

The Novel Character of Today's School Criticism

Mary Anne Raywid

Much of the current distrust of schools is part of a consumer movement directed at government. It calls for a new relationship between school and community.

The 1970s have been a disturbing decade for education, and history may show them a watershed with respect to public sentiment about schools. Until the dawn of the 1970s, one finds a fairly steady progression in our esteem for education and our conviction that public schools could teach effectively for all (save, perhaps a negligible minority) of the nation's children. Such sentiment reached a zenith in the 1960s with federal policy presupposing that the schools could change the social order if given sufficient resources.

But such optimism now seems a long time past. Less than a decade later, negative evidence began piling up on a dozen fronts: reports of declining achievement and falling test scores; school violence, vandalism, and myriad forms of lesser but explicit student estrangement; tax revolts and other displays of public disaffection. The list is now long and all too familiar.

Is it merely a cyclic plague

come round once again? After all, there have been repeated periods of fairly intense school criticism, and there is even a much-used quotation from Aristotle claiming that education of his day had deteriorated alarmingly. Many are comparing the negative public sentiment of today with the school criticism that was so extensive in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Certainly there are parallels—in some of the targets of complaint and quite noticeably in some of the critics. In the 1940s, as now, right wing political interests and sentiment seemed prominently associated with a number of the complaints and demands—certainly with some of the objections raised against particular content and orientations, and in the insistence on a return to "basics."

But some very fundamental differences are also clear when educational criticism of today is compared with that of 30 years ago. For one thing, it was possible in the late 1940s to trace much of the

criticism to the political right. It was also quite clear that the persuasion and real agendas of those bringing the criticism were sharply at odds with the beliefs and desires of a vast majority of the American people. These two conditions recommended the strategy for dealing with such criticism: expose it for what it was—a politically motivated program for molding public education in the image of a small but powerful network of right wing extremists. The techniques were clear: unmask the critics as the "front groups" a number of them were, and display the full extremist platforms they were serving. Simultaneously, rally the vast majority to active support of education by showing them what was actually going on in the schools. The premise was that all who were given an accurate picture simply could not help but approve.¹

It's Different Now

If this two-pronged program now seems inadequate, it is not so much due to our earlier naiveté as to an extensively altered present context. One would have to note at least the following as major differences between the two sets of educational criticism: first, to-

¹Detailed documentation that this was, indeed, the strategy of the day would take another article. But it was quite evident in such assorted ways as the establishment and mission of the NEA's Commission for the Defense of Democracy Through Education, and the program of the National School Public Relations Association founded in the early 1950s; in my book, *The Ax-Grinders*, and in *The Censors and the Schools* by Jack Nelson and Gene Roberts. Nelson and Roberts cited the answer to the attacks of the period, proffered by the president of the American Textbook Publishers Institute: "We can meet the charges which threaten textbooks and education only by substituting understanding for misunderstanding when it exists." (*The Censors and the Schools*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1963. p. 191. Emphasis in the original.)

day's school criticism is not confined to any political persuasion, but emanates from across the full political spectrum, left to right. There are a number of right wingers, to be sure. But study of the critics suggests that this source accounts for only a portion of the criticism—and perhaps not a very substantial portion of the total at that. (A major study of decision making in American education concluded that interest groups have much less influence than often supposed, and that left wing groups are more active than right.)² This yields a related major difference, which is that much of today's educational criticism seems less politically inspired and more typically a matter of just what it purports to be. Today's school critic, that is, is less likely than the school critic of 30 years ago to be operating in the service of a political faction or ideology—and more likely to be objecting to school practice in its own right.³ Third, various indicators suggest quite clearly that during the years of 1947-53, when educational criticism seemed at a peak, most Americans remained quite positive about their schools. Today, by contrast, a majority seem dissatisfied and estranged. The Roper Poll of 1950 concluded that although everybody seemed to have some gripes about the school down the street, so far as schools in general were concerned there was "one inescapable point. When Americans think about education they are complacent as a whole and . . . they feel that the over-all situation is sunny. . . ." The latest Gallup Poll, by contrast, finds only 34 percent of the American public willing to grade the schools an A or B. And a Harris survey showed that between 1966 and 1972, those with strong confidence in the nation's educational leadership dropped from 61 percent to 33 percent.⁴

Now what practical conclusions can be drawn from such contrasts? It would figure that the differences in today's educational complaints—with respect to auspices, type, purpose, extent—would recommend some very different ways for handling them than the methods appropriate to the problems of the 1940s. When it is safe to assume that an informed community will be a supportive one, then meeting educational criticism calls for one kind of strategy. When

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accurate information is just as likely to generate wrath as approval, however, a different strategy is indicated.

