

The Superintendent

THOMAS P. MCGARRY

Accountability

It's hard to find anyone to trust. Or so it seems to anyone who reads or watches the news with any regularity. Consider what we've been hearing about:

- public servants who cheat and steal;
- prominent scientists who plagiarize or falsify their results;
- doctors who regard medicine more as a commodity than a service;
- clergymen who follow a moral double standard.

It's no wonder that teachers, principals, and superintendents don't get a favorable response when they suggest to the public, "Trust us, we'll do what's right for your child." The best we can hope for is what President Reagan suggested in talking about the INF treaty: "Trust, but verify."

We all expect accountability and verifiable results when we are clients or consumers. Yet educators often react with exaggerated hurt and a sense of betrayal when it is suggested that we too should be accountable. Frequently our negative reaction is expressed indirectly: we suggest that the standard measures of accountability are invalid and that the ultimate proof of our methods lies in the quality of the students who are graduated from our schools. Perhaps our greatest failing has been not to move beyond this carping to the development and use of instruments that we and the public can accept and live by.

Why not allow teachers—and students—to voice their opinions of teachers, administrators, and schools? Why not use a model like that used in the public schools in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada? There they solicit the judgment of students, parents, and staff on the performance of teachers and administrators at every level, and they publish the results. Or why not use teams of teachers and parents to visit

schools and pass public judgment on how well individuals and organizations are doing in reaching agreed-upon standards?

How are other professionals evaluated? Most of the time, we evaluate them with our feet, leaving them unceremoniously when they don't measure up. The disturbing discussions about school vouchers are a reflection of public frustration and the perception that educators are aloof and unresponsive. The trouble with such school-choice initiatives is, of course, that much more than accountability is at issue; issues of desegregation and of educating the poor and disadvantaged are intertwined. Whatever the merits of school choice, the reluctance of educators to deal with measures of

accountability makes choice plans seem like a good idea.

I recently attended an educational conference with a large number of teachers and administrators. Although parts of the conference were excellent, other parts were poor. It became common for members of the audience to get up and leave when a session was below par. During one of these migrations, a teacher walking out with me muttered, "It's a good thing our kids can't do this."

That's the point, of course. Our students are the world's longest-sitting captive audience. More and more of them are quitting or enduring failure and boredom until they graduate. Even the ones who succeed—including those of us who became teachers and administrators—can tell too many horror stories of indignities and boredom in school. Why did we put up with it? Should we have put up with it? Should anyone else put up with it?

Most of us were socialized in a tradition that taught endurance and passivity in the face of all indignities short of outright threat. I'm not sure that was healthy. Motivated perhaps by the competitiveness of the baby boomers or perhaps by the abuse that our trust has suffered, many of us have become more assertive and less willing to be pushed around—especially by bureaucracies. That's healthy. So how can we complain when the public insists that schools produce results? They are doing no more than we do ourselves. Perhaps if we agree to focus on students' growth, happiness, and well-being and to hold educators accountable to that end in realistic terms, community members and educators together will achieve real reform. □

Thomas P. McGarry is Superintendent of Schools, Longmeadow Public Schools, 811 Longmeadow St., Longmeadow, MA 01106.

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