

# Back to Basics— With a Difference

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*A new—and different—"back to basics" movement now seems to be gathering momentum and power. The school is a prime and "reachable" target. Our response should be efforts to work for a better education and a better society.*

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**A** NEW, yet seemingly familiar, voice is heard in American education today. The cry is for a return to the "basics."

Many are apparently equating the "back to basics" of the mid-70's to just another of those perennial quarrels about teaching the 3 R's. The pendulum always swings and it always comes back—so goes the dominant mythology. But we cannot assume that the issue is simply about readin', ritin', and 'rithmetic. They may be only a smoke screen. Few people today would quarrel with the necessity—one way or another—of learning the basic skills.

The slogan "back to basics" suggests immediately the question, "Where is back?" The word "back" is, of course, pregnant with possibilities. How far back shall we go? To the glory that was Greece and the grandeur that was Rome? . . . to the trivium and the quadrivium? . . . to the Latin Grammar

School? . . . to America's moral lessons and impositions of the last century?

The root concerns of many who are calling for a return to the basics in schools grow out of the current condition of our uneasy society. The "back to basics" proponents long to return to an earlier and simpler society.

These concerns about the present and nostalgia for the past have resulted in a "back to basics" drive with a difference. First, the new "back to basics" advocacy is not an internal conflict within the educational establishment. We have had many of these professional swings of the pendulum during the 20th century. This movement, however, is essentially a grass roots challenge by parents spearheaded by non-school professionals—ministers, politicians, and leaders of community groups. Second, this is a movement without a singular thrust and without organized and identifiable leadership. Its concerns are many: textbooks, patriotism, discipline, morality, skill development—and it has assumed a variety of modes of operation:

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legislation, propaganda, intimidation, and harrassment. Third, this back-to-basics call is meeting with success in state legislatures and school boards. Fourth, the back-to-basics emphasis of the mid-70's is emotion-laden and tends toward axe-grinding. "Back to basics" reflects a growing frustration with bureaucracies, whether presidential, congressional, or educational. But almost all institutions other than schools are beyond the reach of most citizens. Yet all can vent their anger and frustrations against schools, for the school seems to be physically "next door" and its people are known or knowable.

## **Our Uneasy Society**

The past 15 years have been very difficult times for America. We approach our Bicentennial in turmoil and in confusion. For many Americans the 60's were a decade of intense personal involvement and often bitter struggle; a period of civil rights marches, demonstrations, riots, and assassinations; years in which many Americans died on bloody foreign battlefields and others went underground and rejected the official policies of their homeland; and a decade which saw the emergence of a counter-culture whose use of drugs and sexual freedom challenged America's accepted morality. Our schools, as only could be the case, were engulfed in these struggles: desegregation, busing, challenges to administrative and professional authority, and violent death on the campus.

In the early 70's, as the national climate and school atmosphere appeared to many to return to stability and normalcy, this passage was viewed by some Americans with relief. But the calm was short-lived. By the middle of 1975 it has become apparent that the challenges and struggles of the 60's were only forerunners of what was yet to come.

It is now evident that the structure, programs, and ideology of our most basic institutions are confronting significant challenges. Our gradual disengagement from Viêtnam during the early 70's was indeed painful, for we had never before "lost" a war. But this was to be overshadowed by the challenge to America's image of herself of the events

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throughout Southeast Asia during the first half of 1975. Watergate, which was initially viewed by most as a silly and singular event perpetrated by fringe elements within a major political party, grew into a bitter struggle among the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of the American governmental system. It resulted in the exposure of deeply rooted entanglements between big business and big politics. The very structure of the American political system has been severely tested.

We also live with the conjunction of inflation and recession as well as with the entwined and often conflicting needs for energy and ecological balance. The complexities of our economic dependency upon a community of nations have become vividly clear. The crime rate continues to rise, even in small town and rural America. Finally, the counter-culture of the late 60's has left its impact, in spite of the fact that it is no longer clear, distinct, and identifiable. New life styles, superficially identified with sexual freedom and use of drugs, are no longer restricted to urban pockets and rural communes. In consequence they become much more difficult to deal with. Suburbia and more recently rural and small town America have had to face challenges.

