

# IN AN AGE OF DISBELIEF

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Throughout the 19th century, visitors to America, such as Tocqueville and Lord Bryce, noted a spirit of hopefulness in the new American nation. As late as the mid-20th century, John F. Kennedy envisioned a New Frontier in which Americans would "ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country" and Lyndon B. Johnson envisioned a Great Society in which a War on Poverty could be waged and won. Events of the 1960s and 1970s crushed these hopes and moved the nation into the current Age of Disbelief. Today American education is shaped by the lack of faith that prevails in American society. A loss of confidence in a society's institutions is accompanied by a loss of confidence in schools.

The Vietnam disaster contributed heavily to our disenchantment and to disbelief in America's role abroad. While we reeled from the shock of Vietnam, Watergate showed us that Lord Acton was right in his dictum, "power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely." Recollections of Watergate and related abuses of power may fade, but the heritage endures—a disbelief in the integrity of government and of leadership, a deep abiding suspicion of corruption and abuse of power.

Caught in this rising tide of disbelief were our law enforcement and intelligence agencies. We moved from admiration of the FBI (remember the heroic gangbusters in pursuit of Dillinger and other criminals?) to mis-

trust of an FBI that tried to smear Martin Luther King, that ordered surveillance of lawful liberation movements and illegal break-ins. We moved from admiration of a wartime Office of Strategic Services (remember when spies were heroes?) to mistrust of a CIA that underestimated popular movements to overthrow despotism, that plotted assassinations of foreign leaders and overthrow of elected governments. As a result, we came to disbelieve in those who represented the law and those who were to supply intelligence to policy makers.

In the years following Vietnam and Watergate, our disbelief increased as our institutions seemed unable to cope with problems that beset them. Inflation moved into double digits while business, labor, and government insisted on getting theirs. A presidential call to meet the energy crisis with "the moral equivalent of war" was laughed away. OPEC charged what the market would bear and no one was able to do anything about it. As international relations deteriorated, the cries of the hawks were heard again in the land. The Three Mile Island accident demonstrated incapacities in both industrial technology and governmental regulation; the possibility of catastrophe became real to a public which had earlier been skeptical of nuclear alarmism.

Earlier in the 20th century, during the Progressive Era and the New Deal, Americans called on government to help solve problems. After all, government in a democracy should be the servant of the people, the force helping them do collectively what they could not do otherwise. But now the servant of the people seemed to become the enemy of the people.

## Disbelief in Education

Is it any wonder that this Age of

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## **The public's loss of confidence in schools can be countered by communication and political action.**

Disbelief has affected education? It could hardly be otherwise. In a society characterized by a pervasive skepticism, the American public has also lost confidence in its schools.

Historically, America has wanted schools to educate for citizenship. Yet the degeneration of the political process made a mockery of civic education. How could education for citizenship prevail in an era when the people were lied to, their leaders imprisoned for crime, their law enforcers suspect? The most promising citizenship education approach of the 20th century, the community school, was seldom used. When the movement was revived as action learning in the 1970s, relatively few schools put youth into civic action through voluntary and governmental efforts.

Our youth lacks civic knowledge and is unskilled in civic participation. As a result, draft registration and nuclear energy issues may lead to a renewal of the clumsy and violent youth protests which characterized the disorderly 1960s.

Americans have also wanted schools to develop literacy. From the time of the Puritans, skill in the three R's has been persistently prized. But in the 20th century the printed word has been overwhelmed by new media. Movies, radio, and especially the omnipresent television now dominate. "Read a book," says the father to son while father scans the TV guide. "Study your math," says mother to daughter while mother dials in a soap opera.

Meanwhile, the schools attempted to provide more and more schooling for all of the children and youth, many of whom came to school without a tradition of book learning. Since the job market did not welcome youth employment, they stayed in school rather than drop out. Yet the statisticians compared the skills

in the three R's demonstrated by all of the children and youth of all of the people with the skills demonstrated by a former social and economic elite. These often discouraging comparisons were reported to the public and, remarkably, nobody laughed. Instead, disbelief grew that contemporary schools could ever develop literacy and basic skills in the three R's.

Historically, America has wanted schools to equip young people to earn their living. Yet technological advances accompanied by parsimonious financial support have contributed to obsolescence of vocational education as conducted in school facilities. More promising vocational education through realistic participation in industry has been advocated by proponents of new transitions to adulthood. Despite the prestige in the 1970s of such groups as the Panel on Youth of the President's Science Advisory Committee and the National Commission on the Reform of Secondary Education, the transition to adulthood movement is dying a-borning due to a combination of factors: laws restrict youth employment, labor fears the cheap competition of youthful workers, business can't be bothered, society as a whole is beset by economic fears. Consequently, the public has concluded that the educational system is not to be relied upon for vocational preparation.

