

PARENTS AS PARTNERS: THE POWER AND THE POTENTIAL

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Introduction. First, let me extend a personal welcome to all of you who have chosen to attend the Annual Spring Conference of the Minnesota Council of Teachers of English. Second, I offer you my congratulations for having had the resolve to arise early enough to make this breakfast session. Third, allow me to begin by explicating what is intended in my title, "Parents as Partners: The Power and the Potential." I wish to detail the challenge of Joseph Featherstone, teacher at the Harvard University Graduate School of Education, who states:

"...the challenge for parent and citizen groups...is to redirect the priorities and allegiances of the two key sets of practitioners in schools: principals and classroom teachers. What the politics of education badly lacks is coalitions of parents and practitioners."¹

Imagine, if you will, three concentric circles. The public comprises the largest circle, encompassing the second circle which is composed of parents, a large segment of the public. At the core, place the professionals, who, serving in loco parentis, would be the only group whose membership intersects all three groups. Embattled as some school systems have been in the troubled 70's, one wonders why the challenge Featherstone poses has not as yet been sufficiently prized as a goal to weld together the most powerful potential that exists in the nation.

Three anecdotes may serve to illustrate how it is that the

public, parents, and professionals often fail to communicate to each other at the sacrifice of social harmony, albeit interpreting equal justice.

The first anecdote involves three friends who are passengers on a long journey by rail. The acoustics are bad and fatigue is showing. The first passenger awakens drowsily, nudges the second passenger and asks absently, "Say, what time is it?" Only partially awake, the second passenger yawns and replies, "It's Thursday!" Overhearing this, the third passenger awakens and says, "Oh, are you thirsty, too? Let's all get a drink!"

WHEN WE AREN'T LISTENING WELL, WE ARE APT TO HEAR WHAT WE WANT.

In the second anecdote, a Minnesotan fleeing the long winter is a tourist in Hawaii. Enthralled with the islands, the people, and the sunny climate, she is determined to make a point of speaking accurately about the fiftieth state when she returns to Minnesota. Walking up to someone who looked like an old-timer or a kamaaina, she asked how a new-comer or a malahini should pronounce Hawaii. Was it Hawaii, or Havaii? Exuberantly the gentleman replied, "Havaii!!" The Minnesotan was pleased to receive such a firm answer and thanked the gentleman. "Mahalo," she said with satisfaction. To which the gentleman replied, "Vell, you're velcome."

WE SHOULD CONSIDER THE SOURCE WHEN RECEIVING INFORMATION.

The third anecdote centers around adolescence, a trying developmental stage of growth when 'tween-agers are yet establishing grounds for adulthood. A young lad had been selected from amongst other speech contestants in his school to deliver his prize winning speech before a group of parents on what it meant to him to be an American citizen. He had rehearsed his speech numerous times, but when he reached the climactic point in his delivery where he had chosen to quote Patrick Henry on the importance of liberty, he blurted out, "Give me puberty or give me death."

WE SHOULD REMEMBER THAT EACH OF US HOLDS A PERSONAL POINT OF VIEW.

Having taken time aside to use humor to describe circumstances which lead to misunderstandings, namely, 1) persistence in hearing what we wish, 2) failure to assess the source of evidence, and 3) holding to our own point of reference, let's return to Featherstone's statement:

"...the challenge for parent and citizen groups...is to redirect the priorities and allegiances of two key sets of practitioners in schools: principals and classroom teachers. What the politics of education badly lacks is coalitions of parents and practitioners."(1:p.18)

One might ask how this redirection of priorities is to be accomplished and to what ends, enough to be desired that a unification of seemingly disparate needs is possible. Three parts follow in this presentation in which I hope to deal with these questions, bringing our concentric hearing bands closer to a merger in under-

standing.