## **You Can't Go Back**

It is understandable that in a troubled society some Americans would seek a national solution in "back to basics." The encompassing social uneasiness has been expressed recurrently during the past five years in the Gallup Poll of public attitudes toward schooling in which a primary concern of parents has been with discipline in the schools. The recent and renewed challenge to curriculum materials used in our schools is also an expression of the same concerns. In many communities, some textbooks are viewed by

parents and laypeople as anti-Christian, anti-American, pro-rebellion, and subversive of the authority of parents, adults, and the law. As one protest movement leader has argued, "We can't take a chance on undermining society by teaching children to rebel against God and their country like these books do."<sup>1</sup>

Let us be specific and graphic about what "back to basics" has come to mean as it is implemented in our schools. The October 21, 1974, *Newsweek* reports on the reaction of an alternative public school, the John Marshall Fundamental School. *Newsweek* describes John Marshall as follows:

. . . a bastion of tradition-oriented education. Letter grades, regular examinations, strict dress codes, and detention for delinquents are integral parts of the school's conservative program. Both the faculty and the student body are expected to present "an outstanding image" in dress and deportment. The curriculum is strict and basic; it features computational arithmetic (i.e., the old math), reading drill in standard phonics, and rigorous homework requirements from kindergarten on. At lunchtime, teachers and volunteer parents move about the cafeteria correcting table manners. There are no graffiti on the Marshall walls; in their place hang framed patriotic sentiments and didactic homilies ("Happiness is Manners"). A 35-page school handbook spells out the Marshall goals in jargon-free clarity: "Traditional education, order, quiet, and control."<sup>2</sup>

Or consider the description of another "traditional" school as presented in the October 28, 1974, *U.S. News & World Report*:

At Meyers Park, children are taught good manners and patriotism along with such things as arithmetic and penmanship.

Rules of deportment are posted in classrooms. The children must have a pass to leave the room. Running about the corridors, noisy conduct, speaking without first raising a hand are not permitted.

<sup>1</sup> "War Over Words: Latest Moves To Ban Certain School Books Worry U.S. Educators." *The Wall Street Journal*, September 20, 1974, p. 18.

<sup>2</sup> *Newsweek*, October 21, 1974, p. 87. At John Marshall Fundamental School there are 1700 students enrolled and more than 1,000 on the waiting list. In the same community 550 students are enrolled in a K-12 open school with a waiting list of 515.

"Thoughts for the Day" are transmitted over the intercom system. Some recent examples: "Let all things be done decently and in order." . . . "An error gracefully acknowledged is a victory won."

Grades are strictly defined. Report cards evaluate work habits, effort, and achievement.<sup>3</sup>

The words from these two descriptions of "back to basics" sound very familiar. They remind one of the New England Primer or a McGuffey reader. This demand for "back to basics" in many ways is a call for returning our schools to the common schools of the last century. It is a new romanticism, a new idealism if you will, to promote character, to foster patriotism not by living it but by slogan, by memory, by indoctrination.

America, however, cannot "go back." The nation, let alone the world, is much too complex for this. One conclusion which ought to be clear to educators is that "you can't go home again." You can never put your foot in the same river twice. Besides death and taxes, there is one certainty—change!

## Fears for Their Children

As much as these descriptions of "fundamental" schools may sound like the rhetoric of the 1800's, there is a significant difference. Those who spearheaded the creation and growth of the common school during the 1800's were not concerned with the possibilities that their own children might not develop "proper" deportment, character, and patriotic loyalties. They were, rather, frightened by the possibility that the increasing number of children of immigrants, with assorted and differing ethnic, religious, and racial backgrounds, posed a significant threat to the middle class, Protestant, American way of life. The basic fabric of the culture was being challenged by "outsiders." The common school was viewed as an agency for enculturating the children of others. Proponents of the common school were certain that their children would appropriate within the context of the family and primary community

<sup>3</sup> *U.S. News & World Report*, October 28, 1974, p. 96. The applications for admission to Meyers Park outnumber the spaces more than 2 to 1.

those basic beliefs, values, and attitudes essential to proper deportment, character, and citizenship.

Fundamental changes in the structure of the family, community, and school and their interaction have occurred. Urbanization, industrialization, and technology have had an impact. The child no longer has a

middle and upper class can be interpreted as an effort to re-establish a homogeneous community within which one's children might be socialized into a value system like one's own, as an effort to insulate children from the complexities of our own cities. But many of those who fled are now discovering that suburbia does not work. The worlds in which children live and grow transcend immediate community boundaries.

The family can no longer control through its own means the socialization of its young; many are now turning to their schools. In turning to the schools for a solution to a major societal problem, many Americans have appropriated the basic assumptions of liberal school reformers during the past 150 years. The difference, however, is that the problem is now at "home"; the problem is with "our" children. There are others than those with a nostalgia for the past who are concerned with the power of the school as an agency of socialization. In our urban centers, many blacks and Chicanos are struggling to achieve greater control over their schools.

