

# Supervising Supervisors in an Urban School District

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**R**ECENT writers on the problems of urban schools seem to insist that most supervisors and administrators are irrelevant and often obstructive in the process of education. Such major theoreticians of public education as Conant, Bruner, Keppel, and Clarke hint strongly that the Age of Reformation in education, particularly urban education, is in danger of foundering upon the rock of administrative hierarchy.

A fair question to be answered, then, in investigating the relationships between a supervisor and his subordinates in the central administrative hierarchy, is why *are* supervisors necessary? One would hope that it is not, as most of the stereotypes of the supervisor imply, to serve as inspector of a generally poorly trained and incompetent teaching staff—the chief duty of supervision in the late nineteenth century, and apparently still their chief duty in the sclerotic bureaucracies remaining in some of the major metropolises today.

It is not that the supervisor is the “specialist,” possessing all that is worth knowing about his subject and feeding it in nourishing mouthfuls to the infantry in the classroom, although a good supervisor must continue to be recognized as one of the outstanding teachers of his subject to be found anywhere. Nor can the supervisor any longer be the manipulator of teachers, cajoling them into discov-

ering goals and methods which have already been set for them by top administration.

Instead, the most important words found in recent descriptions of the supervisor's function are “help,” “aid,” “stimulate,” and “lead.” McKean and Mills, for example, see the supervisor as a facilitator, helping each school, each teacher, to develop the goals and methods appropriate to the particular educational climate within that school. For the central office consultant in the large school district, McKean and Mills are specific in delineating the limitations imposed upon him by the very nature of his job:

The central office consultant is limited in his contributions because he necessarily must spread his energies and resources among many schools in the system. He probably lacks intimate insight into the nature of the individual school's student population, the strengths and weaknesses of the faculty, close and continuing acquaintance with the building and equipment, evolving local modes of operation, shifting patterns of interrelationships among the staff, and prevalent feelings and attitudes toward change.

At the same time, he is apt to have a broad view of the total program of the school system. He can safeguard the individual school from excessive provincialism. His function may be to bring new perspective to local problems, to

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suggest different points of view, to help broaden the vision of building personnel, and to indicate new possibilities.

Ideally, the central office consultant works in a staff capacity. He has little or no administrative authority. For example, his services are better received and evaluated if he is not required to rate teachers. He ordinarily does not visit classes unless invited. As a supervisory consultant he must convince teachers of the worth of his suggestions. The special art of supervision is the ability to help teachers discover better approaches to instruction, rather than directing or requiring them to use different methods or teaching materials.<sup>1</sup>

If supervisors in urban school districts could work within the definition set down by McKean and Mills, they would be welcomed into the classroom rather than dreaded, as apparently they are in some systems. Nevertheless, in many urban districts, central office consultants continue to rate teachers, often on the basis of a single observation. There may be some value in this central office observation, in that it obliges the supervisor doing the rating to visit probationers regularly if he is to perform this function honestly. The disadvantage, aside from the strong possibility that the evaluation is based on skimpy evidence, is that rating inevitably raises a barrier between the supervisor and all but the most secure or the most indifferent of teachers, a barrier which interferes with the primary job of the consultant—to help, to stimulate, to lead.

In a large school system only two basic approaches to central supervision can be possible. One is to hold the entire system to a single approved approach to all instructional problems. The other is to maintain a flexible and varied curriculum by helping individual schools and even individual teachers to make the fullest use of their own talents and resources, and without ignoring individual liabilities. The second approach, despite the difficulties it poses for the central office supervisor, is the direction of the future. The supervisor in education will con-

tinue to exist only if his role changes from that of the "overseer" to that of stimulator and colleague.

There are disadvantages to democracy, even in education. For one thing, it takes longer to come to a decision, and in these impatient times for the cities, when federal funds come trailing hundreds of strings—guidelines, deadlines—it is often difficult to give up time to democratic planning, when to the experts the solutions already seem so obvious.

Teachers themselves are often unwilling to give up the time for joint planning, but perhaps this is because their contributions to planning have had to be made on their own time. Districts must provide meeting time for teachers if they expect joint planning efforts to work. The involvement of principal and teachers in determining for their school the best use of the services of a reading specialist means that the reading specialist will receive stronger staff support than if his job description were determined centrally. The decision of an individual school to adopt structural linguistics, transformational grammar, a multitext or eclectic approach, or no text at all, as the best way to develop sensitivity to and precision in the use of English in communication, is the best way to ensure that teachers *want* to make a method work. Whether it be Hawthorne effect, professional pride, or just plain stubbornness, teachers when challenged will make their own methods work—when, somehow, other methods fail.