First, I would like to develop perspective on educational progress in our nation's history to afford all of us a publicly prized outlook. Second, I would like to cite recent examples of situations where the public and the profession have moved from provincial to providential solutions to school problems. Third, and most importantly, I would like to place the first two parts mentioned into global perspective to lend urgency to the challenge that we use our combined and concerted efforts to reach the powerful potential possible in terms of what is at stake.

Perspective. You perhaps are aware that a sense of humor has been defined as having perspective. It is, after all, the distancing that comes with perspective which affords us enough objectivity to look upon our actions with sufficient levity to attack problems anew. This special kind of humor is desperately needed in professional circles today, otherwise, I fear that the twin circumstances of apathy and cynicism may consume our best efforts.

The National Society for the Study of Education issued as one of two equally arresting volumes in 1978, THE COURTS AND EDUCATION. In this volume, Koenig discusses "The Law and Education in Historical Perspective."² The following is a brief summary from that source:

In the two hundred short years of the history of our nation, the federal government has been a willing partner and an active

advocate in using education in the following manner:

- 1) to meet the needs of society
- 2) to provide an informed and competent citizenry
- 3) to promote the general welfare
- 4) to enable economic growth
- 5) to protect national security

Since the twentieth century, the courts have profoundly affected the interpretation of educationally related issues by rendering decisions on the first and fifth amendments to the Constitution dealing with civil rights; the fourteenth amendment dealing with due process; the first and eighth amendments dealing with the general welfare of American citizenry. If we are listening actively with all three of our concentric hearing bands, we are not merely hearing familiar goals translated into thousands of behavioral objectives for which the professionals shall be held accountable vis-a-vis the parents who comprise the same segment of the public to which professionals also belong. We are hearing testimony of both parents and professionals continually struggling to interpret what more we wish of ourselves as American citizens.

What does the more consist of in terms of educational delivery? In reviewing the emerging roles of education through history, Zettel and Abeson assess the meaning of "The Right to a Free Appropriate Public Education."³ They describe the following changes:

- 1) In the early years, states were to provide a common school and uniform curriculum, but it was the individual's responsibility to take advantage of it

- 2) In the 19th century, the "separate but equal" concept operated with educational facilities established for certain children
- 3) In the 1960's, the "separate but equal" concept was discarded for its obvious inequities; differential input for equal results was attempted, but faltered because the concept of educational equality was seen as practically unobtainable
- 4) Today, the courts have established the following legal rights with respect to equal opportunity, if not educational equality as an outcome:
 - a. the right to an appropriate education
 - b. the right to a "free" public education
 - c. the right to due process of law
 - d. the right to placement in the least restrictive environment
 - e. the right to nondiscriminatory testing and evaluation procedures

This brief summary describes how the public has continually interpreted its wishes with respect to educational provision for its children. And, it must be added, the profession has continually responded. Nonetheless, there exists at present, a feeling of generalized despair. According to Daniel Yankelovich, the poll taker, a common denominator unifying an otherwise diverse population, i.e., rich or poor, rural or urban, old or young, blacks or whites, is the feeling that no matter what you do, no matter whom you vote for, no matter what cause you enlist in, you can't change the future. This is a strange commentary on the world's most future oriented society. Many people are fed up with decisions made for them about taxes, zoning, power plants, hospitals, schools, etc. They register frustration with slow-moving unresponsive bureaucracies. The horns of the dilemma are clearly that there is a lot we say we are fed up with, but there is little

understanding about what we are to do about it.

