Parents Know What They Want for Their Children

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Bess Goodykoontz, Associate Commissioner of Education, U. S. Office of Education, Washington, D. C., analyzes the results of several surveys and studies which were made to ascertain whether parents are acquainted with and approve of the present instructional programs in the schools. Miss Goodykoontz is well known to ASCD members as immediate past president of the Association.

FINDINGS from a growing number of studies of what parents think about schools tend to show that parents know what they want schools to do for their children; they have ideas as to whether schools are serving their children satisfactorily, and they have a concept of their own educational role.

What They Want

For example, across the river from Washington, more than 400 parents of Arlington and Alexandria school children told in a survey made by the League of Women Voters[1] what they hoped the schools would do for their children. They said, among other things, that there should be a uniform building and equipment program to provide necessary working facilities. There should be playgrounds and recreational facilities to permit a more effective health and recreation program. A guidance program should be initiated in all schools and for all pupils to meet the needs of the individual child. There should be greater emphasis on drill in the basic subjects, and cultural subjects should be expanded.

This study is typical of many made in other parts of the country, sometimes by interested community groups, sometimes by official school groups, sometimes by research persons or agencies. In a city of something less than 10,000 persons located in a midwest agricultural area called Centerville,[2] replies from 270 adult citizens rated these three as the most important things for boys and girls to get out of their education at school: ability to make a living; learning to meet life's problems; and social adjustment. In their list, fundamental subjects, character education, citizenship education, and others followed.

Recent state-wide surveys of school services have sampled citizens' opinions about desirable school programs in a study made in 1946 by the state-wide Florida Citizens Committee on Education.[3] The comments of citizens were invited through newspaper inquiries all over the state. Also, letters of inquiry and check lists were sent directly to the

[1] Parents Like Alexandria Area Teachers. The Washington *Post* (date unknown)

[2] Koopman, Margaret O. *What One Midwest Community Expects of Its Teachers.* Educational Research Bulletin, February 13, 1946. pp. 34-41.

[3] Florida Citizens Committee on Education. *Education and the Future of Florida,* A Report of the Comprehensive Study of Education in Florida. Tallahassee, March, 1947.

parents of children in grades five and eight, or nine and eleven in selected areas. Some 5,000 to 6,000 usable returns were thus secured. In these replies from parents, more than ninety percent of those responding considered these things very important for schools to do: (1) Teach pupils the tools of learning; (2) Train for good citizenship; (3) Help to develop good character and sound moral principles; (4) Create good health habits; (5) Help develop a higher standard of living and more effective use of resources.

A similar study made by the State Education Commission in North Carolina concluded that "the offerings and services of too many schools are too limited. . . . . Vocational offerings, preschool services, adult services, provision for out-of-school youth, and care for handicapped children are quite inadequate."[4] The returns from inquiry forms in this study also showed that the citizens particularly wanted more emphasis on reading with understanding, effective study, knowledge of the operations of government, appreciation of art and music, acquisition of moral values, and preparation for marriage and parenthood.

In a study of the schools of Red Wing, published in 1945, 850 families were sent questionnaires which asked their opinions about various school services.[5] Without any extensive follow-up, 120 usable forms were secured. An analysis of replies to the question, "Which of the ten listed services do you consider the most important for the schools to provide?" these five headed the list: (1) Acquisition of skills; (2) Ability to meet usual problems of life; (3) Successful vocational life; (4) Physical and mental health; and (5) Social behavior. Ninth and tenth on the list of ten purposes were: preparation for college and worthy use of leisure.

Certain extensions of the present program as well as modifications in emphasis were recommended in this Red Wing study. For example, forty-five percent of the replies indicated that they believed Red Wing should establish a junior college for youth who might otherwise not be able to complete the thirteenth and fourteenth years of school. In answer to a specific question, sixty-three percent of the persons replying said that they would personally be willing to pay higher school taxes to provide the improvements they were recommending.

It is easy to see differences in the replies in these studies. The point here is that parents are ready to give their opinions of what schools should emphasize, and that usually they ask for a broad, life-centered curriculum.

Parents Know Whether Schools Are Serving Satisfactorily

In a study made by the Board of Education of the San Francisco Unified School District in 1944, more than 42,000 parents returned the inquiry forms which had been sent to them.[6] One sec-

[4] State Education Commission. *Education in North Carolina Today and Tomorrow,* A Report. September, 1948. p. 33.

[5] Bossing, Nelson L., and Brueckner, Leo J., *The Impact of the War on the Schools of Red Wing.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. May, 1945.