Of course, as supervisors, the members of our staff often find themselves in disagreement with the teachers and administrators they are trying to help. Often the director will find himself in disagreement with his supervisors. Yet if he were consistently to overrule their decisions (sometimes it may be necessary) in recommending a particular teacher for transfer or a particular textbook for adoption, he would be communicating his lack of faith in their judgment as specialists in their particular field. On the other hand, if he can convince his colleagues through reason, through his ability to win respect and

<sup>1</sup> Robert C. McKean and H. H. Mills. *The Supervisor*. Washington, D.C.: Center for Applied Research in Education, 1964. p. 40.

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confidence, even enthusiasm for a point of view not originally their own, then he has made his point as a professional rather than as an authoritarian. In the same way he and his staff members try to direct their efforts in working with principals, department heads, teachers, and librarians, to promote their enthusiasms, their feelings of adequacy and personal worth, their originality, toward the goal of helping children to learn.

### Preparation of Supervisors

Martin Haberman describes teacher education as "a process whereby each individual is offered numerous personal choices as he lives through a variety of experiences."<sup>2</sup> The education of supervisors does not differ markedly in terms of goals and objectives from the education of teachers. McKean and Mills' list of personal characteristics necessary for the successful supervisor are much the same as those for the successful teacher:

- Ability to win respect and confidence
- Empathy and sensitivity
- Enthusiasm
- Feeling of adequacy
- Originality
- Sense of humor
- Sense of relative value
- Resourcefulness.<sup>3</sup>

Another writer describes the successful supervisor as one who is democratic, "people-oriented," able to see situations as others do, well-informed, and so forth,<sup>4</sup> again undeniably the qualities of the successful teacher. The important difference is that the supervisor works with adults, with professionals, with intellectual equals, with teachers often more gifted than himself. Insofar as the supervisor is a model, a leader, a teacher of teachers, he must exemplify all that is best

<sup>2</sup> Martin Haberman. "The Professional Sequence for Preparing Teachers: A Proposal." Mimeographed working paper for the Teacher Education Conference, University of Rochester, Rochester, New York, January 6, 1966.

<sup>3</sup> McKean and Mills, *op. cit.*, pp. 42-44.

<sup>4</sup> Jane Franseth. *Supervision as Leadership*. New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, Inc., 1961. pp. 59-71.

in contemporary teaching by stimulating professional growth among the teachers with whom he is working.

As head of a large department in the instructional division of my school district, I am charged with curriculum and staff development in English, reading improvement, and libraries. My department, because of its strategic importance in the education of disadvantaged children, has mushroomed during the last three years, as a result of the wider availability of federal and state funds. By the fall of 1968 Rochester schools had employed 160 English teachers, 60 or more reading improvement teachers, and 30 librarians. To accomplish any change in language instruction, in library utilization, or reading improvement, I must rely upon the supervisors reporting to me to maintain an efficient and coordinated program.

Nine of the supervisors are English department heads in secondary schools, who are responsible chiefly to their schools. We meet together regularly on a city-wide basis to discuss materials, methods, and curriculum; we meet individually to discuss specific school problems of personnel, class load, and innovation. Three of the supervisors—a teacher on special assignment in English, a supervisor of reading improvement, and a supervisor of libraries—work directly with me. Although their responsibilities are great, they have a more immediate knowledge than I of the teachers and students with whom they work. In working with these supervisors I have found it necessary to delegate increasing amounts of authority as my own responsibilities have increased. This delegation in turn has placed obligations on me to help the supervisors meet these new responsibilities.

In an article discussing the relationship of administrators to their staffs, Chester Ingils probes the motivations of administrators who hesitate in their obligations to staff development.

Many administrators . . . follow practices that indicate a lack of recognition that they have any part in the developmental process of subordinates. Some follow practices that show signs of actions that would impede (if not prevent) a subordinate from progressing in his develop-

ment. They withhold from a subordinate knowledge of the organization or the environment in which the unit operates.<sup>5</sup>

Ingils sees the delegation of authority as "an absolute necessity for the successful operation of an organization. Without delegation, growth and development of the organization is limited to the capacity of one man."<sup>6</sup> He suggests that an inability to delegate grows out of fear by an administrator or leader that he will be superseded by a more successful or more dynamic subordinate—the same kind of fear, one might propose, that makes it difficult for authoritarian supervisors to give teachers the initiative.

