

Blocks to Change

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THREE major "blocks to change" impede the progress of education in America's public schools. They are: separatism, anti-intellectualism, and extremism. The nature and influence of each may vary between schools and communities, but differ little as a distinctive process of human behavior.

Supervisors and curriculum workers in many school systems are in need of the operational means by which they can more actively assist classroom teachers in improving instruction. Designated as "staff"¹ personnel, their role definitions usually state that they must request administrative permission to enter a school and that they will personify no "line"² authority to effect change in either teaching methods or course content within their specific fields of expertise. The result is that often principals fail to invite supervisors or curriculum workers whom they may find personally objectionable into their schools to induce change, and thus classroom teachers are free to disregard their professional advice. Therefore, these specialists in teaching and learning are in many areas caused to be ineffective.

¹ Staff—staff personnel (supervisor, coordinator, dean, counselor, teacher, librarian) interpret and fulfill the decisions and directives (policies, regulations, processes, procedures) issued to them by the school board and school administrators.

² Line—line personnel (superintendent, assistant superintendent, director, principal) are delegated and apply the decision-making and directive-giving authority that requires and regulates staff and pupils' school behavior.

• Such organizational awkwardness is but one example of the *separatism* that exists in a chain-of-command school system wherein authority is more synonymous with rules of conduct and accounting regulations than with instructional achievement. Further study of such an outmoded administrative structure shows that the school board may be conversant only with its selected superintendent. The superintendent's open line of communication may not function efficiently beyond his adjoining office associates. Assistant superintendents, directors, supervisors, and curriculum workers may each have so many schools and personnel to serve that they can seldom meet with every faculty or be available to every teacher. They may, therefore, substitute bookkeeping means for reviewing school practices and reporting on the conditions of education in the school district. Instructional personnel, in turn, may indicate that there is a lack of recognition in the district office of actual pupil achievement and immediate teacher needs.

Other examples of separatism that must be reconciled include (a) unequal school curriculum for minority groups of pupils, (b) manifest prejudice and discrimination that are detrimental to "those other pupils," (c) the offenses of scheduling that are incompatible with the realities of how pupils learn and successful classroom management, and (d) the operations of classroom teachers' associations and supervisors' associations

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and principals' associations and superintendents' associations and school boards' associations as "benevolent and protective orders"—as though they are not all in the same business together for the same and only reason: the instruction of children and youth.

● *Anti-intellectualism* in the schools is another matter in need of sound evaluation and repair. Petty policies of dress and rote conduct that produce servile obedience and demonstrate lack of adult regard for pupils should be replaced by planned provisions for pupils and teachers to: practice politeness; better demonstrate respect for human dignity; show respect for the feelings and values of others; and exhibit responsible behavior in group action. Practice in the application of honest dissent and critical judgment should displace the deportment "A" for displayed docility. Teacher demands for pupils' conformity to stock assignments should not evidence lack of teacher-school respect for individual and group interests and differences.

The sterility of imagination shown in the rigid scheduling of classes, subservience to the Carnegie Unit, and grouping of pupils should not preclude innovations in what and how pupils learn. Teacher-made and standardized tests that do not measure what individual pupils know and can do and that are alien to their individual or group frames of reference produce inaccurate data and should not be used as criteria for labeling them as "unsatisfactory" people. There is a noticeable omission in education today, in the lack of qualitative concern and quantitative effort that are devoted to the evaluation of pupil achievement, teaching, and instructional programs. More time should be spent in schools in assisting teachers to write test questions, to analyze and interpret pupil test data, and to prepare-compare-repair their curricula and teaching methods.

There is also an example of intellectual dishonesty in the educational programs that transmit social inaction (the appearance of participation, the engineering of the consent of the governed, the expression of promises

with all of the dashing display of Madison Avenue spectacles) and that show no results. These create anxieties in pupils which retard goals of instruction to raise their hopes, absorb their energies, and challenge their talents.

● *Extremism* is another block to educational change. When extremism is applied purposely to suppress objective teaching or civil liberties, or to direct the "menial" teaching of pupils, classroom practices in the means and uses of inquiry, analysis, and discovery are dealt debilitating blows. Such a calculated movement to control the schools and school personnel can stifle teacher and pupil incentive to improve rather than repeat the behavioral shortcomings of the status quo. This danger from outside the schools can be checked by ethical and able school boards and school personnel who will not subject children and youth to moral injustice.

Extremism within a school board, the superintendent's office, or the teaching ranks is an even greater threat to responsible instruction. School staffing, budgeting, purchasing, programming, and teaching so controlled can command conformity among school personnel. Renovation of these closely supervised procedures requires major campaigns by reliable, persistent people. This may well be a function of a local professional rights and responsibilities committee.

Guidelines for Action

Exposure of these three blocks to the light of reason and to the will to improve curriculum and instruction may induce adherence to the following guidelines.

1. Steadfast commitment by school boards and school personnel to ensure that human deprivations created and fostered by acts of separatism, anti-intellectualism, and extremism do not exist within the operational policies and procedures of their school systems.

2. School policies, operational procedures, and evaluative processes should make certain that:

a. Planning: Adequate budgets of time and funds for conducting thorough planning and evaluation of school curricula guarantee the professional retooling of programs and personnel for meeting the educational needs of today's pupils for tomorrow's world.

b. Evaluation: School personnel know and apply the findings of current educational research. (The overuse of group test scores for labeling individual pupils and evaluating individual teacher efficiency, as compared to the lack of use of the important data obtainable from test item analyses and their relationships to pupil progress and teaching effectiveness, can indicate that a school system is taking the wrong approaches to answer the wrong questions about learning and teaching.)

c. Management: Instructional leadership is not retarded by removal from the schools of master teachers and significant principals to district office desks to front school support issues, to make up projects to be funded by governmental and philanthropic agencies, and to control the piles of paperwork required for reporting to sundry state and federal agencies.

d. Staffing: Promotional practices do not create inbreeding effects that weaken the entire school structure by requiring the staffing of all key school positions only from within the school faculty, based upon years of loyalty to the administration or the union.

e. Scheduling: School administrators do not substitute the finger-counting of set numbers of instructionally unlike pupils into classrooms for their major responsibility of creating operational means

for teachers to ensure optimum learning by pupils.

3. Pupils' time in school, regardless of whether it is in a single K-12 building or in a kindergarten—elementary—junior high—senior high series of feeder schools, must be conducted so that their progress in learning and achieving is not retarded by eccentric grade-level or school-level habits, such as:

a. Lack of teacher communication between grade levels, or among feeder schools, in order to know what curricula, content, skills, and media are being taught to pupils. Redundancies (landing the Pilgrims three times in grades 5, 8, and 11 American history classes) and omissions (due to teachers' not knowing what their pupils have studied previously), plus non-planning to articulate pupils' learning opportunities as they progress through school, all contribute to teachers' failures to teach pupils rather than their grade level subjects.

b. Teachers' tendencies to assume that their pupils did not learn enough either in quantity or quality in previous grades.

4. The planning, trial run, and evaluation of model programs must challenge and employ the best personnel, receive the best equipment and materials and facilities for ensuring their success. When such a program proves to be more successful than an existing program, it should replace the less successful program.

In conclusion, if this essay serves only to turn on flashing red lights in the minds of readers, it may have served a useful purpose. □



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