

WINDOW OF OPPORTUNITY

by Denis P. Doyle

America's occasional, often alarmist reassessments of the public school system usually leave something constructive in their wake. Sometimes the benefits are concrete, such as the subsidies for science and language instruction under the National Defense Education Act of 1958. Sometimes they are psychological—merely a residue of healthy nationwide anxiety. There are already signs that the current wave of soul-searching will follow this pattern; that America is, once again, summoning the resolve to turn adversity into advantage.

Moreover, this effort will coincide with a rare demographic opportunity to overhaul the teacher force. And the teachers are the most important single factor in the schools. But before looking at that opportunity, let us consider several recent developments which, together, give cause for optimism.

The first is perhaps the most promising. Academic specialists are at last reaching agreement on what "works" in the classroom. After years of doubting whether *anything* done by teachers could overcome the ill effects of parental neglect, broken homes, or poverty, they have concluded, happily, that a child's socioeconomic background does not necessarily predetermine his performance in Algebra II; that schools do, indeed, *matter*.

Given the right supervisory back-up, teachers who cherish their subject, scorn sloth, reward effort, punish indiscipline, work their students to the bone, and assign lots of homework (and take the time to correct it) can raise the achievement of any student from any neighborhood, even in schools that lack computer terminals, large libraries, and unscarred furniture (see box, pp. 96–97). This common-sense perception may come as no surprise to most Americans, but it has taken researchers and educators several decades of debate, often clouded by ideology, to reach the same conclusion.

That is why a second development—the decline of the "expert," and the emergence of the layman, as the prime mover in educational affairs—deserves at least two cheers. Over the next decade, such reforms as may be introduced in local school districts will not trickle down from the ivory tower or from Washington, D.C. They will instead be pressed by taxpayers and grassroots groups. Those reforms will be based less on regression analysis and theories of neurophysiological development

than on intuition and community values. Increasingly, these values will be traditional ones.

It is through state government that the man in the street is making his voice heard. During the 1960s and '70s, while Washington was preoccupied with egalitarian pursuits, more than two-thirds of the state legislatures passed laws requiring minimum competency tests for teachers or students. They did so in the face of apathy in Washington and concerted opposition from graduate schools of education and the teachers' unions. "There is no test conceived that would be helpful in determining whether teachers should continue to teach," asserted John Sullivan, a National Education Association spokesman, in 1979.

Paying the Piper

Taxpayers did not agree. Having been told for years that more money would mean better schools, parents and state legislators watched aghast as every new round of increased spending—per-student outlays more than doubled in real dollars between 1958 and 1982—was followed by lower achievement test scores. As the Baby-Boom generation passed through the schools and each class did worse than its predecessor, perplexity gave way to outright suspicion.

Suspicion alone might not have produced state intervention. But it happened that, at the same time, the state's role in financing education was growing by leaps and bounds. Historically, American public education had been a *community* concern, funded primarily by local property taxes. In 1920, local levies paid for more than 80 percent of the cost of public education. Even as late as 1945, the figure was still 64 percent. By the late 1970s, however, the statehouse had become the main source of money for most public schools. The federal government chips in about 10 percent, mostly for special programs such as bilingual education, compensatory education for underprivileged children, and aid to handicapped students. Whether this shift in financial responsibility caused or merely reflected state legislators' heightened interest in schools is not altogether clear. Suffice it to say that state officials are increasingly both paying the

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piper and calling the tune.*

Buoyed by citizen support, and sometimes by help from the business community, many states are even continuing to increase school budgets, despite declining enrollment and economic uncertainty. Two years ago, Charles Benson, one of California's leading authorities on public finance, was skeptical about the possibility of more state school aid. It would come, he said, "only if the citizens of California march on Sacramento and demand a tax increase." The citizens did not march. But the California Business Roundtable did endorse a one-year, \$800-million increase in school expenditures—one-third of it to be raised through new business taxes. The bill passed.

Similar resolve is evident elsewhere. Democratic Gov. Bob Graham of Florida last summer signed into law a \$228 million bill that includes \$80 million for a lengthened school day and \$10 million for a merit pay plan for teachers. In Mississippi, long an educational backwater, where to this day 42 percent of public school students drop out before high school graduation, Democratic Gov. William F. Winter in 1982 pushed through a package of school reforms that will cost an estimated \$86 million per year through 1985. Among them: state-supported kindergarten, \$1,000-per-teacher pay boosts, and a law requiring children to stay in school until age 14.

