

# What Lay Citizens Appreciate about Their Schools

**When citizens look objectively at their schools, they find much to praise, much to commend.**

IT SOMETIMES seems as though the American people's favorite indoor sport these days is criticizing their public schools. Magazine articles by the dozen and in all kinds of publications try to prove that school children don't need "costly palaces" or to demonstrate that we are less well educated today than we were fifty years ago.

Now, no thinking person would deny that our schools are far from perfect; that they have not yet solved the problem of how to do a really successful job of educating *all* of our young people to their highest potential; and that we all need to lend our best and most constructive efforts to the problems faced by our democracy today if we are to make our total educational system as effective as it needs to be. But it is also important that we look honestly at what we have in our public schools and that we count our assets as well as our liabilities. Most of us seem to find it very easy to be critical and are all too prone to ignore the value of what we already have.

---

*MAYBELLE K. CHAPMAN is school director, Edmonds School District 15, Edmonds, Washington. Mrs. Chapman is also immediate past president, Washington State School Directors' Association, of Olympia, Washington.*

---

## A Positive Approach

The experience of looking on the positive side of the ledger and of answering the question, "What do you appreciate about your schools?" was refreshing and satisfying to the writer of this article as well as to those to whom she posed this question. It was interesting to observe people's reactions when the question was put to them. For a minute or two they looked baffled and somewhat at a loss as to how to answer, but once they got started they seemed surprised to find how many things they did like, and many seemed to get real enjoyment out of thinking in positive terms. At the end of one session of this sort—a PTA executive board meeting attended by about 20 people—someone remarked, "It's nice to be looking for things we appreciate about our schools, and not finding fault." To which everyone present readily agreed.

The people who were asked to appraise their schools are either parents of children in the schools of our district or are recent graduates from our high school. Most of them are individuals with more than average knowledge of and interest in their schools, the parents being PTA and community leaders and the former students having been active

in school affairs. They live in a district which is a middle-class, suburban residential area 15 miles north of the city of Seattle. It is a very rapidly growing district with a school population (K-12) of nearly 10,000, and increasing at the rate of about 1000 pupils per year. Its pattern and problems are more or less typical of districts adjacent to all the metropolitan centers in Washington State and, perhaps, in many other parts of the nation.

In gathering opinions and impressions from the various individuals and groups questioned, no attempt was made to do a scientific job of sampling opinion or to make a random selection of persons to be interviewed. It is important to note, however, that practically all those questioned were people whose opinions are based on a firm foundation of close contact with their schools over a considerable period of time.

### What Are the Good Points?

Having defined the kind of people who responded and the type of district upon which the answer to our question is based, it may be well now to ask, "What do these people like about their schools?" The areas of comment fall into several well-defined categories: teaching, relationship between school and home, special services, curriculum, buildings and their use.

From practically everyone, whether parent or recent student, the first answer related to teachers. Some said, "I like it that our teachers are interested in the students as individuals." This came particularly from those who had recently graduated and who immediately began recalling how this teacher or that had been so interested in helping the students, not only in class but after school, too. Others said, "I'm happy that our

teachers hold the pupils to high standards and see to it that they do their best." Still others expressed it in these terms: "I appreciate the high quality of our teachers." "I like having the teachers make me feel welcome when I visit my child's school." All of these responses reinforced the writer's own conviction that good teachers are the key to successful education, and are and should be the object of our deepest appreciation.

Parents were quick to praise the parent-teacher conferences which have replaced two of the four quarterly report cards in our elementary schools. In fact, one father, whose working hours are such that he is never free to attend a PTA meeting, even if he would, took time off from his business to attend the conferences scheduled with his daughters' teachers. His remark was, "That's the best way to get parents into the schools, especially the ones who feel uncertain or uncomfortable about visiting school when there isn't some special reason for going." Others saw the conferences as a means of getting more comprehensive and comprehensible information on how their children were progressing in school, and were appreciative of the planned opportunity which the conferences present for meeting with the teachers.

Another favorable comment, which was made again and again, related to the closeness of contact which exists between parents and the schools. People are made to feel at home when they visit school, and to know that they are welcome at all times. The opinion was expressed that the kind of PTA which we have had for many years in our older schools, and which organizes another unit whenever we open a new school (one or two each year), has

helped to build a strong and friendly relationship between home and school.

