

Do School Boards Take Education Seriously?

By JOHN WALLACE and
PHILLIP SCHNEIDER

DESPITE the fact that most school board members feel that their actions prove otherwise, the majority of them do not take education seriously. Moreover, as long as they persist in construing their functions as they presently do, school trustees will never take education seriously.

At first blush, such a statement appears shocking and indeed, unfair. However, school trustees may take consolation in the fact that few in our society do take education seriously. While huge expenditures are made for education in this country and while many people are expending vast amounts of energy in maintaining the present educational establishment, neither fact ensures meaningful involvement in education. It is not entirely the fault of the school trustee that he finds himself in the paradoxical position of serving education but not being able to take it seriously.

If board members don't take education seriously, what is it that they do take seriously? Obviously, they appear to be deeply involved in education. They give unselfishly of their time. They attend numerous meetings, make many decisions, conduct studies, attend conventions, and participate in many other activities. However, one may with reasonable justification assert that the majority are concerned with the accouterments of education rather than its essence. They have accepted unquestioningly a traditional role which militates against meaningful involvement in education.

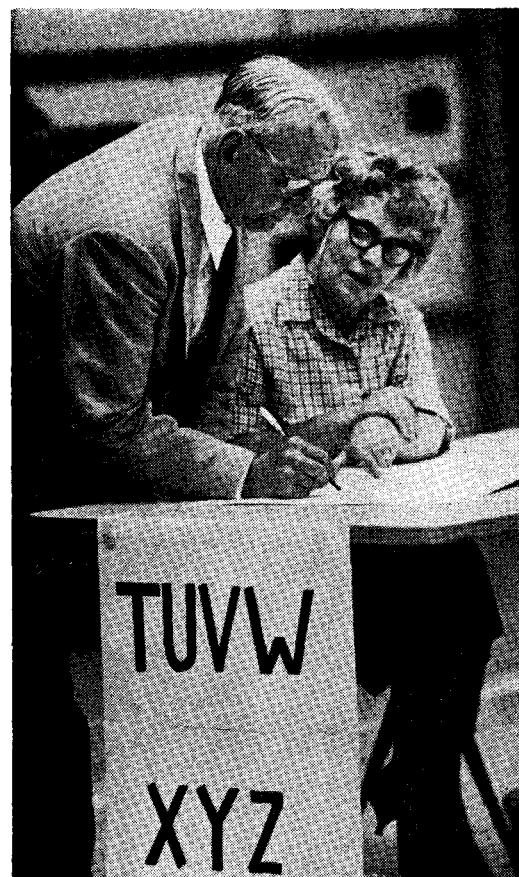
Traditionally, school trustees have viewed themselves as guardians of the purse strings of the inhabitants of some limited geographical area, and as defenders of the status quo. On the surface, these would appear to constitute necessary and valuable functions. However, it is precisely this conception that has impeded educational progress and limited severely the contribution of the

school board member to the community he purports to serve.

Given their present functions, school board members might best be recruited from the ranks of company controllers, transportation workers, food service employees, and building contractors. Unfortunately, the very same statement could be made about school superintendents. It is significant that at recent meetings of school trustees and superintendents from throughout the State of California held in Los Angeles, not a single text book was in evidence. In an extensive "education exhibit," the virtual absence of instructional materials, curriculum suggestions, and other matters directly related to education was conspicuous. The remarkable array of folding doors, desks, construction materials, etc., suggested that somebody had confused the "educational exhibits" with those intended for a convention of building contractors.

Matters of transportation, buildings, cafeterias, budgets, school district reorganization, are certainly important. However, that such matters should capture the imaginations and energies of public school representatives to the exclusion of real concern with education *qua* education is most deplorable. On the other hand, considering the manner in which school trustees construe themselves, would one really expect any other outcome? After all, learning *per se* doesn't cost money. The acts of learning and discovery, in and of themselves, are indeed "costless" as well as priceless. But it is the conditions under which learning is to take place, *i.e.*, the areas, the buildings, the materials that cost money. Hence, if one's principal concern is with the cost of education, one will be most concerned with those features.

