

LETTERS

Dear Editor:

Steve Hallmark's "The Educational 'State of the Union,' 1979" [*EL*, January 1979, pp. 227-32.] was perturbing because it seemed to say:

1. Nothing is happening in our schools, and our schools are irresponsible.

2. All school people need to go through the "revival of faith" that was characteristic of the people in Washington involved with the Water-gate mess.

The latter is an implication that educators have been involved with deceit and lies. The former implies that nothing is going on in our schools. I take exception to both.

One can easily fall into the trap of concluding that our schools are failures if one reads only newspapers. After reading Hallmark's article, I had on my desk John Henry Martin's introduction to the final report and recommendations of the National Panel on High Schools and Adolescent Education. Martin says, "Accordingly, my review of their (the panel) recorded discussions and my re-reading of the background papers made me conscious of how easily deep analysis of an institution can lead to a feeling that all is pathological. On the contrary, the panel repeatedly was struck by the huge dimensions of the unique and essential salutary achievement of universal secondary education in the United States."

Henry Steele Commager has stated, "No other people ever demanded so much of education—none was ever served so well by its schools and educators."

I could quote others. That does not mean that we cannot improve; every educator worth his/her salt is constantly trying to improve education in his or her domain.

What we should do, however, is to speak out on some of the good things that are happening in the schools and to improve those areas that need to be improved. We need more and more voices

beginning to say education is doing a creditable job.

Donald R. Frost
Past President—ASCD

Steve Hallmark replies: Don Frost clearly has a point. American education is getting a bad rap in the media and a response is needed. As I see it, there are two alternative tactics embattled educators can use. On the one hand, as Frost suggests, we can emphasize the positive and try to counter negative statements with statistical evidence. This approach, I think, can be particularly effective with openminded people who are willing to question the accuracy of media reporting.

The other tactic—the one I suggested in my article—is to acknowledge that we are not perfect (as Frost explicitly does in his letter) as a means of regaining credibility with people whose minds are already made up, and who are generally *unwilling* to look at the evidence available, which shows that educators are doing something right. By getting them to agree on one thing (that educators could be doing a better job), we also may get them to look seriously at our ideas of *what* needs to be done to improve education, not who is to blame for perceived inadequacies, whether or not the deficiencies are real.

As I see it, these two tactics spring from a similar conception of the problem: the public doesn't trust us. It also seems to me that these two approaches to the problem are essentially complementary, rather than antagonistic, since their goal is the same: getting the public to take a second look at what's really happening in education.

Dear Editor:

I was delighted to see Hallmark's article in your January issue [*EL*, "The Educational 'State

of the Union,' 1979," January 1979, pp. 227-32.]. He expresses a concern I have had for some time regarding the lack of leadership in education, which has caused the abdication of responsibility to the point that education is increasingly being designed and directed by noneducators. Setting arbitrary, narrowly-conceived competency standards of measurable mediocrity to which teachers teach and on which learners are tested and accomplishment mistakenly rated is but one unfortunate example. Legislating goal attainment is not sufficient for learning to occur. Too many school administrators, needing good-sounding answers, default to sincere but misguided school board members who contend that a business and industrial input/output is needed in schools.

Another area where educators have shown a remarkable lack of leadership is in the myopic "back-to-basics" movement, which may actually undermine that which is most basic. Proponents of the movement are urging schools, in the name of improving test scores, to retreat from the very areas which scores show need attention, such as ability to reason and to deal with large ideas. Frequently the "back-to-basics" advocates are also those who demand autocratic discipline and instructional methods, completely contrary to what is known about how to reach the very students most in need of acquiring these basic skills.

It is certainly past time educators began to provide the forceful leadership to school boards, politicians, the public, and textbook publishers that can result in improved quality of education and more positive attitudes toward the schools.

Fred D. Gillispie, Jr.
Lynchburg, Virginia

Dear Editor:

I was deeply impressed by the "Patchwork Curriculum" section of the November 1978 *Educational Leadership*. Your comments and questions

direct attention to important concerns. Since you requested comments, I gladly comply.

Fad education such as career, bilingual, or whatever is not the most pressing problem. For a while, these movements divert valuable educational resources such as time and money: a few guides are composed, sets of materials are distributed, and teachers sit through inservices with glazed eyes. There is seldom much change in the curriculum.

As I perceive the situation, however, an even more serious problem has occurred within and among the traditional content fields. At the elementary level, the area of my greatest expertise, a disastrous fragmentation appears to be taking place.

Children who are struggling to learn to read, write, and think are drowning in a sea of subdivided skills. Holistic learnings are being neglected or excluded. Dissected curriculum has become the thrust.

Evelyn Robinson
Assistant Professor
Southeastern Louisiana University
Hammond

Editor's note: We have invited Evelyn Robinson to prepare an article expanding on her comments for a future issue.

Dear Editor:

I teach junior high English, helping children learn about themselves through reading and express themselves through writing. The boys have some fine models in the literature we read. The girls have next to none.

