

"I'm only a U.S. citizen enjoying my rights, until I come to school."¹

EDUCATORS have been "foot dragging" and divided in rendering an opinion about the ability of students to participate in determining their own destiny. Students have sensed this dividedness and confusion, and have proceeded to seek answers to the question for themselves. Their answers have been manifested in student protest and demonstrations.

Students Want To Participate

Last year, more than 2,000 high schools across the nation experienced walkouts, sit-ins, boycotts, or other means of student expression in an attempt to prove that they are important and want to participate. A careful analysis of the protest movement would indicate that many of the demands and concerns of students are indeed legitimate, and would suggest that a complete evaluation of how we do business with youngsters in school is needed. In fact, to deny a student the right to participate in his own destiny is an infringement of his constitutional rights, as described in the Fourteenth Amendment and the Bill of Rights, and reflected in a growing body of court opinions. Our judicial system has

¹ This quote, and others which appear not documented, was extracted from a doctoral dissertation prepared by the writer. These were responses by ninth- and twelfth-grade pupils to a survey about participation.

called for a halt to the flagrant abuse of student rights in school.

Clute advocates that

Students must become partners with us in the process of their education. Partners, in that students must share in the vital decisions of school life. Particularly those that affect his privacy and his precious constitutional rights, and equally important is his participation in the decisions which affect the rights of others. Responsibility grows out of the respect for one's self and an understanding of the meaning of personal freedom. *Responsibility cannot develop prior to the granting of freedom.*²

"I think the students should be consulted more about the problems we are having. Just think, we might be able to come up with something."

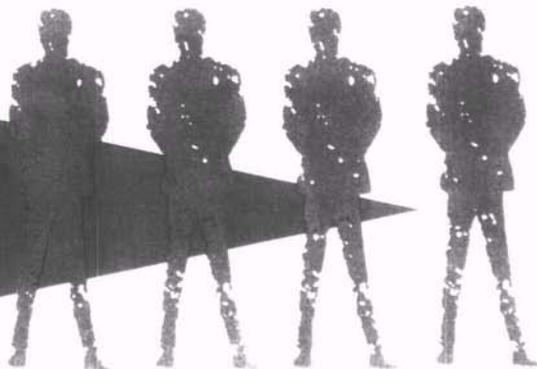
One very simple, but fruitful, way of resolving some of the problems in the educational arena is merely to seek answers from our clients—the students. Folks in the business world spend millions of dollars annually to gather consumer opinions about their products. New directions are charted as a result of these findings. Research tells us that students want to be consulted as "consumers" of our educational "wares."

In a recent study conducted for *Life*³ magazine, more than half of the students

² Morrel J. Clute. "The Rights and Responsibilities of Students." An unpublished paper, Wayne State University, Detroit, 1969. (Mimeographed.)

³ "What People Think About Their High Schools." *Life* 66 (19): 24-25; May 16, 1969.

Participate Destiny?



JAMES E. HOUSE *

polled in one hundred schools across the nation revealed that they were unhappy with their limited participation in school policy making. Moreover, more than 60 percent of the same students wanted more say about making rules under which they must live, and a greater share of involvement in making curriculum decisions. The issue of decision making is relevant for pupils, as 54 percent labeled it "very important."

This student poll compares very favorably with one conducted by the writer for a dissertation, in which more than 60 percent of the pupils revealed that in their schools, pupils really wanted to decide what happened to them. Only 30 percent of the pupils in the same survey felt that they "usually" or "always" had a chance to participate in decision making on policies and rules under which they must live.⁴ The conflict between students and adults is crystallized, as described in the *Life* poll, where only 20 percent of the parents and 35 percent of the teachers felt that students should have more participation in policy making. Only a mere quarter of the adults polled placed student participation under the "very important" category as compared with 54 percent of the pupils. This accounts, in part, for the generation gap that exists, hence student unrest.

⁴ James E. House. "A Study of Innovative Youth Involvement Activities in Selected Secondary Schools in Wayne County, Michigan." Unpublished Ed.D. dissertation. Detroit: Wayne State University, 1969.

Ingredients for Participation

"The students themselves should organize and use their group power to attain the goals they feel are necessary, and truly run their own school and get rid of the toy government, the student council."

Some secondary schools value student participation, and every effort is made to have this participation become a significant part of the educational process. How do these schools differ from other schools? One quick observation of these forward-looking secondary schools is that you will find an open communication link to help students participate in a significant way in their school operation.

Teachers and administrators in these schools seek student opinion and use this to strengthen the fibers of togetherness. Students are trusted and encouraged to be different, because being different is one way of testing what one really believes. Decision making is seen as a cooperative venture by all who are affected by the decision. An open communication link in the secondary schools provides for a grievance procedure—a system of redress. This procedure is known by all students in school; it shows no favorites. We know that where communication is missing, it always breeds suspicion and a lack of trust.

