

46
Wilson copy

THE RELATION OF THE CITY SUPERINTENDENT TO THE COMMUNITY,
THE SCHOOL BOARD AND THE TEACHING BODY.

By Will C. Wood, Superintendent of Public Instruction.

Most people who are at all in touch with the situation recognize that city school administration in America is on an unsatisfactory footing. In most every city there is lack of harmony in school administration, varying in degree but apparent even to the casual observer. There is lack of continuity of policy and in some instances lack of the spirit of progress because of the constant shifting of responsibilities and changes in management. During the last ten years, Chicago, for example has had five superintendents; Los Angeles has had three; Boston, three; and Oakland, three. In New York, Superintendent Maxwell was able to hold on for years only by constantly fighting for his official life. The average term of city superintendents in California is only about four years and in most instances, changes in the superintendency have been due either to friction or lack of wholehearted community support. School boards come and go with surprising regularity. All of this militates against continuity of plan and checks real progress. It makes for the development of "fads" and the pursuit of "fancies". Such superintendents and boards seeking to continue in office frequently feel called upon to emphasize the spectacular in education rather than the substantial. It makes also for extravagance in school expenditure.

since a change of policy means the "scrapping" of the old, and preparation for the new. Educational progress and economy of administration both demand that some way shall be found to secure better continuity of school policy.

We can not meet the situation by treating outstanding symptoms; we must seek for the deeper causes of which the things I have spoken of are only symptoms. In my judgment, the cause is not to be found in the personality of the superintendent. I have known too many splendid superintendents who have moved on because of unhappiness or even more urgent reasons, to attribute the shortness of terms of service to the personality of the superintendent. Of all the nerve-racking positions in the field of government, the city superintendency is pre-eminent. The martyrdom of thousands of good men is silent testimony to that fact. Under our present system he is forced to bear a burden of responsibility that few human beings can bear without bending or breaking. The very nature of his work,--the shaping of the lives of children, requires that he shall be a man of broad and deep sympathies. There are few men of really sympathetic nature who are not also sensitive. We have, then, a most trying position filled by a sensitive man, a truly incongruous situation.

I believe that the real cause for frequent changes in the superintendency is to be found in the system. No man should be required to bear alone the tremendous responsibilities now

resting on the shoulders of the city superintendent. The chief defect of our city school administration is the unwise centralization of responsibility in one man. The Board of Education ought to bear its share of the burden. It should not assume that each new superintendent is a prophet to be followed implicitly until he proves himself merely human. It should start with the assumption that he is human like the rest of us, and that all educational wisdom is not crowded beneath his cranium. We ask too much of a superintendent when we ask him to be omnipotent, omniscient and omnipresent, as many school boards do.

If we are to prevent this quadrennial hegira of superintendents we must get away from the idea that the superintendent is a policy maker. He isn't, and he can never be a policy maker in any American community. The American people are so constituted that they do not accept any policy without question, no matter how handsome the wrappings of the package may be. They want leadership and advice, but they reserve to themselves the right to analyze the offering, selecting what they deem good and rejecting what they do not like. A school board fails in its duty to the superintendent as well as the public when it accepts any policy before it is convinced of its soundness. It should require the superintendent to prove all things in respect to policies before accepting them as good. A policy whose wisdom cannot be demonstrated to the complete

satisfaction of a board of laymen can afford to wait. If it is accepted solely upon faith, it has in it the elements of failure, since the community can not be expected to accept it more readily than the members of the Board who have had better opportunity to study its worth. And a policy that is not accepted by the community is not a policy after all.

This brings me to a consideration of the relation of the superintendent to the public. A superintendent can do good work only when his relation to the public is cordial and sympathetic. It is his business to know the community if he is to advise it concerning its educational interests and policies. School Systems ^{not} are/like plants that may be transplanted. A school system that serves Pittsburg in excellent fashion may be poorly adapted to Los Angeles. A school system, to be most worth while to a community, must be the outgrowth of community conditions and needs. Only a man who knows a community thoroughly can suggest the most appropriate lines of school development. For that reason the superintendent must know the people with whom he is working. He must know the city geographically, must know it industrially, sociologically, economically. He should know where expansions of the school limits will probably be made, so that he may plan school extensions. He should know the industries of the community if he is to plan vocational training to meet community needs. He must know manufacturers, business men and labor leaders with whom he must

00403

work. He must know in cordial manner the newspaper men and ministers who have much to do with shaping public opinion. He must be in touch with all kinds of civic organizations, women's clubs and parent-teacher associations since they are the informal instrumentalities through which democracy functions. Directly and through assistants he must keep in touch with parents and pupils so that he may find the reaction of school policies upon them and their reaction upon school policies. He must be so closely in touch with affairs generally, so likeable, so respected, that every organization and newspaper will be open to him for the exposition and interpretation of school policies. He must be as deeply interested in community development as any other citizen, and must be so broad in his outlook and sympathies that he will be regarded as a community builder in the broader sense. In all his activities, however, he must be non-partisan, and in all his official dealings non-sectarian, since he is representative of a community institution which includes all parties and all sects.

Before passing from this phase of the subject, I want to emphasize the responsibility of the superintendent as a community educator. His chief function is to interpret the schools to the people, to keep them informed, to suggest policies, to receive their suggestions and criticisms. It is his business to keep the schools both public and popular. He must be an evangelist of education, thoroughly believing in his mission and able to show his fellow citizens the value and needs of the great

institution of which he is the chief officer.

