

The Importance of People

Column Editor: Fred T. Wilhelms

The Importance of ASCD

IN those pleasant years when I worked at NEA, there was one set of offices I always had a special feeling about visiting. If my work went flat or it was one of my juiceless days, I used to wander down to ASCD's cramped, back-stairs quarters, and after a while come away feeling better.

Why? That sort of thing is hard to define, of course. But, for one thing, there was the talk. To make a conversation come alive you didn't need to talk about federal aid, or the administration of anything, or even the politics of the house. You only needed to speculate on what happens when a teacher meets a kid. ASCD headquarters always cared about that.

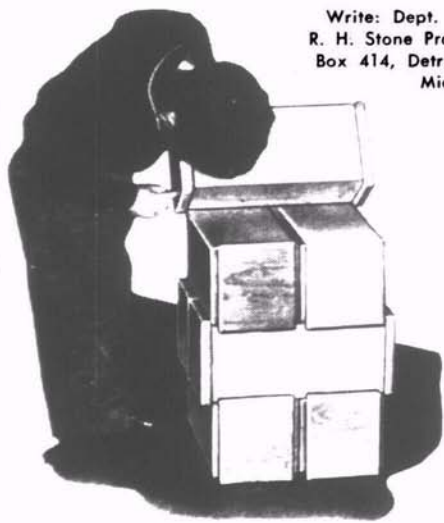
And then there were the people. In most offices a few "professionals" bossed a group of "clericals." At ASCD everybody got into the act. The newest typist was responsible for something or other—and the responsibility was genuine—and she was proud of it, with a shine in her eye.

ASCD was only a youngster then, having a struggle of it, financially. Last year, when I went back, I rubbed my eyes at the fine desks, the spacious rooms, and all that. But that very day a pretty young staff member had just published her first poem—about a baby—

and everybody was feeling good with and for her, and the atmosphere felt the same as always.

Two characteristics: caring tremendously about children and teachers and what happens when they get together; the ability to involve almost everybody; these, to me, make ASCD stand out above all other organizations. Of course, these two root down to something deeper—I don't exactly know what—a vision of what society could be, perhaps, so goading a vision that it never lets compromise be comfortable; a faith in the human person, so deep-rooted it cannot be shaken. Sometimes I feel that the "something deeper" lies very close to Albert Schweitzer's *reverence for life*.

Whatever it may be, it is not the fragile optimism of those who have never been tried, for ASCD's 15 years have had more than their share of stormy weather and rough going. After the Progressive Education Association, ASCD has always been out front, taking the battering. Specifically, there were the violent attacks on *Building America*. But, more generally, an era that could stand a McCarthy was bound to be painful for an organization so firmly in the liberal van that even its sister organizations sometimes half-resented its uncompromising idealism.



Write: Dept. L-560
R. H. Stone Products
Box 414, Detroit 31
Michigan

**have your teachers looked into these
fascinating interlocking hollow blocks?**

—write for your free, helpful
Mer-Pla Block Play Program

In all those storms ASCD never ran for cover, or even took in sail. I do not claim that the record was one of exceptional bravery, any more than I think a mother must be brave to risk her life to save her child. The measure of the mother is not her courage, but the devotion which makes the courageous act the only one possible. ASCD was so devoted to what it was working at that it never really questioned going on about its business. And after it all, ASCD has come through the storms stronger than ever and more deeply idealistic, with the strength and the toughened faith of the seasoned veteran.

Now it appears that the weather has cleared a bit, and it may be about to be sunnier still. At least the extreme surges of fear and passion seem to be quieting down, and it is growing possible once again to hear the quiet voice of reason. In such a time what has an organization

with ASCD's unique characteristics to offer?

One is tempted to prescribe. For instance: We have grown accustomed to being an embattled minority. Now the time may be at hand when, instead of using our energies to struggle against rising tides of negativism, we shall be able to give encouragement and direction to a gathering power of warm and positive motivations. Shall we be ready to play that role? Or shall we be like a man pushing on a stuck door, who falls on his face when it suddenly gives?

These past few years the American people have been fed a pretty heavy dosage of innuendo, of talk that sometimes came close to sounding as if only the intellectually brilliant are worth cultivating, and only a few old-line formal disciplines worth teaching. One of these fine days the people will shake all that off and reassert the historic American position. But some scars of uncertainty will remain. Lay persons will need reassurance from trusted experts who believe in all the children and who are not overawed by the symbols of academic respectability. When that day comes our greatest asset will be a cultivated ability to communicate to parents and citizens. So far, we have communicated mostly with ourselves. Should we try to reach out? We already have some of the most readable publications, and our concerns are such as appeal to parents and citizens. Should we try deliberately to write to them part of the time?

