

The New Breed of School Critic

LESLIE A. HART*

ON ONE side of the chasm are those who manage and operate the schools. On the other are those who send their children and pay the taxes—and who are becoming more and more concerned about the competence of educators to provide acceptable education. The gap between the two is dismayingly wide and potentially explosive. Bridging it, it seems to me, must be an urgent objective for all concerned with the future of public education.

In a real sense, those on either side live in different worlds. The working educator as a rule went through school, attended college, and then reentered the school world as a teacher, specialist, or administrator, with perhaps little more than a glimpse along the way of what all too soon became “the outside world.” Moonlighting jobs, summer work, and occasional contacts serve feebly to offset the persistent isolation normally engendered by teaching or other school employment.

To the lay person, looking from his side of the gap, the local school system has long seemed a walled fortress, fiercely resistant to intrusion. Let us admit the fact: those citizens who evidenced curiosity about the how and why of school functioning have likely soon found themselves fended off, none too subtly. The more penetrating their questions and persistent their intent, the more teachers and administrators seem to bridle. They suspect, often correctly, that the information if given may lead to criticism rather than applause; and they may feel also that their “professional” purlieus are being threatened.

The prober traditionally has been put off with delay, or double-talk, or “you wouldn’t understand.” If persistent, he has often been cast in the role of crank, troublemaker, or disreputable radical. Members of the board of education, equally allergic to informed criticism, usually join ranks with the staff to help put down the intruder.

In the past most would-be critics have rarely got far. Most citizens have assumed that the educators knew what they were doing overall, and that the schools were tolerably successful. Recalling their own experience

* *Leslie A. Hart, Author and Specialist in Advertising, Recruitment, and Audio-visuals, New Rochelle, New York*

of school as dull and hateful, they assumed that their children must also be prepared to endure. "I survived school—my kids will have to, too" about expressed the common parental attitude. The investigating citizen roused little support, even as he found the world of the schools strange, nebulous, and incomprehensible. Usually he gave up.

Few are the administrators today who do not realize times have changed. Barrage after barrage of criticism, much of it from highly placed sources, as well as shocking events have reduced to tatters the mantle of all-knowingness. Many a concerned citizen has begun to suspect that what educators know chiefly is how to run the schools of yesteryear—and even that by habit and rote more than by any fundamental, professional body of knowledge. Goaded by soaring taxation that seems to buy nothing new or better; alarmed by vandalism, arson, misbehavior, confrontations, and the widespread use of drugs; and upset by the schools' seeming inability to respond to current needs, the local critic is not now so easily put off.

At the same time, he is likely to regard education as more important than ever and more worth fighting for. The *quality* of education has become a hot issue. The probing citizen asks more pointed questions in an increasingly demanding tone. He wants answers.

The Layman Is Shocked . . .

Few working educators, I believe, comprehend or are prepared for the *shock* such laymen are going to get when the answers, under pressure, begin to trickle through. Educators view their world as normal. It is hard for them to see it through the eyes of those whose norm is the world of business, industry, science, technology, or a learned profession. However imperfect these environments may appear on close inspection, they use as a matter of course a basic assortment of 20th-century concepts, techniques, and controls. To discover that these are *not* used in the schools jolts the layman right down to his toes. To him, it is like entering what he has assumed to be a modern building and finding dirt floors, candles for light, no plumbing, and a log fire in the corner for heat.

Let me provide a few specific examples.

- The layman is *shocked* to find that the schools operate in a sea of opinion. Each teacher, each specialist, each administrator constantly makes decisions with little recourse to research, established findings, verifications, or the checking of results in meaningful ways. Myths, folklore, habit, antique practices continue in use because they are seldom checked against readily available knowledge. School people often seem not even to *care* whether what they are doing is the best practice, so long as it suits their convenience and preferences. Pressed to justify their views, they become annoyed and abusive, as though no such obligation exists and the request is a personal attack. To the layman, such behavior seems irresponsible, and so unscientific as to suggest something out of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*.

- The layman is *shocked* to discover that teachers are paid almost wholly without regard to assignment or performance. One may get \$10,000 for handling a class of 30, while another next door with pre-

cisely the same responsibilities (and perhaps more ability) receives \$5,800. Two teachers are each paid \$7,500, one of whom is considered atrocious, the other the school's best. For almost all teachers, there is nothing approaching an adequate "promotion ladder," no way to get paid more for superior teaching. Locked into a classroom, largely prevented from watching other teachers work, a teacher can readily become less sensitive, more rigid, more outdated and weary each year—yet win a pay increment based on "experience"! The layman gasps in disbelief, and when forced to believe, grows angry.

- The layman is *shocked* to find that the schools expend huge sums, requiring more than half of all local and perhaps state taxes, without the remotest sense of cost accounting. Records show who got the money, but whether a particular expenditure has produced any observable or measurable educational result is usually a total mystery. Money is spent mainly the way it was spent last year. Inertia is the chief guide. Useless, even harmful practices can continue to absorb funds for decades because there is no built-in or provided check or feedback to call a halt—even while the educators cry poverty and ask more taxes each year. Accustomed to having to justify every dollar he spends by proving results, the layman feels his head reeling as he beholds this wanton squandering of public funds.

- The layman is *shocked* to learn that the school operates in a state of near-anarchy, with teachers "owning" their classrooms and doing just about what they please within them—often almost literally thumbing their noses at school, system, or even state policies, and virtually daring their superiors to supervise them. That effective supervision and control has all but vanished is too evident. Principals in turn ignore, defy, or frustrate their central administration. To suppose that such a disjointed, unsteered, diffuse organization can respond to complex and urgent needs of the day seems to the layman purest madness.

Administrators, I believe, have but one practical course open: to invite the critic "inside," to help him know and accept the realities, and genuinely to ask his assistance in reform. This calls for vision and new attitudes, to be sure. Yet we already have had ample previews of the alternative: the confrontations and tax revolts we have seen are but a mild sample of what can soon come. More and more often, for more and more reasons, *schools close down*. General collapse may be nearer than many working educators realize. The informed critic, able to help bring into the schools 20th-century practices that school people know little of, is needed as never before. He can contribute greatly, and he should be encouraged to do so. □



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