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In spite of the difficulty in establishing a workable communication link, some secondary schools have initiated student-faculty-parent advisory councils that are concerned with such problems as discipline, classroom conditions, and human relations. One superintendent in an Ohio school district invites student representatives to his office to talk and listen to one another on a regular basis. Still other schools have appointed an ombudsman, have conducted open forums, and are sharing more power with the student council. Communication is beautiful, but tough to accomplish.

"The students have great ideas about rules and regulations, they just don't have a chance to express them."

A second glance at these forward-looking schools would reveal the existence of human rules and regulations. If rules and regulations are to be more acceptable and workable, students must have a chance to help set the regulations. Rules and regulations must not be viewed as a means of keeping people in line, so that undesirables can be suspended when they do not toe the mark.

Every effort would be made to eliminate those regulations that may be classified as annoyances, such as hall passes and permission to go to the rest rooms. Self-discipline would be the goal of every student, if the professional staff would help him to achieve this goal. Students would, in fact, determine regulations such as the length of hair, wearing apparel, and beards, and would set up their own discipline procedures.

Educators are rightfully proud of the Freedom School being operated in Washington, D.C., by students. Not only do students determine the rules under which they must live, they also select teachers, develop the curriculum, and make other important decisions.

"I don't think the school faculty listens very much to our student council. I think our student council should have some say in our curriculum."

Another characteristic of forward-looking schools is an exciting and relevant curriculum. It would show evidence of being

responsive to the current sociological problems on the educational scene. Students do not understand why they cannot deal with problems related to poverty, racism, black studies, sex, drugs, and the Vietnam war. Instead of placing emphasis in these areas, educators have been forced to revise the academic disciplines (science, math, foreign languages), and make them tougher. This process has placed a great deal of pressure on students to succeed. Nonclass activities, in which many children find a sense of accomplishment, would be an important part of the curricular experience. Such activities would not be viewed as something tacked on, after the fact.

In some schools, pupils are reshaping the curriculum by calling for the elimination of the track system that segregates pupils. Still others encourage pupils to teach courses without credit, to volunteer for essential community services, to attend department meetings as advisors, to suggest course content for black studies, and to share the spotlight with teachers on curriculum advisory councils.

Teachers and administrators in one Maryland school eliminated the regular schedule for a two-week period. A student-recommended curriculum was initiated which included a visit to Congress, listening to jazz music, working with deprived children, debating the war, and a broad spectrum of exciting educational experiences. The curriculum can be relevant.

"The teacher should not look to the bright kids all the time. The other kids feel hurt and not wanted."

A final ingredient that would be found in these forward-looking schools would be an understanding and knowledgeable teacher—a teacher who felt comfortable with pupils helping to run the class. Pupils do not like to sit still and listen to teachers talk all the time. When students have a voice in decision making they are more eager to raise questions, explore options, and make value judgments about issues for the love and satisfaction of it all.

If the class engages only in oral discussion and answers the questions at the end of

each chapter, then something is gravely missing in the educative process. Students know what activities "turn them on"; teachers need only to ask.

In the classroom, there are factors related to grading practices, student-teacher planning, teaching methods, and the future-oriented curriculum that tend to prohibit pupil participation. A grading practice in the classroom that is used as a weapon, rather than an effort to evaluate pupils in terms of their own accomplishments, would be rejected. Pressure to participate solely for the sake of a grade has a tendency to reduce meaningful participation.

Teachers can, most of all, help pupils to participate in their own destiny by helping them to acquire a feeling of dignity and worth. No student in the classroom should feel belittled. Each pupil must have a feeling that he is the most important person in the classroom. His teacher can help him feel wanted and important, thereby giving him the skills he needs for determining his own destiny in school.

Some teachers are using students as aides, assistants, tutors, evaluators of teacher performance, and in other creative roles. Other teachers are meeting the challenge by providing experience in independent study and small group discussions.

The evidence is starting to mount that pupils can participate in their own destiny if

the school environment is one of trust, which recognizes the dignity and worth of students. Student demands to participate in their own destiny provide a real chance for us to correct an injustice that has existed for too long. We should be proud that a pillar of democracy—student participation—is moving closer to reality.

If students are to participate in their own destiny in school related matters, students must choose ways and opportunities to use their talents, interests, and feelings. Here is something that you can do in your school now: See that

Students have a voice in planning, deciding upon, implementing, and evaluating experiences in which they participate.

Youths have opportunities to *work with other youths and adults* in a variety of situations, in a variety of relationships.

Leadership is shared. Youths share with teachers and other adults the responsibility for guiding and leading activities to the reasonable maximum of their potential.

Youths are encouraged to *originate plans and ideas* for enhancing their role and participation in school and community activities.⁵

Why not try it?

⁵ Dolores Paskal, Leonard S. Demak, and Edwin J. McClendon. *New Roles and Relationships*. Detroit: Wayne County Intermediate School District, 1969. p. 3.

A Curriculum for Children

By the ASCD Elementary Education Advisory Council

ALEXANDER FRAZIER, editor

\$2.75 ● 143 pp.

NEA Stock Number: 611-17790

Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, NEA
1201 Sixteenth Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036

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