As Gallup Polls regularly demonstrate, the American public wants its schools to foster discipline. Yet the celebrities reported in the mass media are often themselves undisciplined role models. The violence of surrounding communities often invades the schools. Meanwhile, traditional family controls weaken and new patterns emerge slowly as more women enter the job market through choice and through the need to supplement family income in an inflationary era.

Self-discipline encounters hard sledding in an era of the Me Generation. And so, disillusionment with the schools as a civilizing agency which contributes to democratic discipline spreads.

Inadequate school programs also contribute to the growing disbelief in the schools. Teachers and administrators frequently resist significant educational ideas which depart from older ways as John Goodlad and his associates have repeatedly documented. Only a segment changes while the majority stands pat.

The causes of the lack of confidence in our schools are multiple and, admittedly, open to debate. The decline in public confidence, however, is indisputable and particularly rapid in recent years.

The standard response of American educators when confronted with problems, including lack of confidence, is "give us the money and we will show you what we can do." Educators can readily demonstrate the correlation between good programs and substantial investment in schools. But today the response is less effective than in earlier years. The American people are feeling the remorseless squeeze of inflation combined with the growing tax bite. The steady rise in American cash income is deceptive. Like the inhabitants of Wonderland, we run and run in an effort to remain in the same place. Who is to blame?

The easy answer is that government is to blame. In the public view, education is part and parcel of government. If the government is the enemy, why support the schools? Teachers see themselves as people who legitimately want more money to keep pace with inflation and to move toward salary levels comparable to other professionals. Yet teachers are often viewed by the public as a highly organized union within the governmental bureaucracy, and thus the enemy of the taxpayer. Administrators who want better buildings and equipment are seen as selfish bureaucrats. School board members are seen as part of the governmental campaign against the public pocketbook. Paradoxically, school men and women unwittingly add to the hue and cry with their steady complaints about paperwork and regulations. Each complaint provides anti-government forces more ammunition.

### Overcoming Disbelief

A grim picture, you might well say at this point. What can be done about it? Let us consider first our contribution as citizens and then consider our professional contributions as educators.

Take advantage of a paradox. The existence of disbelief means that you can personally and collectively make an even greater impact. Select your cause and take part in voluntary action. In a climate of disbelief many around you have surrendered their opportunities to count. Because they have abdicated, you have a greater opportunity to be heard and to influence events. In an era in which many have opted for total immersion in an occupation, or in the pursuit of pleasure or self-cultivation, the voluntary social organizations need manpower and womanpower as seldom before. As the disbelievers move out, the believers committed to democratic values can move in. They can both speak for their values and act on their values.

In addition to social and civic action, we have a major responsibility in our role as professionals. The loss of public confidence in the schools can be countered through carefully thought-out programs of individual and group action.

**A**bove all, we must communicate. If you are a teacher, build your access to the parents of the students you teach. Whether through meetings, bulletins, conferences, visits, or whatever, keep parents and other citizens informed and hear them out. Interact—communication is a two-way process. Share your successes and failures. Have faith that parents will respond; their children are precious to them.

If you are an administrator, build relationships with your clientele which reach beyond shiny public relations gimmicks. Yes, identify and report your successes. But also identify your most significant problems and involve parents and community in the search for solutions. School people are not supermen or superwomen; as we have learned from recent presidential administrations, the people expect and tolerate mistakes, but they will not forgive lies.

If you are a staff member of a college or a university, widen the

range of your communication. It is not enough to talk to other professionals, to write for their perusal. Communicate your ideas to the general reader or general listener as well. If education professors spent even 20 percent of their time sharing their insights with the general public, they might ease the crisis of confidence in our schools.

Individual action by educators must be supplemented by group action. Educators must be heard in the halls of Congress and state legislatures and city halls and the courts. The National Education Association's willingness to endorse candidates and to enter into political action resulted in a long overdue Department of Education. State associations have shown us that dubious legislation establishing narrow competencies for students and faculty members can be countered through effective political action.

The potential political power of the education profession is enormous. What profession has more members than ours? What profession is more dedicated to better schools and a better society? The sleeping giant, once awakened, will be heard.

And what should we be saying and doing? We must enlist public support for the development of programs in those areas about which the public has repeatedly shown itself to be concerned: citizenship education, literacy and the three R's, vocational preparation, and appropriate discipline for free men and women.

As we work on matters that the public demands, we must always accept our leadership responsibility to foster programs that are less evident to the public. Let us proclaim the humanistic message and demonstrate that a psychologically sound humanism can be reconciled with public demands. Let us advocate and practice the full, free, and fair examination of even the most difficult of social problems and stubbornly defend the study of social realities as essential to free men and women. Let us permeate our instruction and our procedures with democratic values, reaffirming in an Age of Disbelief the democratic values of respect for human personality and concern for the common welfare. Educators are not weather vanes, turned and twisted by every wind. We are professionals and we must be heard. ■

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