Although this depiction of the national climate is accurate, the mood is unwarranted and reveals both short-sightedness and short-mindedness. Frances FitzGerald, Pulitzer prize winning author of Fire in the Lake, a book about the Vietnamese and the Americans in Vietnam describes an earlier spirit, interesting by contrast:

"Americans ignore history, for to them everything has always seemed new under the sun. The national myth is that of creativity and progress, of a steady climbing upward into power and prosperity, both for the individual and for the country as a whole. Americans see history as a straight line and themselves standing at the cutting edge of it as representatives for all mankind. They believe in the future as if it were a religion; they believe that there is nothing they cannot accomplish, that solutions wait somewhere for all problems, like brides.⁴

That we have moved from optimism to what may be described as a less than positive mental paralysis is unfortunate, and hopefully temporary. If we allow memory to serve us well with the help of media to portray what has been accomplished on balance, along with the criticisms over what yet needs to be done, we will overcome myopia and ethnocentrism. After all, the United States in a short two hundred years of remarkable history, has developed one of the finest universal public educational systems in the world. As a concomitant, its citizens enjoy a high rate of literacy. Ironically, educators should take pride in the very vociferous criticisms voiced by the public; it bears testimony that we have

indeed educated a citizenry to the point of enabling it to critique its own circumstances in a country which allows it to do so.

The schools have become the crucible for change. It is abundantly clear that the democracy that the United States apparently fought for abroad, is the democracy its citizens should expect it to educate with at home. Next, let us look at examples of the public and professionals working toward desired change through participation, not paralysis.

Examples of Parents and Professionals Working Together to Make a Difference. The balance between lay and professional control of education has shown an acute change in the last fifteen years. Hudgins, in an article on "The Balance Between Lay and Professional Control,"⁵ highlights the change by indicating that as of 1975, more than half of the states allowed unionization of teachers. He interprets this to mean that teachers have become greater partners/adversaries in decision-making and that fewer unilateral decisions will be made by school boards in the years ahead. However, parents and the public in the same period have also become greater shareowners in decision-making. It is yet an open question as to whether truth shall transcend differences in matters to be deliberated. What is required is the mobilization of professionals to creatively meet the demands of citizen movements, and the enlightenment of the general public to the legitimate concerns and problems of professionals in service to the

citizenry.

A growing concern of both teachers and parents is that there should be tolerance for diversity since there is no right pedagogy for all students. In a positive volume entitled Schools Where Parents Make a Difference, edited by Don Davies, Director of the Institute for Responsive Education, documentary evidence is given of the kinds of solutions parents and professionals have developed together to meet educational problems. Davies indicates that the message in his book is significant because:

"...parents, working with school people, can make a difference. Democratic participation is an important part of American life and can help improve schools. Schools need change, the change that only school-community alliances bring. Evidence that democratic participation works comes at a strategic time--a time when Americans are wavering between activism and apathy, between cynicism and hope."(1:p.8)

Time does not allow me to elaborate on all of the examples representing hundreds of others selected by the Institute for Responsive Education and described in its publication. However, the following list indicates the kinds of successful efforts which have been mounted to improve education by coalitions between schools and communities:

"In Louisville, Los Angeles, and rural Wayne County, West Virginia, school councils enable parents and community members to have a direct and continuing say in local school policy.

In Minneapolis and a little town in northern California parents now choose the style and type of schooling they want for their children--from the freest to the most traditional.

In Crystal City, Texas, a community organization used politics to force the schools to be more responsive to the needs and goals of the Chicano majority in the town.

In one of the nation's most affluent suburbs, Hillsborough, California, parents play a major role in creating a private 'dream school' for children with special talents.

In Milwaukee, inner city black parents run remarkable educational programs on shoestrings in old parochial school buildings.

On Indian reservations in New Mexico, Montana, and Wyoming, Indian children now attend schools staffed by and accountable to their own tribes.

In Boston, New York City, Washington, and suburban Madison, Connecticut, private citizen organizations act as watchdogs, community information services ombudsmen, and mobilizers of citizen action to improve schools.

An elementary school principal in Boston is finding successful ways to involve parents in the desegregation process.

These examples include parents who have decided to design private school options such as the Nueva School in Hillsborough, California for gifted children. They include programs involving little or no cost as well as programs requiring larger budgets. Some of the programs received federal monies through grants, others did not.

The Lagunitas, California experiment in which parents were offered a choice of three co-existing programs, an ABC traditional program, an Academic Plus team taught situation with student electives, and a wide open environment in Open Classrooms was a first in the nation. This effort was mounted without federal funds.