Unfortunately, one may seriously question whether or not school trustees in their traditional roles as guardians of the public purse strings best serve even the economic interests of the public. Without serious examination and understanding of both education and society, school trustees are incompetent to authorize the expenditure of a single penny of public funds. The vast majority of school trustees have got the cart before the horse. One cannot spend money wisely for the accouterments of education while disinterested in the act of learning itself. In their anxiety to assure the public that funds are being used in



—Photos by George Zimbel (Monkmeyer).

School board election in Lake Mohogan, N.Y.—“A trustee is ideally a person interested in education in the broadest sense of the term.”

a “no nonsense” way, to represent willingly even grossly ill-informed public opinion, and to avoid controversy at all costs, trustees, for all their expended energies, are failing to provide the kind of representation and leadership desperately needed.

A trustee is ideally a person interested in education in the broadest sense of the term. Trustees unwilling or unable to grasp the significance of events occurring outside their narrow areas of influence are antiquated. The abysmal provincialism of school trustees as the zealous guardians of something called “local control” has done more to impede progress in education than we realize. Witness the tenacity with which many school trustees have blocked efficient reorganization of schools under the banner of “loss of local control.” Curiously, such trustees fail to realize that their refusal to recognize and deal with gross disparities in equality of education throughout their states must of necessity encourage greater involvement of state legislatures in education at local levels. And legislative involvement at the local level will not likely end with concern over school reorganization as long as trustees cling to a concept of school districts as islands unto themselves. One can expect increasing legislative participation in the specifics of curriculum, the

John Wallace is an Assistant Professor of Psychology at Stanford University and a member of the Board of Trustees of the Whisman, California, Elementary School District. Phillip Schneider is the Superintendent of the Whisman Elementary School District.

nature of instruction, and the management of learning. Numerous inefficient small school districts cannot provide the excellence demanded of modern education nor can they provide organized political power necessary to influence legislative trends. Paradoxically, then, the more trustees vehemently demand their right to what they call "local determination," the more they insure increased involvement of state legislatures in education.

The significance of the acute myopia of trustees reveals itself in other important ways. Many elementary school trustees refuse to concern themselves with such critical problems as the school dropout. They see this as a problem for the high school since it makes its appearance at the time the child becomes of legal age to leave school if he chooses. Given the fact that a potential dropout can often be identified simply on the basis of his learning experiences in the elementary grades, such an attitude is astonishing! The problem of the high school dropout may well be solved in the elementary school or even through development of pre-school clinics. In these early formative years crucial attitudes and expectancies concerning learning are established.

Just as it simply won't do for the elementary trustee to consider the problem of the high school dropout as out of his realm of responsibility, it won't do for the high school trustee to view events on the university campus as irrelevant to his major interests. There are many reasons for the rather dismal state of affairs in teacher training and not all of them can be attributed solely to education departments of institutions that provide teacher training. A major portion of the present difficulties in teacher preparation can be traced directly to public indifference and lack of involvement in what is surely the most crucial ingredient of education. During the many years in which we permitted the training of our teachers to take place in essentially anti-intellectual environments, were we taking education seriously? Happily, renewed efforts within the educational establishment to develop effective teacher preparation programs are now apparent. However, there is no question that much remains to be accomplished. Informed, interested, and involved school trustees can contribute in many ways to improving teacher training.

Rapid developments in basic scientific information and technology coupled with significant changes occurring within our society in such areas as civil rights renders ours an age of transition. School trustees must grasp the significance of these changes if they are to administer properly to the educational needs of children. It simply won't do

to focus one's attentions entirely upon extant local needs. By doing so, trustees may find that they have helped to prepare many students for a life of unemployment and poverty. And perhaps worse than poverty, a life of "absurdity." Local needs are affected by events occurring in the society at large. The attributes of the "educated" person in the latter half of the twentieth century are slowly emerging. One must set one's sights on the broad domain of American society and its relationship to other societies in order to glimpse these qualities which define an "educated" person.

