

What Do Parents Need To Know?

PARENTS have always been interested in the schools their children attend. They have always welcomed assurance that their offspring were learning happily and successfully, and that they were participating in a variety of school activities. Only rarely, however, have they shown concern for such professional matters as school organization, curriculum or methods. Having gone to school themselves, parents felt they knew it well and were content. Although the school may have been changing more than they realized, these changes passed unnoticed or were accepted almost without comment.

In recent years, however, parents' awareness of their schools has been considerably sharpened. In the wake of Russian successes in space exploration, widespread criticism of education has become the order of the day. Modern journalism has turned its penetrating analysis upon American schools, and parents have read the results in newspapers and in a score of popular magazines. Interest-catching headlines—*Can Ivan Read Better Than Johnny?*—*Big Troubles in Our City Schools*—*Coming Boom in Ignorance*—*Harder Work for Students*—*U.S. Education Too Slow?*—have stimulated parents to ask questions—questions about aspects of education they have seldom before considered

their domain. Should children be learning more at an earlier age? Should more time be given to the 3 R's? Should children be grouped according to IQ? Should pupils be compelled to meet grade standards before promotion? Are new science and mathematics programs better than the old? Are our schools out-of-date? Why are we not taking steps to improve them? Questions and more questions have become the subject of community speculation and discussion.

Such unprecedented interest on the part of parents and others has generated a variety of pressures on the schools. Pressures to begin formal learning at earlier levels, to eliminate subjects not considered "fundamental," to group children according to ability, to departmentalize the elementary school, to restore fixed promotion standards, to apply external incentives to improve achievement—all these, for various reasons, have appeal for many parents. If pupils are not learning all they can in the primary grades, it seems logical to parents to insist that instruction in certain subjects be undertaken at an earlier age. If the fundamentals are being neglected, the solution, of course, is to give them more time in every school day. Convinced that

Maxine Dunfee is Professor of Education, Indiana University, Bloomington.

special teachers can teach mathematics better than the usual classroom teacher, parents naturally add their voices to the demand for specialists in various subjects. And so on. Parents want the best for their children. They want to conform to that which is being thought of as "moving in the right direction." It is to be expected that they may be caught up in pressures for change and may actually contribute to their realization.

How can patrons of the school understand and interpret changes and pressures for changes which are bound to come to their attention through various communication media and through their own contacts with the school? Will statistics about school finances, data about needs for new facilities, outlines of curriculum content, and descriptions of special services, all of which are commonly communicated to school patrons through various avenues of information, adequately prepare parents to evaluate proposals for change in terms of the needs and well-being of their own children? What, then, do parents need to know?

Children Are Different

Parents need to know, first of all, that children are different. To be sure, parents know this fact in a certain way. They buy clothes of different sizes for children of similar age; they do not expect all children to learn to walk or talk at the same age; they have daily evidence that children do not react emotionally or intellectually to problems in just the same way. Yet frequently they regard school achievement as though all children are the same and should be expected to act uniformly.

Furthermore, parents need to know that how and when a child learns are

individual matters and that rules cannot be laid down for all children to follow. Understanding this principle is an important step toward helping parents consider whether or not beginning formal instruction in certain subjects at lower levels of the elementary school is desirable for all children and for their children in particular. Even though embarkation upon such stepped-up programs may enhance the prestige of the school, parents need to be well-enough informed to think clearly about the advantages and disadvantages of certain new programs so enthusiastically reported in the press.

Parents need to know that children, not subjects, are the focus of the school curriculum. Since their own school experience emphasized the learning of content and the development of skills in the 3 R's, parents find it difficult to understand the modern school's concern for process, for functional use of knowledge, and for the acquisition of behaviors and skills consistent with the social setting of the school. Many and varied opportunities for experience, extensive resource materials, and experimentation with new teaching techniques make sense when parents understand that the curriculum must serve the needs of children.

Parents need to know that learning to learn has come to be an imperative in becoming an educated person. Many parents are aware of the explosion of knowledge, the difficulty of keeping up with what is happening in the world, and the multiplication of sources of information available to those who want to learn. Because it is impossible for children to deal specifically with all existing knowledge about their world, parents need to know that the emphasis must be upon acquiring habits of inquiry and upon learning prin-

ciples and ideas that can be used to organize information needed in solving problems today and in the future.