In Minneapolis, with federal funding, a large and thoroughly

documented experiment referred to as "Southeast Alternatives" (SEA) offered choices to parents in five schools: (1:pp.123-124)

The Tuttle "contemporary" school offers a self-contained, graded education.

The Pratt and Motley elementary schools were paired and provide continuous-progress, non-graded programs for children 5-12.

Marcy Open School allows children 5-12 and their parents more than the usual choice of educational programs.

The Southeast Free School has the wide-open educational approach you'd expect from a free school and students ranging in age from pre-kindergarten to post-secondary.

Marshall-University High School gives junior high and high school students a number of alternatives ranging from a trimester plan on "individual-directed study," which allows parents and students a major role in the educational process, to a highly structured program of less control.

The interesting part about the "Southeast Alternatives" is that unlike many other programs receiving federal funding, the program continued after the funding ceased. Moreover, parent response to a questionnaire indicated that 93% were "very satisfied."

To imagine that any of these examples of joint efforts between the public and the profession were developed without problems would be naive. The importance of the effort lies in the participation and support of the public and the profession. The dimensions of the task required to appropriately educate the citizenry to meet the needs of society have become as increasingly complex as has life in a technological society. Both the public and the profession need each other's support in order to accomplish the gargantuan

task.

Although I have mentioned but a few of the examples of concerted efforts resulting in desired changes in schools, these examples will suffice to lead us to the consideration of the vital nature of the challenge bearing on the moral consciences of all Americans to unite in support of a higher cause--that of peace at home as a beacon for peace abroad, for we have reached that point in history when there is no alternative other than to put our best efforts toward learning how to share means of improving the quality of living on our shrunken globe.

Global Perspective. It is my opinion that adding a fourth concentric band to the other three I introduced with this presentation would make a pivotal difference in the manner in which otherwise potentially adversarial groups would view the compelling challenge to form partnerships. If it takes truth to transcend differences, then that truth can be that it is a national and international imperative that we continue to accommodate the pluralism in our society; it serves as a microcosm not only to deal with the differences in our society, but equally as importantly, it serves by transfer to the macrocosm, to help us to understand the vast differences amongst the earth's people. The understanding of differences should serve as a basis for dealing with the common need to share the planet in peace.

A recent item appearing in the International Edition of the

New York Herald Tribune on March 14, 1979, underscores the need to add global perspectives to our viewpoints:

"A government survey...shows that 27 percent of U.S. high school seniors believe that Golda Meir was president of Egypt, 40 percent think that Israel is an Arab nation and 17 percent estimate that the U.S. population is larger than that of China or the Soviet Union.

A Gallup poll showed in 1977 that half the U.S. population did not know that the United States had to import petroleum to meet its needs."

Recent events should suffice to alert us all to the fact that our mental attitudes need embrace the fact that television makes instantaneous neighbors of peoples around the globe, and economic conditions makes us necessary partners as well.

Global perspective indicates that in the conduct of our partnerships to effect our educational mission, we include these understandings regarding interactive factors globally:

- Of the world's more than 150 nations, living within them, most people are not free
- Of the world's land areas, excluding Antarctica, 45-50% of the land surface is too cold or too dry (without irrigation) for grain cultivation
- Approximately 71% of the world's total surface is covered by oceans and connecting seas and more than 4 billion of the earth's people need to survive on the remaining arable land area
- The most populous continent on the globe is Asia where more than 59% of the world's people live
- Approximately 7% of the world's total land area is United States territory, it being the fourth largest nation in the world by size in which approximately 5.5% of the world's population lives