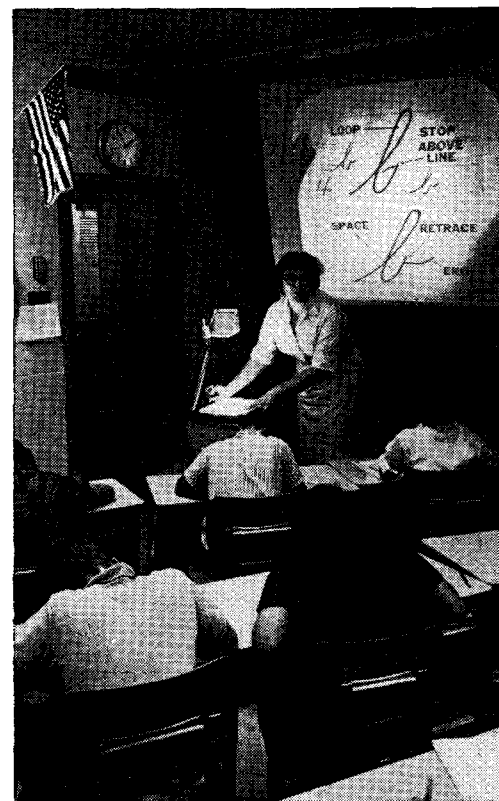
EDUKATION is not and will never be a static process. In contrast to their traditional position of defenders of the status quo, board members must encourage and facilitate needed change. A conception of education as the vehicle through which a traditional stable fund of information is transmitted must be challenged. The rapidly accelerating rate at which new knowledge is being developed and disseminated in our scientific culture has rendered many of our "truths" about the nature of man, his physical universe, and his values little more than curious historical relics. In an age in which the probabilistic nature of knowledge has become increasingly apparent, we persist in teaching our children the comforting myths of "facts," "absolutes," and "certainty." Much more than supposed "basic" information, our students must come to understand the conduct of the inquiry, i.e., the strategies through which new knowledge is developed. Clearly, they must learn how to pose answerable questions and how to proceed to answer them. Students must learn to go far beyond the information given to them. They must learn to question, examine, leap beyond the obvious, reason, and evaluate. A "fact," in and of itself, is dull. Examination of the logical antecedents of a "fact" can be exciting. Moreover, understanding of the processes by which a "fact" came into being, may result in modification of it or even abandonment. School board members who are inclined toward the status quo need the comforting illusion of "facts." And most tragically, at a time when mankind is in desperate need of creative solutions to massive problems that threaten his very existence, many board members will insist that the same myths be transmitted to their children.

While we are in need of creative solutions to our problems, it seems the case that few educators and fewer trustees are cognizant of the dynamic forces developing in our society which militate against creative behavior. And though we pay lip service to the desirability of developing creative behavior in our children, few would accept the conditions necessary in schools to permit such

behavior to take place. In general, we tend to create conditions in schools that discourage rather than encourage creative behavior. And we do so because we subscribe to the myth that creative people are born not made. In the midst of all the mystical nonsense that has been written about the creative process, one necessary ingredient of this process stands forth with remarkable clarity. Stated quite simply, this ingredient is freedom. In order to create, one must be free to examine alternatives, to reject that which is given, and to imagine worlds not extant but dimly perceived. In short, one must have the courage as well as the freedom to re-examine his assumptions about the nature of truth. Through constant re-examination of his own values as well as those of others, the school board member must work toward providing conditions in our schools that encourage rather than discourage creative behavior. He must be prepared to discard values appropriate to a less complex culture and to create new and pertinent values.

If it is true, as we have attempted to show, that the traditional role of the school trustee militates against meaningful involvement in education, in what way can the present situation be corrected? The solution is clear. The school board member must come to reconstrue his place in the educational enterprise. The most vital function that he can perform is to engage both the educa-

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An overhead projector at work in the classroom—"Board members must encourage and facilitate needed change."

Schools Make News

A "head start" is needed not only by pre-school children. Disadvantaged students facing the critical transitions from elementary to high school and from high school to college also need help, and this summer some of them were getting it.