More Protein

From the point of view of professional educators, the growing participation of citizens and politicians in the education debate may seem intrusive. It is. It is also long overdue.

The nation's colleges and universities for years abdicated their responsibilities toward public education. But there is evidence of a turnaround here, too. This change is a third force impelling the public schools toward higher quality. After lowering standards for both matriculation and graduation during the tumultuous 1960s and '70s—between 1967 and 1974, an estimated 80 percent of America's four-year colleges relaxed their course requirements—state universities from Oregon to Massachusetts are atoning for their sins and tightening up.

At the University of California, for example, a high school

*Most of the legal power over education has always resided in America's statehouses, not in Washington, D.C.—thanks largely to the U.S. Constitution's failure to mention "education," much less locate it in the federal domain. The length of the school day and school year, conditions of teacher tenure, the rules of collective bargaining, the manner of textbook adoption, and the depth and breadth of the curriculum—all are state prerogatives. Local school districts, which manage affairs on a day-to-day basis, do so at the sufferance of (and as agents of) the state.

senior once had to pass 11 yearlong courses in basic subjects—English, algebra, history, and the like—to attract the attention of the admissions office; now the threshold has been raised to 16. And the state Board of Regents has asked that the new rules take effect as soon as possible in order to “transmit to the public high schools of California a sense of urgency” about the need for more rigor. As the regents noted, stiffer entrance standards in academe will ripple back into the high schools, forcing teachers and administrators to put more protein into their curricula and toughen examinations to prepare students for what lies ahead.

In view of the shrinking pool of college students—enrollment will drop by an estimated five percent by 1989—the new regimen in public colleges and universities seems audacious. How can admissions officers be choosy in lean times? The answer may be as simple as this: Those in charge are ashamed of themselves. “The general lack of concern on the part of higher education for elementary and secondary education is at the heart of the nationwide educational crisis,” Theodore M. Hesburgh, president of Notre Dame University, has written. “We can do much to help, and we should.” It also seems, here and there, that state universities, like the public schools, are encountering a new quid pro quo—more public money in exchange for higher standards. Legislators and taxpayers alike, conscious of how little return on investment they have gotten in the past, are guarding the pursestrings more carefully now.

All in all, the signs are propitious—an indignant citizenry, insisting on reform; responsive state legislatures, committing fresh funds to the cause; and responsible colleges and universities, righting their past wrongs. But such trends can only come to fruition if America’s schoolteachers do their job well. And here we have a real problem.

As numerous studies have shown, the average American



Analysts of higher education now report a reversal of the trend toward watered-down college curricula, which began during the 1960s.

teacher is not an intellectual. The learning impediment posed by teachers who are duller than their students has been compounded in many schools by one of the great egalitarian shifts, prodded by court action, of the past two decades: eliminating "tracking"—the segregation of students by ability in various courses of study. When students are "tracked," teachers are too. And when the fast and slow lanes are merged, mismatches can arise. Imagine one of the nation's 15,000 National Merit semifinalists, with combined SAT scores of about 1,450, seeking clarification on a nuance of inductive logic or non-Euclidean geometry from the nation's "average teacher"—who chalked up an 813.*

Bargain-Baseament Teachers

In view of what teachers are paid, it is unsurprising that they do not constitute, overall, as illustrious a group as we might like. In 1982, their average starting pay (for less than ten months' work) was about \$13,000. This compared with a \$22,000 annual salary for a computer specialist with the same amount of schooling and \$24,000 for a physics major. Mathematics majors leaving college could expect to make \$21,000 (so long as they did not intend to teach math). Raises come with time, but only a handful of teachers ever go beyond the \$20,000–\$30,000 pay range. Last year, the 10 percent of teachers who fell into the highest income bracket had an average salary of \$31,500.

Two historical "flukes" explain why Americans expect competent teachers at bargain-basement prices. The first is discrimination. Before World War II, teaching was one of the few white-collar professions that college-educated women could enter in large numbers without arousing resentment from men (and other women); teaching also conflicted with family responsibilities less than did other jobs. Similarly, teaching was long one of the more prestigious career avenues open to racial minorities, especially in the segregated South. Despite the low pay, the classroom attracted blacks, Hispanics, and intelligent women whose ambitions went beyond the home. A certain amount of status and authority came with the job, as did a (nominally) short workweek and long vacations.

