

## Arrows from the Political Arena

*I am amazed at the number of committees I am asked to participate on for a total of five to eight additional hours a week...and the lack of any fruitful outcome by participating on these committees. Ninety-nine percent of these committees deal with mandated reform efforts...usually nothing more than subterfuge for what the building administrator wanted to begin with. (High school math teacher)*

*I get so maxed out on three-letter abbreviation programs presented by yet another guru! Some politician hears about a new education gimmick, and everyone has to jump on the bandwagon and that program becomes the thing for the year. Then the next year a new model is embraced and we are asked to go down yet another path...OTE and CIM and PCR and OBE. . . the list goes on. (Grade 4 teacher)*

It is in the political arena that many decisions affecting teachers' working conditions occur. At the national and state levels, today's tax-cutting and anti-public-servant climate makes the political arena particularly volatile and hostile to teachers. At the institutional level, teachers still face issues of power and control that limit their abilities to make the decisions characteristic of true professionals. A variety of constituencies and forces currently tie the hands of teachers. These include pressures from special interest groups in society, reactionary reformers' attempts to make teachers more accountable, debilitating working conditions, competing paradigms, and a lack of decision making power.

### **Powerlessness**

One definition of power, according to Sarason (1990), is "possession of control, authority, or influence over others" (p. 49). In spite of restructuring efforts, many teachers are still given very little power in what happens in their schools. Too often, only minimal control is granted, such as the choice between two textbooks or a staff development activity. But this is not control related to policy decisions. At the same time, teachers sometimes resent being involved in decision-making because of time factors and the belief that this is the work of administrators. Sarason (1990) points out that "any educational reform that does not explicitly and courageously own up to issues surrounding changing of power relationships is likely to fail" (p. 31). He also notes that the issue of power must be considered in a systems framework, not only in one part. Changing these power relationships is necessary but not sufficient to bring about desirable educational outcomes. According to Sarason, teachers' 'control over' anyone or 'the ability to act or produce an effect' is almost totally nonexistent" (p. 50). He suggests that this is because the system and relationships within it are not changed, so individuals cannot, on their own, make much of a difference. Jennings (1996) believes that one of the results of feeling powerless has been a turning inward by educators and not engaging the public. When school structures are rigid, teachers have little elbow room for creativity, innovation, and professional decision making. Although most teachers begin their careers full of idealism and excitement, within a few years, too often their lofty ideals and goals have turned to pale, gray vestiges, and survival becomes the primary concern.

### **Poor Working Conditions**

Some 40 % of teachers leave the profession due to dissatisfaction with working conditions (Glickman, 1991). The best teachers will not stay in paternalistic schools characterized by top-down control. What is needed instead is capacity building (Darling-Hammond, 1993). She notes that other countries invest more in supporting the "front line workers in schools... [rather than] trying to inspect, monitor, and control their work" (p. 757). Darling-Hammond finds that in most developed countries, teachers work with groups of students 15 to 20 hours per week, and spend the remaining 20-30 hours constructing curriculum, working with individual students, planning, and conferring with other teachers. Japanese teachers teach three periods per day (Glickman, 1991). In America, teachers teach five or six "batches" of 30 or so students, and rarely have time for planning. The limited release time teachers have for preparation is not considered an integral part of their job and can be taken back by administration to cover classes or manage the lunchroom.

What motivates excellent teachers, according to Glickman (1991), is "discretion and control over resources, time, instructional materials, and teaching strategies, so as to make better educational decisions" (p. 7). Citing the 1990 Carnegie Foundation study, Glickman states that 70% of teachers are not deeply involved in curriculum decisions, staff development, student grouping, promotion/retention policies, or school budgets--the real fare for educator decision-making.

### **Restructuring/Reform Efforts**

Continued restructuring efforts have occurred in part due to the inadequacies of previous reforms. Fullan and Miles (1992) suggest that one difficulty with these rapid restructuring measures is that such approaches are often not fully researched nor are long-term implications considered. Pogrow (1996) finds that too many reforms are based on myths and on "silly posturing about knowing what works when there is no proof that any of these reforms work on even a small scale" (p. 662). According to Morris (1996), all too often these reactions to forces of change are merely quick-fix responses to long-standing, complex problems. While agreeing that reform is essential, legislation is needed, and money is necessary to bring about educational improvements, Morris notes that if such reforms are enacted in a top-down, defensive fashion, results will be limited.