In discussing the relation of the superintendent to the teaching force, I trust you will pardon me if I make a brief analysis with a view to bringing out certain principles which I deem fundamental.

The school system is the chief instrument devised by democracy to insure the continued existence of democracy. Democracy is not predicated upon documents, court decisions, words or phrases, but upon the intelligence, enlightenment and character of the people. It is not a thing that people inherit from their forefathers; neither is it a thing to be conferred upon any generation or people. Quite frequently people grow up in a democracy without becoming democrats. The Mexicans borrowed the forms of democracy but used them to cloak autocracy and later, anarchy. Each generation must grow into democracy, consequently a democratic nation looks carefully after its growing boys and girls. They are the ones who will determine the kind of a world we and our children shall live in. The American school system has been established to preserve and advance democracy by developing good citizens - law abiding, self-supporting, participating, cooperating, progressing citizens. If our school system does not do that, it is a failure.

Now people become democratic citizens by a process of growth. A man may be twenty-one years of age, but he is not a democratic citizen unless he has learned to participate in

00405

democracy, to bear its responsibilities, and to co-operate with his fellows in common affairs and enterprises. The school system, up to very recent times, has not afforded opportunity for participation and co-operation. It has been an autocratic school system, from kindergarten to college. There have been few opportunities for self-directing participation or for co-operation. Even the recitation has been a matter between the teacher and one pupil, - the one who happened to be answering the question. In recent times, the spirit of the schools has changed somewhat. Pupils, especially in high schools have been given opportunity to participate and bear responsibilities. Clubs, organizations, enterprises have been introduced so that pupils may grow in ability to assume responsibilities and to do things instead of reading about them. The result has been life and growth.

People grow by assuming responsibilities and by having a part in things. What is true of pupils is true of teachers. In the past, they have not been expected to think about fundamental school problems. In many instances they have been denied the right to determine even the details of their work. In many systems they have been supervised in details to such an extent, that individuality, life and spirit have been crushed out. In teachers institutes, such teachers are inert and listless - they have lost the thinking habit. Everything is determined from above, so "why worry." How can such teachers develop participating, progressing,

00406

responsibility assuming, co-operating citizens? The answer is - they can't. The only teacher worth while is the one whose thinking powers have not been subject to atrophy, who does planning on her own account, who participates in making school policies, who co-operates with her fellows in something besides a sewing circle.

It is time for us to introduce democracy in our school organization. I would have supervision, but I would not confuse supervision with direction in matters of detail. I would have plans, but they would not be imposed by the supervisor. They would be worked out by teachers under the leadership of the supervisor, theory and practice having opportunity to meet, and adjust themselves to one another. I would have internal school policies, but they would be worked out by the principal with his teachers, or by the superintendent with his council. In every city school department, there should be a council of representative teachers elected by the teachers themselves to discuss with the superintendent and make recommendations upon matters of internal school policy, subject of course to review by the board. Matters pertaining to courses of study, promotion of pupils, adoption of textbooks and so on should be presented to them. The superintendent should present his plans to this body, answer questions, accept criticisms, and when the plan is submitted, it should be the plan of the whole body. In this way we should throw responsibility

00107

where it belongs--upon the teachers; they would grow professionally through participation; they would learn to co-operate; they would learn in actual practice the principles and applications of democracy which they are expected to teach. In no other way, I believe, can we keep professional spirit among teachers; in no other way can we overcome the spirit of unrest now prevalent in the teaching body; in no other way can the superintendent keep the confidence and co-operation of the teaching body. The plan will, I believe, dignify class-room teaching and will eliminate much of the friction in the school organization. I am pleased to note that your eminent retiring superintendent, Dr. Albert Shields, has already made a splendid beginning along democratic lines.

Let me summarize, then, the chief points that should be kept in mind in considering this problem:

First, the school board, representing the public, is the body charged by law with supreme administrative responsibility. It should retain in its own hands the power and responsibility of passing upon all matters of public school policy except professional matters.

Second, all professional matters, including matters of internal policy should be delegated to the superintendent or to professional assistants, through the agency of the superintendent's office. In the interest of real progress, the superintendent

should advise in these matters with the representatives of the teaching body, whenever that body is rightly concerned.

Third, the teachers should be accorded the privilege of conferring through their representatives directly with the Board whenever their salaries or working conditions are under consideration.

Fourth, the Board should adhere to its present plan for the appointment of teachers, similar to the civil service plan, leaving the rating of applicants to professional assistants.

Fifth, the tenure of teachers should be during efficiency and good behavior, but a reasonable plan for dismissal of incompetent or undesirable teachers should be provided. The suggestion of Dr. Steddom made at the last meeting, has much of merit in it.

Sixth, the city of Los Angeles, in the interest of continuity of school policy, should elect its board members for longer terms, and provide for gradual retirement of members instead of a sweeping retirement as at present. In my judgment, this is a very necessary change.

The fundamental thing, in the reorganization of American city school administration, is the introduction of the spirit and machinery of democracy. It will, in my judgment, relieve the superintendent from responsibilities which he should not be expected to bear and will encourage teachers to plan and work with

better spirit and to better advantage because they will feel that they are no longer cogs in a great unwieldy machine, but a part of a living institution. It will substitute co-operation for inharmony so prevalent in many city systems. It will also enable American democracy to renew itself continually and in a natural way, through a school system democratically organized and democratically administered.