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"EDUCATIONAL reform," in our opinion, will remain an impossible dream until the relationship between the public schools and the larger society undergoes a basic readjustment. Americans need to recognize the interdependence of these two entities, and we need to consider just how long we can ask the public schools to change the social order in ways which we as a people apparently find unpalatable. The wisdom of changing the social order is not the issue, only the unrealistic expectation that schools alone can do the job.

Faced with inconsistent yet insistent demands, school superintendents cannot long

survive unless they band together in some way and learn to look for answers to their problems outside the closed circle of professional training. Training—the word itself and all that it implies—is part of the problem. Rarely does professional training actually prepare people for the job; they learn that on the job itself, or perhaps in an internship or apprenticeship. (We are writing about school administrators here, but the observation probably holds for doctors, lawyers, journalists, and plumbers.) The school superintendent who recognizes the inadequacy of his or her training invariably looks for better training. So, too, is reform usually

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planned in terms of "better" training. Both processes amount to chasing one's tail.

"My training wasn't adequate; please give me better training," is wishful thinking despite its apparent logic. While many claim to know a good superintendent of schools when they see one, no one has yet devised a training process to produce the model. The intervening steps (analysis of the characteristics of good superintendents and then recruitment and training to produce those characteristics) befuddle the well-intentioned process.

Ambitious reform programs end up with narrow aims precisely because those aims are achievable, and even if the programs achieve their aims, the products are not de facto better superintendents. A reform aimed at upgrading major departments of educational administration can do just that, a program to turn capable non-educators into educators can be successful, and a campaign to get minorities and women into the

superintendency can achieve its goals—but none of them will necessarily be turning out better trained superintendents. The reformers haven't escaped from the closed box of training.

Neither have we, by the way. When we talk about training, we are using the word in the usual sense. We are not proposing a "better" way of training. We are talking instead about a "self-help" process of re-education that begins when superintendents band together. We recognize the inadequacy of reforming what is not appropriate, and we are groping toward daylight.

Superintendents must band together, but that is not enough. Every superintendent already belongs to a number of official organizations and unofficial networks. They must also find a way to reeducate themselves, because graduate schools, in-service courses, and professional workshops simply do not provide the skills that modern school administrators must have just to survive.

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## The School's Many Roles

The modern public school is as much a social service agency as an educational one. We Americans hope that through the schools we can tackle our major social problems: hunger, disease, social maladjustment, mis-

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use of drugs and alcohol, and inequality of opportunity. We also hold schools to an unrealistic standard of decorum, and we tend not to accept conflict as normal human behavior. Finally, we want quality education but are unwilling to pay for it.

The superintendent is squarely in the middle, nominally in charge of a world he does not control. Quite literally, the daily business of running a school system requires all his attention and energy. It is called "putting out brush fires," in the trade, and only the rare superintendent has the time and energy, whatever his mandate, for reforestation.

Almost every American school superintendent came up the career ladder: teacher, principal, administrator, and superintendent, and it is highly debatable whether any of these roles can be considered training for the next higher post. As it works now, performing well in one position leads to eligibility for the next, but eligibility should not necessarily be equated with preparation. Seymour Sarason<sup>1</sup> has observed that there is nothing in the isolated setting or responsibilities of the classroom teacher that can be called preparation for the principalship. That observation holds true for higher positions on the career ladder.

The available training in educational administration does not seem to be much help either. Almost all training is provided by ex-school administrators turned professors. The departments of educational administration—except the very best of them—turn inward by design. Ex-superintendents become professors and proceed to turn ambitious principals and teachers into certified, employable school superintendents. And, as the data show, almost everybody—professors and superintendents alike—is satisfied with the process.

