

A Conversation with Wilson Riles

Q: Have people in your state lost confidence in public education?

Riles: I'd put it this way: people in California—and in the nation as a whole—think public education is important. They are concerned about it; they want it to be better; but they're not ready to throw it out.

Following passage of Proposition 13 a number of polls were taken asking what services should be cut. Invariably the answers were: don't cut fire services, don't cut police services, and don't cut the public schools.

Q: What are the prospects for adequate long-term financing of education?

Riles: That's our greatest challenge. There was chaos after passage of Proposition 13. Organized groups all moved quickly to lobby for their special interests, but few parents were saying much about it. So we encouraged parents to go to Sacramento and talk directly to their legislators—and that made a lot of difference. The fact that 61 percent of the voters voted against Proposition 9¹ in June of 1980 is a signal, I believe, that the people in our state want adequate financing for schools.

Q: What have been the effects of Proposition 13?

Riles: Some people have said nothing has happened but they're wrong. We haven't felt the full impact, of course, because of the state bail-out. But local boards had to make cuts—in maintenance for example, and in

custodial services. In some districts class sizes went up. The main effect was a dramatic shift in the source of funding. Prior to Proposition 13, 52 percent of the support for schools came from local property taxes and about 46 percent from the state general fund. Now, 80 percent comes from the state.

Q: With financing usually goes control.

Riles: Talk of state control needs to be put in perspective. The fact is that every state constitution says the state is responsible for education. It's a state function. Now, most states have delegated management and operation of school districts—the hiring and firing of teachers, the building of buildings, and so on—to the local level. That's appropriate, but the state still must ensure an adequate level of education. With the state supporting education so heavily there is a real danger of too much state control, but thus far we have managed to avoid that.

Q: California has a requirement for proficiency standards. What's the relationship between the state and the local school districts in that program?

Riles: The original proposal was for the state to set minimum standards as was done in Florida. I opposed that because I thought it would be better for standards to be set by people elected at the local level. By the way, many of them weren't too happy setting the standards themselves. It's interesting that when it gets hot at the local level you find some of the strongest advocates for local control wanting to shift decisions to the state. But that's the way we enacted our law. The state provides technical

assistance but we do not develop or administer the tests.

Q: I asked about state control because a lot of educators feel hemmed in by regulations coming from the different levels of government. Are you concerned about that?

Riles: Yes. I think there are too many regulations and some of them are too rigid. But I think it would be naive to expect those who allocate money to give schools a blank check. What troubles me is that when something is difficult for local people to manage politically, they appeal to the state to resolve it. Let me give you an example. Our State Board had a regulation prohibiting smoking, but students smoked anyhow. We had students come before the Board who wanted schools to set up a smoking area on the parking lot or somewhere to protect those who didn't smoke. They said restrooms were being used for everything except what they were designed for, and they made a good case. So I took the leadership in getting the State Board to eliminate that regulation and leave it up to the local high schools. Well, that bit of flexibility was not received with open arms. They'd rather have the state say, "You can't do it."

Q: It isn't only the state dictating to local schools; increasingly it's the federal government. Some say federal support has fragmented education by creating so many different categorical programs.

Riles: That's a serious problem. It's partly one of coordination and communication at the federal level, and I'm hopeful that the new Department of Education will improve things. But we must recognize that the problem

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emerged in the first place because needs of certain students—children from low income families and handicapped students—were not being addressed. And I believe that if the federal government had just put the money on a stump and let people pick it up, those needs still would not be addressed. Yes, the regulations are overly restrictive but they have a purpose.

Q: Will the federal government be able to get away from categorical programs?

Riles: I don't think so because every program has built up a constituency. If we tell those constituencies that the problems will be handled adequately at the local level, they're not going to believe us. And I think they have history on their side. Nevertheless, I hope we can find ways to put more

trust in educators at the local level. I myself would rather be clear on the goals and purposes of a program, be given the flexibility to use the money in accordance with those purposes—and be held accountable for the results—than be expected to follow every little line in some regulation.

