



# ut On A Limb?

## Responses to Regina Paul

NORMAN V. OVERLY

Are you out on a limb? Unfortunately, many educators are or believe they are, and Paul's article plays on their feelings of ennui and abandonment. Her focus on assessment of community desires is a look in the right place but for the wrong reason.

Instead of trying to find out what the community wants in order to provide it, educators should be finding out what the community thinks in order to spur them to consider more desirable goals. I would suggest that educators have forgotten or never knew how to lead. We have been a sheep-like profession, running to and

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from critical wolves and ever more frequently succumbing to those stimulated by the scent of blood and carrion. We lack a sense of purpose beyond personal survival in our own educational position. If educational leadership only means playing to the gallery, then I say, "Bring on the hemlock."

Paul does point out some major problems in efforts to discern community positions on the broad goals of education (not to mention the pitfalls one must dodge in developing local programs). While one may agree with her that polling efforts are often heavily flawed, so are the efforts reported here, in so far as we are permitted to judge. Critical data are missing; but, more distressingly, even Paul's message is unclear.

In my view, the critical question is her last one: "Should educational

leaders lead?" not "Are you out on a limb?" Instead of being concerned with limbs we should be leading the cry of "Woodsman, spare that forest!" We must carefully think through our positions. We must be willing and able to articulate them for a public that is in a state of cultural shock, unable to sort through the pressures of information explosion, technological advances, moral dilemmas, economic uncertainties, and rising self-awareness. It is no wonder we suffer from goal ambiguity in education. We as leaders are wondering if we are on the *right* limb. In such a state it is likely that the uninformed will hunger for more simplicity and certainty. But educators should be informed and in a position to help the public deal with the complexities of life rather than turning tail and running from them.

What if 99 percent of the public wants more math? Does knowing how to add and subtract resolve any of the problems that have set us in flight from the wolves? I think not. I am convinced we have enough math. (The quality may need attention.) What is needed is a sane vision of an informed community that has skills and knows when and how to use them, that can appreciate the value, as well as the challenges, of diversity and change in culture. But these are not easily recognized needs. Educational leaders must help their public increase the community's horizons instead of stockpiling specious survival kits filled with deteriorating skills, inappropriate for the world of tomorrow.

The public needs and wants leadership in all aspects of its functioning. It needs people who look to the future with imagination and vision of what might be, not what is or has been.

### GALEN SAYLOR

The most significant statement I found in this mish-mash of dogmatic instructions for running a school was that some people would spend the entire \$1,000 on the fine arts. Hurray! Some students and parents even had the temerity to want the school to teach a foreign language. Of course, no top, alert, computer-oriented administrator would let such insignificant, "get-lost" minority of students and parents deter him or her from pursuing the appointed course laid out by the Policy Studies in Education.

We need a basic point of reference, completely missing in Paul's study. The fundamental purpose of the school in democratic America in the late 20th century is to contribute as fully as possible to the maximum development of the potentialities, capabilities, and talents in socially approved directions of each of its students. Any lesser mission denies our basic humanity and shortchanges the richness of life as a whole for the nation.

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Obviously, choices are essential and decisions must be made. Madaus and others (1980), in one of the most significant educational books of these times, point out that "it seems crucial that citizens, educators, politicians, and social planners think more carefully and dispassionately about the goals of schools and schooling. They must decide what are realistic expectations for schools; what effects they can and should have upon pupils and society."

Who makes these choices? Most everyone would agree that the school board, school administrators, teachers, students, parents, and other citizens generally should participate in the decision-making process. But taking a poll and then selecting those goals that get 60 percent approval is not thinking "carefully and dispassionately" about the purposes of schooling.

Fortunately for us, within the past few years a few significant research studies and developmental programs have provided some very important insights on the matter of planning the curriculum. Edmonds (1979), Goodlad (1975), Rutter and coworkers in England (1977), Brophy (1979), Bussis and others (1976), and Pedersen and his coworkers (1978) have contributed greatly to our knowledge of educational planning for schools. They show overwhelmingly the importance of (1) the building principal and (2) the school's teachers in carrying on effective programs of schooling.