A few were not satisfied, including a career U.S. Office of Education official named Donald N. Bigelow. His discontent, and that of others like Nolan Estes and Richard Foster, bubbled to the surface and developed into a special kind of training, which came to be called the Superintendents' Network. We now see the Superintendents' Network as something of a prototype for a National Network of Educational Reform, which would involve mayors, civic leaders, educators, and representatives of all the organizations that impinge upon the public schools and make them what they are.

## Is Networking an Answer?

It is not easy to explain the process of "networking," and the hundreds of superintendents who have already participated in 2½-4 day networking sessions will recognize the shortcomings of the following description. In fact, it is easier to begin by saying what networking is *not*.

There is no "theory pill," sugar-coated with "practical stuff." In fact, the direction and distance a session travels is generally up to the participants. The "sugar-coating" image is perhaps inappropriate, because the goal is not explaining and selling theory but participation in the process called networking.

We believe that school administrators already know how to manage and communicate; they already know a great deal about what should be done. In large measure, training for an experienced administrator is often a process of enabling him to act on

<sup>1</sup> Seymour B. Sarason. *The Culture of the School and the Problem of Change*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, Inc., 1971.

what he already knows. For example, most administrators know that ordering changes in behavior usually does not work. They know it from experience, from educational and learning theory, and from the behavioral sciences. Nevertheless, they still mandate. In a sense, then, the information which provides the superintendent a frame of reference for his or her own behavior is already present in large measure. The issue for most practitioners is to translate into action what they know and believe. So, rather than saturating the participants with more theory, superintendents are asked to tell each other what they know about dealing with critical issues in their own systems. They are asked to move back and forth between generalization and specialization just as they do in real life. On the one hand, they must act in a specific situation, but on the other hand, they must respond to general policies, requirements, environmental factors, and a body of knowledge and theory. Theory and strategy inform action, while action contributes to the development of theory and knowledge.

As the participants move into specifics, they are asked to tell each other how—and why—they would react to realistic problem situations. This only happens gradually, because most people feel vulnerable when they begin to disclose how they would handle a specific situation (they are afraid their behavior will be analyzed, attacked, or second-guessed) and because they have learned through experience that explaining their individual actions may be somewhat ego-filling but has very little impact on how others behave. Yet as the superintendents get involved in performing tasks, they begin to talk about what they know and to analyze and categorize strategies, methods, and processes for getting things done. Gradually, as superintendents begin to share their hopes, aspirations, goals, and ideas, they also begin to share some of their concerns and even some of their fears. Quite early in the process it is recognized that most everyone feels rather alone. One superintendent will explain that his job is more than a little tenuous: the community is taking potshots at him; some of his own staff members are

doubtful about some of his programs; the teachers, either individually or in an organized way, are pushing in different directions; and the school board is mandating solutions that he feels may be destructive. And as others test the water, candor, which might be more difficult in a more mixed group, becomes possible. The group's homogeneity makes for a relatively quick development of trust. Because others in the group also feel somewhat isolated from their own staffs or feel the pressures of the community, it becomes fairly easy to begin to explore ways of dealing with these and other problems.

### A Way Out?

Our thesis is that no worthwhile, significant school reform is possible until it is generally recognized that the schools are controlled by and interdependent with other social institutions. Schools can be changed only through the intensive involvement of those other systems. Further, superintendents must equip themselves for their newly politicized positions, and the governing systems whose actions affect the schools, directly and indirectly, must allow the schools to participate in their councils of power. It is not enough for a superintendent to be capable, if the municipal decision-making process does not give him the power to bring about change.

Social and school problems are not amenable to solution solely by the school board and the school superintendent. Nor will the addition of courses to the curriculum solve great social problems, although that is precisely what was attempted in an effort to reduce traffic deaths, divorce, and drug abuse. Courses in driver education, marriage and the family, and drug abuse education are small monuments to the insufficiency of our political leadership, or perhaps to our general unwillingness to accept the inter-relatedness of our social system. We think the Superintendents' Network is a step toward the re-education of school administrators and a readjustment of the relationship among the schools and other social institutions. □

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