

Uniting Forces to Improve Education

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A Time for Understanding

THE DAYS AHEAD are going to be difficult ones for the educator. This fact becomes increasingly evident as each day passes. The determination of that part of the South—"the hard core of resistance"—to ignore the mandates of the United States Supreme Court as these bear upon the abolition of segregation in education now is openly and vehemently expressed, even within Congressional halls. A counter determination, of course, is held equally by all who find it beyond belief that enlightened citizens of a democracy would, in 1956, deny to some the rights the law of the land grants to all. And, as if this were not enough to try men's souls, there lurks in the background all the while a further cause of conflict and dissension, the pressure against our traditions that many now exert to topple the wall of separation between church and state and, come what may, to introduce religion into the public schools.

These words are being written as the annual meeting of the ASCD comes to the halfway mark. They are being written by one whose spirits are troubled. They reflect the thinking of no one but the editor of this column; yet, unless a succession of hours of intensive convention activity have numbed him into insensitivity, they reflect, also, the disturbing thoughts of a large percentage of delegates who have been sharing

their deepest concerns in formal and informal gatherings. None but the foolhardy and the arrogant (and these qualities have not been in evidence) would predict the way out of our present dilemma, would insist that all who are out of step with him are blind or lacking in courage.

A friend and colleague of the writer, one who has taught 38 years in the South, wrote from Alabama just before this meeting started. He stated, "I thought I knew the South but now that every prediction I made has been shown to be wrong I am at a loss to know what turn matters will next take. I do know that I can find not the slightest sympathy in any quarter for the decision of the Supreme Court."

These words might have been written by many of the delegates. It seems to me I have heard them a thousand times in the past three days. I have heard them from white teachers, and from Negro teachers. Always they have carried an overtone of sadness; yet they have been accompanied, also, by a coloring of quiet determination, a determination to move forward on the front of human decency. But how to move? This is the question that all ask. And the sensitive teacher from the North, who is as deeply implicated in this problem as are the teachers of the South, has no ready answer, however

convinced he is that this is a time for firmness, a time to stand on the side of that which is both morally and legally right. *

A white supervisor from South Carolina reveals that the slightest public show on her part of sympathy for the forward movement in education she knows to be right will mean the end of her usefulness, in the school system and in the community at large. A Negro teacher from Georgia, and another from North Carolina, ask that they not be crowded, suggesting that the speed of a movement which from another perspective seems to resemble a snail's pace has already created conditions that may delay their full entry into the shared responsibility of citizens who work together to build a better world for all. They have struggled hard to come this close to a cherished goal. They have no wish to be swept back to the starting point of their effort by an irrational behavior. Yet a white teacher from Alabama insists we must now be men, not mice. He is joined by another from Louisiana, and one from Texas.

All the while, of course, the teachers from the North, anxious to get on with what they believe to be the necessity of showing the world immediately that the principles of democracy are the basic ground on which to nourish the lives of all citizens, that it is within our shared lives, not merely in our sacred documents, that these principles are preserved, wonder how they can help. Their anxiety is heightened at times by the fear that their own schools may get caught in the backwash of emotion which has now grown so intense that even the threat of excommunication does not prevent an up-

welling prejudice to override religious commitment. Yet all the while one thing is clear to them. The school people of the South, trapped as they seem to be in the web of cultural forces, are holding fast to professional values. Their very presence at this convention; their willingness to speak with such honesty to the rest of us; their readiness to study the problems which all must solve conjointly if education is to be improved; their example of an adjusted selfhood, as this is revealed by the public demonstration that they have risen above the limitation in growth angry men in the South would now make the ceiling for the growth of all—these and other facts that may be daily observed as they consider the problems that arise in this meeting attest to the substantial base of professional growth on which the future of education in this country rests. This fact must be understood. It is our present anchor on the windward side of life.

We do not come to this moment of trial unprepared. Our young people have learned something about the dignity and quality of men of difference in sports, in the Armed Forces, in the classroom, and from the wealth of material now appearing in our differing communicative media. And teachers have learned over the years that none among us has a priority on intelligence and human decency. It may be said with truth, however, that we delayed our preparation over-long and we would do well, therefore, not to be caught off-guard by the sudden emergence of an unreflective demand to rest public education on a religious base. We cannot be split apart in too many directions and survive.

I was accused in the column I wrote for the October issue of *Educational Leadership* of pulling my punches, of tiptoeing through the areas of controversy in all too gentle fashion. This I denied (see "Letters to the Editor," *Educational Leadership* 13:323-27). I may again confront an accusation of retreat. If so, I shall again enter a denial. I do not ask that we support any deliberate tactic designed to hold from the Negro the privileges that are rightfully his. I ask only that we understand why it is that our colleagues in the South, whose commitments are no less than ours, do not immediately stand forth and make the restricting forces of their communities buckle under. I ask only that we use nothing less than the best intelligence we can bring to the task in finding the ways that will not only bring to the Negro child his opportunity to grow as fully as his talents and desires permit but, equally, will permit the teachers of the South to be creative and purposeful in overcoming the limitations to humaneness past history has established.

We know what principles are at issue. So do the teachers of the South; indeed, they may know them better than the rest of us because they had to reach beyond the structures of their upbringing to grasp their meaning. If we now share with them our understandings, surrounding them with help but not overwhelming them by our properly held sense of urgency, the cause we cherish will not be lost. And what else, indeed, is our alternative? Our future as a nation rests in their hands today more fully than it rests in ours.

—H. GORDON HULLFISH, *professor of education, The Ohio State University.*

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