

# BAROMETERS OF CONFLICT

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**W**HAT are some important indicators of conflict and impending controversy in schools? How can one tell when a conflict is about to get rancorous, ugly, and painful? What options do school personnel have when they do know something's about to tear loose? Answers to these questions require reflection on the current conditions of our schools, and on the societal context for alternatives.

Schools are dependent upon the society—both nationally and locally—for funds, for legitimation of programs, for staff personnel, and for students. Therefore, any worthwhile barometers for school conflict must be able to detect levels and patterns of conflict in the American society at large, as well as those within the school organization.

When differences in values and/or interest are accompanied by inequitable shares of power and rewards, injustice is rife; and then natural conflicts become rancorous and potentially challenging to the social order. Injustice, then, is the key: its understanding is the guide and alteration of the conditions that create it is the path to a new order.

## **Societal Context of Conflict and Injustice**

Current conditions in the society at large give rise to high levels of conflict which can be detected through multiple broadscale

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*School situations are sharply affected by problems of social justice. Given here is an analytic framework and "personal inventory of commitment" that will help each school person make clearer choices about future management styles and decisions.*

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indicators of strain and injustice. The national economic system and local tax arrangements affect the financial resources available to schools; and the exercise of corporate controls and needs sets the conditions for vocational/career training and employment opportunities for graduates.

Another set of indicators can be drawn from the political sector of our society. The erosion of public trust in governing leaders and political institutions is another measure; one that indicates that the school is not alone in its problems of satisfying its clients or constituents. And both these indicators are present in other data about who benefits from programs that seek control of human and natural resources—the water, air, forests, and non-renewable forms of energy we all use.

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Other social indicators of injustice may be seen in increasing patterns of urban segregation based on race and class. The delivery of public services to different geographic areas varies considerably.

Finally, an increasingly important class of conflict indicators arises from the changing interface of the United States with the rest of the world. Historic patterns of U.S. domination, exploitation, control, and security are being seen as unjust, and the hand that fed, fostered, and nourished less fortunate nations is being bitten. Our growing dependency upon unfriendly resource suppliers, and our response to world wide famine and suffering will continue to bring conflict home. As the U.S.'s international political and economic power changes, new understandings of our historic and current roles contend for attention in school.

These conditions affect schools by affecting the public and private lives of us all—students, teachers, administrators, scholars, and public citizens. They also affect the resources (funds, personnel, energy) we

have to support our schools, and to strive for better school organizations and programs. This is the context of conflict and injustice in which we and our schools are found.

## Schools as a Context

Schools often reflect issues in the economic or political arenas by implementing societal images of classism, racism, or sexism. Curricular bias, racial imbalance between staff and student populations, tracking, or other forms of discrimination are similar to the domestic race and class structure and to the world situation that separates people with regard to life choices and access to knowledge. Teacher or administrator protection and abuse of unilateral authority adds additional stress to their roles as agents of law and order. Students chafe at consequent multiple rules and controls. The school, like national and international systems, operates with public mistrust or suspicion of governing incumbents. Leaders often retreat to apathy or despair, or to more overt forms

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Alterations in international power and control patterns  
Growing needs for American monies, food, and technology  
Multinational corporate influence

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Domestic concentration of wealth and other resources  
Burden of inflation and taxation on the poor and middle classes  
Control and use of public resources  
Erosion of public trust in centers of influence and representation  
Urban segregation and socialized poverty  
Inadequate legal and health care delivery systems and social service budgets

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Figure 1. Macro-Diagnostic Barometers of Conflict and Injustice Impacting on Schools

of resistance to student or community initiatives.

School organizations are characterized by conflicts for which there are numerous indicators. Discontent with and alienation from both procedural and substantive issues are manifest in high levels of student absenteeism and teacher and administrator turnover. And when people are physically present, they are often psychologically elsewhere, defended against school life by various tranquilizers or narcotics (marijuana, caffeine, alcohol, heroin, nicotine, or valium). The incidence of mutual physical and emotional violence between students and school staff, or among student groups, and presence of vandalism, police, and security guards is further indication of the torn fabric of our schools.

