

## A School's Reach

**FRED T. WILHELMS**

WHERE does the campus end and the community begin? As J. Paul Leonard said when he was President of San Francisco State College, "It's better if nobody can quite tell."

I know that one of the loftier clichés of our time runs to the effect that "Schools take on too many responsibilities and therefore fail to meet their central responsibility well." But my own observation points the other way: Schools are damaged—get a chilly, sterile quality—when they conceive their work narrowly; they blossom out in new vitality—and do everything better—when they reach out to do what needs to be done just because it needs to be done.

Those fussy, solicitous people who worry so about that "central responsibility" generally see it in exclusively intellectual terms: the teaching of subject matter and the training of the rational powers. Theirs is the kind of view that leads teachers into claiming that their only "truly professional" role is standing before a class and teaching a subject. It is the view which sets one exclusive criterion for a school: how fast and far it pushes its pupils in the acquisition of knowledge and skills. As a side effect, it is a view which tends to value the bright children and reject the rest. That school of thought achieved its dominance in the late '50's and early '60's—and we have been mopping up the results ever since.

It won't wash! Even if the only function *were* to impart knowledge and train the mind, it could be performed well only in a school that took the broader view. The intellect is not all that detached, and true education is a personal becoming—and the evidence for those statements is now so overwhelming that only the willful can ignore it.

Consider for a moment what gains could be achieved if the schools would lengthen their reach. At the early childhood level, the pioneering work of scholars like Martin Deutsch has shown beyond question that we could radically improve the cognitive effectiveness of children—perhaps especially that of children from slums and meager homes—if we instituted a genuine educational program at age two-and-a-half or three. Even Operation Head Start, hastily thrown to-

gether, amateurishly operated in many cases, has demonstrated that we simply do not need to have large numbers of children coming into the first grade too crippled intellectually to manage the school tasks. We still have a lot to learn about all this. But even with what we now know we could launch an early-childhood program, lasting several years and followed through in the ensuing years, that would change the whole level of school achievement. Here is an educational job of the first magnitude; it belongs in the schools; and it will not be done by people who are forever afraid that they will be spread too thin.

At the adolescent level a great variety of projects which might be subsumed under the term "Higher Horizons" (including "Upward Bound" and the inspired efforts of some universities to find diamonds in the rough and help them shine) testify to what can result when schools reach out beyond subject matter and the purely intellectual to work at cultural stimulation and the enrichment of the self-concept. The amazing thing is that it is so easy, with many youngsters who seem destined for the slag heap, to change the whole posture toward self and toward life. We know even less about this one—except that many different approaches "work." But it is obvious that the payoff can be tremendous, in relation to input. And, again, this is a job which won't get done by people who are afraid to skate on the outside edge.

### **Engaged with People**

Finally, one need only look at a healthy, vigorous country like Denmark to see what can happen when the schools stop fussing so much about their proper academic role and just engage themselves with people, regardless of age.

None of this means that the schools must *do* the whole job. But they do need to be *engaged* in the whole broad sweep of concerns, partly because they are the institution best situated and partly because the engagement will do the schools themselves a world of good.

Take the case of the new Parent-Child Centers, working with mothers and babies and even with prenatal problems. I cherish the hope that they will in some sense be "in the schools." Yet the massive and technical health and social services they will require can probably be supplied better by other agencies. Even if we actually administer very little of the program, it will do us a world of good to be "in on" the whole business of growing healthy, alert babies. Educators are all the better for it when they see themselves broadly as specialists in children—even if their actual daily job is to teach reading and arithmetic.

Or take vocational education. Unquestionably, the schools should be playing a much larger part in it. Yet most of it might well take the form of *work experience*. Then most of the "learning stations" will be out in the community and most of the equipment will be that of the community's enterprises. All this can be true and yet the schools can be the senior partner in the planning and coordination and in the endless search for the enrichment of educational opportunity.

Again, the schools should engage themselves because they are the agency best situated. Yet enormous gains will accrue to the schools themselves, just out of

being involved with a bigger slice of life. Nothing is so healthy for us school people as to see life more nearly whole. If we were truly involved in the real world of work, the effects would resonate back through every part of the curriculum.

One could go on and on with examples. We cannot do all the television broadcasting that is to be labeled "educational," but we can and should be deeply concerned with it, and playing an active role. We needn't run the libraries and museums, but we ought to be in partnership with them.

### **Society's Tribune**

Of course, all this will take more money, more staff. But we are going to have those, if we have the vision to use them. I think we scare too easily; we tend to boggle at ventures of great magnitude, because we aren't already used to them, even though we carry on even greater ventures with aplomb, because we *are* used to them. The schools are essentially society's tribune for children and youth. The only real definition of our "proper" role grows out of that truth—and we ought to go wherever it leads us.

For myself—to take just one example—I think it is arrant nonsense, in a nation as rich as ours, that little children are still starting school with bodies enfeebled by malnourishment and poor medical care, with a lifetime of dental trouble ahead because they got a bad start. I should like to enlarge the concept of "Head Start" to a solid *good start*. And I wish we school people would get off our academic hobby horses and wade in to take the lead—*regardless of what it costs*.

If this be socialism, make the most of it. This great nation has become what it is largely because it has been uniquely ingenious at using the schools as *troubleshooters*, using them to do what has to be done. In other nations, for the most part, the schools have stuck to that old "central responsibility"—and their economies and their societies show it!

Now we have reached a very high plateau. As a nation we are gathering our nerve for the next big push. If we schoolmen are going to put the mighty engine of education behind that push, we had better be gathering our nerve, too.

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