The second factor was the Great Depression of the 1930s. By closing off many more lucrative job opportunities, the moribund economy induced a teacher "bonus" of historic proportions. Would-be businessmen, bankers, doctors, and lawyers—among the brightest men of their generation—gladly settled

*That was the mean score in 1982 for college-bound high school students declaring education as their intended major field of study.

A MATTER OF ETHOS

Equality of Educational Opportunity, sociologist James S. Coleman's landmark study, was commissioned by Congress under the 1964 Civil Rights Act. President Lyndon Johnson's campaign against poverty—especially the disproportionate poverty among blacks—relied heavily on federal aid to the public schools. Coleman, among others, thought his research would vindicate Johnson's faith in the ability of education to lift up the disadvantaged. When published in 1966, however, his report not only failed to do that; it raised doubts about the value of schools in general.

Coleman documented the disparity between white and black students' achievement test scores. At first he sought to explain the difference in terms of school facilities. However, in this regard, mostly black and mostly white schools proved surprisingly similar. It was not the quality of libraries, laboratories, or teaching materials that accounted for most of the "achievement gap," Coleman concluded. Rather, what mattered were the habits and values picked up from family, friends, and schoolmates. As oversimplified in press accounts, his verdict was clear-cut: "Schools don't matter."

Since the publication of *Equality*, Coleman and other researchers have been busy dispelling simplistic interpretations of it. By focusing less on schools' tangible assets and more on "intangibles," they have shown that applying sound principles of education can help students of any race or family background learn faster.

One key intangible is "ethos." The term gained currency among educators after publication in 1979 of Michael Rutter's *Fifteen Thousand Hours*, a study of 12 inner-London schools. Rutter used "ethos," a Greek term, to refer broadly to a school's sense of purpose and commitment—and, specifically, to a spectrum of 39 measurable characteristics found in particularly successful secondary schools. These schools had better records for attendance, orderliness, and scholastic achievement than analysts would have predicted on the basis of the incoming students' disciplinary and academic histories, which varied greatly.

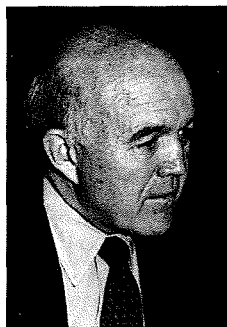
Principals in these schools laid down clear guidelines and monitored teachers closely for compliance—checking, for example, to ensure that they assigned ample amounts of homework. Teachers expected high performance from their students and rewarded them

for the regular, if meager, paycheck that teaching offered.

But the instructors who signed on during the 1930s have since retired. Teachers hired at age 22 during 1940, the last year of the Depression, retired in June of last year. Most men of comparable caliber today enter more lucrative white-collar professions. And ambitious women are now free to seek careers in computer programming, law, medicine, and academe. Indeed,

in return. One of the few "tangibles" found to be significant—well-decorated halls and classrooms—turned out to reflect an intangible: Instructors gave praise when it was due, posting students' exemplary work on walls and bulletin boards.

A 1982 study by Coleman, Thomas Hoffer, and Sally Kilgore indirectly supported Rutter's findings. In *High School Achievement: Public, Catholic and Private Schools Compared*, Coleman et al. concluded that the heavy homework assignments, ambitious goals, and strict discipline found in parochial schools accounted, at least in part, for their relative effectiveness. In Catholic high schools, between the sophomore and senior years, the difference in the test scores of blacks and whites narrows; it *widens* in public high schools.



James S. Coleman

Teachers, as well as academic researchers, are rediscovering ethos. In Washington, D.C., where pupils had long ranked well below the national average in standardized test scores, school superintendent Vincent Reed implemented a rigorous back-to-basics program in 1976. Teachers started monitoring students' progress more closely and providing intensive remedial tutoring in the Three Rs. In some schools, even gym teachers found themselves passing out homework—as many as nine essays a year.

By 1983, Reed's successor, Floretta D. McKenzie, could point to improved scores at both the elementary and secondary levels. And, for the first time, the District's third-grade and sixth-grade students *exceeded* national norms in math, language, science, and reading.

