

Crisis in School Organization

LUVERN L. CUNNINGHAM *

WE THROW words around indiscriminately these days. "Crisis" is an example. It probably is not at all an appropriate or useful term anymore. The media have effectively emasculated the word. Nevertheless we use it—over and over again. Now we employ the notion to describe our current uncertainties within or about school organization.

Certainly widespread anxiety about educational organization is shared by lay citizens and professionals alike. Ironically, targeted interests such as improving the teaching of reading, acquiring social values or sharpening motor skills shift quickly to examinations of educational organization. And discussion of organization too often begins with an apology. "Organization really doesn't make much difference—it's what goes on in the classroom that really counts."

The fact is that organization *does* make a difference. That is why we turn so frequently to the subject.

Citizen, student, and teacher pressures are upsetting our traditional thinking about educational organization and, concomitantly, decision making within organization. In my judgment the product of these clashes will be healthier institutions. So, on with the fray.

A sprinkling of extremists would have us smash all traditional conceptions of educational organization—indeed, such may be necessary in some cases. Creating entirely

new institutions may be required where men of good intentions can find no way to overcome the dysfunctional features of large scale bureaucracy. Yet I doubt this will be necessary across the board.

The "destroy" alternative is seductive. We can get all wrapped up emotionally in organizational genocide with no one assuming responsibility for drafting a new institutional design. Following this alternative, we would find ourselves disconsolately rummaging through the ruins, looking for rubble to use in the invention of new institutions.

Things are bad but they are not that bad. Anarchy would only produce new tyrannies. Our responsibility, it seems to me, is to face our imperfections squarely—inequity, prejudice, discrimination, powerlessness, alienation—and deal with them. We are faced, probably for the first time, with the imperative of bringing our ideals into juxtaposition with reality. John W. Gardner's language is eloquently reassuring:

The effort to educate all our citizens entails certain consequences. It means mass education. It means crowded schools and huge universities. It means devising educational programs for youngsters who will grow up to be plumbers and farmers as well as for those who will grow up to be philosophers and art critics. In short, it is a very different system from one

* Luvern L. Cunningham, Dean of the College of Education, The Ohio State University, Columbus

designed to educate young aristocrats for the role of cultivated gentlemen. We have set ourselves a task of astonishing dimensions. And having set ourselves these objectives, we cannot weep because our educational system no longer resembles the cozy, tidy world we deliberately put behind us.¹

Organizational tensions are emanating from three interrelated but sharply conflicting centers of power. And each of these power arenas is marked by internal differences and stresses which make life even more interesting.

Student Disenchantment

Professor Nystrand at The Ohio State University has just completed a study of student unrest in selected secondary schools in five cities.² He found in these schools a variety of student feelings about life, many of which were deep seated. Their sentiments were, however, based upon matters over which school officials have some control. Remarkably few of the student leaders of boycotts, walkouts, demonstrations, or marches on boards of education wanted to obliterate the existing system and start over. Their frustrations, which had escalated into violence or near violence, were understandable and probably justified. Although the participants in riots or other types of demonstrations included all types of students, the leaders were bright, often alienated young men and women.

A short time ago I met one evening with a hundred junior and senior high school students who were forming a city-wide (out of school) student organization. The questions addressed to me were searching, penetrating, exciting. But the evening was saturated with hostility toward "the establishment." And the establishment included me, the school system, all adults, even their peer group conformists who in their judgment were selling out to the "system."

¹ John W. Gardner. *No Easy Victories*. New York, Evanston, and London: Harper and Row, Publishers, Inc., 1968. p. 68.

² Raphael O. Nystrand. *Student Unrest in Public Schools*. Worthington, Ohio: Charles A. Jones Publishing Company, 1969.

Similarly, in interviews with student walkout leaders in other places, the grievances that students have expressed are such that they not only evoke sympathy but should be responded to organizationally. For example, one student said:

... black children do not leave their problems on the doorstep of the inner city high school. They take them into these high schools—problems they face in their community, problems of life, problems that black people really face. They take into the schools their hate for the white people that they meet, not only in the community, but prejudiced white people who take offices in the schools. . . . black students cannot leave their brains, or their hatred, or their determination on the doorstep of the school.³

The prejudice indictment is severe but not unexpected; nor is it a phenomenon which should be ignored by school officials. Racial prejudice among teachers, counselors, or administrators must be dealt with—not swept under the rug as we have been prone to do in the past. It is ironic that part of the pressure for facing prejudice head-on should come from students. It is also refreshing.

Student anxiety turns on such things as prejudice, curricular irrelevancy, and lack of access to the decision system of the school. All of these are matters to which school officials can and must respond.