In Newark, New Jersey, Seton Hall University ran a six-week "Pre-High Head Start" program for 105 children from the economically disadvantaged sections of the city. The stated goals were "to help stop high school dropouts and to break the chain of poverty and ignorance." The program offered remedial work in reading, "English expression," and mathematics. Music appreciation, sculpture classes, a trip to the New York State Theater, and similar activities provided many with their first creative and artistic experiences. The program was in great demand and is expected to be continued and even expanded next summer.

For college-bound students, the University of Pennsylvania and Lincoln University in Pennsylvania carried on similar programs. Project College Bound offered Pennsylvania high school graduates who were already accepted to college, remedial and cultural opportunities.

At the University of Pennsylvania, another project, the Counselor Institute, aimed to help guidance counselors work with students from low-income backgrounds. In lectures and small group discussions, counselors studied low-income group attitudes, changing employment conditions and opportunities, and the development of an improved liaison between school counselors and industrial personnel.

Both Project College Bound and the Counselor Institute were pilot projects for a statewide program and will be continued through the academic year. If the planned statewide program becomes a reality, high school graduates from disadvantaged backgrounds will enroll in a five-year college program, each student taking twelve semester credits of regular courses and six credits of remedial work, rather than eighteen of regular courses.

Whatever happened to Calvin Gross? The former Superintendent of Schools in New York City, whose dismissal last winter stirred nationwide controversy, is now Dean of the School of Education at the University of Missouri at Kansas City, Missouri.

"The National Program of Educational Laboratories" is designed to identify educational problems, to create new institutions to conduct educational research and research-related activities, to train individuals for leadership in such activities, and to assure educational improvements by implementing that research. The program will work toward these objectives through the initiative and the cooperative planning of scholars, school personnel, and representatives of various other groups interested in education."

This is the opening paragraph of "Guidelines," a pamphlet describing the new laboratories program of the U.S. Office of Education, established under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965. Individuals or groups interested in establishing or becoming a participant of a laboratory should write the Division of Laboratories and Research Development, U.S. Office of Education, Washington, D.C. 20202, for "Guidelines," information, and application instructions.

Profiles in Courage, the television series based on the book by John F. Kennedy, is now available to school systems for use in the classroom. The series, approved by President Kennedy before his death, has received the George F. Peabody award and has been cited by the National Council for Social Studies as an "outstanding contribution to the social studies curriculum."

The films may be purchased with funds made available under the National Defense Education Act or the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965. Educators seeking further information about the films or purchase procedure should contact Profiles in Courage, Robert Saudek Associates, 630 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10020.

New Publications. The National Student Association has launched a new quarterly, *The American Student*, of which two issues have already appeared. Well edited, usually well written, the magazine focuses on the projects and activities of the organization, both domestic and international. First issues have covered topics ranging from sit-ins to sports, and included articles on "Student Action on Apartheid" and "Americans in Asia," as well as "The Impact of Berkeley" and "Lessons of the Teach-in." The twenty-four pages appearing four times a year carry a surprising amount of worthwhile news about the student world. For more information, write the NSA at 3457 Chestnut Street, Philadelphia, Pa.

Southern Education Report is a bi-monthly magazine published by the Southern Education Reporting Service. It takes the place of *Southern School News*, which was discontinued last June. The new magazine will maintain the same policies of factual, objective reporting that won such respect for the *News*. The emphasis will be on reporting programs designed to expand educational opportunities for the socially and economically handicapped in the seventeen southern and border states. A regular feature of SER will be an objective survey of developments in school desegregation.

Subscription rates are \$2 per year and \$3.75 for two years. Write: Southern Education Report, P.O. Box 6156, Nashville, Tenn. 37212.

Volunteer's Digest is a newsletter put out six times a year by the Volunteer Community Activities Clearing House, Inc., "a non-profit service providing information on community activities of volunteer organizations throughout the country." The *Digest* offers summary descriptions of projects dealing with youth, poverty, prejudice, as well as other community services such as park maintenance and health. The descriptions intend to inform and make no attempt to evaluate the effectiveness of the projects. Subscriptions are \$7 a year and may be obtained from *Volunteer's Digest*, 5507 Third Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20015.