Appreciation of our schools did not stop there. The importance of the special services which our district has come to offer in recent years was also recognized. These include speech and hearing testing and therapy, home teaching for incapacitated children, special classroom instruction for the physically or mentally handicapped who are capable of attending school, and the full-time services of a school psychologist to help solve the problems of emotionally disturbed children.

Various aspects of the curriculum came in for special comment. Parents were happy that foreign languages are being offered to fifth and sixth graders as part of an enrichment program for the rapid learners, or so-called gifted children. French or Spanish are the two languages usually taught, but in one elementary school a quite remarkable class in Norwegian is being given. Last year the class produced a program, "Christmas in Norway," for the Educational Television Channel in Seattle, and participated in several international celebrations, which gave the children a better understanding of other peoples and their customs.

The instrumental music program which starts in the fourth grade was favorably mentioned, while the musical and dramatic productions of our high school students as well as the beautiful work which they turn out in the arts and crafts courses came in for a deserved share of praise.

Parents seemed gratified that in our schools today a conscious and continuing effort is made to relate the subject matter being studied to the world in which we are living. They also felt that textbooks, especially those in the social

sciences, have improved tremendously both in eye-appeal and in style of writing since the days when *they* were in school.

Parents and former students alike were appreciative of various experiences which our schools offer to children and young people. Participation in student government and other activities, involvement in the sports program, either as players or in other roles, traveling on school buses, learning better health and nutrition habits through the classroom lunch program, these and many other experiences growing out of phases of school activity apart from regular class work enable individuals to acquire new skills which help them to become more mature and capable human beings.

Having expressed themselves about what goes on inside their schools, people also said that they like the new modern school buildings, finding their functional design with its emphasis on light and color very appealing and attractive. As in the case of textbooks, they compared the present-day structures with those which they remembered from childhood and liked the new much better than the old.

Nor was type of construction the only point regarding buildings which was lauded. Parents were also deeply appreciative that our school buildings are used to house community affairs practically every night of the week. In addition to the PTA's, the Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, safety councils, garden clubs, political organizations, and other groups too numerous and varied to mention use school buildings for their meeting places. This is as it should be, for schools belong to the people and should be centers for their activities.

Here, briefly, are some reactions of a variety of people in one school district

to their schools. That the ideas expressed by these individuals are not unlike those which would be found among residents of other parts of this state is borne out by a recent public opinion poll.

### Results of a Survey

Less than two years ago the Washington Education Association decided to find out what the people of the state of Washington thought about their schools. The association engaged the services of an eminent California research firm to conduct a statewide survey of public attitudes toward teachers and schools in this state.

One of the questions which the survey included relates directly to the subject of this article. Those who were interviewed were asked, "If you were praising the schools or school system, what would you praise most?" Statewide, 39 percent of the respondents placed the teachers first; 23 percent ranked teaching methods at the top, while 18 percent mentioned the modern buildings and equipment first. Various aspects of the curriculum and scattered miscellaneous items account for the rest. These findings, scientifically arrived at, are amazingly similar to the responses which

came from the people whom I questioned in my own district.

Both sets of results corroborate the impressions which I have gleaned from people in all parts of the state with whom I have had opportunity to talk and work during the past four or five years. Numerous "Little White House Education Conferences" have been held in this state, many of them at the community and county levels, two of them being statewide meetings. I have been privileged to participate in many of them, and from them have gained insights into the attitudes of many citizens regarding their schools.

By and large, lay citizens who have been close enough to their schools to have a solid factual basis for their opinions appreciate the work which is being done by teachers, administrators, and school boards to meet the challenge of providing a good educational opportunity for all of our children. These are the people who are positive and constructive in their approach. These are the people whose evaluation of what still needs to be done and whose suggestions for improvement should and will be accepted in the spirit in which they are offered.

## Elementary School Science: Research, Theory and Practice

*Written for ASCD by*

MAXINE DUNFEE and JULIAN GREENLEE

Helps teachers, supervisors, administrators:

Use research findings in elementary school science

Identify the role of science education in the elementary school

Relate science education to the everyday experience of children

Improve the elementary science program.

67 pages

\$1.00 per copy

Order from:

ASSOCIATION FOR SUPERVISION AND CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT, NEA  
1201 Sixteenth Street, N.W., Washington 6, D. C.

Copyright © 1958 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.