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viable place within an integrated extended family and community. The child's place today is a separate place—a "child's world" of peers, mass media, children's things, and a large and often impersonal institution called school. These profound changes are now recognized by an increasing number of Americans. They are concerned and understandably so, with the impact of the "child's world," including the schools, on *their* own children. They have come to recognize, as have many educators, that there is a "hidden curriculum" to schooling.

This is not to suggest that such people are unconcerned with what is happening to children who live on the "other side of the tracks," or in that "unthinkable" city not so far away. But the concern of many Americans now, in contrast to 100 years ago, is fueled by the intensity of their involvement with their own children and what they see is happening, or might happen, to their own flesh and blood.

This is what "back to basics" is all about. It is a desire for what its backers regard as a "natural" part of the family and growing up during most of our history. It is the desire for a homogeneous community of influence within which one's children might be reared. It is crucial that we recognize the nature of this concern. We must acknowledge both its historical antecedents and its parallels. The growth of suburbs surrounding urban areas can be viewed as an outgrowth of the same desires. The flight to the suburbs by the

### **The Wrong Target**

The current criticism of the school by "back to basics" proponents is, as it has been so often in the past, misplaced. Unfortunately, the specific focus is leveled at an easy prey and indeed the wrong one. The curriculum projects of the early 60's were superseded by the call for humaneness and openness in our schools during the late 60's and early 70's. Those schools that appear to operate under the rubric "open" something-or-other bear the brunt of the new criticism. The problem of our society, it is assumed, is a sickness growing out of permissiveness, soft-headed relativism, and misguided individualism. A sponsor of the supposed sickness is assumed to be open education.

The attack on the "open" school is misdirected for often (certainly not always) it is these schools which identify their programs, structure, and process as "open" that have recognized the dramatic and radical changes which have occurred within our culture during the past century. It is these

schools which have attempted to listen to parents, pupils, and the community-at-large in their effort to bring the educational program of schooling into relationships with the culture. It has been these schools which have been most willing to take the risk of trying to deal in new ways with the changing circumstances of children. Educators committed to openness in school programs and processes came to recognize early that any effort to convince *all* Americans that *all* schools ought to incorporate an open curriculum was unsound. They recognized the danger of "closed-ness" in efforts to impose open schools upon those who did not understand and who resisted. Consequently, the movement for creating a variety of possible alternatives within the public system developed.

Paradoxically, the more appropriate target for "back to basics" proponents who want a voice in education should not be openness in education, but rather, "closed-ness." Our traditional schools are essentially closed. Decisions concerning curriculum, teaching-learning interactions, evaluative criteria (for both students and professionals), facilities, equipment, timing, and spatial arrangements are made almost entirely by professionals. Many schools are centralized and monopolistic, and "closed-ness" is necessary for maintaining monopolistic control. Too often parents are discouraged by traditional schools from asking questions.

Perhaps many of us have forgotten that schools are for students—not for the convenience of teachers and administrators—and that society's future has a relationship to our schools. For too long many schools have lost sight of their goal—teaching persons. Many schools have wasted considerable time in attempting to keep the so-called nonprofes-

sional out of school affairs. Many teachers have spent too much of their energy fighting anyone who in the slightest way resembles a school administrator. Many school administrators have become obsessed with technology and systems. Many schools have become packagers and labelers: gifted students, disadvantaged students, vocational students, merit teachers, team teachers, directors, coordinators. Have we too often dealt with issues through our in-house rhetorical and semantic games? Perhaps we in our own ghettos have become a little arrogant, perhaps a little smug, and have forgotten to listen. Perhaps we are too concerned with yelling at one another, building empires, and distrusting everyone. Perhaps we too have been captured by power group politics in our culture.

Maybe educators deserve "back to basics"—its opportunities *and* its dangers.

What is significant about "back to basics" in the 70's is that it has an external school thrust; it has emerged from the communities beyond the four walls of our school buildings. Because of this, the movement may bring with it significant new possibilities for educators, possibilities for dialogue, for openness, and for change.

The issues are deep, cutting to the very heart of institutionalized education. Can we accept the call for dialogue and for involvement from the communities we serve? Can we come out from our "closed shop"? Can we at the same time avoid the nostalgia for a past which is seen as closed and secure? In a world which inevitably changes, can we work for a better education and a better society than that of the uneasy present? Can we help create a better future through education? □

## Future ASCD Annual Conferences

|             |             |               |                          |
|-------------|-------------|---------------|--------------------------|
| <b>1976</b> | March 13-17 | Miami Beach   | <i>Convention Center</i> |
| <b>1977</b> | March 19-23 | Houston       | <i>Civic Center</i>      |
| <b>1978</b> | March 4-8   | San Francisco | <i>Civic Center</i>      |

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