- Approximately 59% of the world's people live in countries whose per capita income in 1975 was less than \$500, whereas approximately 25% of the world's wealth is currently produced in the U.S.
- In 1975, 12% of the world's total exports came from the U.S., but 49% of the world's total exports of grain came from the U.S.
- Of the world's total military expenditures of \$324 billion in 1975, 25% came from the U.S.
- In the period 1961-1975, \$88.3 billion or 40% of the world's total exports of arms came from the U.S.
- The approximate ratio of world military spending in 1975 to spending on regular operating budget of the United Nations was 1,090:1

These figures have been taken from the February 1978 issue of Update, Vol. 12, No. 6, issued from the Minnesota State Department of Education. I find it interesting to note that proportionate expenditure on education in global perspective is totally absent, and conclude that until more people perceive its significance in relation to the other facts and figures, there is a massive challenge ahead for all nations.

To what ends should the public and professionals unite? I can offer no better challenge to conclude this address than to quote from an editorial appearing in the October 1978 issue of Change, by George W. Bonham, the title of which is: THE FUTURE FORSAKEN.

"The future shape of the human race is not likely to be one which the current school and college generation will be able to recognize when its time comes at the helm. One of the tragedies for American schooling--and thus for the nation--

is the abominable lack of student preparation for a world in which an adequate global understanding by all citizens may be the only road toward saving the world as we know it.

Even college seniors have generally no idea that the world has fought over 100 civil and international wars since The War ended in 1945, or that world expenditures for arms now exceed \$400 billion annually.

This country has developed mass communications and universal education to a point unprecedented in human affairs. We are, in many ways, the most informed nation of citizens, and yet we continue to live in a fool's paradise in believing that this is still the American Century, and that it is here to stay.

Our national tribute to the New Parochialism can be confirmed everywhere. In New York, one of the country's most advanced states educationally, less than 15 percent of all history and social science courses in the secondary schools are devoted to covering three fourths of the world's population and two thirds of the area that constitutes the non-West. And no wonder: Only a bare 5 percent of all of the nation's teachers have had any exposure whatever to international studies and training.

Such a gross lack of preparedness for this interdependent world is not only to be blamed on educators but on the inattention to these issues of citizens generally.

How to reverse this awesome incongruence between educational shortsightedness and accelerating world change should receive the study and action of the very best people in and out of the academy. The current concern over 'back-to-basics' carries its own twists of irony, of course, since not even its most prominent advocates consider a minimal understanding of our nation-world more than a luxury, to be tended to once the three R's are mastered. Both, of course require urgent attention, and both now form a basic requisite to citizen survival.

It will take bold resolve of many institutions to overcome the country's present myopia. It will take uncommon effort to prepare this generation of young Americans for a world which they cannot in fact now discern in their classrooms. The need for such collective and imaginative leadership stems not out of some one-world idealism, but out of the clear

necessity of surviving in a risk-ridden world. To do anything less is to gamble with the very lifeblood and soul of a great nation that cannot in the long run prosper except as it successfully lives side by side with 150 other nations of vastly differing circumstances."

FOOTNOTES

- ¹ Davies, Don (ed.), Schools Where Parents Make A Difference, Institute for Responsive Education: 704 Commonwealth Avenue, Boston, Mass., 1976, Introduction by Joseph Featherstone.
- ² Koenig, Robert A., "The Law and Education in Historical Perspective," in the Seventy-seventh Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education, Part I, The Courts and Education, edited by Clifford P. Hooker, University of Chicago Press, 1978, pp. 1-26.
- ³ Zettel, Jeffrey J., and Alan Abeson, "The Right to a Free Appropriate Education," in the Seventy-seventh Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education, Part I, The Courts and Education, edited by Clifford P. Hooker, University of Chicago Press, 1978, pp. 188-216.
- ⁴ FitzGerald, Frances, Fire in the Lake, Vintage Books, N.Y., 1972, p. 9.
- ⁵ Hudgins, H. C. Jr., "The Balance Between Lay and Professional Control," in the Seventy-seventh Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education, Part I, The Courts and Education, edited by Clifford P. Hooker, University of Chicago Press, 1978, pp. 54-83.