

Political Power, the School, and the Culture

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HE school in its new role as an agent of social change can no longer work in a vacuum. Until the school is willing to recognize the fact that it must become involved with the society of which the school is a part, no real change will take place. Let me quote from J. A. Battle. In his book, *Culture and Education for the Contemporary World*, Mr. Battle says:

Without a politics of education that is intelligently led and altruistically based there can be little hope for gaining quality education within a democracy. Since a democracy is dependent upon politics and education it must have a good politics of education to survive. Someone has said that a democracy that scorns education is actually an hypocrisy. One could say also with much truth that an educational system in a democracy that scorns politics is an hypocrisy. The public school system of a government in which the supreme power is vested in the people has to go to the people through its governing agencies to gain support, and its very reason for existence is the welfare of the people.¹

The people have been trying to tell the schools that they are willing to cooperate with them to bring about change, but deeply inbred tradition blinds many school people to this. The school is now being forced to get involved in the political scene at the grass-roots level, and thus at a level where there is significance.

Education has been pushed into the political arena, the gates are closed. To survive is to fight. Three or four decades ago, such a confrontation would have meant sudden

death. The changing climate of the past ten years has made combatants of educators and education.

What once had been considered the prerogative of the school has become the concern of the State House and the White House. Such matters as pupil placement, curriculum development, learning concepts, selection of building sites were the matter-of-fact, the mundane, to educators. Today, the mundane has become the dramatic. The words have changed. Local control, quality education, black studies, integration, neighborhood school concept, freedom of choice, decentralization, relevance, accountability, the list is long. Different words mean different things and stir different emotions in different people.

There is evidence that as government moves toward ridding the North of de facto segregated schools, and the South of dual schools, people are resorting to pressuring the legislatures to create laws which will make their bigotry or racism legitimate. The once powerless minorities are developing techniques that frustrate and anger those who are in the majority and who have legitimized their undemocratic actions.

These minorities who live in the core of our urban centers have become concerned about the learning and the preparation that their youngsters have for life beyond the school. These people are demanding "local control" of their schools and, in order to bring this about, have gone to the street and are using the techniques of the street to get those with political power to listen. I put "local control" in quotes because local control has always been the way of American

¹ J. A. Battle. *Culture and Education for the Contemporary World*. Columbus, Ohio: Charles E. Merrill Publishing Company, 1969.

education. The local community has had the responsibility of selecting its board of education and of assisting in the determination of the kind of school that its youngsters should attend. But as our communities have become more complex, and as our boards of education have become more political and have little direct contact with the people, there is the feeling that there is a need to have a system of education controlled by those who are being affected.

Institutional Racism

Many boards of education have begun to yield power at the local level. They are giving the people of the community the right to select their principals and to have something to say about the kind of curriculum that is being developed in their particular schools. However, this has become frightening to many people in power, and so in one instance, for example, the power has been taken away from the local board of education and assumed by the state legislature.

Under the guise of decentralization or, supposedly, an attempt to satisfy those who are crying for local control, the state legislatures have proceeded to think and plan for the people. As an example, the State of Michigan mandated that its only class A district be divided into from seven to eleven semi-autonomous districts. These districts, composed of between 25,000 and 50,000 school-aged youngsters, were to have a certain amount of autonomy. The central board of education was given a limited time to draw the guidelines and to establish the boundaries for these districts. Community groups were given an opportunity to submit their plans or their concepts of how these districts should be developed.

Because of the pattern of segregated living, suspicions ran high. The black areas wanted the lines drawn in such a way that they would have control and power within their groups and within their areas. This was also true of the white groups. They wanted the lines drawn to be sure that the housing pattern or the pattern of the school did not change. Members of the board of education,

having listened to all of the requests that had come in from interested groups, proceeded to draw the district lines.

At the same time, they felt that this was an opportunity to carry out the mandates of the Supreme Court decision of 1954. So not only did they draw the district lines in terms of the number of pupils, but their design also took into consideration a move toward integration of schools. This action was legitimate and moral.

The white community became enraged. Pressure was brought to bear on members of the state legislature. The previous action of the legislature was rescinded and a substitute bill was developed, a bill that would void the attempt on the part of the board of education not only to draw decentralization lines, but to integrate the schools. This is a perfect example of institutional racism.

An American Culture

Where states have taken over the responsibility for school decentralization by usurping power from the local board of education, the democratic process is threatened. The quality of life and society in the United States can only be improved when schools continue to work toward the improvement of our culture. An American culture must become a reality.

America is divided by its many subcultures. Each of these groups does make a contribution to the total of the American culture. But emphasis on any one of them or any few of them could delay the development of a basic American culture. Schools must recognize that much of their difficulty, whether it is at the local level or at the state level, has been promulgated by many of the subgroups of our American culture. Again, to quote J. A. Battle, "Without a politics of education that is intelligently led and altruistically based, there can be little hope for gaining quality education within a democracy."²

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² *Ibid.*

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