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Doing Better With Less

Ask educators what they need to do a better job and most will say money. For good reason: books, buildings, and equipment cost a lot. People cost even more—and people are the main ingredient in education.

We usually associate higher cost with higher quality, but it's not necessarily so. The portion of our Gross National Product devoted to education more than doubled between 1950 (3.4 percent) and 1975 (7.9 percent).¹ Although in many respects the quality of services—libraries, counseling, provisions for the handicapped—also improved, measured outcomes did not. Now, because of changed national priorities and doubts about the ability of schools and other public institutions to use money wisely, financial support for education is declining.

Americans could, if they wished, use some of the wealth now spent for entertainment and frivolous gadgets to make teaching a rewarding and respected profession and to give every child the best possible start in life. That apparently is not going to happen. For students' sake we must do better with less.

This issue presents two approaches to improving productivity. One is organizational: James O'Hanlon analyzes Japanese management practices and considers their application in American schools. Larry Chase advocates Quality Circles, a vehicle for solving organizational problems perfected in Japan and adopted successfully by leading American companies.

When we discussed what he might write, I asked Chase how the Quality Circles process was different. "It may be needed in factories where workers have never been asked what they think," I said, "but it's not a new idea in education. I've served on, and appointed, committees and study groups all my professional life." Chase's article argues convincingly that the Quality Circles approach is different because it uses specific techniques to help groups do more than gripe. He includes a long list of typical school problems suitable for resolution by the Quality Circle process.

Another way to raise productivity is to

employ technology, not to supplement teacher-delivered instruction as in the past, but partly to replace it. John Dammeyer, who has worked for nine years with computer-assisted learning, predicts that schools will run out of money in the 1990s if they don't change their ways. Computers, he declares, are the way to change.

Dammeyer's position is supported but qualified by Arthur Melmed, who monitors developments in educational technology for the National Institute of Education and who has testified before Congress on the subject. Melmed notes that other sectors of society have raised productivity by augmenting human labor, while education has become even more labor intensive. He, too, believes small computers may turn the tide, but he cautions that we need more research to learn to use them effectively.

To realize the savings envisioned by Dammeyer, Melmed, and other technologists schools will have to be organized and staffed quite differently. Teachers will not meet with equal numbers of students in identical classrooms. Some adults will supervise students and give technical assistance, while others will meet with students to aid them in processing their learning. Still others may specialize in diagnosis and planning. This restructuring of roles and relationships was anticipated in recent decades by educators who experimented with individualized instruction, modular scheduling, and differentiated staffing.

Even though such different arrangements may be more efficient in the long run, however, they are difficult to establish without spending additional money temporarily. Installing and programming a computer-assisted learning lab, for example, is expensive. Schools will need Quality Circles and more as they struggle to resolve the problems they will encounter in making the transition to more productive modes. □

¹*Digest of Education Statistics, 1982* (Washington, D.C.: National Center for Education Statistics, 1982).

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