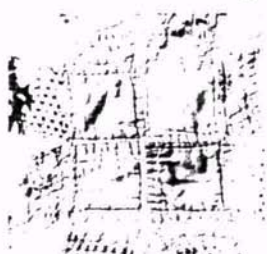




If Only They Knew . . .



If Only We Knew

Donald W. Nylin

Dialogue with our constituents is essential if we expect them to support public education.

In the recent "Gallup Poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools,"¹ curriculum was rated the highest in why local public schools were particularly good. In the same poll, curriculum was fifth of the top ten problems confronting the schools. If they only knew, how would it rate? If we are to believe some of the futurists and the authors of two recent ASCD publications, *Curriculum Theory*² and *Improving the Human Condition: A Curricular Response to Critical Realities*,³ we could be forced to conclude, "They don't know." They don't understand. "The schools have prepared us, and go on preparing children for stability, that is, for the logical continuation of what is known about the past and present."⁴

But maybe they do know. Back to the basics, better discipline, competency testing, more local

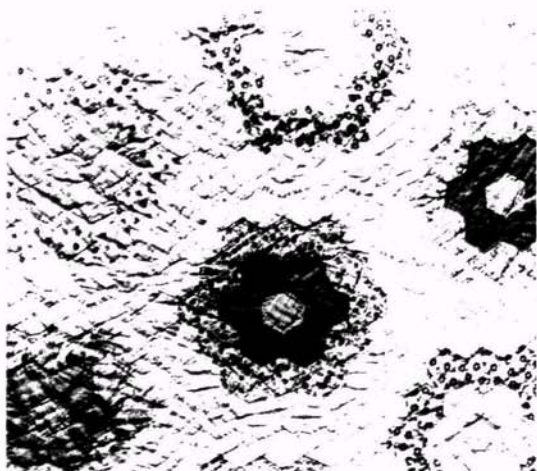
control, Proposition 13, more pupils attending nonpublic schools are phenomena frequently encountered. Is not the message clear? Many of the public who pay for and whose children attend the public schools have some very definite ideas about

¹ George H. Gallup. "Ninth Annual Gallup Poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools." *Phi Delta Kappan* 59(1):33-48; September 1977.

² Alex Molnar and John A. Zahorik, editors. *Curriculum Theory*. Washington, D.C.: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1977.

³ James J. Jelinek, editor. *Improving the Human Condition: A Curricular Response to Critical Realities*. Washington, D.C.: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1978.

⁴ Shirley H. Engle and Wilma S. Longstreet. "Education for a Changing Society." *Ibid.*, p. 231.



what they want from their schools and for their children.

Therein lies the dilemma for educational leaders, particularly those concerned about the curriculum and what it should be. The dilemma is further aggravated by increasing budgetary restrictions. Confronted with this situation it would be very easy for educational leaders to assume one of two opposing positions: take an elitist stance that maintains that we know what is best by virtue of our "super-vision"; or take a populist position of giving the public only what the citizens ask for. But we can neither dictate nor abdicate.

What can we do? If we only knew. Our publics are diverse, our purposes multiple, our resources limited, our staffs older, and maybe even we are getting a bit weary of the struggle. Twenty years ago, the editor of a small town newspaper advised a superintendent of schools, "Keep the grass mowed and the buses running on time, and the people will leave you alone to do what you want." No more, at least in most places. What can we do? If we only knew.

Last spring we (a K-12 school system of about 10,000 students) attempted a variation of the business-industry-education visits popular a few years ago. This time our entire professional staff went visiting in the community to listen. We went to hear what the employers and social service agencies had to say about our students and graduates. We got our ears full—of criticism and compliments. We heard of graduates who couldn't

spell, compute, write legibly, or think. We heard of students and recent graduates who were doing unusually well and growing in responsibility. We heard it as a portion of our public saw it. Consensus? Of course not, because our schools and yours serve a variety of purposes. The important thing for us was the beginning of dialogue on a much broader scale than we had before.

