

# “Nobody Understands Us!”

## —The Alienation of Educators from the Public

Robert V. Flynn

*Some causes of the alienation are noted here. To overcome this, curriculum leaders must work toward developing strategies of effective planning, delivery of instruction, and evaluation of programs and services.*

The American public school system, with all its shortcomings, is one of the great—if not the greatest—experiments in world culture. No other nation in the world can rival the quantity of educational opportunity provided in the United States. Statistics reported by Paul Blanshard in 1975 show that in the late 1800's, 20 percent of our people could not read or write. Today that figure has been reduced to 2 percent. This nation would not have prospered without the public school system. Millions would not have had access to proper education, and the high level of technology that has made the United States a world leader would be missing.

Why then is the public showing signs of alienation from its schools all across the nation? What are the causes of this alienation? Why are people attacking the school system? How can educational leaders turn the tide of criticism before irreparable damage is done to the “Great Experiment?”

### Causes of Alienation

There are many reasons that can be listed for the unusually severe alienation that now exists.



Basically, the reasons seem to focus on fear, mistrust, and poor communication. Listed below are some of the contributing factors in the growing public disaffection with the schools:

1. Watergate syndrome—People seem to be obsessed with the idea that all public figures will abuse their authority if they are not constantly watched. Consequently, every decision and program in the schools is now routinely investigated.

2. Locking-out parents—Educators do not treat parents with proper professional deference. School people often appear to be supercilious and inflexible to the public.

3. Teacher strikes—Battle lines have been formed over the increasing incidence of teacher strikes. The political issues involved in these episodes are often irrelevant to the public.

4. All things to all people—Education has been expected to cure all of the ills of society. Often educators have acquiesced to these expectations without plans or appropriate professional skills.

5. Special interest groups—The increase of public funds poured into education has made education the main event in the political arena. Everyone wants a piece of the action and the resources are beginning to spread too thin.

6. Pedagogy—Educators have tended to hide behind an oral and written “gobbledegook” when attempting to answer legitimate questions raised by their constituents.

7. Lack of aggressiveness—Educators haven’t taken the initiative in rebutting their critics.

8. Back-to-basics concept—This movement has deepened the rift by tacitly debunking comprehensive educational programs.

9. Abdication of parenthood—Parents are not taking an active role in the guidance of their children. They often support the children in conflicts with the school value system.

10. The strong school board—Boards of education are showing more interest in involving themselves in routine administrative decisions.

These are a few of the reasons that have brought about a temporary demise of the confidence of taxpayers. Confidence must be restored in order to continue good public relations in education. Most of the factors listed here can be

resolved with aggressive leadership. Such leadership must focus on effective communication.

### Turning the Tide

The saying “the best offense is a good defense” may apply in football, but for the purpose of rebutting public school criticism, it fails to get at the issues. Instead, it is suggested that educators launch an offensive on the proper enemies of the school system. This approach will take courage of the highest magnitude. It is time for the educational leaders to emphasize those things that are best for the education of our young people. It is time to be decisive and to explain and sell proper professional ideas to our constituents. Let’s be honest about our capabilities and not get caught in overextending ourselves.

Admittedly, educational problems cover broad areas. However, no purpose is served by leaping on one bandwagon after another or by obfuscating problems. Recently, for example, local newspapers in Pennsylvania printed two rather surprising stories dealing with school problems. One article discussed the concern of a citizens’ group over an elementary school reading program. It appeared that a significant number of students had fallen behind grade level in achievement. The administrative explanation was that these students were probably suffering “developmental lag.” Needless to say, the parents of these youngsters were somewhat skeptical. At issue here was not the cause, but what initiatives would be taken by the educators to deal with the problem.

The second article dealt with a more bizarre issue. In this case, a teacher arranged a showing of some footage of *Deep Throat* in a class. His purpose was to prepare them for what they would find on the outside. Regardless of what one’s feelings are about academic freedom, free speech, and pornography, it must be universally agreed that such an episode is strikingly inappropriate for education. Furthermore, the fact that a teacher would feel justified in showing this film to students is a good indication that there are people in the profession who do not know specifically what is expected of them. Therefore, professional expectation is an issue over which an offensive may be launched effectively.