A Different Strategy

I am convinced that the educational criticism of today—in sharp contrast to that of 30 years ago—is approaching the dimensions of a legitimacy crisis for the institution. Americans in growing numbers seem increasingly uncertain about whether schools are intellectually, emotionally, and even physically, healthy places for their children to be. And if this is so, what seems needed is nothing less than a plan for rebuilding the legitimacy of the institution. This, of course, is not just a matter of public relations, however vigorously pursued. I suspect the only

way that faith in public education is going to be restored to large segments of the American people is through a fundamental reworking and restructuring of the relationships between the home and the school, and/or the community and the school.

Indeed, a reworking of these relationships is already underway, as evidenced by an array of coercive measures forced on schools and teachers. Perhaps the most visible manifestation is the competency testing movement, which has forced an unprecedented degree of reporting to the public. In the long run, perhaps the most important thing about those testing programs newly adopted in three fourths of the states is their reflection of the public's unwillingness to assume any longer that schools are effectively accomplishing their mission. Certainly the withdrawal of such trust ushers in a new sort of relationship between the school and a public determined to examine for itself whether, when, and for whom education has "taken." This, then, is one way in which the broad reworking of home-school

² L. Harmon Zeigler, M. Kent Jennings, and G. Wayne Peak. "The Decision-Making Culture of American Public Education." Cornelius P. Cotter, editor. *Political Science Annual: An International Review*, V = 1974. New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1974. pp. 177-219.

³ Of course there are several very strong arguments to the effect that politics and education—as well as politics and schooling—are not divorceable from one another. I subscribe to this general view. It does not, however, in my judgment preclude marking *degrees* and *types* of political domination and intrusion and declaring some of these inappropriate.

⁴ For the several polls, see: "What U.S. Thinks About Its Schools." *Life*, October 16, 1950, p. 11; George H. Gallup. "The Eleventh Annual Gallup Poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools." *Phi Delta Kappan* 61:1 (September 1979); and "Confidence in Education Leaders Declines." *Today's Education*, January 1973, p. 3.

and school-community relationships has already begun.

Malpractice suits represent another way. So far the courts have shown limited inclination to support the concept of malpractice in education, but such suits are, nevertheless, a potent force for coercing schools to assume responsibility for their failures.

The advocacy movement is still another way in which new relationships between the school and the public are being forced on schools. There are programs in urban schools that now place "advocates"—frequently social workers or CETA workers—in high schools to represent students' rights and interests there, as against those of teachers and administrators. A story told me by an administrator in one school illustrates the kind of restructuring of authority the arrangement brings: A student was sent to my informant—a girls' dean—for having tripped a teacher in the hall, causing her to fall and break a wrist. The girl was summoned to the dean's office and arrived accompanied by an "advocate." When, in the absence of any question as to the facts, the dean told the girl she was suspended, the advocate protested—claiming that the way the teacher had upbraided the girl in class explained and justified the incident, rendering the tripping forgivable.

Citizen Organizations

A somewhat different sort of approach to rearranging the home-school relation is reflected in the programs of several organizations launched in the 1970s to render the schools more responsive to the parents most immediately concerned. One is the Institute for Responsive Education, the other the National Committee for Citizens in Education. While there are pronounced differences in the two as to flavor and militancy, it seems safe to say that both are explicitly

concerned with "increasing citizen participation in the affairs of the nation's public schools." NCCE explains it this way:

Such participation is vital to all democratic institutions. . . . Moreover, we believe that publicly financed institutions should be held accountable to the public, not only for the moneys they spend, but for their programs. Until now, it seems to us, there has been neither as much public participation nor as much public accountability in the schools as is desirable. For too long, school decisions have been made primarily by professionals, and usually in private, removed from public view.⁵

Several things about such an assertive posture seem noteworthy. One is that the author of this statement is no extremist critic, but an ex-state commissioner of education. The second is that his organization—the National Committee for Citizens in Education—is no minor operation, but an outfit claiming to represent 225,000 people, including 335 affiliate groups as well as individual members.⁶ A third and even more important factor in assessing such a stance and its prospective impact is its place within broad social trends, the way it fits with other views and developments. Here is where we find a major reason why today's school criticism is not likely to abate very soon, or its demands disappear. The accountability insistence in education and the demands to be "part of the action" in schools reflect a broad consumerism being pursued in relation to many institutions and activities.