If we do reach out, should the reach include work on legislation? For instance, there's NDEA, wherein by federal fiat some parts of the curriculum got more important than others. Did we bring the kind of pressure to bear on that *curriculum* issue which our administrative-minded colleague organizations bring to

bear on a money bill? Should we have?

For instance, again: Our position and communications with the public would be much stronger if only we could be speaking more at one with the experts in various subject matter fields. Easier said than done, I know; maybe never wholly possible. The physicists, the economists, the mathematicians, and the scholarly representatives of all the disciplines may choose so much to promote their special interests and may persist so much in ignoring what is known about learning and teaching that we can never come to agreement with them. And yet, is it not anomalous that we of the major organization for the curriculum in general should be so little allied as we are to the specialists? Does it have to go on that we speak so much at variance with them? Have we tried hard enough to build a sound, long-term relationship? Although there are dangers, it is also

true that wonderful things can happen when public-school generalists and university specialists from the several disciplines work together.

Another for instance: As part of its unsurpassed commitment to democracy, ASCD, in its very earliest years, made a great investment in the use of group process and the study of group dynamics. We made tremendous contributions for a few seasons; progress was rapid, and there were real discoveries. Then what became of the penetrating study of dynamics—the part that was aimed at real breakthroughs? Didn't the techniques become routine, if not a little boring? Can you think of a single significant improvement in the past five years—one that would lead to a fundamentally better product? Meanwhile those who see group process as a smooth, polite road to conformity gain ground. Those of us who are at least as committed to en-

The Leader In Its Field for 20 Years

Now the 1960 (Third) Edition

LEE and LEE'S

THE CHILD AND HIS CURRICULUM

Few other books in any field have so well deserved the continuing success of J. Murray Lee and Doris May Lee's phenomenal "best seller" in the field of elementary education. First published in 1940, this book became an immediate success and is now regarded as a standard text. The new (Third) edition represents a substantial revision which incorporates the important developments in elementary education since the publication of the Second Edition ten years ago. Four chapters are completely new. To be published in May.

APPLETON-CENTURY-CROFTS, INC.

35 West 32nd Street

New York 1, N. Y.

hancing every individual in the group as to increasing the effectiveness of the group greatly need a way of channeling our efforts. If ASCD does not provide it, it is hard to see who will.

But I did not set out to prescribe what ASCD should do as times change. That question needs long thought, and it's so challenging that the minute you consider it you'll find it hard—as I did—to resist tossing in a few personal suggestions. But my real purpose was to underline the extreme importance of what ASCD decides to do. I've wished to do that because I think it's easy to get used to what is almost a part of us and overlook its value.

It is hard to realize how different American education would be today if ASCD had not been there. When the battles were going at their worst, there stood our organization. General Jackson at Bull Run, standing there "like a stone wall," was not a firmer rallying point. It makes a difference when there is a place to stand.

There are a few hundred of us who rally to the strong point again and again. We do it when we read a magazine or a yearbook, work on a committee or a commission, go to a state or national convention. We always go back to our work a little bit stronger, a little less lonely and discouraged. And that's important, for we're a rare and peculiar breed, awfully important to America's schools.

We've been selected more by temperament and purpose than by the titles of our jobs. We aren't exactly the "practical" type, and yet we're characterized by long, tough service in the lines. We compromise, but we don't compromise away principle. We're idealistic, and yet no group has ever been more realistic about the difficulties ahead. It's

not that we don't know it's a fight; it's that we don't quit fighting. On average we are short on authority, long on influence. Our ideas count more than our orders, and that tends to be good for us because we have to work with people instead of telling them what to do.

We've been people who intuitively move toward life rather than away from it. We have a tremendous commitment to democracy, and an even deeper feeling for the lone individual inside that democracy. We're deep-dyed professionals with a terrific urge to build a school system on what we know about children and societies and learning and teaching—not by the guidelines of what's safe or politic or fashionable. We're an odd crew—tough, tender, earthy, visionary, fond of each other, argumentative—and with it all everlastingly devoted to the job as it is given us to see the job. I think we are the cream of American education. And what we think today is more important for what happens in America's schools tomorrow than any other single fact. We had better be right.

And it is very likely that we will be right. Wrong in many a technical detail, of course; dangerously wrong, sometimes. But at bottom we are likely to be right. Because, maybe more than any other group, we refuse to look aside to the immediate and the expedient. We keep our eyes on the youngster and what he can grow to be if we are good enough at helping him. We keep our eyes on human beings and the society they can build as wisdom grows among us. In all our thinking and feeling we are guided by the most valuable of all habits: the habit of being enthusiastic about the importance of people.

—FRED T. WILHELMS, *professor of education, San Francisco State College, California.*

Copyright © 1960 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.