The effectiveness of a school in educating its students is largely an individual school matter, operating, of course, as it does in an organized system of schools in a community. The leadership, the skill in human relationships, a vision of the fundamental purposes of the school, the day-by-day support of the staff, and the insight of the principal are crucial factors in quality education. But it is the staff as a team that ultimately determines the nature and quality of the learning program of a school. Rigid, central office dictums interfere; freedom, flexibility and creativeness among teachers and their principal succeed.

But, you say, this is good, but off the point: what should be the curriculum? The curriculum is what takes place within the classroom—

"behind the classroom door," we say. Sure, you can publish courses of study, set down regulations, have workshops and inservice training programs, and poll your constituency. But what students learn in school is what the teachers provide in the way of learning experiences in their full scope—content, expectations, interpersonal relationships, breadth, and the like. The poll says "teach reading." But reading achievement varies widely from classroom to classroom, other factors weighed. Why? The teacher.

The primary need in the administration of schools today is top quality leadership across the board. The administrator and his or her board of directors know how to sense the views of the community, but he or she doesn't eddy like a bobber on a fishing pole with every wave of opinion. Rather, the administrator guides and directs coworkers and clientele in discussing, weighing, analyzing basic assumptions, and then proceeding to define the fundamental purposes of a school in a truly democratic, humanistic society. The individual school within the system must then engage in the most demanding task of formulating a program of schooling that has the greatest promise to fulfill purposes.

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## RONALD R. SUTHERBY

Knowing where you desire to go before you begin the venture is key to achieving your ultimate goal. Likewise, it is essential to find out which specific areas taxpayers expect students to master before they receive their diplomas. Unfortunately, Paul skims over the best methods for ascertaining the community's true values and priorities. In this time of budget cutting, it is vastly important that educators discover the community's priority level for each goal believed to be important.

As Paul very briefly states, an excellent approach is to grant people completing the survey a specific dollar amount and then have them assign a dollar amount to each goal. Experience has shown that this narrows down the school's top priorities to a number it can handle. Open-ended questionnaires produce lengthy and cumbersome goal lists. The one method that forces the community to zero in on their top priorities is to have each individual divide the allocated dollars among the possible goals.

Another point Paul mentions is that there is a large difference in what communities expect elementary students to achieve and what they expect secondary students to achieve. Consistently—in rural, suburban, and city districts—community members expect students to not only master language (reading, writing, speaking) skills and mathematics skills before the end of the sixth grade, but also to be able to apply these skills to real world problems. At the secondary level the community's first goal is for the student to develop self-discipline, responsibility, and the necessary skills to get and hold a job.

We must not lose sight of the importance of determining the community's priorities for the goals they identify. We must share with the community the situation we are in with declining financial resources—having to assign a portion of their limited dollars to each school goal.

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It is equally important for us to determine what the community goals are at the elementary and secondary levels.

## ANN KAHN

There is always a risk in attempting to draw generalizations from a study done in only three school communities. The risk is even greater in dealing with the poll results from a single district. But as chairman of the tenth largest district school board, I cannot resist a resounding *no* to the question posed by the Paul-Brickell study when they wonder if their results speak for my community also. The conclusions of our recent poll, and my nine years of board experience, challenge their conclusions and lead me to believe that districts may be worrying about the wrong problem if they accept this thesis.

At issue is the question of whether school systems are misreading the seemingly extensive public expectations of the appropriate role of the public schools and the blueprint of what constitutes a desirable education. The questions in the study mixed what is important for students to learn, what is important for schools to teach, and what might be considered necessary for exit from a school system. All of this was thrown into the same pot so that respondents could decide where limited financial resources should be placed. The funding game forced participants to identify their most barebones educational priorities, which the pollsters then identified as the scope of community expectations.

Is this how the citizens of my community feel about our school system? Not by a long shot. Of course, they expect us to start at the beginning, but the key word is *start*. I know of no proponent of the arts who sees these courses as a substitute for learning to read. But neither is our emphasis on early basic skills achievements intended to be read as a return to the McGuffey reader. The "basics," like beauty, seem to be in

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the eye of the beholder. For many parents with whom I deal on a day-to-day basis, the real basic they want to see in the system is teaching children to *think*. Test scores all over the country are alerting school systems to get beyond memorization and concentrate on teaching how to apply basic learning to new and different situations. We can't teach the answers because we cannot yet foresee all the questions these young adults will face in their lifetimes; but we can, and do, teach them how to define the questions and search for answers.