Consumerism

Ours is a time of profound dissatisfaction with a number of our most pervasive arrangements. People are just unwilling to sit still and take what has been, until recently, fairly standard operating procedure. Doctors and hospitals are taking their lumps a little differently from schools, but curtail-

ment of their prerogatives and expansion of patients' rights have been occurring over the past decade—along with medical malpractice settlements in unprecedented amounts. Indeed, the whole "rights" phenomenon is a case in point, with the rights of employees being asserted in relation to employers; the rights of welfare recipients in relation to social agencies; the rights of dependent children, of the indigent, and the incompetent in relation to the range of professionals and institutions that can harass and restrict them. Government itself has been far from immune from the consumerist impulse—which is exactly what is at stake in the many proposals last November for returning to the people the right to propose legislation, render the final decision on it, or oust elected representatives. These proposals—known formally as initiative, referendum, and recall—represent traditional populist measures. But this aspect of populism is closely akin to consumerism—here, consumerism addressed to government. The same sort of "I want to do it myself" sentiment is being asserted, directed at government officials and institutions instead of at the private agencies and individuals that consumerism typically addresses.

The determination to hold businesses and professionals and governments accountable for their actions—and to assume more direct, personal, individual control of these activities—marks an unmistakable trend in American life today. People are not dissatisfied just with the school-parent and school-community relationship, but with the expert-client relation in gen-

⁵ Carl Marburger. *Who Controls the Schools?* Columbia, Maryland: The National Committee for Citizens in Education, 1978. p. 4.

⁶ "NCCE's Annual Report to the Public." *Network*, December-January 1978, p. 4.

eral, the consumer-seller relation, and the government-citizen relation. The scope of the disaffection suggests the likely durability of negative sentiment—and sets the limits on what can be anticipated by way of quieting or satisfying the criticism. Even if it were possible to wave a magic wand and



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restore the school's presently tarnished image to its former brilliance, the problem of reorienting the relations between formal education and the community it serves would still be with us.

Information Not Enough

What does this suggest? First, as earlier noted, it means that public relations is a poor bet for handling current educational criticism. This is not to say such programs are useless or that they ought to be eliminated. It is simply to warn against counting on them to do the job they did with fair success 30 years ago. The needs are different today and public reservations run deeper. We would do far better to concentrate on seeking modes of active public involvement with schools. What kinds of mechanism can be found to allow direct observation and participation?

What sort of structures can we devise to facilitate involvement?

An increasingly diverse array of means for increasing parental participation is emerging. One general strategy is the attempt to transfer a number of now centrally-made educational decisions to the individual school, or to an area wherein local voices are presumed to carry more weight than in the school district as a whole. Detroit has divided the city into regions, each with its own board. While the central board retains formal power, efforts have been made to increase parental access to the local or regional body, and to give each of the latter a real voice in the central group.⁷

More venturesome departures from traditional control arrangements include local school councils that have now been required by law in some states. They are designed to constitute "intermediate structures in the political process which open access to those previously excluded from decision making."⁸ As such, they represent the attempt to meet the consumerist impulse by permitting, if not a direct voice in school affairs, at least an enlarged representation and an additional forum in which to present one's case.

Expanded Parent Role

Other arrangements are designed to give parents a much stronger and more immediate voice in their child's education. The optional schools arrangement now existing in a number of locales (for example, Minneapolis, Cincinnati, Grand Rapids) makes available a variety of distinct educational programs, recognizably different from one another. The family chooses which school the youngster will attend.

Another example of an expanded parent role is the concept

of "family-designed learning," which calls for more active participation from parents who recurrently, throughout the school year, sit down with their child and his or her teacher to jointly select the individual instructional objectives the youngster will be pursuing.⁹

For those for whom none of these goes far enough, there is a burgeoning home instruction movement recommending that the parent withdraw the child from the school altogether and go it alone. There is even an active association intended to aid such parents with the legal problems they may encounter (the National Association for the Legal Support of Alternative Schools in Santa Fe, New Mexico) and a newsletter designed to help them deal with their children once out of school (*Growing Without Schooling* written and distributed by John Holt).

So it would appear that the consumerist impetus has already developed a range of media and approaches for giving parents an increased voice. It is not at all the scene of 30 years ago, which yielded quite nicely to stepped up efforts at telling parents what was happening in the school. Indeed, it often seems as though a reversal of that arrangement is what today's critic seeks: not information on what the school is doing, but the opportunity to inform the school on what the community *wants* it to do. The stakes are high. I hope we'll not blind ourselves to the message. *EL*

⁷ The arrangement was described in somewhat greater detail by William G. Cunningham in: "Citizen Participation: Antagonists or Allies." *Theory Into Practice* 15(4): 276-77; October 1976.

⁸ Miriam Clasby. "The Community Voice in Education." *Social Policy*, November/December 1977, p. 76.

⁹ Thorwald Esbensen and Philip H. Richards. *Family-Designed Learning: A Next Step for Individualized Instruction*. Belmont, California: Fearon, 1976.

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