According to Barr and Parrett (1995), as governors and state legislators discovered the political power of educational reform, almost every state legislated some aspect of reform in public education. In fact, rather than being initiated by experts in education, recent school restructuring efforts have been spearheaded by politicians, economists (Goodlad, 1995; Sarason, 1990), or even demagogues, such as talk radio hosts, who proclaim "THE ANSWERS" for education but know little about how learning occurs (Kamii, Clark, & Dominick, 1994). When politicians meddle in schools and classrooms in the guise of school reform, education becomes a political football that induces instability each time the party or politician changes.

The greatest changes in many years are occurring now in schools, in part due to changes in how federal programs are funded. The shift is from individual student benefit, such as a handicapping condition, to systemic change through professional development (Lusi, 1994). One example is the move to site based management wherein schools are supposed to make decisions based on their own particular contexts (see Educational Leadership, 1995/1996). Theoretically, the concept has possibilities, especially if decisions can have comprehensive impact, such as budget control or staff selection (Geraci, 1995/1996; Gleason, Donohue, & Leader, 1995/1996). Unfortunately, such decentralization has often been accompanied by central control of staffing and less money for discretionary use within the school. All too often, site-based management has been thrust on schools in times of budget crises in order to

require schools to make their own cutbacks, leading to suspicion and pitting of staff members against each other (i.e., Oregon after Measure 5).

Accompanying restructuring efforts, teachers have had to spend countless hours meeting on ways to address new mandates (for example, developing scoring guides for assessing growth in mathematics), often to have state departments of education eventually develop their own and insist that all adhere to them (i.e., Oregon). In addition, work on site councils, curriculum development committees, discipline task forces, and parent meetings often consume two or more evenings per week after the regular school day.

Reform and restructuring efforts have not produced the desire and commitment for fundamental change among teachers (Goodlad, 1996). New mandates and reform agendas (federal and state) rapidly firing down the pike generally have not acknowledged teacher voice, teacher time, or teacher focus. Many teachers feel "done to." Comments such as "They tell us to do it." "Keep the door shut; this too shall pass." "There have been many waves before. This is just the latest fad or band wagon," are commonly heard in teachers' lounges across the country. Most often, changes are directed from above without provision of time to master new concepts and integrate them into instruction, or without time to work collaboratively. Teachers are tired. There are too many things to do at once and too many other problems to cope with. Finally, teachers often find that the reforms seem peripheral to their central mission: helping students to learn (Gitlin & Margonis, 1995).

Clark and Astuto (1994) state "Everyone agrees that the work of teachers is the critical element in effective schooling" (p. 517). However, these authors insist, most reforms focus on technical skills that limit professional discretion. Instead, they should maximize the abilities of teachers through establishing appropriate conditions. Bureaucratic structures force teachers into passivity, dependence, and lack of self control. Clark and Astuto argue that professionalization, collegiality, and ethical practice, not technical proficiency, should be the emphases of school reform.

### **Competing Paradigms**

Teachers are caught in the middle of the paradigm wars that currently are making their way through the school system (Darling-Hammond, 1993). According to the tenets of the increasingly popular constructivist paradigm, for example, children are viewed as building knowledge actively, based on their own unique experiences and interests. Therefore, determining what is learned must be done through authentic assessment, through analysis of the actual products students develop, as well as evaluation of the processes they use. In the old paradigm, most frequently associated with behaviorism, students were viewed as vessels to be filled. Thus, they were to "dump" their learning on objective tests that measured what they had internalized. However, in classrooms that use the new world view, student assessment still is driven by the old paradigm. Students are required to take SAT or ACT tests to get into college, or to take standardized achievement tests because states demand them at certain grade levels. In reaction to such inconsistencies, teachers often feel like they are in a giant tug-o-war that pulls in multiple directions!

### **Litigious Society**

Suing appears to be a great American pastime. Teachers, principals, and school board members are worried about every action (Dunklee & Shoop, 1986; Gerlovich, 1986). Teachers are afraid to touch students for fear of spurious child abuse charges. They are distracted by the extra work required to anticipate every conceivable circumstance in preparation for field trips and special events. Accidents do happen under the best of circumstances. When a child slips and breaks a leg playing dodge ball during Physical

Education, it does not mean a teacher or school is being negligent. Regardless of fault and eventual outcome, however, the process of litigation can malign reputations, consume vast amounts of teachers' energy, and decrease educators' feelings about their own self-efficacy. It used to be that a pat on the back or a hug was a means of affirming a child. Likewise, an outdoor education experience was for group building as well as for understanding the environment, but it becomes too risky in today's legal climate. What have we lost?