Last month, we ran a check on our 1981 graduating class. Of 10,036 graduating students, 80 percent are continuing on to postsecondary school. This is true despite rising tuition costs and it reflects a continuation of high community expectations for a public school education that prepares students for a lifetime of learning. Our system has increased the number of courses necessary for graduation, exceeding the state requirements, and including units in social studies, foreign languages, and the fine and practical arts. In a random check on our 23 high schools, I found they're offering 200 different required or elective courses this year. Our community is telling us not to retrench, but to continue to offer a strong basic education, supplemented by a wide variety of challenging and useful electives that prepare students for their future.

Is our school board and our educational staff out of line with community expectations? As a follow-up on a 1974 poll, the school board in February 1981 authorized an extensive community poll by a respected national public opinion research firm. Was the message one that would bear out the warnings of the Paul-Brickell poll? Absolutely not. In the face of our broad curriculum and an extensive educational commitment at a time of rising costs, the results are heartening and bear review by other school systems.

There is an astonishing degree of continuing confidence in our public system of education in Fairfax County. In 1974, 74 percent of the public ranked the schools as excellent or good. By 1981, that percentage had risen to 82 percent. Of particular interest is the reason given for this



affirmative rating: "a good and varied curriculum" followed closely by "high scholastic standards" and "good and dedicated teachers." When elementary parents were asked what changes they would like to see, they looked for *expansion* in subject areas such as science, art, music, and foreign languages. The entire study indicated parents and community members have a much broader set of priorities than indicated in the Paul-Brickell study. Indeed, the major dissatisfaction, indicated by 45 percent of the respondents, was that schools do not have enough funds. This was true in a county in which over half of the local revenue goes to support of the schools.

Are communities nervous about schools going into "sensitive" curriculum areas and is this where they want the schools to pull back? Our experience this year indicates that the loudest voices are not necessarily



representative of the desires of the total community. The poll showed strong parental support for a public school role in the area of human life development, and the first schools that are offering the newly revised courses bear out this response. Parents have the opportunity to determine their children's participation in these courses, and the parental authorizations are running at a rate of 260 approvals for every ten parents who choose not to have their children in the course. How can this be so when we are warned about parents who do not feel that values and ethics are an important part of public school experiences? The truth is that parents continue to believe that development of ethical behavior is a hallmark of the school experience. Let the school system ignore cheating on exams and it will quickly learn whether parents feel that moral behavior is something that can be taught only in the home.

In short, the Paul-Brickell findings are very much at odds with the facts in my community. I have a feeling that if school boards and educators will stop beating themselves to death, they will find their communities are not likely to opt for retrenchment in education. Of course, priorities have to be established in every district and there is a logical order and sequence in which learning should take place. Of course, we are accountable for every dollar we spend, and we should be. But the future of public education will not be enhanced by designing a curriculum so limited in scope that both parents and educators would have to question its perpetuation at all. If the limb gets sawed off, it will not be because we offer a broadly based education. It will be because we are not successfully meeting the needs of our children and because our nervous focus on that limb is keeping us from developing community understanding of how important the growth of the *whole tree* is to the future of this democracy.

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GRAHAM DOWN

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Paul's description of goal surveys presents the chilling possibility that curriculum development

could become something like music programming on a Top 40 radio station. Find out what the listeners want, then overdose them.

In a way, that's what happened in the 1960s and 70s when everyone expected schools to be repair shops for the breakdowns other social institutions handled badly. But those were boom times, and school reform meant adding options, services, goals—whatever.

The arrival of hard times has shown many school districts to be ill-prepared for making hard choices. They know how to add but must learn how to subtract. As Paul explains, the most useful twist in the procedures she and colleague Brickell developed is the spending game, allocating an imaginary \$1,000 to school priorities. Players detest the game, says Paul. Naturally. Who wouldn't, after two decades of never having to say no? One wonders how long it may take to recover from this hangover.

I see two potential problems in the use of goal surveys. With proper care by the administrators of surveys, both can be averted. The first problem will be familiar to the computer crowd: GIGO—the acronym for "garbage in, garbage out." A flawed survey questionnaire can produce unreliable and misleading results. Paul is acutely sensitive to this problem, according to her article, but I suspect that validating a survey instrument would be a long, complicated job, one that raises many questions. A total of 250 goals sounds impressive, but is that the right number to consider? How should the survey deal with controversial goals? How are results affected by the format of the survey? The list could go on.