The loss of trust in a consensual harmony is evident in organizations established by administrators, teachers, and other professional groups to advance their definition of quality education and to garner their share of educational resources. Students and various community groups also have organized to press their partisan views of quality and justice in schools. Each group is suspicious and distrustful of other groups, and seeks unilaterally to impose its own values and goals.

The conditions of conflict and controversy create serious dilemmas in the exercise of traditional forms of authority and leadership in schools. The general response of educational leaders and their publics has been to create a variety of innovative programs. Whether designed as such or not,



"Further indication of the torn fabric of our schools"—A Copiague, New York, firm announces a new personal alarm system that provides instantaneous protection for classroom teachers by means of a portable button transmitter to be concealed in a pocket or worn around the neck.

their net effect has been to leave basic societal and organizational issues untouched and to socialize control of youth even more tightly. Illustrative innovations of this sort include: specialized diplomas, behavioral modification designs, sensitivity workshops, modular scheduling, specialized grouping for remedial programs, multiethnic understanding programs, work-study efforts, quiet rooms, tranquilizers (for students and staff).

Innovations less sophisticated about covert control, but along the same line, have been human or material security forces (TV monitors, ID cards, and security guards). The growing ease of invention and implementation of these multiple innovations glosses over the diagnostic indicators of conflict and controversy and helps hide basic problems of justice in the society and the schools. It may be that nothing can be done by trying to change the schools in the face of a potent and oppressive social order, but it may be folly to try to operate schools in

the old ways while waiting for the society to change (or be changed).

## Managing Schools in Conflicts

What can be done under these adverse circumstances? The easiest possible response is to deny or ignore these diagnoses and treat our analysis of schools and society as naïve hand-wringing at best and as outright subversion or pessimism at worst.

A second major possibility is to treat this analysis seriously, and to decide nevertheless to try to control and manage schools in more or less traditional ways—with a little more innovation here and a little more priority planning there, a little more community participation here and a little more teacher-student problem solving there.

A third major possibility is to commit oneself and one's system to a social justice

agenda, to redress and reform basic school and societal conditions. Such an undertaking will not be easy, nor is it likely to guarantee popularity and success. No other agenda, however, is worthwhile, on two accounts: (a) no other agenda really speaks to the underlying causes of rancorous social conflict and controversy; and (b) no other public agenda is more deserving of the commitment of America's leaders dedicated to the fulfillment of their nation's original promise and their school's potential mission.

What should be considered in choosing among these options? Much of this is personal and value laden, risky and potentially painful, with little relief in sight. Making a decision may hinge upon such things as guesses about physical and economic security, potential loss of friends, family situation, feelings about professional and organizational subordinates, depth of commitments to social justice, and potential weariness that comes from keeping one's finger in the dike for a prolonged period. The indicators in Figure 2 may be helpful in determining at least one of the preceding choices.

For you to use such barometers requires you to diagnose yourself and your situation carefully. Each person's sense of risks and resources will lead to a different future. The questions in Figure 3 are based on these barometers, and should help you focus upon a personal diagnosis.

Your responses to these questions should be helpful in making clearer choices about future management styles and decisions. Further, you can use these items as a springboard for discussions with sympathetic colleagues or allies concerning strategies for making schools more socially just. Obviously no decision to change is made in the abstract, and any leader/manager/member must be clear about the risks and payoffs of any course of action, whether to remain the same or to change. And a better sense of your willingnesses, including your willingness to take certain risks and not others, is an important element in your decision whether or not to work for more socially just schools.

Economic security as is	Pending retirement
Inability to survive the stress of the current situation	Feeling no one is learning
Sense that schools are ok as is	Unclearly about what actions might help
Knowledge of support systems for change	Sense that schools are going to blow up unless we do something
Lack of skill in making changes	Sense that change really is possible

Figure 2. Personal Barometers of Orientation to Conflict and Injustice

	Low risk			High risk
A. Risk to job and economic security	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Risk to family time and happiness	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Risk to physical/emotional well being	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Risk to integrity	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Loss of friends	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Loss of professional and organizational peer respect	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Unwilling			Willing
B. Willing to put in long hours for change	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Willing to sit it out until retirement	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Willing to act on social justice values	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Willing to endure current situation	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Willing to engage in new conflict behaviors	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Willing to risk the above (A)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Willing to stay where I am	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Figure 3. Personal Inventory of Commitment

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