

## The Superintendent

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### Paper Bullets

Superintendents are inundated by reports criticizing the present state of affairs in the elementary and secondary schools. Recent reports such as the Bradley Commission on History in Schools Report, *Building a History Curriculum* (1988); the American Association for the Advancement of Science's *Science For All Americans* (1989); and the National Endowment for the Arts Study, *Toward Civilization: A Report on Arts Education* (May, 1988) center on one school subject. Each suggests a major upgrading of teacher priorities, more student time on the subject, and greater expenditure of monies on the instruction of that subject.

These blockbuster reports, grandiose in scope, address policy issues with national social, political, and economic implications. The sponsoring agencies or foundations release them with much media hoopla. And then, all too often, the hoopla reappears in local newspapers and television shows denouncing the way schooling is conducted all over America, including the local school district.

From the superintendent's vantage point, these reports are nothing but paper bullets, harmless or irrelevant to the deep and often emotion-charged issues that school systems and their leaders face each day. They are fired off at press conferences and academic meetings; and while all the fanfare may focus media attention on the problems identified by the report, it usually fails to convey any sense of the depth or breadth of the subject of the report. Thus the paper bullets, though prepared by well-intentioned foundations and academic study groups, rarely reach their targets and are easily blown away by the urgency of other problems, like school funding, special education, and labor unrest issues, that superin-

tendents, parents, and state and local officials must deal with.

Take, for instance, the case of *Toward Civilization*, the National Endowment for the Arts report mentioned earlier. Predictably, it is roundly critical of the state of arts education in schools. The report's authors chose to define the arts broadly to include dance, theatre, and media in addition to the traditional visual arts and music, and then proceeded to find school programs ineffective because these newly included arts are not addressed in a significant way by schools. Teachers are not even certified in these newer fields, they lament. Creativity is touted as a key goal in the arts, yet scant attention is paid to the encouragement of creativity—the mainstay of visual arts as presently practiced. Meanwhile, other foundations' reports, like the Getty Center's *Discipline-Based Art Education: What Forms Will It Take?*, criticize schools for concentrating on hands-on and creative art to the exclusion of the study of the arts as a discipline.

Even though *Toward Civilization* states that there are as many arts teachers as science teachers in America, and that the arts receive 10 to 15 percent of an elementary student's school time, it

asserts that "basic arts education does not exist in the United States today." The strong language characteristic of paper bullets is used to insist that, "the arts are in general not being taught sequentially. Students of the arts are not being evaluated."

The report identifies several impediments which stand in the way of arts education and charges, "Americans generally view job preparation as the principal reason for schooling and knowledge about subjects not obviously related to job skills as unimportant." It also declares, "Americans generally confuse the arts with entertainment which can be enjoyed without understanding." An unconcerned citizenry thus becomes one of the targets of the paper bullet.

Without providing any meaningful, action-oriented way to deal with the sorry state of the arts in America, *Toward Civilization* in good paper bullet style puts the burden of reform on arts educators and school leaders. And all this is offered by an advisory committee to the National Endowment for the Arts, which, as the report notes, expends only three percent of its money on arts education.

If *Toward Civilization* had challenged the larger audience of museums, universities, arts foundations, and businesses that set the tone for how the arts are valued, it might have had an impact. As it is now, it will not energize educators, because educators by themselves can not move toward its vision of basic arts education. And because it was not aggressively marketed to teachers, most will not even read it. It will, like other spent paper bullets of an earlier era, be put on the library shelf to be ignored. □

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**These reports are irrelevant to the emotion-charged issues school leaders face every day.**

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