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OVERVIEW

WE CAN'T DO IT ALONE

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For 15 years we have had reports from National Assessment (summarized in this issue by Greg Anrig and Archie Lapointe, p. 4) revealing that students are not learning what many adults think they should. The national results are confirmed by several international studies showing that the attainments of American young people compare unfavorably with those of youngsters in other developed countries (Lapointe et al. 1989, Purves 1989). Our students don't know enough mathematics, science, history, literature, geography, et cetera, et cetera.

To me, these findings are disappointing, even embarrassing. I want schools to be more powerful, and I believe that our profession now has a set of ideas and practices, such as mastery learning, research on teaching, learning theory, thinking skills, cooperative learning, and outcome-based education, that can vastly improve our productivity. I support efforts, several of which are described in this issue, to upgrade curriculum content in mathematics, science, history, and other subjects. Nevertheless, I doubt that this nation's level of learning will be changed substantially by educators alone.

Social conditions. One reason is that many of the children who are least successful in U.S. schools live in urban neighborhoods ravaged by poverty, crime, and drug abuse. We know that, with high expectations and innovative methods, teachers can get at-risk students to extend their reach. But educators by themselves cannot change the social conditions that hamper these children's progress.

Motivation. A second factor contributing to modest achievement is that many of today's students, including those from privileged homes, don't work very hard at learning. That is the conclusion of studies like *The Shopping Mall High School* (Powell et al. 1985), and it is confirmed by countless teachers and principals. The National Commission on Excellence (1983) was right on this point; high standards can exist only with the full commitment of families, community members, and students themselves.

Recognition of the importance of education. Another way of saying this is that Americans seem not to value education very much. They may value *schooling*, and what it can get for them, but not learning for its own sake. That is the most plausible explanation for the relatively

low standing of teaching as an occupation in the U.S., which is both cause and consequence of the mediocre pay and poor working conditions endured by teachers.

Selection and preparation of educators. The predictable result is that we rarely recruit the ablest young people as future teachers, so the self-fulfilling prophecy continues. And because teacher education in the universities lacks prestige and financing, many teachers and administrators have not had the quality of professional training that would make them more proficient.

All these factors are well known. I list them here not to excuse educators from responsibility, but to put that responsibility in perspective. Changing these conditions is not so simple a matter as trying a new practice or adopting a different textbook; they are reflections of society at large.

What's more, if Americans were honestly to consider the price of change, many might not buy. After all, in earlier years our contempt for tradition and our Yankee ingenuity more than made up for our lack of book learning.

But as teenagers say, "That was then; this is now." Emerging world circumstances urgently require that we educate the whole population better than ever before. That means educators have a dual agenda: We must improve curriculum and instruction in the schools as they are now. And we must help the general public understand the transformation needed to begin the process of constructing a learning society. □

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