

Can Institutions Change?

GORDON McANDREW *

INSTITUTIONS can and do change, though generally the process is slow and forced. This is true, because those in control have a vested interest in maintaining the status quo. They accommodate reluctantly and often after the fact. When the gap between the "haves" and the "have nots" becomes too wide, there may follow violent confrontation which, while perhaps necessary, is disruptive to the social fabric. Hence, it is in the best interest of the "establishment" to keep a careful reading of "institutional lag" and to be willing to accommodate. At the same time they must be able to direct, to some degree, what happens. Such is the essence of leadership.

One of the forces currently operating in public education has to do with what we have come to call community control of urban schools. The issue is symptomatic of many things, not the least of which is a growing conviction on the part of poor minorities that the public school is not serving them well. I happen to believe that this grievance has much merit. That aside, however, the educational establishment is not about to turn over control of schools to any "community." It cannot, however, ignore the forces behind that demand. Hence, ways must be found to bring about accommodation and avoid confrontation.

Recently the Gary, Indiana, public schools received a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation to begin what we are calling a Reciprocal Education Program. This program addresses the issue I have described and hopefully will help change an institution in

the direction of better serving children. What follows is essentially the proposal as it was submitted to the Foundation.

Like It Is

They were telling it like it is . . .

They sat in chairs, sprawled on the floor, or leaned against the wall, but there was an intensity and a sense of urgency when they spoke.

A young science teacher in one of Gary's schools told how he had been at the end of his rope trying to keep the attention of his classes. . . . He brought in a record player and now plays "soul" music softly in the background during class and everyone is quiet and the students work on projects while humming and tapping out rhythms—and grades have improved considerably.

A black, middle-aged parent visitor (a paraprofessional social worker) recounts an incident about an alcoholic mother with five children and no husband. Until the parent visitor took the time to fix her a cup of coffee and help her iron a dress and literally took her by the hand, the mother never showed any interest in her children's schooling. Accompanied by the parent visitor, the mother went to school, eventually spent an hour a day there helping to move students from one building to another. Her children took more pride in their mother; their behavior changed; their studies improved . . . and, in follow-up

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calls, it has been found that even the mother's drinking problem has been markedly reduced. Says the parent visitor, "Parents will respond to parents."

The young minister, in turtleneck and engineer boots, speaks of the problem of the organized church, and of the pitiful recreation situation in Gary. . . .

And someone says, "First of all, we've got to believe that we can do it!" Only a glance at the group tells you—they believe that they can do it!

There are 38 million black, white, and Latin American poor people in this country, most of them consigned to a ghetto of one kind or another. The children of many of these people are receiving an education which has absolutely no relevance to their problems or needs. How can a youngster care when Magellan sailed around the tip of South America or in what year Edward the Second took the throne, when his belly is empty and his bed is full of bedbugs and other youngsters . . . and his mother is an alcoholic or a junky and she is too high to know her own name, much less have the ambition to fix him a breakfast or talk to his teacher because he doesn't know how to diagram a sentence.

And let's also face up to the fact that when Johnny and Sally have spent 10 years in this Alice in Wonderland educational experience getting their heads pumped full of mostly useless trivia, they will kiss those hallowed halls of learning goodbye and head for the street corner or back alley and perch there with the rest of the Drop Out Gang . . . like accidents waiting to happen.

Many would react to this by shaking their heads and saying, "So? What do you want me to do? Change the educational system in the many ghettos? Change it so that young Johnny can relate to his school? Enlarge the influence of the schools? Bring in an up-with-people feeling? Create 'community'? Do you want me to wave the magic wand and say the secret word so that Johnny and his mother and all the others will maybe begin to shake off their fears and their inferiorities and come back into the land of the living again?"

That is exactly what the School City of



Photos courtesy of the author

Minority groups believe the schools have not helped them face economic realities.

Gary wants. Because we know that what we are proposing will work. *We believe* it will work. We have already seen some of the beginnings.

Recently, because of a Rockefeller Foundation grant, a survey of attitudes among 1,473 persons in the Pulaski District of Gary was conducted. The district happens to be 90 percent black and in the survey some brand new thoughts emerged:

1. Parents need discussion groups to talk about the growth and development of their children. (95 percent)
2. Parents would strongly welcome community involvement programs on how to manage children. (90 percent)
3. The school or some other community agency should provide information on how fathers can participate more fully in their children's lives. (85 percent)
4. The Gary School System should arrange programs in home management, food preparation, and proper operation of appliances. (74 percent)

5. The schools should provide parents with explanations of credit and purchasing, budgeting, and other everyday money matters. (74 percent)

6. The Gary Schools should conduct meetings where police, fire, garbage, and other governmental agencies could explain their operations, answer questions, and listen to recommendations offered by the community. (93 percent)

Additionally, those interviewed felt the Gary School System should operate a clearinghouse listing all training programs (public, private, and industrial) available to adults in the city. Beyond the obvious, these data prove some important points about life in the ghetto:

1. That the parents interviewed wanted to participate in programs which could steer them toward a more meaningful life.
2. That these programs at present do not exist.
3. And that if they did exist, under the present conditions of "non-centralization" they



Squalid living conditions can infect both the community and its schools.

would be so split up, splintered, and unrelated physically, mentally, and geographically that they would be practically worthless.

