

# Uniting Forces to Improve Education

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## A House in Order

THOSE WHO have responsibility, in whatever capacity, for education in this country are familiar, in a general way at least, with the multiplicity of forces that shape and reshape educational policies and programs. Some, undoubtedly, wish the situation were simpler. It could be. We could scuttle our heritage, substituting a single and official force for the plurality of forces that will always characterize a free society. Fortunately, there are but few among us who are not repelled by this idea.

Our general understanding needs the illumination, however, that can come only as the specifics on which it rests are more clearly seen.<sup>1</sup> Not all forces, for instance, as is too frequently assumed, are bad. Were this not the case the story of public education would have been written differently. It is true that education has had to confront much that has been irritating, disrupting and restrictive. It has been sustained all the while, nevertheless, by the deeply held conviction of the American parent that his children should have a better education than he was able to secure. This conviction has not lessened as it has been more

and more realized generation by generation.

Nor are all forces to be identified by reference to person, to group or to an alliance of groups. Some are, as all who recall Zoll of unhappy memory know. Other forces are cultural trends (or tough cultural facts) to which educational thought and practice have to be adjusted, no matter how much habit resists. The entry of man into the atomic age is a case in point. So, too, is the dawning realization that national security is all one with security for the concert of nations. So, also, is the decision of the people, as this has been reflected by the Supreme Court on two occasions, that the American Dream is beyond realization so long as some children are permitted to suffer the indignities of a segregated education.

### Habits and Attitudes

The fact that segregation no longer has legal status is illustrative of how a cultural fact can have meaning for education. Here is a force with which all schools must now reckon. No edict has been issued before which all schools must now cringe. No edict has been issued before which all persons must simultaneously bow. Yet none can remain unaffected by the

<sup>1</sup>The task of ASCD's Commission on Forces Affecting American Education is to help in providing this illumination.



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growing strength of the American conscience or by the emerging shifts in practice.

The solid South turns out to be a core of states that may almost be counted on the fingers of a single hand. Nor is there solidity within these states, as the vote in Georgia to replace public schools by private ones revealed. The size of the opposition vote was evidence that the American conscience is not to be stopped by state lines.

No one in his right mind can anticipate immediate change the country over. Habits and attitudes are not changed by court decisions, though the latter do help initiate and sustain change. We need only witness steps already taken toward integration in the District of Columbia, in West Virginia, Delaware and Missouri, in Mary-

land, Kentucky, Oklahoma, Arkansas and Texas, to see that this is so. The fact is that a single decision has released a relentless pressure on American education to replace a darkened area in the American Dream by a luminous one.

Whatever the speed of public change, however, the educational profession must anticipate that its members will be, in this instance, a force added to a force. The proper work of education—the development of young people who understand the significance of their heritage of freedom and who, through the capacities they have been helped to develop, steadily gain confidence in their ability to help maintain and extend it—will be but partially done should any percentage of teachers and administrators reveal that they neither respect some children nor some ideas.

There are many factors on which the future of democracy rests. It would be both foolish and dangerous to suggest otherwise. Yet one thing is obvious. Merely to teach about democracy will be fruitless. Our educational house must be set in order so that to live within it is to experience democracy in all of its reaches. To say this is to suggest a fact too little recognized: *professional habits and attitudes are forces that affect education no less than the external forces which are more frequently the objects of our attention.* With a house in order we may release a cultural force that will be meaningful reciprocally, and continuously, both for society and for the schools.

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