

# The Superintendent As Teacher

Superintendents give information and counsel to administrators, board members, parents, teachers, and students.

RICHARD R. DOREMUS

I suspect that anyone who has ever been a teacher will always be a teacher. Looking back on my decision 20 years ago to leave the classroom, I realize that what I really did was become a teacher on different levels: first as principal, then in various district office positions, and now as superintendent.

If, as Gordon (1974) says, "Teaching is a universal pursuit; everybody does it," how do superintendents teach? While classroom teachers have a unique position of authority and responsibility in the classroom, superintendents enjoy analogous privilege and responsibility in a larger sphere: the entire school district. Teachers, parents, pupils, board of education members, administrators, secretaries, custodians, and a host of others listen to what the superintendent has to say. According to Stolorol and Pahel (1963):

Teaching is fundamentally a social process involving communication and interaction between at least two people, a teacher and a student. It is a kind of dialectic in

which both serve as teacher and student at different times and at different levels. A teacher is not only instructing a student, but is also learning about that student, and using what he learns in making decisions about what to do next in the course of his teaching. Similarly, the student is not only

learning, but he is providing information to the teacher, which in turn, guides the teacher in the ongoing interaction (p. 384).

Just as good teaching is more than lecturing and giving directions, so must the teaching role of the superintendent transcend issuing authoritarian directions. Otherwise the "pupils" may never be convinced of the wisdom of those directives. Outcomes that the superintendent desires may be accomplished but will likely be implemented only in form, not substance, and will last only as long as the particular superintendent is in power. I remember Robert M. Hutchins' comment on the rapid disappearance of the reforms he had instituted at the University of Chicago. Hutchins said, in effect, that he had never convinced more than a minority of the faculty of the need for change. The majority had gone along only because he was president. When he departed, the faculty reverted to previous practice.

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*The Year of the Teacher*

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*The Boston Globe*

### **Educating Educators and Parents**

As superintendent, I have tried to teach board of education members, the staff, and the community what I know about child growth and development, learning and behavior, teaching, and the problems teachers face in the classroom. At the same time, I have tried to educate our teachers about the concerns, desires, and problems faced by the board of education. As a result, there is mutual understanding of goals, objectives, and methodology.

To accomplish this, I have used what I learned long ago in my "methods" courses. I have employed lecture, discussion, question-answer techniques, committees, problem-solving strategies, readings, team teaching, role playing, and guest speakers. I

have used television, films, filmstrips, audio-cassettes, records, and chalkboards.

As a newly appointed superintendent, I directed my first teaching efforts toward the professional staff. We needed to develop a classroom observation instrument that the teachers would find helpful and which would be consistent with the board of education's position on teacher evaluation. I organized and taught a series of three-day workshops titled "Analyzing the Classroom Process," which I developed from my doctoral dissertation. I designed an instrument, Indicators of Quality, based on research by Nicoll (1966) and Chisholm (1965) who identified creativity, group activity, humanization, and individualization as

four indicators of the quality school and classroom.

To familiarize staff members with Indicators of Quality, I worked with groups of 25 to 30 teachers and administrators in a classroom setting using lectures, readings, discussions, role playing, question-answer, and films of actual lessons to discuss what they should look for in the classroom. We spent mornings in discussion and afternoons visiting the classrooms of other teachers in the district. The participants developed observation skills and began to internalize what we agreed was important. Through this process teachers got to know me and I them; they learned that the superintendent actually knew something about classroom interaction and cared deeply about its quality.

## "I suspect that anyone who has ever been a teacher will always be a teacher."

Meanwhile, a district committee of teachers and administrators developed criteria for an evaluation program for teachers that included the indicators of quality and other important classroom and nonclassroom behaviors. Grouped under eight major headings, these criteria were adopted by the board of education. They now form the basis of our teacher evaluation program.

### Closer Contact

Administrative meetings provide me with further opportunities to teach. Every superintendent I know has an administrative council or cabinet that meets on a regular basis. Although most superintendents would say that they prefer these meetings to be serious discussions of district problems, with input from all present, they are oftentimes dominated by the superintendent. Things would be different, I vowed, when I became superintendent. However, despite my attempts to stimulate discussion, our minutes show all too clearly who does the lion's share of talking.

A technique that has led to greater participation in my group has been the discussion of a professional book or journal article. One member of the council selects a reading, provides copies, and at the next meeting serves as discussion leader.

As a principal, I found that my most successful method of communicating with parents was in small groups. Parents invited neighbors in for coffee

and informal discussion with me about school programs and their own concerns. It was my way of teaching *about* the school and what we were trying to accomplish. As a superintendent I found that technique to be especially helpful.

An important early task was to persuade the community to pass a bond issue for a new high school. We asked parents to invite their neighbors to evening coffees so we (administrator, board members, and architect) could discuss the need for the school, the educational philosophy, and the physical plant. This teaching technique proved so successful (the bond issue passed overwhelmingly) that I decided to continue it with other issues. The opportunity to talk about the goals of the schools, with immediate and direct feedback from parents and the chance to react to parent concerns, was invaluable. A great deal of negativism about the school district has dissipated; like all teachers, I wonder how much of the change in attitude was due to my instruction.

Gould and Yoakum (1947) refer to teaching as "guiding and advising" (p. 2) and to the teacher as "the counselor and guide to learners" (p. 4). Last year was a particularly difficult one for our staff. Ninety percent of the taxes that support our school district are paid by a completed nuclear power plant not yet in operation. Opposition to the plant threatens to prevent its going on line. Should the plant be abandoned, our tax base would be destroyed and we would have to lay off more than half of our employees. Teachers were faced with difficult decisions. Several came to me to discuss their future. They wanted to stay with us but were fearful of being cut. Some had been offered other jobs and had difficulty deciding whether or not to take them. When they asked me what they should do, I had to help them think through their options, to use nondirective counseling and not tell them what to do.

I have served as a counselor to many since becoming superintendent. Parents, teachers, and support staff have come to me with problems concerning their children, their friends, their marriages and finances, professional planning, and a host of other problems.

Counseling is just one of the classroom teacher's many tasks that the superintendent may perform. I suspect that other superintendents would be able to add to this list. Teaching is craft, art, science, and perhaps magic. My administrative positions, particularly my 12 years as school superintendent, have allowed me to deepen my skills as a teacher, something I have come to realize and appreciate more each year. As I think about that, I am reminded of Jackson's (1966) definition of teaching:

Teaching, characteristically, is a moral enterprise. Teachers (whether they admit it or not) are out to improve things, to make the world a better place and its inhabitants better people. They may not succeed, of course, but their intention, nonetheless, is to benefit others (p. 8).

I hope I have succeeded. □

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