

The Principal Faces

Desegregation

As he furnishes leadership in the local school in implementing the Supreme Court's decision on desegregation, the school principal needs strong and understanding support by the administration. He also must depend greatly upon the widest possible participation by all citizens in finding fair and just answers to this and to other urgent problems of our time.

THE RECENT Supreme Court decision on desegregation in the public schools is a vivid illustration of the fact that the American school system is involved, whether it will or no, in the major social problems facing American democracy today. The ruling serves as a striking reminder to school workers that they are vitally affected by social policy decisions in American life. Some educators may try to keep out of controversial issues, but controversial issues will not keep out of education.

The matter of changing the entire structure of the public school system in a large section of the country to meet the requirements of the Supreme Court's decision has arrived simultaneously with several other urgent needs, such as the necessity to expand facilities to meet growing enrollments; to deal with those who would institute witch hunts for subversive textbooks and teachers; and to treat the delicate problem of the relationship of religion and the public schools.

All of these indicators point up the

value that school teachers, principals and other educators will find in broadening their training and experience to include techniques of dealing with the social realities of American life today. Public school workers, faced with these problems, must be effective human-relations engineers in carrying out the social policies directed by our society.

Because of the great variation in the difficulty of implementing the Supreme Court ruling, we can reasonably assume that it may be some time before many principals actually face the problem of desegregation. A long-standing social institution such as public school segregation, based as it is upon tradition, parallel arrangements in other aspects of social life, and community approval in many areas, cannot be altered immediately. However some principals in fringe sections of the South and in border states will no doubt face desegregation at an early date. In parts of the South where large percentages of Negro population prevail, primary efforts in the near future

may be directed more toward seeking successful means of circumventing the Supreme Court decision than toward effecting it.

The Supreme Court places directly on the school board of the local district the responsibility for developing plans and a program to carry into effect the requirements of the Court. The result will be, as it properly should be, that a variety of means and methods will be taken by school boards in various parts of the country to implement the Court's ruling.

As we look at the picture, we find that if and when a program is adopted, it will be carried out at three levels of action. The first of these levels is system-wide, involving the local school board and administration. The action at this level will be largely that of policy formulation and general outlining of a program to be followed. The second level of action will occur within the individual school, as the principal and his staff, along with the citizens and students, attempt to carry out the policies adopted by the board of education. The third level of action will be in the individual classroom, where the teacher and his students must make the appropriate adjustment.

The principal, in his role, will be greatly helped or hindered by the kinds of policies laid down by the board of education and by the detail with which the means of execution is spelled out. The principal is obligated to defend and support the policies adopted by his board of education, whether he hap-

pens to be in personal agreement with them or not. He must be willing to defend these policies to the best of his ability when they are questioned. A clear understanding of the reasons for adopting any policy on the part of the board of education will be helpful to him in this matter.

Policy and Procedure

A statement of policy such as that adopted by the Chattanooga Board of Education on July 22, 1955, in which it declared that it will comply with the decision of the United States Supreme Court on the matter of integration in the public schools, provides sound reasoning for the principal to use in explaining the Board's action to his staff, patrons and students. This Board states clearly the basis for its policy in this way:

Respect for the law and acceptance of the law is truly involved in the matter of compliance with the Supreme Court's decision. Should we have said that we would not comply with the decision, we would have been saying that each man is the sole judge of what laws he shall obey. If each man should become the sole judge of his actions, then the stabilizing influence of the law would be weakened and gradually fade away. It is an attack upon the very foundation of our way of life and all that it has meant and all that it will mean to the welfare and happiness of all of us.¹

Nevertheless, this Board did not embark on a program of hasty or unplanned action, but declared: "We will proceed as rapidly as possible to set up

¹ "Statement of Policy of the Chattanooga Board of Education with Reference to the Decisions of the United States Supreme Court of May 17, 1954, and May 31, 1955, on the Subject of Desegregation in the Public Schools" (Chattanooga: Chattanooga Public Schools, July 22, 1955), p. 3.

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a plan to secure the widest possible participation of all of our citizens in finding the answers to this problem that will be fair and just to each and every person in our community."²

The principal, too, would be wise to enlist the participation of all those in his school community in making plans for the individual school within the framework of policies laid down by the Board of Education. He must know not only figures and facts about his community, but also the "pulse" of the community. The problem the principal faces will be different in various schools of the same school system, depending on the density of the Negro population, the amount of integration to be effected, community attitudes, and the confidence and good will which the people of the community place in the principal himself.

A carefully planned community study and analysis will give the principal clues as to best methods of approaching the problem. He must be certain that all important factors in the community are taken into consideration. Robin Williams, Jr., and Margaret Ryan in *Schools in Transition* list the following as significant factors in making an initial diagnosis of a particular community:

1. Number and proportion of Negroes.
2. Presence of other "minority" racial or cultural groups.
3. Extent and nature of segregation and discrimination in public facilities and activities other than the schools.
4. Activity or organizations dealing with intergroup relations, local and non-local.
5. Organization and financing of the school system.
6. Amount and kind of communication

² *Ibid.*, p. 2.

between school board and administration and other citizens, and between Negroes and whites.

7. Employment status, tenure, and qualifications of white and Negro teachers.

8. Local attitudes toward the schools and their leadership.

9. Policies and practices of state agencies concerned with public education.

10. Role of local groups such as churches, service clubs, and civic organizations.³

In addition to consideration of such community factors, the extent to which the principal and his staff have been working with patrons and students in solving other problems which have arisen in the school or in the community will have a bearing on the effectiveness with which they may work cooperatively toward the solution of the problem of desegregation.

If the school is one in which people are happy and well-adjusted and in which tensions have been reduced, there seems to be little doubt that the process will progress more smoothly.

The principal, of course, has the responsibility for maintaining order and discipline in his school. Problems of adjustment and discipline should be dealt with firmly, yet with understanding, as they arise. All who are affected by an issue should be led to see the necessity of discipline which will be fair and just to every student. An order for desegregation is more easily given than the process itself can be carried out. It must be remembered that in many areas of the South we have had in effect what amounts to almost two separate cultures developing and proceeding parallel to each other. In some

³ Robin M. Williams, Jr. and Margaret W. Ryan, *Schools in Transition* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1954), p. 239-240.

instances, these cultures have not had many points of contact which can serve as a basis for integrating the youth of the two different groups into one harmonious student body. When the two cultures begin to come into contact at this common point, the public school, frictions may occur. In a school actually faced with desegregation perhaps the best place for reconciling these frictions through an appeal to the common interests of both groups of students is in the educational program itself. This is where the teacher assumes the major role.

Finally, whatever the principal does in his school is done to promote the growth and development of all youngsters for constructive living in a democracy. The greatest resource we have for that purpose is the public school. Probably the greatest danger is that some people are willing to sacrifice the results of seventy-five or a hundred years of public school effort and progress to maintain another social institution, unless school and community leaders are alert to warn them of the dire consequences that would ensue if the public schools of America are weakened. In facing the problem of desegregation, school principals and teachers will be put to a real test of their loyalty and dedication to the public school system.

Bibliography

This bibliography is intended to suggest some materials particularly useful to school principals and other professional people as they work in a community where desegregation is under way.

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