Why Look at School Organization?

The administrator plays a key role in improving quality of instruction.

EVIDENCE is mounting on all sides that school organization practices are coming under increasing scrutiny. Increasingly questions are being raised with respect to the way in which school structure affects educational purpose. Many articulate spokesmen are suggesting that the administrative pattern of a school must be changed in response to new demands. Innumerable local communities are addressing themselves to the task of redoing the operational procedures of their schools to increase their effectiveness.

Plans, in growing numbers, are being proposed which will alter certain time-honored administrative practices so that the school may be free to meet the needs of all children. As these currents are assessed it becomes apparent that a major question is taking shape on the educational front: how should the school be organized? In the judgment of some observers, this concern bids to become a top priority for leaders in education.

To what can this resurgence of interest be attributed? In part, at least, it is a product of the times. The movement stems from a renewed and revitalized public realization of the importance of education. One of the by-products of the school-community partnership of recent years is an examination of the way in which a school is organized. Participating in this discussion are some who are reflecting broad concern, as well as others who are presenting particular points of view.

The questions are familiar: Is the elementary school curriculum becoming too crowded and cluttered? Is it possible for an elementary school teacher to be so adequately trained and knowledgeable in a multitude of subject areas that he can teach them all? Is it not apparent that our children must be taught more content? Does not our present method of training teachers produce many insufficiently qualified for this newer responsibility? Are student talent and potential being wasted because our schools are geared to the level of comfortable mediocrity? Should we not have more subject specialists in our faculties? How can a

teacher be expected to meet the special needs of all children when he is saddled with the responsibility of a common level? These are but a few of the questions. From such expressions comes an exhortation to "do something" about "improving" school organization.

As a consequence, attention inevitably turns to consideration of: heterogeneous versus homogeneous grouping; the pros and cons of ability grouping; track plans, accelerated and/or “gifted” programs, teacher generalist versus teacher specialist, and a series of “plans.” The inference derived from this sort of introspection suggests that the school is failing to do its job and that the basic fault lies at the doorstep of the type of organization. Ergo, let’s change the administrative structure of the school and the problem will be solved.

In an oversimplified sense, the battle lines are being drawn between two basic types of school organization: on the one hand, one teacher per classroom for all subjects; and, on the other hand, a group of teachers for subject matter purposes. In characteristic American fashion it may be argued that there are merits in both procedures and that it is wrong to consider the issue solely upon an either-or basis. Doubtless there are some arguments of reason and logic in each point of view. However, for fear that current agitation may lead to regressive steps and repressive measures, a few cautions are in order.

Certainly the tremendous gains and the noteworthy contributions resulting from the advancing science of child growth and development must not be lost for the children of today. The debate is plagued by a wide range of differences and opinions, accompanied by a dearth of proven evidence, to support varied practices and sentiments. Objectivity is further bedeviled by loose semantics, confounded by puzzling paradoxes of meaning and application. Attempts of an earlier day to come to grips with the problem, through various “laboratory” plans, were relatively effective in adjustment to individual learning rates.

However, these plans did not otherwise modify the curriculum to meet individual needs. They overlooked the innate differences of individual potential and capability and continued to present the curriculum in the single dimension of intellectual exercise, without regard to other considerations. Finally, no single, prescribed organizational pattern can be expected to serve all localities and all children to a consistent degree. Inherent in the very essence of democratic education is the need for a latitude of flexibility and adaptability so that it may serve and react with its immediate environment.

Role of Administration

In looking at school organization, it is important to understand the role and function of school administration. There is a somewhat basic and widespread cultural tendency in the American style of democratic life to be critical of those in authority. It becomes increasingly imperative, therefore, that the true and relative role of school administration be properly assessed. Administration exists as a means to an end. It is not a control function but rather it is a service responsibility. Unwittingly cleavages and suspicions spring up.

We must strive for a sincere and reciprocal sense of sharing the need for and the contributions made by both the instructional staff and the administrative staff. All tendencies to dichotomize vital,
internal relationships must be avoided. Administrators have a distinct responsibility for the creation of an understanding of the tenet that good administration is an essential handmaiden to educational service and quality.

In somewhat the same way, the operation of a school must be properly assessed. A certain amount of management procedure is always necessary. This is an inescapable fact of life when large numbers of persons are involved. It is a basic requisite of a civilized society. The common good, in terms of mutual welfare, safety, responsibility, accountability, prudence, and preservation of individual rights, always necessitates some measure of systematic procedure, prevention, and protection. And so is it with a school. Given several hundred children and a staff of a score or more adults, any school administrator must evolve effective, efficient, and effortless ways of daily life. These are the primary essentials to group action, but they must be established, minimized, and held in proper perspective. Above all, they must not preoccupy the staff to a point wherein its major purpose—the instructional program—is relegated to secondary consideration.

Therefore, notwithstanding the current pressure to attack the problem in the realm of school organization, judgment and wisdom tell us that structure alone is not a high level goal. At best it is only essential machinery which underlies an educational program. Today, our first concern should not be how to effect an administrative organization for children, although this need must be faced. A more vital question is: How are we going to adapt classroom practices to the needs of children? This is the imperative challenge for school administrators.

Unless, in our desire and determination to provide the best structure, we relate this campaign to truly significant changes in teaching, we may well continue to be preoccupied with a superficial aspect and fail to grasp the gravity of the true issue. What transpires in the teaching-learning relationship is the true measure of a school. The kind of organization is only one contributor to the educational worthiness of the school.

