

Gone are the days of minimal state and federal involvement in education. Today's educator must understand the workings of government, politics, and public finance.

POLITICS AND PEDAGOGY: A NEW MIX

Far too many educators have simplistic, nostalgic ideas about the kind of governmental structure and processes that could reconcile the divergent purposes and tasks of education in today's world. Granted, these ideas derive from past practice and are perpetuated because important elements of the structure are still well entrenched. These include the provisions that school governments be independent from partisan politics and from the strictures placed on other government services; that lay control of policy and operations be exercised by local citizen boards, with only indirect or minimal involvement of state and federal authorities; and that the professional dedication and expertise of educators be recognized, used, and rewarded.

This kind of governance which emphasizes autonomy for educational agencies and local responsibility serves the purposes of educators best in communities that freely and continuously support public education and the expansion of educational opportunity, at times when the pace of change permits careful design and gradual growth of programs and services.

For many decades, roughly 1910 to 1960, many school systems functioned in such a favorable environment. During this period, educators were generally successful in "reform by accretion"; that is, by adding new layers to the common school, new subjects to the curriculum, new specialists, or new functions. The schools were not immune to the effects of societal controversies and conflicts, but school governments had rela-

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tively low visibility, strong capacity to achieve consensus among influential policymakers, and predictable outcomes of policy decisions.

The tasks of government devolved on specialists in the profession—superintendents, business managers, state and local association officials—and on small cadres of board members, legislators, executives, or interest groups in the political realm. Largely insulated from the political upheavals that did occur, most school personnel did not know, and felt they did not need to know, the intricacies of the system which controlled and funded their activities. They did not perceive that education is indeed a "political" enterprise in the sense that it has always engaged in a competitive struggle for tax dollars and public approval.

This ostrich-like posture became increasingly inappropriate, indeed ludicrous, during the 20-year period from 1960 to 1980. The upheavals in educational policymaking during the 1960s were associated, as in earlier periods of social change, with the public's perception that the schools might serve as agents of social reform. However, demands for services and for innovations that would enhance the quality and equality of educational opportunity came from a widening public, and responses came not just from schools and local school districts but also from the state and federal governments. Congress and state legislatures increased financial support of schools and established new priorities and standards of accountability to govern the extension of local school services to previously neglected groups of stu-

dents. Experimental programs of every variety proliferated.

As established values and practices were fractured in all sections of society, schools were no exception. Parents and students became restive with their limited influence on educational policymaking and teachers turned to unions to voice their demands. Even the non-union professional associations found it necessary to adopt an aggressive stance in order to influence the policymaking process. One result of these and other breaks with precedent was the growing need of the various protagonists to understand the real workings of government, politics, and public finance.

Pressures on the educational system that took form during the 1960s seemed to converge with great intensity by 1970, especially those exerted by aggressive advocates for disadvantaged minorities.¹ The demands for educational equality during the past decade strongly resemble earlier campaigns to eliminate racial segregation in the schools and to improve the schooling of poor children. School officials have found that in trying to satisfy one group they are sure to alienate others. The administrative and political style for dealing with contending groups that was based on ascribed professional expertise and organizational solidarity was not effective against determined measures by those intent on opening up the system by every available means of political action. One clear result is a marked increase in the stress experienced by local school districts whose governance and procedures for absorbing change date from less strenuous times.

A more fundamental reason to characterize the 1970s as a decade of "politicization" in education—a

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trend that is likely to continue—is the effect of significant changes in the demographic and economic realities affecting public education. Specifically, the numbers of present and prospective school-age children are declining as are financial limitations on public expenditures, due to inflation, an uneven growth rate in the Gross National Product, taxpayer disaffection, and higher costs of energy. It is unlikely that either major new tax revenues or significant funds from other existing program areas will be allocated to education in the near future. Thus, the reforms sought by the activists of the 1970s impose additional costs that cannot be met within existing or lowered levels of school expenditures, unless some services are curtailed. The public is more likely to accept the redistribution of resources in the cause of equity and justice if there are no serious losers in the process. But opposition builds rapidly when the process puts pressure on available resources. Evidence that this has already occurred is found in the state and local demands for greater fiscal assistance from higher levels of government and in the growing influence of taxpayer groups favoring curtailment of government services.

