

# Education Through Partnership\*

Teamwork between teachers and parents requires turning the school bureaucracy upside down and dropping the notion of "professionals" and "clients."

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What H. G. Wells called the "race between education and catastrophe" is in full stride, and in the last quarter of the twentieth century, education is losing that race in the United States of America. The massively administered system of public schools, once unsurpassed in its ability to administer schools, failing individual students, failing families and communities, and failing the nation and its future.

The essential trouble is the nature of the system itself, a system that has become beguiled by a "delivery system" mentality.

Education has been conceived as a governmental service-delivery system; we have set up government-run, professionally staffed bureaus to "deliver" education to our children. When the results are unsatisfactory, our service-delivery approach prompts us to try to solve the problem by delivering more services or by making the service-delivery machinery either more efficient, through improved technology, or more accountable, through political action or better management.

Attempts to reduce to a delivery system something that is by its nature not a service and not deliverable will not work. The effort withers the energy and commitment and obstructs the productive relationships of the key participants in the educational enterprise—students, teachers, parents, and citizens.

Government, bureaucracy, and professionalization must be dethroned as the rulers of educational practice and policy. Partnership is more likely to promote policies and institutions that

educate successfully in accordance with the values of a democratic society.

School board and PTA meetings resonate with warm words about partnership, but the rhetoric often belies the reality. Successful educational partnerships indeed exist in many individual classrooms and schools, but genuine partnership is driven out of education as schools, parents, and students come to think of their relationships in terms of service delivery—of "provider" and "client," of "professionals" and "target populations."

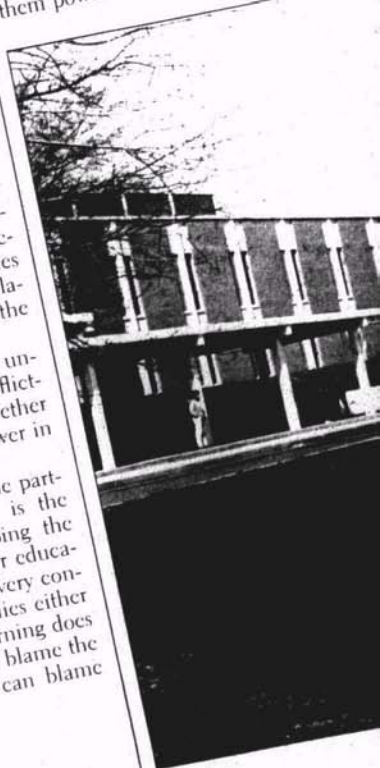
The chief characteristic of partnership is common effort toward common goals. Partners may help one another in general or specific ways, but none is ever a client, because the relationship is mutual. Providers and clients can deal with one another at arm's length; partners share an enterprise, though their mutuality does not imply or require equality or similarity. Participants in effective partnerships may be strikingly different, each contributing to the common enterprise particular talents, experiences, and perspectives and sometimes having different status within the relationship and control over aspects of the work to be done.

The concept of service delivery, unlike that of partnership, leads to conflict-producing ambiguities about whether provider or client wields more power in the relationship.

An immediate advantage of the partnership concept for education is the assistance it provides in escaping the dilemma of whom to blame for educational failure. The service-delivery concept of education makes families either victims or villains. When learning does not take place, the client can blame the provider, and the provider can blame the client.

Arguing about blame is an unproductive enterprise. Both perspectives have validity; families are weakened and disempowered by current social conditions and by social service bureaucracies. At the same time, families are not by nature perfect, and in many cases they do not provide the healthy socialization, nurturing, ego development, early learning experiences, and support for learning that help make schooling successful.

A stalemate caused by mutual recrimination is unnecessary. The partnership concept provides a more productive framework. It can recognize the problems facing families without rendering them powerless.



Shifting to a partnership policy in education will not be easy. Most schools and school systems, like many other institutions, still operate on the premise of the irrelevance or weakness of the family. Most, perhaps unwittingly, are still agents of what Mary Jo Bane calls "social service imperialism." The family's role is seen as little more than that of producing children and feeding, housing, and clothing them so they can go to school. Educational policy has been school policy; families might be the concern of social workers or priests, but not of educators. Many habits of both mind and practice must change before educational policy can fully incorporate an understanding of the family as an important participant in education.

Educational research has begun to focus on the importance of the family as educator. It is now being recognized that much of what a child needs to know, both before and during the school years, is learned in the family.

The implications of these new views are that a sound educational policy requires seeing the family as a resourceful, primary partner in the educational process.

In partnership learning, emphasis must be on the leadership role of teachers and on mutual accountability among partners in the learning process, rather than on professional power and exclusiveness.

For the past several decades it was thought that power was the route to increased teacher satisfaction and effectiveness. Now there are growing doubts whether power by itself is enough. We hear of "burnout" and "combat neurosis" among teachers in small systems as well as large. Teachers feel they are not "part of a team" and that "no one cares about their welfare." Power has been useful for gaining increased pay and job security; it was also a natural response to bureaucratized education, which has disempowered teachers, along with parents and students. Bureaucratic and political power, however, does not guarantee either

teacher effectiveness or job satisfaction. If wrongly handled, in fact, it reinforces the bureaucratic rigidities of centralized rules and procedures and interferes with productive learning by alienating teachers still further from students and parents and by obstructing the kinds of personal commitment and relationships that have always been at the heart of successful teaching.

The present educational bureaucracy is anti-learning; it must be turned upside down to redirect education to its primary purposes and to let teachers resume their lofty roles as partners in the discovery and stimulation of minds and talents instead of continuing them in the ignoble role of bureaucratic functionaries. Teachers will have to be seen as the most important links in the educational process—next in importance to the real producers of learning, the students themselves. This will entail redesigning professionalism.

Partnership requires a different orientation of professional accountability, one in which teachers could be far more powerful than they are today. Teachers in real partnerships with students and parents gain authority—so much so that they are often seen as threats by bureaucratic principals who, if they understand little else, can quickly sense the power of any loyalties not under their control. Only principals who realize that their job is to foster productive learning relationships will not be threatened by powerful teachers and strong student-teacher-parent partnerships.

The professional authority derived from educational partnerships is different from bureaucratic or political power. Teachers in partnerships with parents are accountable to them for guiding the learning of their children. They gain authority from this relationship, and they need not be bashful about using it, as long as it genuinely reflects parents' values rather than professional values and interests clothed in the name of "the best interest of the child."

I have no question but that any community wanting to create a collaborative relationship between teachers,

parents, students, and citizens that will produce educational results far in excess of what we are now achieving. And this can be done despite the present fiscal constraints. Indeed, the effort to create such collaboration can help to overcome past polarizations and generate enough support to provide whatever resources are needed. **EL**

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