Ranking high with educational cover-ups and kooky teachers as a cause of public alienation is



Some of the contributing factors in the growing public disaffection with the schools include teachers strikes, the Watergate syndrome, and an abdication of parenthood. Photos (clockwise from top): The American Federation of Teachers; Staff; and Parents' Magazine Films, Inc.

the negotiation of teacher contracts. Teacher negotiations appear to be here to stay. Teachers, administrators, and boards of education must learn *how* to negotiate professionally before the darkness that hovers over the area of teacher contracts can brighten. The process of teacher negotiations should work for the benefit of students, teachers, and the schools. Nothing in the history of education has caused more alienation than the negotiations process. Curriculum leaders must learn how to cope with this very delicate process and be prepared to facilitate the process of healing wounds. Such preparation should include the development of abilities to communicate to the public that the educational programs of the school are not being subverted in the process of negotiations.

Another challenge facing curriculum leaders is that of dealing effectively with special interest groups. In many cases such groups have legitimate petitions that must be fairly heard and responded to in a professional manner. However, there are some groups that try to use the schools as a forum for issues that are relatively far removed from the central task of public education. Some of these issues are related to religious beliefs, political inclinations, wide-ranging social dilemmas, and broad-based disease prevention. The costs of educational services are rising commensurate with the rising costs of other public services. Therefore, diversions from the basic tasks of educating students to a level of literacy and cognition, which will enable them to assume their role in society, must be avoided. There are numerous examples of the mistakes educators have made by reacting to the ever-present crises that society expects the schools to mitigate. Critics are quick to point out that sorties into nonacademic remedial programs have been costly in terms of money and in terms of distracting the schools from their traditional mission. Educators must resist taking the mantle of Jehovah. Trying to be all things to all people leads to certain disillusionment.

One technique for avoiding entanglement in misplaced and sometimes misguided tasks falls under the rubric of long-range planning. The development of long-range plans for curriculum revision and renewal may temper the enthusiasm of educators, school directors, and the public to leap into the unknown in regard to educational programming. Such a technique need not be the

cause for reactionary curricula in the schools. On the contrary, it may enable the schools to accommodate change more progressively and effectively. A well-defined, long-range curriculum articulating the goals and objectives of the public, the school board, and the educators should be the basis of a contract with the community. It will illustrate what the schools are doing and provide the focus for evaluating how effectively the services are being delivered.

One of the prevailing misconceptions about public education centers on the delivery system. Parents have all but abdicated their role in this system. The concept of educators being the surrogate parent must be examined. Schools cannot replace parents in providing the values that are lacking in students. Indeed, it is even questionable whether it is proper for the schools to attempt to teach a value system to students who evidence deficiencies in regard to the standards of the schools.

The more appropriate approach appears to be for the schools to provide leadership in developing parent awareness of their responsibilities in the educational delivery system. Currently, schools are held responsible by law for the education of children whose behavior is disruptive in the schools. Sadly, every contemporary educator is armed with anecdotes about students whose parents neglect them or openly admit they cannot control them. The cost of parental incompetence in terms of money and in terms of limiting the effectiveness of school programs needs to be illustrated to the public.

Another prominent factor in the educational delivery system is obviously the staff that administers and teaches the curriculum. Poor teaching alienates practically everyone. Unlike other professionals, the clients of education often have no choice other than to endure. Consequently, the criticism of teaching tends to be generalized about the profession rather than focused on specific members of the profession. In the days when teacher shortages were critical, administrators and supervisors often looked the other way. Now, many of these teachers are protected by tenure laws that were originally enacted to protect them from the political capriciousness of school directors and administrators. Seemingly, this is a "catch 22"!

There is a need, therefore, to press for pro-

professional standards that extend to delivery of instruction. These standards should specify the expectations of the community for the professional conduct of administrators, teachers, and school directors. The responsibility for enforcing such standards should be equally placed with the public, the administration, the school directors, and the professional teacher associations. Since curriculum leaders should have the professional perspective of how the various resources of the educational system tie together, their leadership in a movement to refine the delivery of instruction to students is critical.

### Conclusion

It is important that the causes of the many symptoms of alienation between the public and its schools be firmly attacked and resolved. The erosion of the most massive attempt to educate people in the history of the world is at stake. In fact, the basis of American democracy may be in jeopardy. Curriculum leaders must devote their energies toward developing strategies of effective planning, delivery of instruction, and evaluation of programs and services.

The leadership role in these developing strategies must focus on facilitating communication between the educators and the public. Boards of education, administrators, teachers, parents, and students must be included in the process. It is time to move away from established defensive positions and deploy the necessary resources for an all-out assault on the forces of alienation. The consequences of taking no positive action are not acceptable because these consequences will most surely result in diminishing equal educational opportunity. The goal of educational leadership should be to increase the value of the system of public education with regard to enhancing its contribution to the nation of people that it serves.



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