

Politics: A Vital Force in Education

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NO SEGMENT of American government is so thoroughly political as the schools. The effects of political activity are felt in every American school system regardless of its size or composition. Teachers and educators must realize they are not outside the body politic in a protected ivory tower; they are in the center of the political arena.

Education is increasingly involved in politics because it must have support—support which comes from various levels of government. The Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, Public Law 89-10, marked a radical step in federal participation in education which forced educators to re-evaluate their primarily apolitical stand. Not only has the federal government's influence been felt, but to it have been added the roles of major foundations and big business. Education is too important to be left to politicians; however, decisions regarding schools continue to be made by legislators at the local, state, and national levels. Educators must take a hard look at their political action programs. Political decisions regarding education will continue to be made whether or not educators offer their advice.

Presidents are becoming more and more involved in education. The John Kennedy stand on education attracted unprecedented public attention, understanding, and support. Cognizant of this fact, Lyndon Johnson used education as a platform in the 1964 election. Richard Nixon became actively involved in education with his veto of the education bill in the past year. Presidents today are constantly seeking educational ad-

visors to serve on special task forces to review educational issues.

Many of these advisory bodies serve on a continuing basis, for example, the Panel on Educational Innovations and the National Advisory Council on Education Professions Development. Not only the Presidents themselves, but hundreds of outside legislative consultants have considerable impact on educational programs. Although frequent criticisms resound concerning these groups, their influence cannot be overlooked when considering the educational-political complex.

State departments of education have gained added importance with federal funds. The influence of governors, legislatures, courts, state agencies, and departments of education cannot be overlooked. Title V was specifically directed toward betterment of state departments of education by adding to the professional staff and providing funds for undertaking new programs or expanding existing ones.

More and more of the activities of the state departments are influenced by federal agencies. As these state departments assume greater significance in project administration, some educators question the adequacy of state departments in project approval. This is particularly true in regard to Title III, since the departments may not have adequate professional staff to make such decisions, and since the outcomes may become purely routinized or political. To assess the added im-

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portance of state departments of education, all one needs to accomplish is an evaluation and measurement of the present involvement of local school systems with state departments of education as opposed to the involvement 10 years ago.

Teachers have realized that to improve their own school systems they must actively enter into politics. The National Education Association estimates almost 60 federal legislators are ex-teachers, with nearly four times that many serving in state legislatures. The political influence potential of America's teachers of more than 1½ million college graduates is an office-seeker's dream. Moreover, when teachers already are organized in relatively cohesive units, as they are in the United States, their potential for positive political action is almost limitless.

Evidence of the political importance of teachers is that in the 1964 national elections, 89.2 percent of them voted. NEA figures indicated that, while teachers voted in substantially higher percentages than any other segments of the population, only 8.7 percent contributed services as workers in behalf of a political party and 11.6 percent contributed money to a political party. The extension of teacher power is justified and defended in terms of its objectives—the improved quality of educational experiences offered to American children.

The ultimate end must be the improvement of school programs. Individuals alone can exert some influence; however, organized groups can exert *significant* influence. Democracy cannot function without organized power. Our political parties themselves are examples of organized power, and they are the true foundation stones of our representative government.

We become confused about the gold crisis, Vietnamese involvement, the invasion of Cambodia, and the national unrest. National and international issues are too complex to understand; however, there is one last bastion of pure democracy—the local school district. To many citizens, the answers here are always clear-cut. William H. Curtis, a former president of the AASA, said, "A successful superintendent must be more than

an educator, he must also be a shrewd politician."

Educators have been naïve regarding political power structures in their communities. Perhaps too much attention has been paid to the formal political structure within the district at the expense of ignoring the informal power structure. Powerful groups, both formal and organized and informal and unorganized, are likely to have concurrent power in the schools, even though this power may lie dormant except when high level decisions are made.

The importance of formal power sources is not to be overlooked. As the legally responsible agencies, boards of education and state departments of education play prime roles in the formal decision-making process. Other formal groups which have been influential include those from labor, religion, parents, and organized teacher groups.

The importance of the informal power structure within the community as a political force must not be neglected. The keen superintendent is alert to these informal, but highly significant influences. The influence may come from two sources: single individuals or small groups. Many of the most significant decisions regarding the educational institution are made away from the meeting rooms of the board of education. The astute superintendent will be aware of this and use his political influence to be cognizant of all conditions in his community.

Of course the importance of the voter at the local level cannot be overlooked. Every effort must be made to make him aware of the operation of the school system.

In summary, the politics of education are omnipresent and ever changing. Educators must understand politics to improve education. As they seek to gain political allegiance, in the nature of both a commitment and support, they must remember to consider the effects of proposals on boys and girls. Before they want support for a particular issue, educators must become acquainted with their legislators. Those involved in education must learn to speak with a united voice—board members, teachers, and administrators must stand together for needed changes. □

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