Every book on our list features a boy as main character. Only one book (which is not a main text, but is on the supplementary reading list) has a girl as the main character, *Karen* by Marie Killilea.

Not only are boys the most important characters, they possess the most important human

qualities. In *Swiftwater*, love between the father and mother is made inferior to love between father and son. In *Little Britches*, a mother loses her husband, and a boy at ten years of age becomes the "man" of the house.

Should we not give all of our children models to identify with? Isn't it as important that girls develop their self-image and faith in their own possibilities as it is for boys?

Gail D. Ward
Silver Spring, Maryland

Dear Editor:

Your December issue focusing on "Three R's: What Works?" left me very disappointed [*EL*, December 1978].

While I had no objections to the content of the articles, I was very concerned over the illustrations. As educators, we all have an important task of contributing to the elimination of sex role stereotyping. The illustrations in this issue perpetuate those stereotypes. Showing females writing and males working with math problems helps perpetuate stereotypic ideas that "girls do better in writing and language arts while boys do better in science and math."

Linda Chew
Program Specialist
Sex Desegregation Assistance
Center of the Southwest
Nacogdoches, Texas

Dear Editor:

Nowhere—but nowhere—have I ever read such gobbledegook as Christine Bennett's article in the January 1979 issue [*EL*, "Teaching Students as They Would Be Taught: The Importance of Cultural Perspective," pp. 259-68]. The description of Warren Benson's class corresponds to many I have observed in real city schools, but the

rest of the article is nothing I have ever really seen.

And poor Warren Benson! Man, if he tries to find something to relieve his doubts in Christine's departure into world views, he'll wind up somewhere as certified.

G. E. Dart
Beaumont School District
Beaumont, California

Dear Editor:

The article, "Teaching Students as They Would Be Taught: The Importance of Cultural Perspective" [pp. 259-68] in the January 1979 issue of *Educational Leadership* is commendable. Bravo to Christine Bennett for cogently explaining the impact of cultural heritages and experiences, of both students and teachers, on the instructional process. I was particularly impressed by the practical and realistic examples of student and teacher behaviors likely to occur in multiethnic classrooms she used to illustrate major conceptual points about cultural differences.

Bennett's article gets to the heart of what providing quality education to students from different ethnic, social, and cultural backgrounds is all about. Educational research tells us that it is the teacher who makes the difference in what happens in the classroom. I think Bennett's arguments for understanding individual differences within the context of cultural differences, and placing the responsibility for changing to accommodating these differences in instruction more upon teachers than students are indeed valid. Since one's cultural experiences and ethnic heritages are significant influences in shaping his or her individuality, and if educators' commitment to maximizing individual potential of all students is to be realized, then it is imperative for teachers to know well the cultural backgrounds of their students, and how these backgrounds affect classroom behaviors. The acquisition of this kind of

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PEACE OF MIND AT AN EARLY AGE

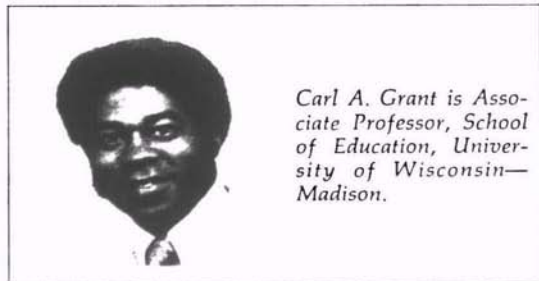
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Many students express boredom, discontent, or mixed feelings about going to school.²³ This boredom can lead students to do nothing or to employ what Goffman calls "impression management," as in the case when a student becomes "a character" in order to manipulate the situation.²⁴ A number of times I have seen minority students act out racial stereotypes they believe teachers have. The teacher becomes more convinced of the accuracy of the stereotype, which in turn influences the teacher's reactions. Once again, stu-



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dents lose, and teachers are unable to break the cycle of nonachievement.

Having academic and social success with students in cooperation with or in spite of the student culture requires an understanding of it. Student culture can be difficult to understand even though teacher and students are members of the same cultural group. When different cultures are involved, it becomes more difficult still—but also more essential.

Not a One-Way Street

The socialization process is not a one-way street. Both teachers and students are affected by one another. If schools are to have greater meaning for students, especially minority students, the reciprocal nature of socialization will have to be recognized and affirmed by both partners in the relationship. That should enable them to better understand and effect social change, instead of becoming victims of the faceless "they" who have too often and too long moved us in the wrong direction.

²³ Jackson, *Life in Classrooms*, op. cit., pp. 39-81.

²⁴ E. Goffman. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971. p. 244.

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knowledge is possible from information like that presented by Bennett. *Educational Leadership* should publish more articles of this tenor and quality.

Geneva Gay
Associate Professor of Education
Purdue University
West Lafayette, Indiana

Have Something to Say?

If so, write to us. Letters to the editor are usually edited for brevity and are printed only if space is available. Letters must be signed, although we will withhold an author's name if requested.

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