### **Unions that Lose Sight of their Mission**

Strong teacher unions are necessary in light of the current teacher bashing and tax cutting climate. The intent of the major unions has been to benefit teachers by improving working conditions and pay. In the past, they have been instrumental in doing so, and central level leadership has been significant in shaping the educational agenda in positive ways, for example, through the visionary ideas of recently deceased AFT President, Al Shanker. But critics complain that local unions have focused too often on protection of incompetence, cumbersome rules and regulations, and power games that lead to confrontation (Feldman, 1998). The new schools of the future need to find ways to harmoniously and collaboratively work together in the best interests of children and teachers, and unions need to support rather than hinder such efforts.

### **Pressures from Fundamentalist Religious Groups**

Although everyone has a right to their own religious convictions, intolerance of others' viewpoints has become a problem. According to Kaplan (1994), fundamentalist groups of varying persuasions believe that public schools are the hotbeds of sinister forces trying to control their children. Their insular political and educational ideas and their prejudice against others' perspectives create a mine-field for teachers, who may be using adopted textbooks, teaching required curriculum on sexuality or values, or using techniques such as guided imagery that are considered dangerous. The sophistication, cunning, and persistence of fundamentalists' political activity is having an effect on schools, according to McCarthy (1993), who states that they systematically infiltrate school boards and use litigation to affect policy decisions. The fundamentalists' alliances with big business and the political far right may strongly influence education in years to come. Kaplan (1994) notes that the Religious Right "may well have more than its share of racists, anti-Semites, and bigots-at-large" (p.K 5). Such prejudices from the religious right and other fundamentalist groups conflict with the increasing diversity and recognition of others' values among public schools. Their emphasis on conformity to narrow viewpoints and a limited set of basic skills conflict with teachers' attempts to improve education through student-centered, higher-order thinking approaches to curriculum and instruction.

Pressure for voucher systems to support private and often religious education is also problematic for public schools already reeling under shrinking funding (Bracey, 1994). Dealing with the kind of interference arising from selective parental and community involvement has put school personnel on the defensive and "bedevil[s] school administrators and teachers across the country" (Kaplan, 1994, p. K 11). Issues over values, dealing with parental rights, and finding common ground are critical areas needing resolution (Brandt, 1996; Burrton, 1996; Vondra, 1996).

### **Standardization, Professionalization, and Accreditation**

In attempts to make education more accountable and to professionalize teaching, many major teacher training institutions undergo accreditation by the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE). Although the purpose of NCATE is to ensure that future educators are appropriately prepared for the profession, national accreditations are costly in

terms of time and money spent by the institution every five years, as well as taking faculty time away from working with teachers. There also are pressures for a nationally standardized curriculum and for national standards of professional accreditation.

Although on the surface these attempts appear beneficial, there are high monetary costs, issues of teacher empowerment, and issues of equity that have not been adequately considered (see discussions in the March and October, 1993; June, 1995; and November, 1997 issues of Phi Delta Kappan; and the March, 1995 issue of Educational Leadership). Glickman (1991) states that the millions of dollars thrown at uniform systems of teacher evaluation have had very little benefit. He suggests that much more would be accomplished if that money were used to help competent teachers become even better. Moves to standardization of curriculum, as well as standards for teachers (Sarason, 1990), may further disempower instead of empower teachers (Eisner, 1993). With all the other pressures they encounter, teachers facing national accreditation to maintain positions, or to rise in rank, may opt out altogether.

### **Countering the Assaults from the Political Arena**

As with the social and economic arenas, involving the community in education is critical for defeating the political assaults on teachers. Other options for deflecting the political arrows include showcasing schools, using the media, and counteracting critics to reduce the amount of teacher bashing; using action research and reflective practice in schools to bring about real educational improvement; refocusing unions on helping children; saying no when pushed to jump on untried new bandwagons; developing a community of colleagues; and finding the will to take action.

#### **Showcase Your Product**

Many of the positive results schools produce tend to be overshadowed by the negative impressions and sensationalizing by media sages. Moreover, educational successes in local schools receive little attention because not enough effort is made to showcase them. Aside from the success of the local high school football team, most people in the community do not hear about the accomplishments of their students and teachers. It doesn't take much time and effort to showcase educational success at the local level. For instance, instead of turning inward, teachers can make a commitment to frequently recognize students' accomplishments, minor and major, through notes home and through phone calls. Teachers who regularly send home "happy notes" that convey pride in their students' mastery of curriculum objectives, boost both the self worth of students and parents' perceptions of school effectiveness. Teachers and principals who make a point of phoning parents to report their pleasure and pride in students' accomplishments first note the trepidation in parents' initial responses to the calls, then the appreciation of people who have just had a positive experience with a caring professional who went the extra mile for them and their children. Inviting the public to events such as a science fair, portfolio display, art show, or theater production allows the community to observe the exciting products of learning.

