

from now on our whole social structure as this generation of children becomes adult—a generation with fewer hours of school, a curriculum rapidly losing its enriching elements, a depleted teaching staff of decreasing professional preparation? We ask ourselves, in particular, how much the individual attention given to a child by a teacher with little understanding of the principles of

human growth and their application is really worth?"

The American public, the parents of today's children, are in a position to determine whether financial or child development considerations will determine primarily the course that will be pursued in working out these problems. They are looking for guidance. Who will give them this leadership?



JOHN H. FISCHER

Implementing the Decision

A problem of immediate and far-reaching concern today is that of implementing swiftly and with understanding and justice the recent decision of the U. S. Supreme Court declaring unconstitutional segregation in the public schools.

WHEN THE Supreme Court declared that racially segregated schools are inherently unequal, it made a governmental and administrative problem of what has long been recognized as a major moral and social problem in America. The fact that thirty-one states have no legal barriers to racially integrated schools does not appreciably reduce the impact upon the seventeen southern states in which law as well as custom has approved the practice of segregation. In these states, school people now face the necessity to keep their schools operating on at least their present levels of effectiveness while they implement one of the most funda-

mental and sweeping changes any system of schools has ever known.

As this is written, the Supreme Court has not yet heard the arguments on the questions regarding the type of decree to be handed down. It is consequently impossible to predict what specific shifts or timing will be required by the Court, but it is to be assumed that segregation in public schools having been declared unconstitutional, the practice will have to be abandoned. Because population patterns, social conditions and readiness for change vary so enormously in the affected states, the nature of the transition problem and its solution will also vary equally. This variation occurs not only among the several states but to a considerable extent as well within any given state. Ignorance of what direc-

John H. Fischer is superintendent of schools, Department of Education, Public Schools, Baltimore, Maryland.

tives the Court will issue is alone sufficient reason for making no sweeping generalizations about what school people should do. But even if one knew what the Court will say, the wide differences in local conditions should be sufficient argument against any effort to project even the most theoretical plan for general application by school administrators or teachers.

What, then, can school people do? For one thing, we can profitably review some of the legal principles upon which the American system of public education is founded and under which it operates. Furthermore, we can take a good look at some of the social and psychological generalizations which have long made for good education and which will presumably be as relevant in the future as they have proved to be in the past.

Schools and the People

Nothing is as fundamental to the administration of American public education as the idea that our schools belong to the people, and within the general framework of our constitutional system are subject to popular control. Created and broadly supervised by the state, these schools operate largely in accord with the direction given by local school boards. The policies for public education in this country are determined by the citizenry acting through their legislatures and their school boards. Teachers and superintendents contribute their advice in the making of these policies and their professional skill to the execution of them. But the responsibility for final decisions is clearly not in the hands of the professional educator. The profes-

sional should have the opportunity to advocate or to criticize board policy, but he cannot properly claim any right either to ignore it or to change it to suit his personal preference.

When we emphasize that policy control rests with the school board, we must emphasize equally that the obligation to employ the best educational knowledge and technique to translate policy into practice rests squarely upon the teacher and the administrator. In the years immediately ahead, the desegregation of American public schools will require important alterations in existing policies. The problems associated with these changes will require of the professional staffs of our schools a keen awareness not only of teaching techniques and child development but also of social currents in the community. The expanding knowledge of the relationship between emotions and the learning process will stand us in good stead in the days to come. We shall do well to learn as much as we can in this field and to apply our knowledge to ourselves and our colleagues as well as to our pupils.

Basic Principles Are Involved

Whatever the timing or the procedure by which desegregation is to be accomplished in any state or community, it will have to be carried forward by the joint efforts of political and educational groups, supported by the general approval of large segments of the public. No major reform in any public school system is likely to be successful without such concerted action and support. The basic principles which are involved in any important educational planning will undoubtedly

be found to apply in the elimination of segregation. Because these principles have been distilled out of long experience with American public education we may find profit in appraising in their terms whatever we do or propose to do.

• *In any learning situation, both pupil and teacher must begin where the learner is and move on from that point.* Among the great lessons which psychology has taught the teacher few are as important as those which deal with individual variation and the readiness to learn. The Court has settled the constitutional question of segregated schools, but the transition to integrated schools will involve more than jurisprudence. New social patterns will have to be developed and accepted. The rate at which such changes may be expected to occur will necessarily vary from place to place. Careful assessment of the current situation and judicious planning of the appropriate successive steps will require the kind of democratic leadership which is synonymous with teaching of the highest calibre.

• *The school exists in a social setting and neither can nor should be separated from it.* This is not to say that the school is forever bound to the worst of the negative forces in that setting. Rather, it is the business of the school to express within its program the best and strongest of the elements which surround it. Parents and citizens generally expect the school to do precisely this and support it for that purpose. Since in every community there are powerful social and moral forces, not least of which is the law-abiding nature of the majority of the

people, teachers may count upon important resources as our schools seek effective ways to implement the new decision.