Flexible Organization

The ideal type of school organization, probably, is one which reflects a high measure of fluidity and flexibility. A school structure which permits its program and its staff to adjust readily to changing conditions, needs, and values will reach greater educational accomplishment. Administrative design will not be a control which delimits educational opportunity for children but will become the service medium through which a rich and satisfying educational program can be offered. Children will cease being sacrificed on the altar of administrative expediency. Only then will we have learned that organization is to serve children, not children to serve organization.

In the development of this type of school organization and program, what is the role of the administrator? In these days of pressures, we realize that the school administrator carries a heavy responsibility. One of the most pressing problems for the educational leader today is how to preserve reason and rationale amid clutter and clamor. As he sits squarely in the center of this social scene he cannot fail to be impressed with the virtue of stable judgment and wise restraint. Contemporary proposals and demands must be evaluated with sobering clarity and must be judged.
against long range perspective. Such wisdom is a top priority in effective educational leadership in these times.

Leadership? Today we discuss and deliberate: what it is; why we must have it; how we can get it; and why it now becomes the panacea for all our educational ills. Possibly a more popular concept has not evolved in years. It is, in fact, the very title of this periodical. The current ASCD Yearbook tells us: "... educational leadership... that action or behavior among individuals and groups which causes both the individual and the groups to move toward educational goals that are increasingly mutually acceptable to them." As of this new day it becomes the priceless quality for which we have long been groping.

Actually, however, perhaps this is not a totally new, salutary concept. In all likelihood this is the very quality for which many have long been seeking. Perhaps, only now is it securing a new and welcome reception. One precaution, however, is suggested. Because so much is heard about leadership, care must be exercised to prevent this new emphasis from reducing itself to a lower level of preoccupation with stereotypes: platitudinous stereotypes which evolve into hackneyed attempts at a superficial level of successful operational management.

It is generally agreed that most leaders possess certain measures of baffling and magical qualities which are basically God-given; these are the sole property of the uniqueness of one's own personality. Beyond this point, however, most studies reveal that a leader develops this skill through careful study of himself and comprehensive study of people. The vast majority of problems and perplexities for school administrators—and, in fact, in most man-made enterprises—lie within the realm of human relations.

There are many ways in which the administrator can apply his skill and knowledge in these areas: tolerance of personality differences—strengths and weaknesses; acceptance of the seeming slow pace of the democratic process; the releasing of staff potential to full flower, without stifling restriction; the selection and assignment of personnel; sheer human understanding and kindness. It is quite likely that skill in human relationships—leadership—is the greatest individual contribution the school administrator can make towards the attainment of educational purposes.

**Improving Instruction**

How can the status leader furnish the creative leadership and professional vision that will support the kind of organization which will result in high quality work throughout the school? For a partial answer, reference is made to a recent national survey of public elementary school organization and administration conducted by the U. S. Office of Education. Included in this nation-wide study of policies, practices, and trends in elementary school administration was a question dealing with problems and difficulties encountered by elementary school principals.

According to a prepared list of 17 administrative functions and duties, responding superintendents of schools were asked to indicate which responsibilities were presenting difficulty to their prin-

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mum assistance to teachers must be provided.

These services should be organized in such way that they will be of greatest benefit to the classroom teacher. The provision of the best services, organized in the most effective manner, is not enough to guarantee a good program of education. In addition, the working relationships within the school system must be based on respect for the worth of each individual member of the school staff and on an appreciation of his professional competence. Only in such an atmosphere can the creative talent of the teacher be utilized to provide the best possible program of education for each boy and girl.

School Organization

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The list comprised management and operational functions; instructional program responsibilities; staff and community relationships; special educational services; and pupil accounting procedures.

In compiling the results to this question all answers were weighted on a first, second, and third choice scale. The results show that Improvement of Instruction remains the number one problem for principals, with a total weight of 5619 responses. The second most pressing problem is Provision for Exceptional Children, with a total weighted response of 3753. In third place is the problem of Obtaining Adequate Physical Facilities, with a weighted response of 1482. Fourth is Programs of Special Education, with 1474. Fifth on this list is the Recruitment of Teachers, with a total weighted response of 1082.

An analysis of these returns shows that the perennial problem of relating the efforts of the school administrator to the improvement of instruction persists. This is not a new thought, for traditionally and historically the principal has always borne this responsibility. Yet, here is timely evidence to re-establish the validity of the need. As a matter of fact, too, it is significant to realize that four of the first five topics on this list of problems for principals relate directly to the instructional program. In these days of pressures and demands, perhaps it is not amiss to conclude that school administrators can be most responsive to needs and urgencies by becoming more closely involved and identified with their programs of classroom teaching.

Yes, we should look at the organization of our schools. We need to determine if administrative organization is a factor which is impeding free expression of educational opportunity for children. But, in so doing, we should not make a fetish of the structural pattern, in the misguided faith that organization in itself guarantees the educational quality we are seeking. Administrative procedures can do much to aid a good program but they alone cannot solve the problem.

The rightful place of inquiry lies in the classroom. What is being done to relate the teaching process and materials to the educational needs of children is the proper point of emphasis. Through the exemplification of leadership qualities, by directing his efforts and attentions to the instructional program, and by increasing his own skills and sensitivities in the supervision of instruction, the school administrator may play a key role in improving the quality of the school.