

A Teacher Becomes a Candidate

ONE day last fall I announced publicly that I would be a candidate for the state legislature in the spring primary. The next morning a senior boy stopped by my classroom and smilingly extended his hand. "It's great to have a teacher run for office," he said. "I'm proud of you." I was proud too. It was the first time a student ever offered to shake hands with me.

If I ever had doubts about the possible adverse effects that my personal activities in politics might have on my students, these would have been dispelled at that moment. The truth is, I have never had such doubts. I have always thought that to be a good teacher one should be a good citizen. To me this means assuming an active role in community affairs including politics.

Whatever the cause, only a small, although growing number of educators take an active part in politics or think that teachers should do so. A 1956 survey reported by the NEA showed that while a high percentage voted (86 percent in the "most recent election") only two percent reported having been a candidate for public office while a teacher. Only 3.6 percent had ever served as a precinct committeeman, and more than

two-thirds of the respondents thought no teacher should do so. The situation had improved by the time of a 1961 survey which reported that 94 percent of the teachers had voted in the "most recent election" and 6.6 percent were active members of political parties.

Many teachers have indicated to me their interest in working in politics, not just because they are teachers, but because they have convictions about good government and they feel they ought to do something about these beliefs. The questions they have asked me illustrate the hesitation that many teachers experience about "getting involved" in politics. Is it professional for a teacher to become a political partisan? Is it proper for a teacher to run for an elective public office? Can a teacher afford to "take sides"? What legal restrictions on political participation affect teachers? Yet, by and large, the question which seems to worry teachers most is, if their political beliefs become public, can they be objective and retain the confidence of students, administrators and parents?

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I suspect that the tendency to avoid political activity for fear of losing objectivity springs more from lack of knowledge and lack of courage than it does from devotion to some imagined ethical restraint. This tendency results in an abdication of a teaching responsibility which is always sorely needed in a democracy. Perhaps the nature of the college preparation of most teachers contributes as much to this neglect as do the traditional attitudes of most communities toward teachers. Too little is done to provide future teachers with the knowledge and practical experience which make them feel easy about working in politics and using that experience in the classroom.

One of the finest experiences I had during my college years was that of serving as an "intern" for a candidate for Congress. The internship consisted of offering my service to be used in whatever way was necessary; in return I would reap the knowledge that can only come from experience in a political campaign. I did research for the candidate, sat in on strategy meetings, went to speaking engagements with him, distributed literature, and performed many other tasks. It was an activity designed for political science students, yet it is one that would benefit any future teacher.

How helpful it is when a teacher begins to understand some of the many aspects of politics—not just how one votes, but the political party structure, the operation of campaigns, the convention system, the party primaries, the roles of pressure groups and of new media, the financing of political activities and the privileges and limitations of elected officials. As these realities are mastered, the awesome aspect of discussing politics in the classroom in an objective manner disappears because there is

so much factual information to discuss.

The more active and prominent in community affairs the teacher is, the more interest is created in students. When the teacher is actually a candidate for public office the feeling of excitement and involvement on the part of students is magnified. My students wanted to know: why I had decided to run; how you campaign for a legislative seat; how much it costs; who my opponents would be. It was a challenge to discuss the campaign with the pupils in a nonpartisan fashion—to explain the problems every candidate faces, the various kinds of campaign techniques, the reactions of the public, and the role of a political party in campaigns. I think some of the necessary generalities of an American Problems textbook suddenly became specific realities in the students' own community.

If in the course of the natural school-day activity it becomes appropriate for a teacher to talk with the students about his political interests, it can be done in a straightforward manner, respecting the fact that many of the children's parents may support the opposite view. Any tendency, however, to put such discussions on a partisan or personal basis will be self-defeating. Both students and their parents will resent a teacher who presumes upon his position by "instructing" students with regard to candidates or political issues. But the more frank the teacher is about revealing his opinions and clearly labeling them as such—the better is the situation for useful discussion and the smaller the grounds for criticism. Even the barest suggestion by a teacher that he has some firm convictions about candidates and public policy and that he is willing to work for them, tends to give his students the courage also to express their ideas, the curiosity

to learn more about the political processes, the determination to make wise decisions, and a faith in the democratic way of life where every citizen participates—even their teacher.

Overcoming Restraints

Teachers have too long considered themselves as being politically unique. They have existed outside the political sphere, or perhaps above it, influenced by the myth that their professional commitments somehow should set them apart from the mainstream of life. It was as though teachers alone among the citizenry should be unresponsive to the effects of political decisions upon their welfare and upon the programs they believe are important to their community and nation.

It is true that there have been real or imagined restraints for teachers to overcome in order to be active. Certainly when public attention is drawn to a teacher's political affiliations and his positions on public issues, the school administrator may have problems to deal with in community and personnel relations. Of course both administrators and school boards would like to avoid sources of controversy and thus they may employ direct or subtle means of discouraging the activity. Yet the teacher has no problem different from that likely to be encountered by the member of a business or legal firm or any other employee aspiring to public office. A teacher who already has a reputation for community activity will be less vulnerable to administrative restraints.

Sometimes teachers have been considered to be in a class with civil servants and thus "protected" from participation in politics. In Oregon the courts interpreted the state constitution as prohibit-

ing teachers from serving in the legislature. A constitutional amendment initiated by the Oregon Education Association and subsequently approved by the people, specifically extended this privilege to teachers and school board members. At present an attorney general's opinion holds that, although state law permits a teacher to be a precinct committeeman and the constitution permits him to run for the legislature, he is prohibited as a "non-elective officeholder" from contributing to any political campaign. It is generally assumed that the ruling would be thrown out by the courts if any attempt were made to enforce it.

Restraints on the community level are less serious, I believe, but they do exist. There are some people who feel strongly that teachers should not be in politics. Those who think the teacher should stick to his classroom and stay out of politics are little different from those who think that woman's place is in the home, that the Negro should stay in his "place," or that some other group of citizens should be politically restricted.

At a recent education convention in Oregon a panel of public officials, discussing the role of the teacher in politics, seemed to agree that teachers should be active in political parties, should work for candidates, but should not themselves run for office. Running for elective office apparently would "hurt their image." This seems to imply that running for office is questionable behavior for an upright person and that to put into practice what one teaches would somehow undermine a teacher's instructional ability and destroy his prestige in the eyes of students and community.

I am afraid that teachers have themselves created a certain "image" by re-

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guistics, has said that more information has become available in the past five years than in the previous one hundred. Joint efforts of linguists, psychologists, and reading specialists promise to reorganize if not to revolutionize fundamental principles of reading instruction. These are but a few of the changes. Keeping up with the new scholarship and discriminating among suggested changes in procedure and techniques demand full time commitment.

Apart from any steps taken to improve the in-service and continuing education of teachers of English, the implications for the supervisory staff are clear. In the absence of a supervisor trained in the English language arts, schools can and probably should rely more on their best prepared teachers for instructional leadership.

Generalists in supervision can do much to create a climate that releases the energy these teachers can bring to the problem. Yet in the long run if supervisors are to be leaders, as they must be, the continuing education of supervisors themselves and the selection of replacements or additions to the supervisory staff should command at least as much attention as the continuing education and recruitment of teachers of English.

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maining aloof from politics. It is they who will have to dispel the image by feeling free to participate in politics as any other good citizen should. How much a teacher involves himself in politics and the form of his participation will be determined by his own convictions and his own abilities and interests. Yet the citizen who is a teacher should be no less a citizen because of his profession.

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