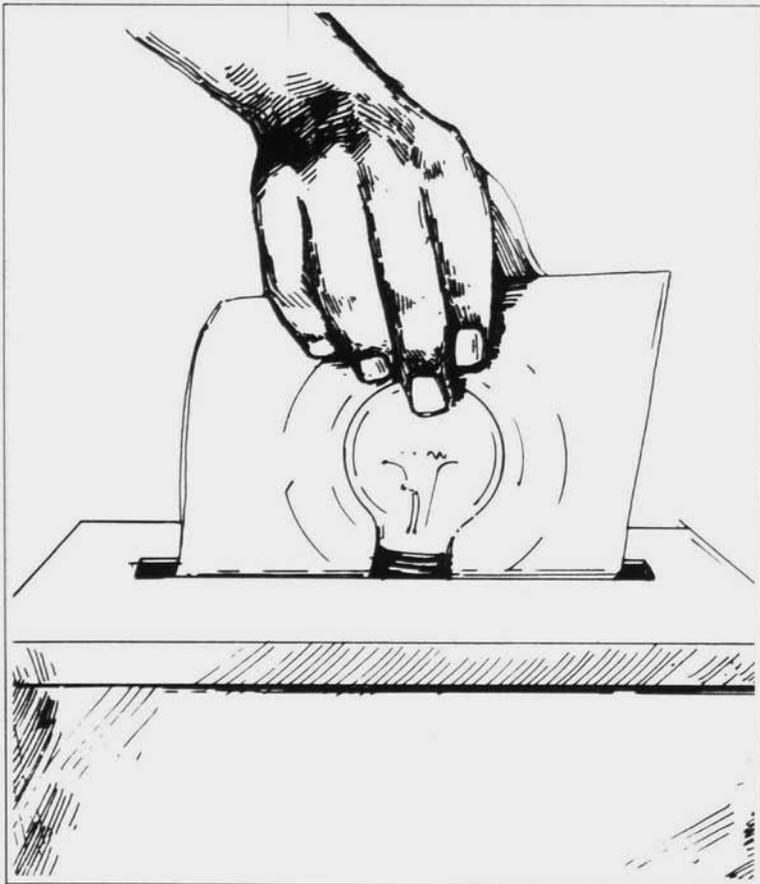


I Have an Idea!

Let's Have a Suggestion Box!

Teachers will feel better about their work if administrators ask for their ideas before setting policies.



LUCILLE G. NATKINS

In the last two of the 20 years that I taught at a New York City public high school, many changes were made. Seven new administrators were appointed, old courses were replaced by new ones, syllabi and methodology were changed, uniform midterm examinations and ability grouping were abolished, and new rules were set for student behavior. More changes are in store. American history will be taught over three terms instead of two, fewer student absences and tardiness will be permitted, and more homework will be given.

These changes have one thing in common. They weren't made by teachers. For the most part, they were made without consulting teachers.

Sorry. Forgot another change. A program was established to involve students in decision making on school related matters. Gotta give kids' input, said the acting principal who established the program, if they're gonna grow up to be good citizens.

Administrators inviting students, but not teachers, to shape schooling is not the only irony. In most school districts lay boards, parents, legislators, and judges, despite their tangential and transitory involvement with kids, have more to say about education policy and practice than do classroom teachers.

Rarely does one pick up a newspaper without reading that "Worker Ideas Lift Output," "Suggestion Boxes Bulge as Workers Offer Helpful Tips," or "The Suggestion Box is Paying Off." But most teachers have no suggestion

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box. In my school, teachers suggested that another school's grade-entering system be adopted (ours was cumbersome and error prone); that salary credit be given teachers for tutoring hospitalized children (credit was given for taking basket-weaving courses); that kids might benefit if teachers could spend a term teaching elsewhere (administrators have that opportunity); and that it might be cheaper to buy 20 designer wet suits rather than heat 150 rooms on 80 degree days (the only way, the custodian said, to heat the swimming pool).

Not one of these ideas found its way to willing ears. As in most school systems, there was no channel for communication, no suggestion box.

Fuel-saving ideas may be peripheral to teaching, but suggestions that go to the heart of education are no easier to make. When a decree came from on high that heterogenous classes were being abolished, my 25-member department was unanimous in its protests. In classes with a narrower range of ability than those being mandated, we argued, weaker students were demoralized, stronger students given little challenge, and discipline problems rampant; increased heterogeneity would only accentuate these problems. But there was no way for our words to reach the education almighty.

Teachers who try to open the channels are often actively discouraged. When nearly every teacher in my department tried to draw headquarters' attention to numerous errors in its tests, three months and three letters passed before a reply came. The reply was addressed to the department chair, not to the letter writers. It ignored our comments and mocked "teachers who can find time in their very busy schedules to write letters of complaint." Five years later, the test errors continued.

Are those who set school policy today more intelligent, more educated, more experienced than teachers? Is the gulf between administrators and teachers so much wider than the gulf that separates industrial managers from blue-collar workers? If assembly line workers can offer tips and ideas that might improve a manufactured product or save money, why can't teachers recommend ways that might improve schools for their students or save taxpayers' money?

It's time for teachers to have a suggestion box. □

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