Wise school people will, therefore, chart a course which takes full advantage of positive social forces as the chief means for overcoming the adverse effects of the negative influences inevitably to be found in any community. The most admirable programs for educational change have often come to grief when educators, whether unconsciously or by design, have cut the schools loose from community support and have sought to go it alone. Conversely, the most lasting gains are those which have been achieved when school and community, jointly aware of problems but sharing common aspirations, have moved ahead at a pace and in a direction upon which both could agree.

• *A major purpose of the American public school is to provide full equality of opportunity to all children, with a maximum of free choice reserved to parents and children.* The decision of May 17, 1954, represents essentially a further extension of that historic purpose. In their zeal to see that all children are treated equally, some will press for identical treatment, even though this requires a degree of coercion with those parents who hesitate to accept certain opportunities. As racially segregated schools disappear, there will be parents and children in many communities who will prefer to remain in schools in which they feel secure and comfortable. Certainly no subterfuge should be condoned which will deny any pupil his constitutionally guaranteed opportunity to attend an integrated school. But neither should any

child be arbitrarily uprooted and transferred merely to place him in a school with a child of another race. Manipulation of children for any reason is indefensible. It is a basic tenet of the philosophy of democracy that the best of ends is no justification for the use of means which may be even mildly harmful.

A corollary of this principle is the concept that children are to be regarded as the ends of social purposes, rather than as the means by which these purposes are to be achieved. If, as most of us agree, it is wrong to segregate children by race in order to maintain a separated society, then it must be equally evil deliberately to use children in order to create an integrated society. The plaintiffs who came to the Supreme Court sought greater opportunity than they had previously enjoyed. It would be tragically ironic if their legal victory were to furnish an excuse for unwise and undemocratic restrictions upon the freedom of choice of others similarly situated.

What Should Be Expected of the Schools

In the face of these serious and far-reaching new problems, and in the light of principles whose value we have long since learned, what shall we school people expect of ourselves? Whether we sought this voyage or not, we are embarked upon it and we must negotiate some treacherous straits before we find ourselves upon the open sea of business-as-usual. If we expect too much of ourselves we risk serious frustration. If we move too slowly we shall do less than our proper duty. It will be a neat trick if we can set our



STANFORD ACHIEVEMENT TEST

*offers continuous and
comprehensive measurement
of basic subjects:*

READING SOCIAL STUDIES (grades 5-9)
SPELLING STUDY SKILLS (grades 5-9)
LANGUAGE SCIENCE (grades 5-9)
ARITHMETIC

Primary battery—for grades 1.9 to 3.5
Elementary battery—for grades 3.0 to 4.9
Intermediate battery—for grades 5 and 6
Advanced battery—for grades 7, 8, and 9

*The standard in achievement
testing for more than 30 years.*

Request information material from:

**WORLD
BOOK
COMPANY**



Yonkers-on-Hudson, N. Y.
2126 Prairie Ave., Chicago 16

course exactly in the channel when no one knows precisely where it is.

It is not at all unreasonable for us to expect of ourselves, and for our communities to ask of us, high purposes and clear goals. Nor is there anything new in this. Only the setting and the specifics are different from what we have done repeatedly in the past. The faith and traditions, the aspirations and the principles of American democracy have been nowhere more assiduously served than in American classrooms. There is every reason to believe that what has been done so well in the little red schoolhouse and in the comprehensive high school can be done with equal devotion and skill in the integrated school.

To achieve our new goals, it is necessary that we accept willingly and readily the responsibility for this new assignment. The task will not be easy, but neither is it impossible. Integrated schools by the thousands operate successfully in thirty-one of the United States every day. There is no sound reason why they cannot do so in all forty-eight. But within the established framework of our administrative struc-

ture, each of us has the obligation to take on with complete conscientiousness his own piece of the job.

A danger inherent in any work that is related to social change is the danger of frustration due principally to impatience. This is, as teachers have good reason to know, a somewhat imperfect world. Even the most meritorious cause is rarely successful all at once. Whatever our expectation of ourselves, we shall need to be patient in our relations with others. Inaction is usually not to be excused but our own mental health and our ultimate efficiency will be enhanced by reliance upon good will, tolerance and forbearance.

Finally, we ought to expect of ourselves and our friends should expect of us that we will furnish a large measure of leadership in our respective communities. If this leadership is militant and aggressive we shall probably find it rejected. But if we can share with those we serve breadth of vision, integrity of purpose, clarity of thought and depth of appreciation we shall perhaps play a creditable role in one of the greater episodes of American history.



Copyright © 1955 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.