Community Tension

A few weeks ago a national task force completed a survey of new forms of citizen participation in school affairs for the Urban Coalition. The team reviewed developments in 13 cities, including some examples of "community control" within established large city school districts. The similarity is remarkable between the aspirations of disenfranchised students and disappointed adults who want to share in educational decisions. Each wants political access, curricular reform especially in the arena of social issues, enhanced attention to and respect for the problems of each child, sustained communi-

³ These interviews were conducted by Russell Spillman, a staff member at the Cooperative Educational Research Laboratory, Inc., during the early autumn of 1968.

cation between students and the schools and citizens and the schools.⁴

There is a lot of fuzzy thinking about community control—and about decentralization. The concepts of community control and decentralization are frequently confused, sometimes treated synonymously, and almost certain to evoke emotions. They are not the same in practice. Many forms of decentralization have been implemented or proposed thus far. Yet no genuine new form of community control has been achieved.

In December of 1968 and January of 1969 articles, essays, or editorials on community control and/or decentralization appeared in such journals as *Commentary*, *The Atlantic*, *The New Republic*, *Phi Delta Kappan*, and *The Saturday Review*. The variation in perspectives shown by the contributors on these matters is dramatic.

Proponents of community control believe that all (fundamental and trivial) decisions about education are the right, responsibility, even the obligation of parents. So firmly is this position held that the existence of racially apartheid schools is preferred to forms of organization that would allow for racially mixed educational experiences. Opponents of this posture such as John R. Everett believe that:

... it is folly to think that the average non-professional citizen would have either the time or the inclination to keep up with the mountain of reports, articles, and books on these (educational) subjects each year. Here lay boards must trust professionals, and the school system will meet community needs in exact proportion to the skill and effectiveness of the professional and his freedom from local community pressures.⁵

The discussion swirling about community control would be ludicrous if it were not so critical to those who now are discovering its meaning. For the first time large numbers of people are taking it seriously,

⁴ Luvern L. Cunningham and Raphael O. Nystrand, *New Forms of Citizen Participation in School Affairs*. Columbus, Ohio: College of Education, 1968 (mimeographed). This report is to be published by the Urban Coalition early in 1969.

⁵ John R. Everett. "The Fight To Run the Schools." *The Atlantic* 222:73; December 1968.

especially in black, lower-class neighborhoods. Community control has been practiced (imperfectly) for decades in thousands of the nation's school districts. Just a few years ago there were in this country well over 100,000 local units of school government (most of them rural) with tax levying authority. Each one had its own board composed of laymen. Tragically we discovered that this pattern of educational government was not serving us well, at least as we defined our needs at that time. Now we find ourselves confronted with the prospect of reproducing those events in our large cities. And I think we must reproduce those events. Ghetto residents must make decisions and assume responsibility for the educational decisions affecting the lives of their children.

Teacher Aggressiveness

The press for participation on the part of teachers—aggressive and militant—in many cases is running headlong into the hostilities of students and parents. The conflict is no longer intellectual or academic. It is physical—as was so visibly demonstrated in Oceanhill-Brownsville last autumn. Such threats, indeed assaults, against teachers and administrators will undoubtedly continue. The tension between the organized profession and community groups in large cities is bound to grow. Parents want teachers to produce results in the classrooms—and the results are those to be specified by parents. Teachers expect protection against the encroachments of parents and students. They expect to exercise professional judgment about what is to be taught, and by whom.

Parent disquiet centers on the belief that teachers are not doing their jobs. Thus performance criteria or expectations will probably be included in future bargaining agreements. Achievement levels will be specified and salary proposals linked to performance expectations. Ghetto parents as well as parents in most other places think such proposals are reasonable. Discussions about appropriate performance criteria will sharpen issues quickly and draw attention dramatically toward overdue clarification of the goals and objectives of the schools.

From Here to Where?

John W. Gardner has observed that the pressures and strain on institutions are particularly severe when people who have suffered oppression, as have some of our minority groups, begin to see a chance for a better life.⁶ This is precisely what we have in our schools today: parents who see a chance for a better life for their children; teachers who see a chance for a better professional and personal life today, not next year; students who are crying out for a better shake for themselves now and not tomorrow.

The pressure cooker character of today's problems is not likely to be modified soon. Hopefully it will not change at least until we have responded to the issues which produced this environment. One of the genuine dangers I see is allowing ourselves to be stamped into impotence.

We should perfect our capacity to anticipate and to plan as well as to deal immediately with deficiencies. The uniform observation shared by teachers, students, and parents is that schools are nonresponsive. When problems surface nothing is done about them.

Yet something can be done about them. To return to my opening thesis: the features

⁶ Gardner, *op. cit.*, p. 2.

of organization *do* make a difference. Organization, any organization, can work at its problem. Most organizations—business, religious, academic—have a remarkable capacity for communicating indifference. Information flow is predominantly one way (outward).

Even when efforts are made to solicit reactions to the organization from parents and students, their recommendations for change are frequently ignored. Usually we talk about organizational "openness" in this regard but our efforts to achieve openness usually fall short. Yet organizational openness can be achieved.

Escalating student, teacher, and parent power suggests the need for creative ways to reconcile what may be competing purposes. An alliance between community (parent) and student interest against teachers seems quite likely. School officials should be thinking of ways to avoid dysfunctional confrontations and integrate the energies of all groups in the common pursuit of improved education.

Society is elevating its educational aspirations for all of its members. Fundamental transformations not only are expected: they are possible. We *can* indeed bring our ideals and achievements into harmony. □

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