Significant Books in Review


This thirty-fifth yearbook of the American Association of School Administrators, devoted to the role of the superintendent in the improvement of instruction, is exceedingly well timed. Today the daily routine of many chief school administrators is composed largely of concerns relating to finance, buildings, personnel and public relations. For the well being of public education it is imperative that the superintendent recognize that, while the above duties are important, schools operate to provide learning experiences for children and that the constant evaluation and improvement of these classroom experiences come under his direct leadership. The yearbook presents this point of view clearly and in the preface succinctly points out through a very telling, fanciful illustration the fate of a superintendent who did a good job in all other areas yet neglected his chief responsibility, the improvement of instruction. The committee charged with the task of writing this volume develops in Chapter One a rather realistic picture of the daily tasks of a school superintendent. The committee states, however, “This yearbook is submitted, not in the belief that they have failed to do what they know they should do. Rather, it is to suggest ways of doing better the things superintendents are now doing to improve instruction; especially in the areas of personal relations and cooperative undertakings which have been the subject of so much study recently.” (page 19)

The volume proceeds to indicate rather specific ways a superintendent may organize his professional job so that more time is permitted for the important task of instructional leadership. Some of the ways mentioned are the development of policies and the delegation of authority. The authors state clearly that the keynote of the volume is that a superintendent’s success in improving instruction will be in direct relationship to his ability to involve the people concerned with the problems, to contribute toward their solution. “The superintendent is the person who can do most about providing the conditions and encouraging and arranging processes for cooperative action.”

The commission charged with the authorship of this volume points out that in the improvement process it is the behavior of the individual teacher that must change and that changes in individual teachers can only come about when the teacher is involved in the problem seeking and problem solving. In the final analysis the teacher determines the curriculum and in a given
classroom situation the teacher makes hundreds of decisions daily with respect to the learning situation. Therefore, it is imperative that the insights of the teacher be broadened and extended. The authors emphasize that the achievement of this goal requires a very permissive environment for teacher participation with respect to curriculum changes and holds that developing an environment that will foster teacher growth is a major responsibility of the superintendent.

The authors then proceed to point out that factors which contribute to this permissive environment are personnel practices which recognize that each person is important and has some contribution to make to the improvement of instruction; that the wise use of human resources contributes to the staff morale, and that the extensive use of material resources contributes to the successful solution of curriculum problems.

With respect to the organization for instructional improvement the commission sets forth the thesis that the organization must be a definite plan of action arrived at cooperatively by the entire staff. Three types of organization, the centralized approach, the decentralized approach, and the centrally coordinated approach are described as possibilities. It is emphasized that a leader must have some concept of the functions to be performed and a recognition that considerable attention should be given to placing maximum responsibility at the operating level.

Naturally in a volume such as this a chapter is devoted to the evaluation process but as the authors point out it is not only the results of the cooperative effort which need to be evaluated but also the process itself. Have teachers and administrators improved the skills of working together, not only in the solution of problems but also in the processing of selection of problems? Have they gained insight into their own behavior in achieving common goals?

The yearbook concludes with a chapter on the in-service education of the superintendent, pointing out that self evaluation and self improvement are the first steps in the process. To achieve esprit de corps a superintendent as instructional leader needs to be a student of human relations and view himself objectively as a person. As an individual develops a new understanding and faith in cooperative problem solving he develops a new faith in individuals and indirectly a greater sense of confidence in himself, notwithstanding his own shortcomings.

The volume provides much thought provoking material, both for experienced and for new superintendents. It has considerable internal consistency in writing style, a quality not always achieved by the contribution of several authors. It is a book applicable to small as well as large school systems, for in either case the superintendent is working with people. It is timely for there appears to be a renewed emphasis upon a critical examination of the learning experiences provided for children. The superintendent, whether he likes it or not, must assume responsibility for the kind of instruction provided in the schools under his leadership.

