Editorial

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Organizing for Effective Learning

ORGANIZING the educational program for more effective learning is the great challenge facing America's educators in the decade ahead. The challenge is not an easy one. Meeting it requires, first of all, a willingness to break the shackles of tradition which to an unfortunate degree limit the development of more effective types of organization.

These limitations by tradition involve nearly all aspects of the school program: the length of the school day and school year, size of class, graduation requirements, groupings, class organization, school plant planning, building equipment, organization of staff and corps, and so on. You can add a dozen more of your own, and as you do, ask yourself the simple question, "Why?" Are these traditional patterns of organization based on sound research? Or have we too often accepted an organizational structure which has grown like Topsy and then attempted to establish a rationale to justify both its existence and its perpetuation?

Meeting the challenge of organizing for more effective learning requires, also, a more creative approach than many of us have commonly employed. These post-Sputnik years when the public schools have been made the scapegoat

for our apparent lag in the probing of outer space are years of great opportunity for us: public attention is focused on the schools; the importance in the cold war of at least certain aspects of education is recognized—and perhaps exaggerated; there is an almost unprecedented willingness on the part of the public to accept experimentation and change in the schools, if those changes will improve the quality of education. In short, the prevailing climate of opinion is one in which creative thinking about educational tasks *should* be flourishing.

How have we thus far met this challenge to be creative in organizing our schools for more effective learning? Examining the changes that have been made, or at least recommended, one finds considerable evidence for a number of generalizations; perhaps they are over-generalizations.

There has been a strong tendency to retreat to the past rather than to push ahead on the frontier. It is easy to find an example. Many school systems have fallen back on systems of so-called ability grouping that were tried, found wanting, and abandoned 30 years ago. Much of what we have learned about individual differences has been disregarded. Rather than seeking new types of group-

ing and more effective ways of determining common factors of motivation, commitment, interest, aspiration, abilities, talents, et cetera, we have fallen back, in many instances, on traditional and highly questionable measures of "ability" as the major if not the sole factor in grouping.

Other examples of our failure to think creatively about the problem of organizing for more effective learning can be cited; untenable systems of grouping are not the only ones. We have too often thrust students, because of public pressure or arbitrary college entrance requirements, into classes in which they have neither interest nor ability. We have increased the number of credits required of all students for high school graduation on the apparent assumption that the soundness of an educational program is measured quantitatively and that whatever is good for one is good for all. We have unwittingly promoted the fallacy that certain subjects are "solid" while others are "soft" without raising the simple question, "Soft for whom?" We have too often fallen into the trap of assuming that to "enrich" a child's educational experience is to pour in more of the same, overlooking the fact that to enrich truly is to broaden and deepen understanding and wisdom.

We have too often forgotten in our "accelerated programs" that the child's rates of mental, physical, emotional, and social growth may vary a great deal. We have emphasized science and mathematics for the top 20 percent. But we have failed frequently in curriculum revision to recognize that mathematics is an important communicative skill for all and that general scientific literacy is essential to all for successful living in today's world. We have overlooked the fact that the home and the church, as well as the school, play an important role in the education of youth. In our sometimes confused search for "quality" we have too often assumed it to be measured by the "quantity" of homework assigned and have left too little time for the normal and very important activities of home and church. In short, in many instances we have become so enamoured with the term "quality" that we have forgotten not only about balance in the program and about individual differences, we have forgotten the pupils!

If we are to escape the limitations of tradition and tackle creatively the problem of organizing our schools for more effective learning, the approach must be on a broad front. We must critically scrutinize every aspect of organization; we must raise some searching questions.

A Critical Examination

The purpose of this issue of *Educational Leadership* is to make a beginning toward this kind of careful analysis. But the excellent articles prepared by a group of educators in whom we all have great confidence can only point a direction; they can only suggest broad guidelines. The basic responsibility for critical examination of existing patterns and for sound, constructive reorganization falls squarely on the shoulders of the administrative staffs at the local level.

