

Politics and School

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WE HAVE JUST come through another election year. We may have stumbled, or groped blindly, or perhaps "marched confidently" through this period of crucial decision making. Regardless of this, however, we, as citizens and as school people, need to look at "what happened" and why. We need to look at the dynamic of change that is labeled "politics." We need to study the informed citizen's role, especially in the influencing of governmental policy relating directly or indirectly to schools and to education.

One definition of politics, though it may be oversimplified, might be the power to influence change in opinion or conviction—and thus to change behavior. In a democracy it is vital that all persons understand and be able to use wisely and responsibly the power to influence others. It is essential also that change be directed toward worthy democratic goals and that it be based on a deliberative rather than solely an emotional process. The schools and their personnel can contribute here. They have a significant part in transmitting the skills of a deliberative process of change that will result in growth and improvement for all who are affected by the school program.

School people are interested not only in the decisions that the voters have made in the recent elections; they are even more concerned with the processes by which the citizens arrived at their decisions. How did they come to their choices? Were they influenced by prejudice, by half-truths, by lack of information and facts? Were they victimized by the attractively packaged and highly slanted "messages" conveyed by the mass media? Or did they, indeed, rely on critical thinking, on accurate information, and on thoughtful analysis?

Doubtless the personnel of public schools need to give more attention to their part in the privilege and task of understanding and mastering the subtleties of politics. This force, whether we will it or not, relates very intimately to the public institution of which we are a part. Politics exerts a continuing influence on the effectiveness of the school, its establishment,

maintenance, direction, and program. In a broader perspective, of course, the school, in turn, helps to shape the course of politics and thus the destiny of all citizens of our democracy.

To Influence Change

What are some of the questions growing out of the influence of politics upon the school, and out of the more immediate and the long-range influence of the school upon politics? Here are examples of such questions:

What is the role of school personnel in relation to politics? Should political issues and political processes be discussed in the classroom? How can children and young people learn to direct their acts by critical thinking, to solve problems on their own, to analyze issues, to act intelligently in situations that on the surface may appear to be deceptively misleading or of little significance? What is the traditional attitude of the school staff and the school board toward politics in the school? What is the role of the teacher and of other staff members in regard to political action, such as politicking, electioneering, or running for office? What is the attitude of school people toward political demonstrations, the right to—and the procedures of—responsible dissent?

What issues, strongly contested in the political realm, at local, state, or national levels, affect the public schools, whether or not such issues are recognized, debated, or even discussed openly? Should school people be concerned, either in the classroom or outside the school, in peaceful and lawful action in furthering progress toward social reform, intelligent use of dissent, and mature assumption of other rights and responsibilities of citizenship?

What type of education is needed by children and young people in order to help them become citizens who can participate intelligently and effectively in politics and in an election?

Persons who are concerned with the influencing or effecting of change must be interested in the dynamics of political action. Supervisors, curriculum specialists, and teachers are, in a special sense, devoted to the achieving of change, growth, and improvement. In their work each day they are directing efforts toward identifying and evaluating areas that may well need to be changed. They must help in preparing strategy for bringing about change and improvement, whether inside the classroom, within the staff, the local system, or the local school community. Certainly some of the techniques for influencing opinion and for effecting change in a free society are evident in the school setting—often involving an interplay between the classroom and the larger community.

If politics is considered to be the power of influencing opinion and effecting change, then school people need to understand and to be able, when necessary, to use such a force in behalf of children and young people. Politics—the implement for change—must be placed squarely and as early as possible in the hands of the young. Only so can we attain and maintain what Jefferson termed “an enlightened citizenry,” and a viable democracy.

—ROBERT R. LEEPER, *Editor, Educational Leadership.*

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