Washington's school system is 94 percent black. But reforms in districts such as Charlotte, N.C., which is two-thirds white, have also proved successful.

In 1973, the average Charlotte sixth-grade student read at a fifth-grade level and had the mathematical ability of a fourth-grader. School officials raised their expectations and made sure students got the message: Anyone falling short of the new standards would attend summer school and, if that failed, would repeat a grade. Attendance policies were toughened, too. The result: In 1983, Charlotte's sixth-grade students read at a seventh-grade level and handled math problems with the skill of eighth-graders.

between 1955 and 1980, the number of women receiving bachelor's degrees each year in engineering, once a male preserve, rose from 177 to 7,669. The net result is no surprise. Between 1966 and 1982, the percentage of college freshmen, male or female, planning to become teachers dropped from 21.7 to 4.7. This group includes too many who are not the best or the brightest.

Going to the bottom to recruit our teachers is bad enough.

The nature of most local public school systems makes the problem worse. School boards or school principals can exert little leverage over teachers once they are hired. Because of union contracts and uniform salary schedules, every instructor—eager or lethargic, bright or dim, strict or lax—receives roughly the same pay (seniority being equal). Not much can be done by way of financial incentives to reward dedication and skill; or, by way of penalties, to show incompetents to the door.*

Thanks to President Reagan's endorsement, the notion of merit pay has become a topic of heated discussion (see box, opposite). It is a wonderful, impractical idea.

Seizing the Moment

In my view, merit pay does not fit the culture of teaching. But less material forms of reinforcement may. Endowed chairs, university-style, can be used to attract eminent teachers. And sabbaticals for research or curriculum design can be granted to reward excellence—or merely to stimulate thinking. The National Endowment for the Humanities sponsors six- to eight-week summer seminars for hundreds of selected high school and primary school teachers on subjects ranging from "The Literature of Friendship" to "Documents of Slavery and Anti-Slavery" at college campuses across the country. By all accounts, the program has been a strong morale booster.

In the end, though, the only sure long-term solution to the problems of teacher incompetence, mediocrity, and apathy is to hire able, energetic instructors in the first place. That is why the remainder of this decade will be a critical period. For we are about to see a "window of opportunity," a chance to alter for decades the quality of public school instruction. Thanks largely to the "graying" of the teacher force—the fact that the once-young teaching population has developed a middle-age bulge—about half of the nation's 2.1 million public school teachers will have to be replaced by 1991, according to estimates by the National Center for Educational Statistics. Enrollments, meanwhile, will begin to rise again in the mid-1980s as children of Baby-Boom children—the Baby Boom's "echo"—start school. Between 1985 and 2000, the school-age population is expected to increase by anywhere from 12 to 18 percent. The demand for

*Tenured teachers can be dismissed for causes specified by state law. In Illinois, a school board can fire teachers for "incompetency, cruelty, negligence, immorality . . . or whenever, in its opinion, he is not qualified to teach." But the courts have placed the burden of proof on the school board, and have generally ruled that only misconduct substantially and specifically related to on-the-job performance is grounds for firing.

MERIT PAY?

Almost all of the \$40.7 billion paid annually to American public school teachers is disbursed to individuals without regard to on-the-job performance. Last spring, however, President Reagan endorsed "merit pay," and the term has been in the headlines ever since. "If we want to achieve excellence we must reward it," Reagan said in June. "It's the American way."

Of the Democratic presidential candidates, only Reuben Askew of Florida has endorsed merit pay. Most others, while not embracing the idea, have refrained from denouncing it. And with good reason: A June 1983 *Newsweek* survey of the general public found that 80 percent of those polled were in favor of merit pay.

Yet the idea may work better in theory than in practice, many educators say. By what yardstick, for example, does one measure quality? And who will do the measuring? Willard H. McGuire, former president of the National Education Association, has argued that when principals and superintendents do the measuring, "personal relationships or subservient behavior [by teachers] is too often equated with 'merit.'" Even if the system rewards only the worthy, a question remains: Will the overall benefits outweigh any damage done to the morale of perennial also-rans?

These questions are now being confronted. The Educational Research Service estimates that "performance-based" pay schemes are either in effect or under active consideration in 21 states.

Thus, in Dallas, computers are being used to remove the "subjective" element from the selection process. When a school's pupils do better on standardized tests than their prior performance would suggest, the principal, teachers, and other staff receive bonuses. But critics contend that such a preoccupation with test scores is excessive.