An administrator's feelings toward delegation are often mixed. The leader has attained success and often believes that this success is truly a result of his own ability and efforts. This feeling becomes a psychological block that impedes him from delegating responsibility and authority. . . . Because of the competitive environment in which he has worked and progressed through the ranks, he often is concerned about the competition he will experience from subordinates. A latent fear of this competition causes him to be afraid that his subordinates will do the work as well as he can—or maybe better.<sup>7</sup>

Although Ingils published his article in an educational journal, he could actually be discussing any organization with an administrative hierarchy. And although he is discussing the relationship of an administrator to subordinates within the hierarchy, his comments are equally pertinent to the relationship of the supervisor to the teacher. Human awareness, "empathy" McKean and Mills call it, is key to any supervisory relationship.

### Staff Responsibility

What Ingils means is that, having participated in the choice of staff, the administrator is obligated to make it possible for staff members to do their job. The nature of the work must be clearly defined, as well as

<sup>5</sup> Chester Ingils. "Advice to Administrators: Clues for Success." *The Clearing House* 42 (1): 15; September 1967.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

the sources of information necessary to accomplish it. In reflecting on this point recently, I discovered that it was much easier for me to define responsibilities for the supervisors of reading and of libraries, areas in which I have less training, than in English. Perhaps this was because I was reluctant to share these responsibilities, even though the growth of my own job made such delegation necessary.

As the subordinate becomes familiar with his new responsibility he should be assigned increasing authority and responsibility that in part was previously held by the administrator. The administrator should retain the prerogative of evaluation of the work that is performed and the privilege to redefine the subordinate's responsibility. At the same time, he should guard against interference with how the work is accomplished.<sup>8</sup>

Guarding against interference includes concern for the conditions under which the supervisor must work. The leader must also be concerned for the morale of his subordinates. He must be sure that their status and salary are commensurate with their responsibilities relative to the organization. He must help them obtain the office space and clerical assistance necessary to their positions. He must help them to define the limits of their individual responsibilities so that they do not attempt more than their capabilities at a given time will allow and so that they can work to their fullest capacities without fatigue and without frustration. When necessary he may have to intervene in support of his subordinates when additional assignments from elsewhere in the organization threaten accomplishment of their regularly defined tasks. A leader who is insensitive to these needs may unconsciously but deliberately be contributing to the lack of success of his subordinates, just as a supervisor who is unconcerned about the work-load or free time of the teachers with whom he is working may in effect become an obstacle to education.

For supervisors and for leaders of super-

visors, the possibilities in a democratic organization always exist that (a) the subordinate may accomplish a particular task more successfully than the administrator and (b) the subordinate might make a mistake. Here, I feel, lie the greatest challenges of all to the ego of the democratic administrator-supervisor. For he must be willing to recognize publicly a job well done (even when it is done differently from the way he would have done it) and, paradoxically, to share without rancor the responsibility for mistakes.

Many administrators find it difficult to do this. . . . They do not have faith in their subordinates, and instead are prone to elaborate and dwell on the error. Such an approach does not correct the mistake, aid the employee in improved decision-making, build his confidence, or aid in the growth of the organization.<sup>9</sup>

When the leader has selected competent subordinates and has provided them with problems clearly defined and with sufficient information and sufficient time to act upon the problem, the problem will probably be solved. "If these elements do not exist," says Ingils, "it is the failure of the administrator."<sup>10</sup> It is a point worth pondering.

American education is undergoing a dramatic change in organization. Within a relatively short time teacher councils, through collective bargaining, will assume many of the functions in decision making now performed almost exclusively by top administration. It would be unfortunate if this shift is based upon power relationships rather than on consideration of what is best for the children in the schools.

In 1961, Henry Brickell could still say pragmatically that the moment the teacher steps outside of his classroom he exerts little force for change.<sup>11</sup> By 1968 it has become clear that in large school districts, and ultimately in all districts, teachers and administrators will shortly become either colleagues or rivals in educational leadership. A central

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 17-18.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Henry M. Brickell. *Organizing New York State for Educational Change*. Albany: New York State Department of Education, 1961. p. 23.

office organization can prepare for this likelihood by developing "collegiality" within its own ranks as it continues at the same time to involve teachers in educational leadership.

Authority for appropriate decisions would rest, not with an official leader, but with the staff as a whole. Leadership would be by consent—delegated to the emergent leader who would be elected by the staff itself. Decision-making would be broadly based; a product of wide involvement.

One might well ask, "What will this do to the profession of school administration?" It seems clear that an administrator is no less a professional if he participates as a member of the staff rather than as the official leader of the staff!<sup>12</sup>

There is still need for individual leadership in education. The first task of that leadership is to remove the obstacles that have prevented teachers from sharing in the decisions affecting their work. The second is to join with teachers in a common concern for education as a profession.

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<sup>12</sup> Robert C. McKean. "Decision-Making: The Administrator Needs a New Outlook." *The Clearing House* 41(5): 287; January 1967.

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