

## The School in a Political Setting

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THOSE reared in a tradition stressing the essential necessity for schools being kept out of politics may find the topic of this issue to be a bit unsettling. This may be true for one or more reasons. For some readers the topic may arouse images of schools beset by "politicians," or even of educators stooping to so-called political approaches. Thus, if one thinks of politics only in terms of smoke-filled rooms, skulduggery, and manipulation, he can easily conclude that the topic is of no necessary concern for him unless it be to try to counteract politics with increased understanding.

For other readers, the topic may seem to imply two worlds, schools and politics, which should be kept forever apart. This latter view probably results from equating politics with government. Our school system developed many of its present forms and practices during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a period often characterized by unsavory political behavior at local, state and national levels of government. This very condition, plus our party system, undoubtedly did much to caution educators against attaching educational hopes to the rise or fall of one political party or to a special interest group representing only a segment of the American public.

There may be still other readers who are so singly focused on the education of all of the children of all of the people, or on intellectual excellence, or on the

whole child that they cannot but see politics as simply a diversion from their main concern. The fact that the word *politics* has many connotations, and different meanings for different people, may well be in part responsible for a tendency to overlook or to disregard its relevance for education.

The development of political science as an area of empirical study has resulted in clarifying definitions and in making more objective the analysis of political processes. To many political scientists, politics is a study of influence, however and wherever it may be exerted. Thus, a political system is not necessarily a government, but rather is a pattern of human relationships which involves power, rule, and authority (legitimated power). When defined in this way the relevance and centrality of politics to education becomes clearer and questions arise such as: What is the relation of education to various political systems, be they local, state or national governments, unions, business firms, or professional associations? Can education itself be profitably viewed as a political system?

### The Educator and Politics

Accepting the existence of differing meanings for the word, politics, may help in exploring different stances which educators might take in relation to various

manifestations of political influence, and which have for so long been open for debate. At least four stances appear to be available for consideration.

First, educators can teach about politics. This is a long accepted function of the educator although politics has not always received extended attention as a subject of study in elementary and secondary schools. However, if a place is found for it in a crowded educational program, what is taught will, of course, be limited by the understanding of teachers. One might argue that until more educators have a better understanding of the political process as it operates today in all areas of American life, it is quite unlikely that they will be capable of aiding the rising generation to understand, and to operate more effectively in, the various political systems to which each of them belongs.

Second, educators can, as citizens, apply their specialized knowledge, wherever it may have relevance, to the social issue of the day. The importance of and the need for educators coming to grips with the major problems of the modern world have often been emphasized. Yet educators appear to lack techniques for making their influence felt. They are almost completely devoid of any reputation for influencing public life or of having an ability to collaborate with those able to utilize wealth, or other resources such as the communications media in influencing critical decisions. While this has been bemoaned by a few, educators generally have not taken action to change the situation.

Third, educators can reveal greater awareness and exert more influence in the control of education. There are many suggestions that American education has operated too long under the myth that it is nonpolitical and only an educational

enterprise. Education is surely one of the most genuinely political undertakings in American life. All public schools are recognized as operating under the authority of a state, but local control of education has been talked about more extensively. It seems clear, however, that the discretionary power of local boards of education is consistently being whittled away, and that their influence is limited except as they choose to accept external and often non-legal pressures for various specific program decisions.

With each succeeding year, education is more frequently mentioned in partisan platforms at all levels of government. Studies of financial support suggest that education is increasingly subject to state and national influences, and often to coalitions of influence which espouse values very different from those held by the local community. Regardless of the shifting and varied patterns of influence operating relative to schools, most would agree that public schools and the education profession are entirely dependent on public support, financial and moral. Further, the quality and scope of educational programs are frequently matters of intense political conflict. Certainly one cannot explain the differences in educational programs from community to community on an economic basis alone.

Possibly supervisors and curriculum workers are in a special position to observe the influences operating on education. For many supervisors and curriculum workers, the past few years have been like a long and upsetting dream. Just as numerous and diverse as the influential persons and groups that have been wheeling and dealing on curriculum matters, have been the evidences and instances of supervisors and curriculum workers being ignored and by-passed in the making of significant curriculum

decisions at state and local levels. Single-minded individuals and groups operating at local, state and national levels have been able to gain support for segments of the program as diverse as sports, bands, handicapped children, physics, foreign languages, television, and methods of teaching. In some instances these efforts have served to distort the total educational plan. Often they have added new vitality and the possibility of long-term improvements. However, regardless of the nature of the influence, the folklore supporting the local professional educator as the major curriculum worker has been sadly shaken.

Fourth, educators may assume still another stance, and this is to concern themselves with the politics of their own functioning as professional groups. Surely this is not unrelated to the three stances already briefly described. Paralleling the debates which have gone on as to what should be taught about politics, as to how the educators should relate to the broad issues and problems of our time, and how the educator should function in respect to the changing patterns of control of education, there have been indications of professional organization concern for the internal politics of the profession. Educational associations have become more articulate in respect not only to welfare considerations, but also in reference to issues of broader participation in educational policy. Educational associations are taking initial and feeble steps to explore policies covering the policing of their own ranks and are bringing themselves to a position where their special abilities can find expression.

Until educators display more unity and willingness to influence their own procedures, is it likely that they can have much impact on major educational policies? Until educators gain increased power

and legitimated authority on educational matters, are they likely to be able to penetrate effectively the broader circles of social activity? The answer to both questions would appear to be a clear, "No!"

This issue of *Educational Leadership* is concerned primarily with the participation of educators in the broader social scene. Yet, educators have not been remarkably effective in this arena. As yet, there is little analysis of the sources of influence which educators individually and collectively can muster, and little thinking about how educators can organize and collaborate with others to effectively enter political arenas.

In view of the contemporary world situation, there probably is no more critical problem before professional educational organizations than a clarification of their political roles. Major decisions as to values to be accepted or rejected are continuously being made on a political basis. Numerous political systems, both legal and nonlegal, are profoundly influencing education including what is taught and how it is taught. If educators are to be more than a very low order of civil servant following the dictates of numerous and diverse influentials, the politics of education will of necessity engage a larger share of their time, thought and energy.

Full and active participation by educators on a mature and active basis, improving the education of all Americans and, in fact, of all members of the world community, will require the attention of the best abilities of the profession in assessing the current situation and in mobilizing individual educators and educational associations toward the attainment of a more influential role.

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