Learning and Evaluation

Parents need to know that seeing a purpose in learning produces more effective and lasting motivation than do the external incentives commonly employed by many schools. This knowledge is basic to understanding why the problem-solving approach to learning secures more active pupil participation than the traditional textbook emphasis. This knowledge also helps parents understand why pupil planning plays such an important part in their children's learning.

Parents need to know that evaluation of progress through school goes far beyond interpretation of test scores and the awarding of grades. Properly impressed with the many aspects of child growth and development with which the school is concerned, parents can readily see the inadequacy of these techniques in describing the child's total performance in school. The current interest in parent-teacher conferences to supplement or even to replace the report card is contributing much to parents' understanding of evaluation in its broader sense.

These, then, are some of the things parents need to know. A real understanding of such imperatives will do much to encourage the reasoning parent to support many of the improvement projects in which school patrons are frequently involved—pleas for space and equipment, for expanded libraries, for new forms of reporting, for extended school experiences, or for special services. All these are practical concerns too little understood by patrons in terms of children's learning. Parents need to know the principles on which educators base these calls for help.

How can parents be brought into partnership with the schools in a helpful way? How can they acquire a background of understanding about their children's school progress that will make their participation in school affairs meaningful? To achieve this partnership, dozens of handbooks and bulletins have been written; just turning through them produces an impression that every conceivable technique for improving home-school relationships already has been invented and tried. This article does not need to summarize this long list of ideas. It is important, however, to emphasize three keys to the problem which may help parents unlock the door to some of the ideas mentioned earlier.

Keys to Understanding

The first essential key is *evidence*. Intelligent parents can be impressed with evidence, and there is evidence to support most of the ideas parents need to understand. The evidence is available from at least two sources—research and observation. Research evidence, unfortunately, seldom leaves the office of the professional; yet why would it not be possible to muster the evidence on any given point, present it simply and effectively in terms that parents can understand, and make it available in a variety of striking ways? If research evidence has convinced educators, why would such evidence not convince parents who really care about their schools?

Observation offers another avenue for gathering evidence. Why not a series of directed observations for interested parents? Guide sheets could be made available to them, calling attention to individual differences, to improvements in methods of teaching, or to changes in emphasis in the school's program. Di-

rected observation is a dependable technique for the education of teachers; would it not be effective in the education of parents?

A second key to the problem of helping parents to know is *communication*. Communication is essential if evidence gathered through research and observation is to be interpreted successfully. It thrives best when parents feel comfortable at school and in the presence of school people, when the school is a real part of the local community, and when parents and teachers can speak the same language. There are no substitutes for these conditions, and schools would do well to achieve them as a prerequisite to improved understanding.

Demonstration lessons illustrating new methods and techniques, emphasizing ways of meeting individual differences, problem-solving approaches to study, and the use of varied resources for learning—all followed by discussion, questions and answers—can promote a sense of partnership and sharpen parents' appreciation of the educational process. Study groups which explore further how knowledge of children gives guidance to the school program can be a challenge to both professional and lay participants. Mass media, of course, have a significant role to play in this communication between home and school. Graphically and accurately, with eye- and ear-catching accoutrements to attract the most casual reader or viewer, these resources can tell the story of the school—not only what it is but what it ought to be and why.

A third key to helping parents learn what they need to know is *involvement*. In building understanding there is nothing more effective than participation in a process.

Parents, like their children, learn best when they are personally concerned

about a problem and when they take part in searching for a solution. Parents can be involved in gathering evidence needed to illustrate any one of the ideas important for them to grasp. In informal conversation groups they can analyze and interpret such evidence and consider its implications for school practice. Assisting in classroom and school activities clarifies problems of teaching and administration, especially if professional people in charge seize the opportunity to emphasize the philosophy and point of view of the school about children and their learning experiences.

Acting in advisory capacities in curriculum study groups is an experience for parents so rewarding in real insight into the educational process that there is no acceptable substitute. Participation in community projects from which all children will benefit—the building of a museum, the improvement of recreational facilities, the sponsoring of out-of-school activities for youth, or the establishment of educational television—these also lead to better parent understanding of the central concern of the school—the growth and development of the child within the social setting.

Parents need to know, and in the knowing they become more effective participants in the educational effort, more confident and supportive patrons of the school, and better interpreters of its program to segments of the community not touched by school activities. The headlines will continue to attract parents interested in children and schools. Yet some fortunate parents who have been accepted as real partners in the educational process will understand, interpret and evaluate wisely what they read and hear about their schools because what they need to know at a critical time, they will know.

Copyright © 1964 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.