

Cities, People

—and Schools

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THE terms "urbanization," "urban schools," "the changing city," "inner-city teachers" and "slum children" conjure up in the minds of many citizens and quite a few educators, pictures of utter despair, substandard living, deprivation and neglect. In short, stereotypes have developed in relation to living, working and teaching in the city which are loaded on the side of negativism, harming the cities and all who live and work therein. Stereotyping has harmed the children of the inner city more seriously than others.

As one who has lived through the great social revolution of the 20th century, which received its renewed impetus as a result of the Supreme Court Decision on the Desegregation of Public Schools in May 1954, as one responsible in large measure for effecting integration in a formerly racially segregated school system in a medium sized city in a border state, as one who repudiates every form of human segregation based on race, nationality, religion, politics or intelligence, I am fully aware of the negative aspects genuinely identified with the terms quoted, but I have learned not to categorize cities, populations, schools, teachers or children.

Most cities of the nation have experienced upheaval, demolition, shifts in populations and in racial or minority ratios. Most have experienced the flight from the inner city of middle-income families whose places have been taken by larger families of deprivation. Most cities have become battlegrounds for the fight for justice or the venting of hatred and prejudice by militant Civil Rights groups and those who would maintain the supremacy of the "whites." Just as with Sputnik, the public schools of the cities have become the scapegoat, sometimes justifying the criticism rained upon them, more often, rallying to meet the demands of traumatic change under pressures few public institutions could stand and survive.

It is true that many cities fit the stereotypes coined by them, maintaining out-moded plants and facilities, unfair and derogatory practices in the employment and placement of teachers, unjust staff promotion policies for teachers of minority groups, and patterns of school organization which perpetuate segregation through the tracking of students. Nevertheless, blanket indictment of schools and the communities that maintain them is dangerous business.

We hear much of the total despair of the Watts area of Los Angeles, yet a val-

ued colleague of mine reported that he saw some of the finest teaching in a Watts school that he had ever observed and some of the most dismal teaching in a neighborhood university laboratory school.

In my own city, I know hundreds of families, living in poverty or near poverty, who maintain decent homes in the midst of the ghetto. Children from substandard neighborhoods, whose parents often receive welfare aid, appear in our schools clean, neat and attractive, sent to school by mothers who care enough to instill standards in spite of terrific odds. People who visit our schools in poverty areas ask, "Where are the slum children?" And one visitor, returning to her native land after years of living abroad, exclaimed, "You have high-class slums." There is little turnover of staff in inner-city schools and few non-certificated teachers. The teachers of these schools take pride in their accomplishments and some of the most ingenious teaching and creative efforts are found in schools which many middle-income parents look down upon in their ignorance. The schools and other agencies of the community are recognized for the quality of their cooperative efforts in the service of children and their families.

Problems of the Cities

The problems of the inner cities, their people and their schools are many, however, even when standards of quality prevail. Several, only, are identified:

—At a time when the inner-city population requires greater school services, smaller class size for effective learning, greater varieties of educational programs to meet the needs of a vast range of human intelligence found in every school, the tax base for support of public education is being whittled away by increasing numbers of residents unable to pay taxes, by the removal of property from the tax list for public housing, throughways and other needed developments demanded for the survival of the cities.

—The flight to the suburbs of middle-income families, the breakthrough from ghetto living by those financially able to move to better neighborhoods now open to them, and the concentration of publicly subsidized housing in the city, are factors contributing to some of the greatest social problems facing our nation, the segregation of peoples by economic status and the racial segregation of total cities surrounded by white suburbia.

—The demand by uninformed citizens for racial integration of public schools occurs at a time of declining white enrollments. Washington, D.C. is the true example of the impossibility of racial integration, with a ratio of 90 percent Negroes and 10 percent whites. Many cities across the country are approaching this ratio.

Possible Solutions

The solutions to the problems of cities, people and their schools have not been found although the search is on. I suggest that some of the elements of successful solutions which each community must resolve include:

1. The creation of new geographic, political and educational districts which will

incorporate cities and their suburbs. A pie-shaped plan is called for, with each new district a wedge of the pie, starting at center city and extending to the perimeter of the suburbs. In this plan it is almost inevitable that racial balance in school enrollments, distribution of economic levels and an adequate tax base for the support of public education will be assured.

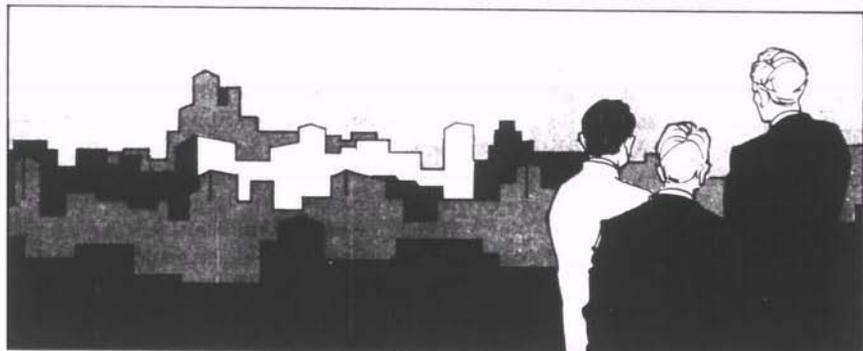
2. A renewed emphasis on education of high quality for all children and youth. While racial integration is a factor in high quality education, until redistricting occurs, as cited in the preceding statement, it is a fact of life that the schools are, in some cases, powerless to effect integration for all children. Preparing all children through high quality education is the chief solution at the present time. Quality does not refer alone to the college-bound. It refers to all programs any good school provides to meet various needs, abilities and aspirations of its youth.

3. The responsibility of faculties of teacher preparation institutions to climb down from their ivory towers, learn what is going on in the world, and provide teacher education programs designed to inspire young people to become equipped to serve successfully and with personal satisfaction in the schools of the inner city.

4. The acceptance by the total community of its responsibility to share in the solution to problems faced by its schools, and the willingness of the schools to open their doors to the community. No school that attempts to hide its problems or to bluff its way out of an attack, legitimate or not, can survive.

Each day, every child looks out of his own private window on the world. What he sees depends in large measure on his city, its people and its schools. What he sees and feels and comprehends determine what he will become. And what he becomes will determine what our nation will become in the years ahead. "Past is Prologue." Today's children are creating their past for the adults they will become. The people of the city, thus, are creating the future for generations to come.

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