

LEADERSHIP

ASCD
October 1989
Volume 47
Number 2

OVERVIEW

ACCOUNTABILITY GOES BOTH WAYS

RON BRANDT

Our children live in a precarious world, separated from adult society, surrounded by the tinsel of affluence, tempted by diversion and danger. In such a world, young people desperately need support from parents—but many are not getting it. Ernest Boyer (1989) found in a national survey that American teachers are greatly concerned about the home conditions of their students.

Educators are mistaken if they think parents don't care, says Joyce Epstein (p. 24). Her research, conducted at Johns Hopkins University, shows that parents of all races and social classes want their children to succeed in school and want to help if they can. Unfortunately, many are so preoccupied with the demands and distractions of modern life that they are not doing enough.

Epstein, and the other authors in this issue, believe schools must do more to help parents. With so much to do already, teachers and principals may not like that message, but if they are to accomplish their primary mission, they really don't have a choice.

The good news is that parent involvement pays off. Donald Lueder (p. 15) writes that when Tennessee tested several different parent involvement programs, all of them got positive results. His conclusion: there is no single best way to go about it, but if a school really wants to improve its partnership with parents, it can. Epstein agrees, although she cautions that some common practices need rethinking. For example, holding a workshop at school will undoubtedly benefit some parents, but if those you most want to reach are unlikely to come, try another strategy.

Epstein divides parent activities into five types: helping parents be better parents, communicating with parents about the school program, assisting parents with learning activities for their child at home, arranging for parents to volunteer, and involving parents in governance of the school. All five are important, but we're hearing quite a bit lately about variations on the fifth type, governance. Several states have adopted or are considering schools-of-choice plans, and nearly everyone (except some local school board members) seems to favor school-based

management, which provides a way for parents to help make decisions affecting their children.

David Seeley (p. 46) would carry these ideas even further by turning current school organization on its head. Rather than being accountable through a chain of command to a distant bureaucracy, Seeley argues, educators should be directly accountable to the parents of the children they teach.

Seeley's idea has merit; parents have a major stake, legally and morally, in the education of their own children. But theirs is not an exclusive claim. Schools are publicly supported because they serve more than a private function; educators are accountable not only to parents but to society as a whole. Beyond that, we are ultimately accountable to ourselves and our professional ethics. Sometimes we disagree with parents, and if an issue is important enough, we must not accede quietly to their wishes, especially at a time when many parents are unwilling or unable to fulfill their own responsibilities.

On the other hand, accountability is not servility. Doctors, for example, are accountable to their patients—or, if the patients are dependents, to the patients' guardians—but not in a way that threatens their professional integrity. Seeley's reasonable point is that in places where schools have been hedged in by too many restrictions and requirements, the system must be redesigned to restore teachers' sense of efficacy.

The other side of the coin is equally apt. Doctors cannot be expected to heal their patients unless the patients—and their guardians—cooperate. Neither can lawyers or architects do their best without their clients' active participation. In other words, accountability goes both ways.

Nevertheless, it's still up to us to act. Because we recognize that parents are crucial to children's school success, and because we can no longer take parent support for granted, we must take the lead in supporting parents. □

Reference

Boyer, E. L. (May 1989). "What Teachers Say About Children in America." *Educational Leadership* 46: 73-75.

Educational Leadership (USPS 168-760) is published monthly September through May except bi-monthly December/January by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1250 N. Pitt St., Alexandria, VA 22314-1403. ASCD editorial office and advertising: (703) 549-9110. Member of the Educational Press Association of America. Contents listed in *Education Index*. Microfilm and xerograph copies are available. For information about these copies, write to University Microfilms, 300 N. Zeeb Rd., Ann Arbor, MI 48106, or to Bell & Howell, Old Mansfield Rd., Wooster, OH 44691-9050. Second-class postage paid at Alexandria, Virginia, and at additional mailing offices. Postmaster: Send address changes to *Educational Leadership*, 1250 N. Pitt St., Alexandria, VA 22314-1403. Printer: Byrd Press, Richmond, Virginia.

Educational Leadership is intended primarily for leaders in elementary, middle, and secondary education but is also for anyone interested in curriculum, instruction, supervision, and leadership in schools. ASCD publications present a variety of viewpoints. The views expressed or implied in this publication are not necessarily official positions of the Association. Copyright © 1989 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved. ISSN 0013-1784 October 89/Stock No. 611-89150

Copyright © 1989 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.