Paul and Brickell are respected professionals who probably have anticipated all such questions and have taken pains to answer them. But school districts that wished to develop their own surveys ought to be equally conscientious. Sadly, the nation's experience with locally made curriculums and standardized tests does not inspire confidence that all local districts are equal to the task.

My second fear is that goal surveys will tempt policymakers simply

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to go with the flow of popular taste—a Top 40 hit parade of goals—and that educators, elected officials, and concerned citizens will abandon or lessen their efforts to influence what the public believes it should rightfully expect from its schools. A "scientific" survey, replete with statistics and the aura of "democratic process," can be powerfully intimidating. Paul points out, for example, that art, music, and foreign languages would soon wither away as school subjects if goal surveys were to dictate the curriculum. The experience she recounts suggests that surveys may lead to minimal ambitions for schools under financial duress.

Plainly, skillful educational leadership and courageous dedication to a sound, basic education will be needed to ensure that the hard choices are also wise choices.

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CLINTON R. BARTER

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*Of course we're out on limbs!*

Anybody who serves in a leadership capacity in public education today is out on a limb. Several, in fact. We seem to spend our working lives hopping from limb to limb. What with declining enrollment, diminishing resources, dwindling public support, RIFs, teacher militancy, *ad nauseam*, the question isn't whether you're out on a limb, but which limb and how far out? A real service is performed by those who can provide safety nets when the limbs come tumbling down.

Crisis, real or imagined, begets conflict, which in turn requires leadership. I suspect that the need for leadership in public education is greater today than it has ever been. Training and experience are certainly important components in the development of effective leadership, but another essential ingredient is information: the capacity to gather, analyze, and effectively use information. That gets to the focus and purpose of Paul's article.

A survey is nothing more than a

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tool for gathering information. Its effectiveness, like that of any other tool, depends upon its design, the care with which it is constructed, and how it is used. The survey instrument developed by Policy Studies in Education is a good tool for what it was designed to do, which is to determine how respondents feel about selected learning goals and school programs. When properly administered, the instrument yields information that is useful to administrators and school boards. The results can serve as effective guides to decision making and policy formulation in the areas of curriculum, graduation requirements, and the setting of program priorities. The results can also, by identifying perceived deficiencies, help in establishing short- and long-range district goals. They can even, with great care and sensitivity, be used as guidelines in the allocation of scarce resources. Too much reliance on any of these uses is ill-advised, however, if sound sampling procedures are ignored, if the survey is improperly administered or interpreted, and if the results are not cross-referenced to other indicators of community needs and desires.

While a well constructed and conducted survey can yield some very useful information, I would be careful not to rely too much on such results alone. Knowledge of your particular community and staff is indispensable in determining how far out on a particular limb—say the budget-cutting or program elimination limb—you are willing to allow survey results to take you. Such results may accurately reflect the community's sentiments, but they may also be misleading. Decisions made by individuals responding to a forced-choice survey in the sanctity of their own homes may change dramatically in the heat and emotionalism of public debate over whether both band and football should fall victim to the budget ax, or should be saved at the expense of increasing elementary class sizes. Abstract decisions made in what may appear to respondents to be a "gaming" situation, such as filling out a survey form, may be very different from decisions those same people make when actually confronted with the loss of a cherished program or activity. Group and special interest pressures can, and fre-

quently do, modify individual judgment. The survey can be a useful and effective tool when used with care and judgment for the purposes for which it was designed. Those who use it must still expect to exercise a good deal of independent judgment, however.

I have been involved in two comprehensive K-12 curriculum development efforts in the past five years, each of which used the results of a PSE-designed survey as a primary source of data. I believe in the process, and feel strongly that Policy Studies in Education has developed a tool that can be very useful to local districts so long as it is not abused. Properly used, the survey can provide that extra little edge that is so frequently needed. It is comforting, when you hear the saw begin to bite into the limb you have climbed out upon, to know that you have a safety net below you.

Now if you can only avoid the little man with the butterfly net who wants to talk to you about your particular compulsion for *remaining* out on those limbs. . . . ■

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Arthur Ashe, National Campaign Chairman  
American Heart Association



**American Heart  
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