—Reviewed by Marvin L. Berge, superintendent of schools, Dekalb, Illinois.


Harold Hand, of the College of Education at the University of Illinois, tells
us that many years of teaching and thought have gone into the planning of this compact but substantial book. Obviously they have gone, too, into the treatment of the various topics, for it shows insight, conviction, and, in many cases, wisdom.

The core of the book is eight chapters offering a host of “shoulds” and “musts,” for reducing the drop-out rate, grading and reporting, the activity program, discipline, guidance, public relations, and sharing in curriculum development and in administration. Important topics not dealt with directly are the curriculum itself (except for a fine historical summary), grouping, the problem of conformity or other-directedness, and the effects on the high school of race tensions, slum living, juvenile delinquency, and the teacher shortage.

Three chapters seem especially helpful. That on improving the school’s holding power presents much relevant information, of which some is out of date, but most is recent, arresting, and full of implications. That on the activity program explains its potential educational role in such detail as to not neglect the speech habits of the football coach. The chapter on grading starts by making crystal clear the distinction between measurement and evaluation, and ends with a carefully reasoned and convincing argument that everyone should receive a diploma. Except for what some might regard as overly heavy reference to the author’s situation and experience in Illinois, all chapters show good balance.

Dr. Hand’s ideas as to what should be done are not pulled from any bag of tricks. Each is logically deduced from nine “basic principles of American public secondary education,” which are similarly derived from eight “fundamental truths.” (Judgments of value are deduced from judgments of fact with the aid of several implicit assumptions, notably that education should always serve the ends which society in fact intended it to.) The most refreshing of the basic principles, by the way, in this year of our concern for the gifted, is that access to high school should be equal for all.

The book is thus a comprehensive theoretical treatment, a sort of Summa. It also represents a sort of Utopia. For it is, as its title says, a book of principles, of descriptions of what should be. Characteristic phrases throughout are: “Teachers should . . .” and “Good schools concern themselves with . . .” Where information is presented, it is usually to illustrate what should be, or to show how badly present practice falls short. Good Utopias are provocative, and one hopes this one will be widely read. But Utopias have congenital disabilities. They may breed naïveté or impatience and, later, disillusionment with “all that theory.” (As Dr. Hand well knows, most teachers work in schools which do not have psychiatrists.) They cannot very well teach us how to improve specific situations. (Not all rambunctious classroom groups will start behaving better upon being involved in shared planning.) Nor can they tell us when and how far to compromise, and how to do it so that short-run losses are outweighed by long-run gains. (How should guidance responsibility be allocated in a school where the teachers resent having any part of it?) Nor do they tell us anything about priorities. To carry out all the things Dr. Hand says a teacher should do, the teacher in an average high school would have to work a 30-day week. With limited time and strength, where should the teacher start?
Finally, a Utopian approach may give the reader the impression that where things are in bad shape it is simply because teachers or principals don't do what they obviously should do, or give the impression that there are now no really difficult value judgments left to be made.

The other major reservation of this reader concerns the book’s deductive approach, an approach which it shares with most current texts in our field. Dr. Hand’s principles, being derived from more basic ones, themselves derived from “truths,” are presented as logically inescapable and hence not open to discussion. Indeed, they are presented with a certainty and self-assurance unpleasantly reminiscent of the writings of the author’s colleague and frequent antagonist, Dr. Arthur Bestor. In writing of counseling, Dr. Hand says that wise self-direction will result not from our “telling a student what to do,” but from our giving him information and helping him to combine it with his own basic values and his knowledge about himself, so as to reach his own decisions. The same procedure would seem to be a good one for preparing wisely self-directed teachers. If so, and if this book is intended as a text, it is unfortunate that Dr. Hand does not present the issues and the proposed solutions, with a welter of relevant information, and ask the reader to think them through for himself. He gives us instead a book filled with answers—however excellent most of these may be.

—Reviewed by Edward T. Ladd, Department of Education, Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut.