

Public Education and the Private Sector

The time has arrived for a new relationship among institutions that must collaborate in socializing the young.

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During the period from 1975 to 1980 the history of human resource thinking in the United States shifted course. That shift, with a history of intermittent efforts dating back almost a century, was signaled by President Gerald Ford's call at The Ohio State University in 1974 for a new partnership among government, the private employment sector, and education. But the decisions which in fact lent substance to Ford's speech in the following years were made not by national leaders from those sectors but by thousands of perceptive leaders in communities across the nation. Drawing on their own frustrations with and ideals for the quality of social and work relationships, these individuals formed their own conclusions, tentatively, about what had gone wrong with education and what was needed to make it right.

Today we are progressing toward developing a national consensus that the problems of America's schools and colleges (problems of confidence and sense of mission as much as of finance and enrollments) are intimately linked to generic problems of economic and political confidence and direction that confront employers, workers, and political leaders. In essence, the socialization of new generations into a society based on principles of democratic capitalism is a critical problem shared by all major institutions and deeply affects the welfare of individuals and the nation.

This still developing consensus differs remarkably from a decade ago when education institutions—especially local

public school systems—were delegated, and accepted with unfortunate hubris, the responsibility for educating and socializing the nation's young. It was common discourse then that schools replaced family and church as the predominant institution influencing the values and skills of new generations. The role of work institutions was ignored. Reform efforts were directed almost exclusively at improving this or that aspect of the formal education system.

The many, but still scattered, efforts today to introduce new, more complex sets of responsibilities for and influences on the socialization of America's young are intriguing. These efforts ("partnerships," "adopt-a-school programs," career education, industry services offices, and so forth) operate on the fringes of most education and noneducation enterprises. The rhetoric attached to these initiatives has been weightier than their substance to date. The possibility that substance will not catch up with rhetoric, that ways will not be found to bring collaborative energies to bear on critical problems, is very real.

But the opportunity to link the goodwill, know-how, priorities, and resources of the nation's major sectors has never been better. One critical element is that educators, private sector leaders, and public officials all share a common language and heritage as a result of their own personal passages through the world's most accessible and most resourceful national education system. Another critical element is the realization that world leadership in economic and political affairs requires closer attention to human capital development than has been the case in the past.

The present decade shows all signs of becoming a watershed period, testing

and then redefining for decades to come the proper balance of responsibilities between management, workers, governments, education, voluntary organizations, and families and individuals themselves. The key question is whether the pluralism of American society remains strong enough to permit collaboration to occur among all these interests without leading to domination of the initiative by narrow interests. Has the time come when the enlightened self-interests of the various sectors will prevail and collaborative activities will result in an expanded, multi-institutional educational process?

With all the recent criticisms of the institutional isolation of schools and colleges, one is hard pressed to recall that this so-called isolation has never been complete, was itself a solution to the narrow partisanship of local governance a century ago, and was essential for the successful professionalization of teaching and school administration. Today, schooling is a mature industry. Its internal mechanisms for self-renewal have achieved much but have also reached limits of systematic impact. This coming decade of more frequent and more imaginative relationships between schools and society tests the presumption that the education profession is prepared to exercise its own share of responsible leadership in working with other sectors.

The significance of the present moment in the relationships between American education, employers, labor organizations, and government can be summarized as a moment of three crucial tests:

- Testing the strength of a new consensus regarding the presumed importance of youth socialization and skill development as critical to the future direction of all American social institutions and to the future successes of individuals.
- Testing the incipient consensus that the responsibility for the education-socialization process must be shared through a new set of multi-institutional relationships.
- Testing whether the leadership of America's education system has enough maturity, professionalism, knowledge, and independence to exercise public leadership and whether, while welcoming collaboration with other sectors, it will act effectively as protector and interpreter of the best interests of individual learners. **EL**

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