attend the Los Angeles conference. On Thursday afternoon, March 11, a series of clinics, demonstrations and bull sessions have been planned around a number of topics which we believe are of considerable interest to you. The clinics will provide an opportunity to attend a session devoted to an instructional problem of most immediate concern to you and to ask questions of a resource panel of individuals who represent a wide range of experience and who have national prominence in this area. This is planned as a significantly different experience from that of the discussion groups. These are sessions which are based on the assumption that those in attendance have one or more quite spe-

cific questions relating to the topic and that the resource panel has within it a fund of experience which can provide helpful advice. These sessions can be a success if those who attend will not assume that their questions are too pedestrian and that everyone else knows the "answers"—and, in turn, if the resource panel will respond under the assumption that their audience will understand their comments to be frank, off-the-cuff reaction to specific instructional problems, not at all intended to supply universal "answers" for such problems.

Paralleling the clinic sessions on Thursday will be two informal bull sessions intended as experiments in "unscrambling" (temporarily) two of the professional groups which participate in our conference (curriculum directors of large cities, 100,000 population or over; and those of smaller cities, of less than 100,000 population). Some of our members, while recognizing the importance of bringing together "under one roof" all of the school persons having a part in determining the curriculum of a school, feel that there should also be some time when individuals with similar job responsibilities in different communities can sit down together and talk through their own "house-keeping" problems. This, then, is the motivation for the bull sessions: opportunity for a completely informal and unstructured discussion around one's own job problems with other individuals who confront many of these same problems in their own daily work. Along with the sessions mentioned above, we have scheduled a demonstration session on citizenship education which involves student participation.

Exhibits and demonstrations of instructional materials are helpful.

The opportunity to examine instructional materials and to discuss these with representatives of the organizations producing them is another important part of the ASCD conference. There are at several other times during the year educational exhibits which are more extensive. However, there are probably few of comparable size which are at the same time devoted entirely to instructional materials and equipment. Many of the exhibiting companies have sent along consultants and representatives who have wide experience in the educational field. Many of them will be participating in our various study-discussion groups, and all of them will be available at their company's booth to discuss and demonstrate materials in which you are interested. A special time for this consultation and demonstration activity has been provided on Monday morning, March 8, from 9:00 to 12:00. Several exhibitors have even arranged for special rooms to demonstrate some of their materials. For those who hold that real curricular progress depends greatly upon adequate instructional materials, here is an opportunity to examine the latest of these. Here, too, is a chance to "educate" certain publishers, if you have some notions you believe they should know about.

Adequate time for committee sessions is essential to an active, on-going program.

On Wednesday afternoon, March 10, open meetings of nearly all of the standing committees of ASCD have been scheduled. These meetings are designed

to provide each participant with a chance to attend a session of one of the continuing committees of the Association, learn of its progress during the past year and help project plans for the future. Last year, at the annual conference in Cleveland, we experimented with scheduling working meetings of the standing committees during the time of the study-discussion groups. This meant that, instead of trying to squeeze committee work in at the end of an already crowded day, our regular committees had ten hours together to plan their activities. This amount of time, supplemented in some cases by further meetings through the year, has made possible a broader, more vigorous program of committee activities than we could ever otherwise have hoped for. One of the concerns, however, which was expressed in relation to this arrangement was that it drew "out of circulation" a number of particularly experienced, competent members of the Association. This year, in an attempt to maintain the important benefits gained from a greater amount of committee work time, while also providing opportunities for these persons to participate in a wider range of activities, we have scheduled a number of study groups centering around topics which correspond to those of the standing committees. These groups, while working independently of the standing committees, may establish with the latter whatever channels of communication seem appropriate to both groups. They will also have the benefit of the standing committee's provision for a content orientation session on Monday evening and may want to attend the open sessions on Wednesday afternoon.

Effective state and regional groups are important aids to instructional improvement.

Still another important series of meetings planned for the conference are the breakfasts and follow-up meetings of the eleven regional ASCD groups on Thursday morning, March 11. Increasingly, many of us are coming to recognize the necessity for active professional groups within regions, states and sometimes even within metropolitan areas. While much can be done through a vigorous association program at the national level, progress in solving many instructional problems depends upon effective communication and cooperation at local and state levels.

Resolutions acted upon at the annual business meeting place the Association on record on matters of national importance.

Friday morning will mark the annual business meeting of the Association involving the Executive Secretary's report for the past year and debate and action on the resolutions which will have been presented for consideration on the Wednesday evening preceding. The resolutions are of considerable importance in that they give direction to the Washington staff in the implementation of Association policies and they place ASCD on record regarding many matters of national importance.

Many other activities contribute to a worth-while conference experience.

This, then, is a brief preview of our plans for ASCD's Ninth Annual Conference in Los Angeles, March 7-12, 1954. There is much that we have not

mentioned, such as the many splendid meetings scheduled by other educational groups just preceding and immediately after the ASCD conference.

We have not mentioned, either, the many fine opportunities you will have as an individual to visit schools or points of interest in the Los Angeles area. Guidance and help by a special California committee will be available in arranging for these visits. Such trips may be scheduled either prior to or following the ASCD conference or for Thursday, March 11.

Still another worth-while element of the conference will be the many stimulating and valuable face-to-face contacts of participants outside of regularly scheduled meetings.

The Orientation and Evaluation Committee will seek the assistance of many participants during and following the conference as it attempts to evaluate the benefits of the meeting. We know that its findings will prove of continuing value to national and state groups as our Association plans for future meetings and better adjusts its conference to the needs and interests of participants.

Most of all, we want this meeting to help each of you—"old-timer" and "new-comer" alike—to push forward your own frontiers in thinking and strengthen your own commitment to our free democratic society and to the kind of educational system which undergirds it. However, wishing alone will not accomplish this. Each person must assume an intelligent and active role, both in clearly defining his own objectives and in selecting and actively participating in sessions which seem to hold for him the potential for fulfilling these goals.

Copyright © 1954 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.