Julius Horwitz, the New York based author and past consultant to the New York Legislature concerning problems of public health and social welfare, has an interesting comment on this in his book, *The W.A.S.P.*, which concerned itself with Harlem life.

All the welfare agencies, the social workers, the psychiatrists, the psychologists, the teachers, the home economists, the clergymen, the police department . . . all of them, aren't worth a tinker's damn, unless and until these people break out of their own individual, intellectual ghettos and swallow their chauvinistic pride and begin to relate to one another so they can finally relate to those people they are supposed to be helping!¹

Reciprocal Education

The name of our program is "Reciprocal Educational Program," or REP for short. By its very nature, REP is designed to destroy the self-defeating walls between the helpers and the helped. REP is geared to obtain the maximum response and interrelation between the various services within each task force so as to "get on with the job."

Easing the bewilderment of a six-year-old, showing a young mother how to clothe her brood of six on her Aid to Dependent Children (A.D.C.) allotment, helping a disillusioned father fill out a loan application, providing a meal, helping in a thousand little ways—the REP task force will be in the community, under one roof.

Under one roof will be housed at various times during the day 13 REP staff members with the following breakdown:

- 1 Vista worker
- 1 Parent Council member
- 1 Classroom teacher
- 2 Parent visitors
- 6 Teacher aides
- 1 Teacher Corps intern
- 1 Student teacher.

¹ Julius Horwitz. *The W.A.S.P.* New York: Atheneum Publishers, 1967. © 1967 by Julius Horwitz.



Schools should stop "processing" students and begin educating them.

The Gary School administration proposes that 10 such REP group centers be interspersed throughout the city, with obvious emphasis placed upon areas where they are most needed.

Once the REP task force is formed, it would be allotted grant funds for the purpose of establishing a base of operations in its designated neighborhood. This would be done by:

1. Renting quarters—a store front, a small house
2. Using the funds to purchase some needed equipment but establishing headquarters in the local school
3. A dream perhaps, but highly industrialized Gary's union men have already constructed a rehabilitation center for crippled children at no labor cost

4. Because of Gary's expanded school building program, entire buildings may become available and salvaged for REP headquarters.

The REP task force of each community, by being a part of that community, will be able to pick and choose the best location to encourage involvement.

Prospective participants in the REP program suggest that once the task force base has been established, the "natural leader" of the group would gradually emerge through the team's interaction.

Grant monies will also be used for the special training of school-community workers interrelated with the continuous training of professional staff. There will then be an opportunity for advancement toward an appropriate university degree or certificate for those who have the ability and aspiration to

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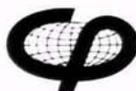
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build on noncollege academic backgrounds and their own work experience.

The training program will include: (a) community paraprofessional work (directed carefully as a learning internship); (b) in-service workshops and seminars; and (c) in-service evening courses and concentrated summer institutes.

The surface has barely been scratched in this brief outline of the possibilities of such a task force working within a community. We in the Gary School System want to take education out of its tuxedo and put it in dungarees. We want to grab the three R's by their arthritic ankles, turn them upside down, and shake out the stiff-necked conventions and meaningless rote of years. In effect, we want to stop "processing children" and begin educating them. We want to be a part of the community, not just nervously coexist with it. We cannot do this until we truly reach the people with meaningful purpose—as Project REP will.

With the REP program in effect, the

school system would be forced to reflect upon the subjects being taught. Curriculum changes would have to be forthcoming to relate to needs. A teacher would come to believe that the resources are where the people are and a parent would have no qualms about letting the schools know his needs.

If a program which includes reading *Dick and Jane* and *Silas Marner* produces children with a 50 percent dropout record in the inner city and in some large urban areas in the United States, something has got to be wrong with the educational process. We want to know what is wrong and *why*. A community educationally sick is like a person physically ill. Just as the doctor can only act when the patient tells him where it hurts, an educator must find out what is wrong in the community, because only then can he act to change things for the better.

It is a simple concept; so simple and so "right" that we wonder why it has not been tried before. Why *we* have not tried it before. We propose to try it now.

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