Q: An idea gaining support in some states is "school site management." The principal and staff are given a great deal of freedom to decide how best to use all the resources available to that school. Is that the case in California?

Riles: Not as much as I would like it to be. I will go so far as to say where I've seen a good principal, I've invariably seen a good school; and where I've seen a weak principal, I've seen a weak school. Certainly at the elementary level, and to a large extent

at the secondary level, the principal is the key.

Q: Is California's School Improvement Program a move in the direction of better coordination, or is it one more program on top of all the others?

Riles: One of the reasons we set up the School Improvement Program was to have a mechanism for better coordination at the local level. We pulled together a task force to design the program, starting not with money, not with regulations but with what we wanted to accomplish. We started with early childhood education and later moved up to fifth grade. Over half the elementary schools in the state are now into the program, and we're beginning to get secondary schools involved. The program has helped bring about teamwork be-

California's top educator has made national headlines with his advocacy of programs for early childhood education and local school improvement, and his efforts to defeat tax limitations and vouchers. In this interview with ASCD Executive Editor Ron Brandt, he talks about education and politics in a trend-setting state.





tween parents and staff at the local school site. For example 200,000 citizens do volunteer work in California schools on a regular basis. It hasn't been easy, because educators have had to change the way they do a lot of things.

With regard to the federal regulations, we've had problems because we are trying to coordinate at the school site level. For example, Title I regulations are written one way and other regulations are written other ways.

Q: Schools aren't permitted to use a single group of individuals to advise on the whole school program?

Riles: Right. Our position is, "Let's take a look at what you want to accomplish; we will comply with that."

California was the first state to initiate advisory committees. The federal government came along with their requirements later on. For example, their advisory committees for Title I were originally district level. We had already pioneered that, but we found that committees at the district level soon began to act like little boards of education. Advisory committees should be at the local school level. When we designed the School Improvement Program we asked, "What about this 'advisory' business? Why not have a team made up of parents and teachers and the principal sit down together and determine what should be done in their school?" But that's not in accord with the federal requirements, so we still have to have a multiplicity of advisory committees.

Q: Some contend that parents shouldn't be involved in governance of the school; that what parents really want and can do best is select specific programs for their own children.

Riles: Parents don't expect to serve in the role of principal, nor do they expect to replace the teacher. But they're willing to work with the school once they've helped determine what the thrust should be. There's nothing better than for parents to be in contact with other youngsters and so be able to evaluate their own child. We've also found that parents can sometimes relate with a neighbor's child better than with their own. I hate to see parents concerned only

about their own individual child because schools are social environments where students relate with one another.

Q: Coons and Sugarman (1978) call their voucher proposal the "family choice" initiative. To what extent do you think families should be involved in choosing schools and programs for their own children?

Riles: I think the School Improvement approach, in which parents determine the instructional thrust of the school, is better. Coons says parents who can afford private schools have a choice, and he wants all parents to have that kind of choice. I say most private schools don't allow parents to tell them what to do; they tell the parents what to do and the parents take it or leave it.

Q: Still, when a parent chooses a school and the programs it offers, that's a major choice. The difficulty with the school site council is that people want different things for their children, so everybody has to compromise.

Riles: The assumption is that a private school can meet the needs of every child, regardless of individual differences. I think that's a fallacy. Parents may choose a school with a certain kind of curriculum, but some children will not prosper under that type of curriculum. There are still individual differences that must be accounted for.

Q: Will California have some type of voucher system eventually?

Riles: If there were to be a voucher system, it would probably come first in California. California is a bellwether state; it's likely to try those kinds of things. Another effort will be made to get a voucher system on the ballot, but I don't think it will succeed because there is no grassroots movement in favor of it. For one thing, most private schools in California are opposed to the idea. ■

¹ An initiative that would have cut the state income tax by 50 percent.

Reference

Coons, John E., and Sugarman, Stephen D. *Education by Choice: The Case for Family Control*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978.

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