As we carry on this task of reappraising our individual patterns of organization for learning, every aspect of the school program should be considered. We might start by giving attention to the prevailing administrative arrangements concerning the school day and the school year. Most school systems still operate with a daily and annual time schedule originally based largely on the

requirements of children in a rural, agrarian economy. Pupils in large urban centers, far removed from any responsibility for planting or harvesting crops, still follow a calendar which opens school shortly after Labor Day and closes it from the first to the middle of June. The growth and extension of summer schools is an indication of a growing recognition that the traditional school year should be re-examined. Yet many schools apparently regard the summer program as an "extra," charging tuition, and limiting summer work to "make-up" and "enrichment."

The daily schedule at the secondary level seems equally tradition-bound. Some questions come to mind: What evidence is there that a period of approximately one hour, with time out for passing between classes, is the most productive time arrangement? Why must all classes be taught in periods of equal length and for five days per week? Are there no priorities? Are there not some subjects which could be taught more effectively two or three days a week over a longer period of time? Does the Carnegie unit bind us forever to a fixed schedule? Of course, there are problems of programming for a principal who breaks the simple traditional pattern, but capable principals will find ways of doing it.

There is a tendency to consider the number of pupils in a class only in terms of "average class size" determined by a formula that fails to give an accurate appraisal of actual class size. It is easy to point with satisfaction to an average of 28, disregarding the 10 or 15 percent of the classes that may have from 35 to 40 pupils in them. What evidence is there on optimum class size? Why do we not more often approach this problem by considering the purposes of a particular course? Isn't it probable that basic purposes in some instances can be achieved in large groups while in others even 20 pupils might be too many? These are only a few of the questions that ought to be raised about some of our common administrative practices.

There are also aspects of our traditional classroom organization that ought to be scrutinized if we are to have more effective learning. In the primary grades we have long recognized the advantages of flexible groupings within classes. These groupings change not only from hour to hour but from day to day and from week to week. Why is this practice, used so effectively in primary grades, usually abandoned in the intermediate grades and almost never employed at the secondary level?

We follow almost universally the practice of assigning one teacher to a class —on the basis of grade level in the elementary school and on the basis of subject matter at the secondary level. Why? Why do we assume that one teacher must be all things to all pupils at a particular level or in a particular subject? Teachers are no more omnipotent than people! Each has his strengths and even the best have some weaknesses. Why do we not more often assign a group of teachers to work with a group of children—the teachers working as a team, each contributing his best to the total teaching load? Are there not ways in which the teachers assigned to a particular school could be reorganized for more effective learning?

In recent years, the technological change which has become characteristic of industry and business has penetrated the schools. The products of this new technology have not always been eagerly employed or even willingly accepted. Too often they have been re-

garded as a threat. Motion pictures were accepted reluctantly; radio was employed with skepticism; television was regarded with suspicion; and the new teaching machines are being viewed with alarm. Generally speaking, the public is much more willing to accept new advances in instructional tools than are the professional educators. Industry is making greater use of these tools than are the schools. Are we carefully and objectively examining our courses of study and content guides to determine how these new tools of learning can be used to increase the effectiveness of the school program? Are we considering the ways in which television can be used to supplement the work of the teacher? Are we giving proper consideration to the ways in which teaching machines may liberate the teacher from hours of practice or drill work, leaving him free for the more important aspects of creative teaching? Modern technology has created for us a great reservoir of teaching aids. Are we organized to use them effectively?

An important aspect of organizing for effective learning is that of building planning. Throughout the nation new schools are being constructed. Generally these are attractive and well-built. Most of the planning is sound and consistent with today's educational philosophy. Science classrooms and laboratories, industrial arts shops, art workrooms, and home economics facilities are generally well-designed and well-equipped. Too often the same cannot be said of the academic classrooms. Advances here have not kept pace with changing methods and new content. Today's mathematics classes need laboratory equipment; the social studies and language arts classes need separate areas for small group discussions and committee work; foreign language

classes need space for laboratory equipment; all need adequate storage and filing space for the great variety of materials needed for effective learning. Again, there are questions: Are academic classes being planned in terms of today's methods or are they still best suited to the old question-and-answer routine? Is provision made for flexible arrangements? Is there adequate recognition of the "laboratory" method so advantageously used in academic areas?

Organizing for effective learning is a broad topic. It covers every phase of educational activity. It concerns all of us regardless of our particular assignments. No one escapes responsibility. The problems are ours to solve and how well we solve them will largely determine the quality of education in the decade ahead.

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