When we began to prepare for the day, the planning committee had mixed feelings. They believed that dialogue was vital, but they realized that a single malcontented person in each group could bring about disastrous results. Most elementary teachers believed the whole idea was a waste of time. Yet for a week after the visits we continued to hear positive reactions and indications that we had heard our publics. Will we change our courses of study? Probably not, but many teachers will undoubtedly reexamine their priorities within their instructional program. In my view, that's significant because I've seen too many courses of study rewritten without making any changes in instructional content or practice.

Advisory councils are very common in the schools. Yours are undoubtedly like ours—the benefits varying from significant assistance to a total waste of time. It seems that the narrower the focus and the more specific the task, the more effective the dialogue. I prefer the term dialogue to communication because it implies two-way interchange. Dialogue is so important if we are to hear and understand our clients' concerns, and if they are to hear and understand ours. Through this dialogue comes the possibility for clarification of present positions and actions and suggestions for future needs and changes. Too often, however, the advisory council is a few parents or community people and one or two staff members.

We need all of the instructional and leadership roles represented. The closer the role comes to the person with pupil contact, the greater likelihood that significant changes will result and the greater likelihood that community people will view what we say as real. Dialogue, honest and open, is a critical necessity in closing the gap between what they and we know.

Various instruments and techniques have been developed to help identify priorities of the public. I believe they fall short because the users have a tendency to look at only the major cate-

gories of agreement, and the users tend to be mainly administrators and supervisors. A further weakness, perhaps the major one, is the lack of possibility for dialogue that can help both the public and the school personnel explore meanings and implications.

Another possibility might be called "ad hococracy." Its advantage is that one can focus on a relatively narrow topic or task and have specific task and time limits. Task groups may or may not deal with specific curricular areas; each has its place. It is essential that the same people aren't always asked to serve or it soon becomes almost inbreeding.

Our most recent task group dealt with an elementary report card, probably not viewed by many professionals as highly significant. But it was a concern for parents. Our sessions developed many questions that got at some fundamental issues of purpose and priorities. Interestingly, these were more probing than a previous group that dealt with the total elementary school curriculum. Perhaps the reason was that the report card group was product-oriented while the curriculum group was information-oriented.

In our structure a parent and a teacher committee worked concurrently on the same tasks. Representatives of each committee then met to resolve differences. Once done, the teacher committee designed the cards that were then brought back to the parent committee for review. After some modifications, the parents took the final draft back to other parents in their respective buildings through PTA boards, parent advisory councils, or selected individuals, and teachers reviewed the draft with teachers in their schools. This increased involvement at least 15-fold. The results were as expected—acceptance—except that the parents reversed a previous position and asked that reports be given on *what* and *how* their children did in art, music, and physical education.⁵

The product, a new parent report form and/or reporting procedure, was the primary goal for the committees, but in the process other significant goals were achieved through dialogue such as the following:

1. Parents had a clearer understanding of what we taught and why.
2. Teachers realized the need for clarity of

goals and objectives and the difficulty in communicating these in both oral and written form.

3. Parents gained new insights into the difficulties teachers have in making appropriate assessments of pupil growth.

4. Teachers were reminded of the complexity of the assessment task.

Report cards may not be your need, but there are many others from which to choose. No topic is a guaranteed winner, but continuing topics for dialogue are a must.

Dialogue with our constituents is critical. The public schools are public institutions created to serve the society that instituted and continues to maintain them. Our roles as educators must be to continue to listen to the expressed needs of our varied publics and help our publics understand the implications of various priorities and actions. This requires ongoing dialogue initiated from the concerns of our publics as well as our perceptions of needs. To be effective, participants need to be drawn from the broad spectrum of the public, both parents and the community-at-large, and from the various roles within the school system. Good public relations, certainly. More important, it is essential for effectively defining curriculum purposes and practices.

Will this erase the patchwork curriculum? Not completely, but it may help to change it into more of a mosaic. It is a significant step to change from *If only they knew . . . If only we knew* to *We all know* with the distinctions between *they* and *we* gradually being erased. \square

⁵ A very useful manual for each committee member was: Sidney B. Simon and James A. Bellanca, editors. *Degrading the Grading Myths: A Primer of Alternatives to Grades and Marks*. Washington, D.C.: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1976.



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