



# Process-Product and the Pledge

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*A principal's attempt to change a Pledge of Allegiance ceremony led to an explosive situation in one school. By careful endeavor, staff and students were able to direct these volatile elements into a constructive curricular experience.*

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**T**AKE one new high school principal, a vocal conservative element in a fairly rural suburban community, and the pledge of allegiance, mix well, and you have the makings of a first rate brouhaha that involves "Rights, Responsibilities and Curriculum."

In the first month on the job, a new high school principal, reacting to what he observed to be an ineffectual opening exercise ceremony and a lack of opportunity for staff and students to enter into the administrative decision-making process, offered a new opening exercise format on an experimental-pilot basis. The new format eliminated daily pledge recitation, over an antiquated public address system, and substituted the schoolwide recitation only once

per week along with a first period option for each individual teacher and class for the remaining days. Students and staff were asked to react to this format and make suggestions for improvement.

The intent of the principal was school-community involvement in the decision-making process and the hope was that better education would result which, in turn, would breed a more patriotic attitude.

The result of this decision was a whirlwind of events that involved charges and counter-charges, threats and counter-threats, local board against local board, and considerable acrimony between and among the various constituencies within and outside the town.

## Rights

The initial suggestion of almost every statement, accusation, or action regarding

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the administrative decision was to defend the rights of some segment of the population. "People have the right *not* to say the pledge," "People have the right *to* say the pledge," "The Supreme Court says—," "Are 31 words and 10 seconds too much to ask?" "The VFW says—," "The ACLU says—."

The thrust of virtually all statements of reaction to the decision dwelled on the *rights* of different elements of the school, town, state, and national populations. The media, newspapers, television, radio, and the wire services jumped on the issue, reported and distorted events and, in some cases, outright misrepresented fact. There was such an egoistic stance on the part of those immediately involved that reason and common sense tended to disappear. As long as the approach to the problem centered on the *rights* of a group or groups, a satisfactory resolution of the disagreements seemed virtually impossible.

## Responsibilities

One step toward moderation was made when the concept of responsibilities was interjected. It was commonly felt by the community that the school and staff had the responsibility of conditioning the students to act patriotically. With this in mind, the local Town Council forwarded a statement to the Board of Education which read: "The Town Council, as the governing body, charges the Board of Education as guardians of our youth, with the responsibility of ensuring that . . . the pledge be observed daily in every facility in our educational system. . . ."

Discussions among school staff and administrators generally acknowledged that school people had a responsibility to promote appreciation of this country and good citizenship with the pledge being one of many ways that such goals might be accomplished.

The students, particularly the student government of the school, felt that they had a responsibility to reflect the desires of their constituents.

The Board of Education was at odds with the Town Council. The American

Legion and VFW (local and state) were at odds with the administration. The local political parties voiced varying degrees of dissatisfaction about the issue's being in the political arena at all.

Because of the acrimony associated with consideration of the issue of "the pledge" and because the issue "was being exaggerated and used to some extent as political fodder" by local candidates, resolution of the issue with an eye toward the *rights* and *responsibilities* arena was negated.

## Curriculum

Is it possible to take an issue that is so explosive as to have one town board at odds with another, the VFW and American Legion opposing the ACLU, Democrats and Republicans fighting with each other and among themselves, the media sensationalizing every small skirmish and something so reputedly dull as the curriculum development process and the bringing about of a rational and workable educational solution?

With this question in mind, the Board of Education elected to take the focus off the pledge and unanimously approved the following motion:

*Motion:* In an effort to turn a potentially divisive and destructive situation into a constructive learning experience for the students of the high school, I move that the Board of Education establish and schedule a meeting or series of meetings if necessary, with members of the school community, to include parents, staff, and student representatives, to discuss what actions must be taken to encourage the formation of an "ethical and moral sense which values the goals and processes of home, state, and country." (Public School Goal #6.)

By acting in this manner the Board took the only positive step toward the systemwide goal.

Movement toward the stated goal would have been much more difficult if achievement had been attempted in the emotional atmosphere of a typical rights and responsibilities debate. Yet the relatively sedate atmosphere of the curriculum development pattern proposed by the Board lent itself to a more ra-

tional approach to problem solving and goal achievement.

## Heart of the School Operation

The curriculum development process and product should be the heart of a school operation. All too often, however, development of formal curriculum occurs in a relatively sterile atmosphere restricted to specialists with little or no involvement of students, teachers, and parents.

In spite of the emotional, sometimes irrational, behavior referred to in the first part of this article which usually follows involvement of students, teachers, and parents, such "gut level" involvement may well generate the most meaningful and productive curriculum. The caution must be, however, that the emotional level be kept above a pathological type of conflict.

Responsibility for monitoring the level of emotional involvement rests with the building and system administrators. As Harold Shane pointed out in his editorial in the March 1973 issue of *Educational Leadership*, the community environment and the internal school environment are critical factors in making curriculum modification decisions. He stressed the necessity for good human and public relations and effective faculty communications, pointing out that involvement by all must be "real."

## Is Involvement Worth the Risk?

As of this writing, a final decision regarding a specific pledge practice is still in process. However, *process* is coexisting with

whatever will be the eventual goal or *product*.

Good education has already resulted. Parents have reassessed their role in education for patriotism, as has the school system at each level. Consideration of the role of various civic and patriotic organizations regarding citizenship training has also resulted. Students and staff, primarily English and Social Studies teachers, have used the pledge issue as a sounding board to review rights of minorities and majorities, and citizenship responsibilities. All those involved have reassessed the role of the mass media in our society.

## Involvement a Must

Education for the third century of this country, which begins in 1976, must provide for "responsibility and order" as Jack Frymier stated in his 1973 ASCD keynote speech. Responsibility can be *told*, but not very successfully. Responsibility can be *shown* but an ingredient to its being learned is still missing. If students are *involved* in a process, responsibility can be understood, internalized, and affected. Administrators must assume the responsibility for orderly change through such involvement.

A major goal of any school curriculum should be to produce responsible educational activists. If attainment of such a goal entails some risks, some emotion, building administrators must be willing to risk controversy while striving to build curriculum around meaningful issues. If the issues are truly meaningful, it is a virtual certainty that rights and responsibilities will manifest themselves both as process and as product. □

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## Future ASCD Annual Conferences

1975	March 15-19	New Orleans	Rivergate
1976	March 13-17	Miami Beach	Convention Center
1977	To be announced		
1978	March 4-8	San Francisco	Civic Center

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