

# Issues in School—Community Relations

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This article defines some of the basic issues in the cooperation of schools with other community agencies.

THE FORTHRIGHT efforts of educators in probing the innumerable facets of school-community relationships in order to protect and improve the right of children and youth to good education are most heartening. The earlier stages of school-community relationships which can be characterized by such slogans as "Selling the schools to the public," "Keeping the public informed," and "Bringing the public in" ended in disillusionment, as ballyhoo ventures often do, for educator and public. Misunderstandings, attacks, half-hearted participation and apathy remain and in some cases seem to be on the increase. Therefore, the sober, more sincere and serious approach to understanding the building of constructive and protective ties between school, community and society in general is timely and encouraging.

Progress resulting from this more basic method may be slow and uneven because, as any cursory analysis will reveal, the undertaking is full of issues of huge scope and weighty consequences. Probably no snap answers or sure-fire methods will be found.

Our concern for achieving fine working relationships among school personnel and public stems from two consid-

erations. First we realize that the primary institution in American society is the family. How parents, or guardians who are parent substitutes feel about the child's education is of utmost concern to them, to us as educators and to the child because he becomes affected by the attitudes of adults. How to develop school-community contacts that create and maintain parental confidence is therefore essential. Second, the school is one of many community agencies touching the lives of the community citizens. We are becoming increasingly aware of the importance of a wholesome community atmosphere, one in which the main forces at work are for the good of the community. We also are aware of situations where the whole community is charged with discord and distrust. As we ask ourselves how to develop effective school-community relationships these two basic points need to be kept in mind.

Let us look at some of the questions which arise as soon as one begins to examine the important matter of how to improve relationships between community and school.

- Are we as educators clear as to what our purposes of education are? or should be? We have spent the past several decades responding to all manner of pressures and adding to the school's responsibilities. Have we taken on some duties which belong to the

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family in matters of health, recreation and guidance? Are we expanding our program to include services to children and youth which more appropriately belong to the field of welfare? Have we become promoters? True we have aided worthy enterprises, such as Junior Red Cross, but the question remains, is this the school's appropriate function?

Some critics already have accused us of parking, or of short-changing our educational work for matters inappropriate to education. Among these critics are some whose insight and critical ability we can draw upon for assistance as we examine this question.

- This first set of questions presupposes other questions, namely, do we enter upon our inquiry with the assumption that we may find it necessary to reconstruct our outlook and subsequently the school's program in light of clarified understandings? And are we considering how to work with individuals and groups of the community so that they modify their views and practices in light of their increased understanding of the school's effort? Such considerations are essential to honest cooperative efforts.

- Are we ready to wrestle with the difficulties that we face in communities with sharp cleavages about the purposes of education? For example, will we face the problem of compromise? When is compromise acceptable? When is it a negation of our professional integrity? Many problems of curriculum content, textbook and library-book selection, and pupil placement may be dealt with judiciously or unwisely, honestly or dishonestly depending upon our abilities to face and work constructively with divergent views.

- As we study the fact of conflict in values in community life are we ready also to study the effect of such conflicts upon children and youth so that we may more adequately help them to grow in understanding rather than permit them to drift and to become more confused? This question is interwoven in the three foregoing queries. In light of increased reality coming from our deeper understanding of community attitudes and values we will understand more fully what ideas and attitudes, understandings and misunderstandings youngsters are acquiring.

No one today assumes that the school can seal itself off from community influences, but a careful study of how to educate children and youth in the light of a clearer conception of these influences remains as one of the continuing responsibilities of the educator. It is the respect for this need which challenges anyone who is a thinking teacher, administrator or curriculum specialist to seek eagerly to develop constructive school-community understandings and contacts.

- As we recognize and meet divergent views, how can we develop common values which help a community including the school to work for the common good and in so doing to achieve a real sense of community? In recent years much concern has been expressed over practices that are divisive. Is it possible that some trends in school and community practices have led us into the partitioned state which many localities now reveal? Can we as educators so engage in school-community work as to build on the part of adults and pupils a stronger sense of community and a deeper under-

standing of how to work toward a common good? This question is basic to the development of citizens in our democracy. Counts in *Education and American Civilization* shows the relationship between this regard for the importance of common values and purposes and education's future. "That the values of democracy must be profoundly different from those of despotism is of course not debatable. But that a society of free men has no common values of its own and must therefore be equally hospitable to all values is the sure road to suicide. Only when our democracy has confronted this question profoundly and positively will our education be able to rise to its full stature."<sup>1</sup>

• Are we aware of the fact that today's public includes persons and groups highly informed about guiding children and youth, about their education needs and about the function of the school? Many professional and non-professional community members face the problems of education with us on an eye-to-eye level. Formerly, the educator was assumed to be the "answer man." Remnants of this attitude still persist in our language. We "enlighten the public," "we educate parents," we "inform the lay members of our community."

Many issues and problems which are common on today's education front require the efforts of members of other professions working with us for a joint solution. For example, many problems in censorship demand the assistance of lawyers for their analysis and

solution. Journalists and librarians are often deeply concerned and eager to share in meeting such problems and to participate in policy making in regard to them. So with many other problems. Inter-disciplinary efforts, as revealed by the Midcentury White House Conference on Children and Youth, are essential in these days of complex problems for advancing the good of children and youth.

• What assistance can we muster to meet those issues that arise from the emotional disquiet of one person? One upset person can spearhead an attack on the school's method of teaching handwriting, or on the content of a library text, or on established practices in guidance. What are some promising efforts which may reduce the stress such a person feels?

We in the United States have made rapid strides in many ways in the past decade. We must now face even more directly such fundamental issues as segregation, slum clearance, population mobility, school transportation and many questions related to religion. We are suddenly finding ourselves self-conscious, experiencing as do the sociologists a more complete awareness of community life in these times. This state of affairs is full of opportunities for professional growth. We may become aware of never-before-recognized shortages and new-found essential strengths. Effective school-community relationships can in the long run help strengthen child-family ties and help weld the wide diversities of our citizens into a wholesome community, each living honestly with himself while working with others to achieve common goals.

<sup>1</sup> George S. Counts, *Education and American Civilization*, Bureau of Publications, Teachers College, 1952. p. 298.

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