In Tennessee, Gov. Lamar Alexander is pushing a "master teacher" program that not only rewards the "best" but enhances their influence. Under the plan, teachers who qualified to move up the pay scale—from "apprentice" to "professional" to "senior" to "master"—would spend some of their time teaching other teachers and designing curricula. Committees of teachers and administrators from one school district would evaluate teachers in another—thus (in theory) "depoliticizing" the selection process.

The jury is still out on merit pay. A task force commissioned by the House Education and Labor Committee last year warned that it is no panacea, but supported further experimentation. More pilot programs seem likely. Under taxpayer pressure, leaders of the American Federation of Teachers and the National Education Association have muted their longtime opposition to all "performance-based" pay schemes. (Not surprisingly, they seem most receptive to merit pay accompanied by some sort of across-the-board salary hike.) According to a 1983 poll, 63 percent of U.S. teachers support the idea that "more effective" teachers should receive more pay.

teachers will then rise. Altogether, government statisticians predict, we will need nearly 1.3 million new teachers by 1990.

They can be 1.3 million *good* teachers if we are willing to pay the price. But the price will be high. Quality costs.

This is not a novel point. Spokesmen for teachers' unions trot it out every year when salary negotiations roll around. But they usually fail to make their case persuasively, in part because they reject any notions of quality control. The result is often ugly—strikes, accusations, lingering bitterness—and, from the teachers' point of view, seldom productive; teachers' salaries fell by 12.2 percent in real terms between 1972 and 1983. Taxpayers always prefer something for nothing, and school board members listen to taxpayers. But, whether teachers know it or not, they have at their disposal a possible means of short-circuiting the resistance to higher pay.

Supply-Side Education

The key may lie in teacher licensing. A license is simply state approval to do something that is otherwise prohibited. A truck driver is someone with a truck driver's license, and a teacher is someone with a teacher's license. Licensing helps define the supply of workers, which, in turn, helps determine their pay. Require truck drivers to take three years of driver safety courses and there will be fewer truck drivers—and higher wages. Require prospective high school teachers to score above a certain daunting threshold on standardized exams and to hold a bachelor's—or master's—degree in the subject they will teach and the resulting scarcity will drive salaries higher.

For elementary school teachers, of course, licensing requirements should be different. The "how-to-teach" courses that clutter the curricula of our teacher colleges have *some* value to those who instruct the very young. But such training should be "hands-on" whenever possible. And the elementary school teacher must have a solid, balanced academic background. A licensing exam testing general knowledge would help keep those who overdose on pedagogy out of the classroom.

Bricklayers, lawyers, accountants, and embalmers have had no trouble grasping the basic relationship between supply and demand. The European craftsmen of the Middle Ages also understood it. By restricting entry into their crafts, they increased both their status and their earnings.

"Teachers Demand Tighter Standards" is a headline that reads much better to taxpayers than "Teachers Ask More Pay, Shorter Hours." And it is as good for their pocketbooks as it is

for their public image. Once any state significantly tightens its licensing requirements, school boards (and taxpayers) will have to put their money where their mouth is. Within a few years of doing so, they will have an abundance of qualified teaching candidates to choose from; the pool of prospective instructors is market-sensitive.

Higher pay might mean, at least for a while, that school districts could afford to hire fewer teachers. But the threat of teacher layoffs usually arouses public resistance. Fresh—and, probably, creative—scrutiny of the entire school budget, and of the school's academic menu, is a more likely long-run result.

Toughening up licensing rules is not the only way to put some quality into lackluster school faculties. If teachers do not seize the opportunity, the citizenry will no doubt find an alternative method—perhaps one that tenured instructors will find a bit more threatening. Teachers' unions would be wise to act soon if they want a hand in shaping the fate of their profession.

Imagine, for a moment, that American teachers, backed perhaps by the NEA and the AFT, finally drew a line in the sand. Only trained mathematicians could teach mathematics; no more retooled football coaches. Only scientists could teach advanced placement physics; no more part-time guidance counselors. Only English teachers with superb credentials could mark up the essays of juniors and seniors; no more earnest art majors.

Three things would happen: Teachers' salaries would start to climb. Teachers' status would rise with them.

And children would begin to learn again.