#### **Use the Media**

Advertising the value of education through the local media need not be expensive. Most local newspapers run human interest stories, and the novel achievements of children make appealing reports as well as strong advertisements for the accomplishments of local schools. Some school systems collaborate with local newspapers, arranging regular "Students of the Week" features, ensuring regular exposure for children and public education. Some districts, consortia of districts, and teachers' unions develop their own 30-second radio advertisements about the importance of education. If aired in regular time slots these advertisements can

influence regular listeners over the course of time while encouraging beleaguered educators with rare positive messages about their work.

### **Counterattack the Critics**

Those who influence the minds of the public enjoy a great deal of power in the making of important socioeconomic and political decisions. In our society, the immense power of the media has been effectively used against public education. It is a daunting challenge to save the teaching profession and ultimately the well-being of millions of children, but educators must fight a pitched battle against those who seek to destroy public education through negative propaganda. Educators must lead the battle because they are the only people in our society with the motivation and the educational backgrounds necessary for understanding and countering the shady reasoning in the propaganda. For instance, Berliner and Biddle (1995) provide a good starting point for arming educators for this battle with their extensive and insightful refutation of the flawed evidence used by media pundits who most persistently attack public schools and teachers. Individual educators should amass as much of this ammunition as they can and use it to counter inaccurate criticisms that emerge in the community. Teachers unions and other professional educational organizations should use this ammunition to launch systematic counterattacks on those who unfairly attack public schools in the national media.

### **Become a Community of Learners and Researchers**

Thinking transcends the trenches! Real learning and growth can occur when teachers, administrators, students, parents, and community members from a school or district get together to focus on solving a problem through open, honest reflection. For example, if children fear coming to school because of violence, all parties can try to think of ways to improve the situation. All the layers of the school community (Higgins & Cohen, 1997) can conduct action research to try to identify specific problems and seek workable solutions. Although suggesting that educators work with all these learning layers when they are so stressed seems to be another paradox, it is one that needs to occur for both growth and real solutions.

School-based research can also help teachers creatively tackle the problem of time. For example, by using block scheduling and "houses," a middle school carved out almost two consecutive hours per day for each house team of teachers for collaborative planning, conferencing, and preparation. Encourage Teachers' Unions to Adopt a "Children First" Orientation.

In the current teacher-bashing atmosphere, teachers' unions must be vigilant about protecting the rights and interests of their members. But much can be gained from a shift in attention toward the central players in education: the children and well-prepared teachers. A tax-resistant public swayed by persistent media messages about the weaknesses of public schools is not sympathetic to the plight of overloaded, under-appreciated educators. They are, however, impressed by genuine selfless attempts by teachers' organizations to better the lot of children. Lessons can be learned from some Canadian teachers' unions that, so far, enjoy the benefit of stronger public support for public schools. For instance, some Canadian unions maintain provincial committees to develop and improve curricula and to coordinate special educational events for students (Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation, 1996). The Akron Education Association has initiated a program for at-risk youth, providing training and resources for teachers that benefit both students and community. In addition, unions that hold high standards and advocate adequate training and peer review, provide mentoring to new teachers, focus on strengthening individual schools, organize around teaching as a career, and increase teacher effectiveness are more likely to be perceived by the public as professional

associations than as self-serving organizations (Chase, 1998; Feldman, 1998; Kerchner, Koppich, & Weeres, 1998). Stand Together and Just Say NO!

An individual's voice may not be heard, but a group voice is loud. When too many initiatives come at once, sort out what is important. Keep foremost in mind that any new venture must be good for students and for the heart of school--the teaching and learning process. Ask to see research evidence of the value of a new model or method. This is not a suggestion to encourage rebellion, nor to ignore new ideas. Rather, it is to take a measured stand with colleagues for the children's benefit. If it is not helpful to kids and learning, just say "NO"!

### **Build School Spirit: Have Fun with Each Other**

Some schools in extremely poor and difficult communities manage to build a spirit of community and cooperation in spite of the problems educators face daily. Finding a space for a faculty room and making it a comfortable retreat, sharing food treats, having brown-bag lunches together on topics of interest are ways to build this spirit. Student-teacher sports activities or talent shows build fun for both kids and teachers. Shared work activities, such as making a school garden or a work day to clean up the community, build a "can-do" spirit, find ways for students to be successful, and improve relationships with the community. Out-of-school social activities also help. Taking a few minutes of each faculty meeting to do something fun, such as singing a song; telling jokes; recognizing birthdays, new babies, or other life events; or even doing the bunny hop around the room increases the fellowship. In Fairhill School, one of the most impoverished elementary schools in Philadelphia, teachers took a few minutes to belly dance together at faculty meetings, laughing all the way. One of the richest, warmest, most creative environment in any school was encountered in this setting.