What then is essential to learn about the politics and government of education today? We may derive some general conclusions about the situation by examining the aforementioned concepts of autonomy, local control, limited involvement of the state and federal governments, and public reliance on professional expertise. First, the capacity of the schools "to go it alone" in winning financial support is weakened by losses of tax revenues and intense competition from other public services, such as those for the aging population. Moreover, as governments at all levels have assumed greater responsibility for the well-being of the diverse American population, the number of problems requiring collaboration among public agencies has mushroomed. For example, educators are confronting new challenges in working with health and welfare agencies in administration of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act. At the same time, schools are feeling the effects

of intensive judicial intervention and legislative oversight. Catherine Lovell writes: "Policy is no longer made mostly in a single governmental unit but is hammered out through a negotiating, bargaining relationship among multiple governing units. Policies are continually altered and implemented in the inter-jurisdictional milieu."² So much then for the vain expectation that school systems can function in isolation from the rest of government. Similarly, it is unlikely that federal and state governments will revert to the role of bystander or mere facilitator of local educational initiatives and objectives.

School systems were late arrivals to the changing milieu of intergovernmental relations among public agencies which began in the 1930s, but the federalization process in education is now well advanced. It is rooted in national and, to a lesser extent, in statewide concerns with attaining educational equality for students previously disadvantaged by disparities among local school district resources and operational policies.

The principal instrument of increased state and federal influence has been the grant-in-aid, which provides partial or full funding for specified programs to be carried out by the states or localities or by some combination of state and local action. Although replete with the restrictions and regulations that accompany use of public money, these funds are seldom cut off for compliance failures. A confusing patchwork of programs has emerged, which reluctant localities may be willing to undertake only because of their dependence on the additional funds.

The increasing pressures from many quarters for a piece of the action account also for the present decline in the sheltered status and decision-making authority education professionals have regarded as their prerogative. Educators are not alone in feeling the effects of this trend; hospital managers and physicians are now subject to new forms of governmental action and scrutiny. Accountability for results has, in fact, moved from the exclusive sphere of professional ethics, standards, and sense of responsibility to the public arena. This is the underlying explanation for legislative concern with such matters as competency-based education,

test results, and individualized education programs for handicapped children.

Active scrutiny of the performance of the schools by the public may be a mark of the success of schools if it is a better-educated populace that employs its critical skills to expose unwarranted claims of professional know-how. Whatever the reasons and whatever the costs to the morale of educators, opinion polls all indicate that the public wants the schools to function more effectively, and some people are more than willing to lobby their elected officials to that end.

These trends, which have brought enormous complexity and confusion to the schools, may not be healthy for advancing or even balancing the goals of community, equality, and efficiency in education, but they may be reversible, at least in part. The past two decades have brought us to a transitional stage where long established structures and practices aren't working as well as advertised, and newer modes of operation aren't working too well either. Stereotypic or doctrinaire prescriptions won't provide the basis for corrective action. School personnel need a firmer base for interpreting the buzzing realities of their current situation. Catherine Lovell expresses this as follows:

We need to throw away many of our organization chart descriptions and prescriptions and find new ways of describing and perfecting the systems so that governments and agencies may coordinate better among themselves at the local levels and can become more accountable to their publics. We need to concentrate on defending the variety and diversity in our system, while at the same time searching for ways to help the system's parts work together as a whole when that is essential.³ ■

¹ For a recent analysis of the developments of the 70s, see: Edith K. Mosher, Anne H. Hastings, and Jennings L. Wagoner, Jr., *Pursuing Equal Educational Opportunity: School Politics and the New Activists* (New York: Teachers College, Columbia University, ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education, ERIC/CUE Urban Diversity Series No. 64, Summer 1979).

² Catherine Lovell, "Where We Are in Intergovernmental Relations and Some of the Implications," *Southern Review of Public Administration* (June 1979): 6.

³ *Ibid.*

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