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 whole-hearted 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 se-
cure 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 centrali-
zezation 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 super-
intendents 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 leader-
ship 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 con-
vinced 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 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
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
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 partic-
cipation and co-operation. It has been an autocratic school
system, from kindergarten to college. There have been few oppor-
tunities 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, progress-
responsibility assuming, co-operating citizens? The answer is—
they can’t. The only teacher worth while is the one whose think-
ing 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 organiza-
tion. 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 super-
visor, 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 super-
intendent and make recommendations upon matters of internal school
policy, subject of course to review by the board. Matters pertain-
ing to courses of study, promotion of pupils, adoption of text-
books 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
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. Steedman 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.