### **Find the Will to Take Action**

To deal with all the assaults coming at once is overwhelming. If, however, each teacher assesses his or her own personal sphere, determines what is particularly important and feasible, makes a commitment to work on just one area, and gains the knowledge needed to counter the attacks, much can be accomplished. Even more can be effected by working collectively. What is required is will. Decide to take action and do it!

### **Collectively Fighting the Siege**

The siege of the profession is claiming significant casualties. Over 50% of new teachers leave the profession within their first seven years of experience, never to return. Two thirds of those who leave do so within their first four years in the classroom (Hewitt, 1993; Juska, 1994). According to these authors, most of this attrition is attributable to conditions and events similar to the siege conditions described in this monograph. As Halford (1998) observes, education has been called "the profession that eats its young" (p. 33). Considering the current huge teacher shortage, with over two million teachers entering U.S. schools in the next ten years (Halford, 1998), schools cannot afford to lose new teachers.

Thankfully, educators tend to come into the profession with a strong sense of altruism; hence, they are remarkably strong in spirit. Although unjustified attacks from an unappreciative society force many talented people to leave teaching every year, many others remain in classrooms keeping their idealism alive at least to some degree, and serving their students to the best of their abilities under difficult conditions. These teachers certainly are to be admired. They intuitively recognize that expanding the minds of tomorrow's citizens is the most important work in an era of rapid, unpredictable change and monumental societal problems.

In fact, there finally appears to be growing support for teachers by the general public. In spite of many misperceptions about public schools in general, the 1996 Gallup poll on attitudes toward education (Elam, Rose, & Gallup, 1996), found that most respondents believe that teachers are committed to school improvement; they are satisfied with the teachers who work with their children; and they would like to encourage the brightest students to become teachers. This is good news for educators who can now begin to rally the public to their cause.

All of the initiatives discussed in this paper seem inadequate in view of the enormous problems facing public educators. To borrow an insight from philosopher Mary Midgely, "You can't shift a muck heap with a teaspoon." The attacks on public education have been so persistent for so many years that they have left us with a considerable muck heap. The sociopolitical attacks and the economic erosion faced by most school systems will be difficult to overcome; nevertheless, we must try. A single teaspoon cannot shift the muck heap, but many can. If enough educators can mobilize themselves to address some of these recommendations, their collective efforts should make a difference over time. Furthermore, these initiatives are just a few ideas about how to fight the killing of the profession. If thousands of caring, committed, and intelligent educators and future educators around the country get their heads together to brainstorm other initiatives along with parents and members of the community, and then disseminate these throughout their school systems, the impact on the problems could be substantial. The alternative is to accept the steadily worsening status quo and to preside over the demise of effective teaching and learning in public schools in this nation.

Many of today's voters and decision makers do not recognize the importance of the profession to their own future well being, and the well-being of the nation and the world. Educators must face the likelihood that they are the only ones with sufficient knowledge of the situation to make an impact on public apathy and hostility. The current political climate certainly is not conducive to the emergence of elected leaders who will defend the teaching profession, and the public seems distracted by more trivial matters.

There is a strong connection between support for the teaching profession, student success, and the well-being of the nation. As Edelman (1991) points out, "No society that considers itself civilized or moral can condone the victimization of millions of children by discrimination, poverty, and neglect" (p. 296). Nor can a society consider itself civilized or moral if it bleeds dry the education of these children through withdrawal of resources because such withdrawal represents the most insidious form of neglect. An inadequate education will be a far greater burden for our children than the federal budget deficit that had been the focal point for so much political rhetoric.

The public must come to realize that this siege on the teaching profession ultimately is an attack on their children, and on their own futures. Attacks on teachers eventually undermine the effectiveness of schools, thereby setting the stage for more criticism, which further encourages the public to withdraw financial support. Thus, the siege on the teaching profession has the potential to establish a vicious circle of criticism-withdrawn resources-criticism. The nation has little chance of social or economic advance in the 21st century unless our education system is a great one. The killing of the teaching profession could be the most serious threat to our future viability as a civilized nation in a rapidly changing world. We must take action NOW to defend it!