[6] San Francisco Unified School District. *What Parents Say About San Francisco Schools,* A Report on the 1944 Survey of Parent Opinion. June 15, 1945.

tion of the inquiry had to do with the parents' opinion as to whether certain aspects of instruction were satisfactory. Eighty percent thought their children were making satisfactory progress in reading, seventy percent in writing, seventy-five percent in spelling, seventy-nine percent in language. Only about 3,000 parents took the opportunity provided in the inquiry to tell the parts of the school program they did not like. About 1,000 had no specific criticism; 367 felt there was insufficient emphasis upon the fundamentals; 366 specifically disliked the system of teaching reading; 229 thought that there was not sufficient discipline.

In the Florida study, greatest dissatisfaction was expressed regarding the attention given to the skills and attitudes needed for success in some vocation, for improved family life, and the use of leisure time. Citizens generally would be glad to see more emphasis on sex education, music and arts, and extra-curricular activities. On one item, the memorization of details rather than understanding principles, lay citizens indicated that they felt their schools were definitely wasting time.

Also in Red Wing, parents had some reaction to the question of how well schools were carrying out the principal purposes they had accepted. More than eighty-six percent of the respondents believed achievement of proficiency in the basic skills of arithmetic, reading, writing, and speech to be satisfactory. Seventy-six percent thought schools were doing satisfactorily in the development of physical and mental health knowledge and habits. Eighty-four percent thought the schools were preparing youth adequately for college.

It is obvious from these brief summaries of what parents say about the effectiveness of the schools, that they have pretty definite ideas on the subject. Where they get this impression is another matter. Some of it comes from the information they get through report cards. Possibly more of it comes from their sensing of the general situation—children's feeling of liking or not liking school and the teacher, children's eagerness or lack of it to get to school, children's feeling of the importance of what is going on and their eager cooperation in school activities. They watch, too, for the abilities they associate with competence in mathematics, ability to write a good letter, participation in discussion of community affairs. Their evaluation may be non-technical, but it is on-the-spot, continuous, and probably influenced by their desire to have their children succeed in school. Though too seldom asked to tell the schools how they're doing, parents have their own ideas.

Parents Know Their Own Role

But parents also have a concept of what their own educational role is. For example, in a study made in Cincinnati a small proportion of the replies showed that parents were endeavoring in a variety of ways to help their children achieve higher academic standards.[7] These illustrations of replies are given: "We are working with Mary on spelling and science so she will improve"; and "I am not permitting Bill to listen to any more radio programs until he brings up his marks." About ten percent of the parents replying to the in-

[7] Cincinnati Public Schools. *Better Teaching*. Vol. 8, No. 7, March, 1946.

quiry said they would like fuller information on their child's progress at school. One parent said, "Why has Ann's mark in health habits gone down?"; another, "What is the main reason for so many failures on George's report card"?; and still another, "What trouble is Jane having in household arts? Is there anything I can do at home to help her?"

Only a few went so far as to send back to school their own type of report, a practice which many people think should be encouraged. One said, "Carl doesn't seem to have any rhythm in his soul, so I don't think his music will improve much." Another parent reported, "Alice plays well with other children at home." This kind of report from parents, showing a relationship in the parent's mind between in-school and out-of-school learning programs, is one which has great possibilities for cooperative planning. Other parents in the Cincinnati study recommended that in order to help them fulfill their educational role better, the schools should develop a better plan of homework assignments.

In San Francisco the homework assignments also seemed to carry a considerable amount of importance to parents, and although fifty-eight percent of the children were reported as receiving homework in the first grade, two-thirds of the parents reported that that was not enough. This desire for some carry-over of the in-school program to an out-of-school situation seems to be worth exploration. It might lead to a clearer definition of the educational responsibilities of parents, and how they differ from but are related to teachers' responsibilities.

What the Studies Show

The studies quoted seem to show these things: parents know, in general, what they want schools to do for their children; they have an idea as to whether the schools are effectively carrying out functions they consider desirable; and they have some concept of what their own educational responsibilities are. This is not meant to say or to imply that the things which parents know, or believe, are all true or reasonable or sound pedagogically. Nor are they necessarily untrue, unreasonable, or unsound. They lead to some conclusions, however, that have bearing on parent-school relationships.

¶ First, they show that parents are deeply interested in what the *schools'* purposes are. They have their own purposes and hopes for their children, and they wish to know what the schools' purposes are and in what way both are related. A good program in school-home cooperation would answer this question.

¶ Second, the replies show that parents tend to carry over into adult life some of the attitudes toward teachers and schools which they had as students. Many of them believe that the teacher knows the answers, that the schools have their own ways and are not to be changed by the wishes of outsiders: "*They* will tell us what we should know about the schools"; "The schools have a right to do as they think best." When these attitudes persist, possibly parents do not seek explanations of schools' programs as often as they should. This makes parent-school cooperation all the more important. Things are not all right just because everything is quiet.

¶ Third, extreme changes in school

objectives or procedures, if not explained, may find no understanding on the part of parents and may produce uneasiness because they seem to be at great variance with what parents have understood and expected. For example: character education at one time had a respectable place in the school curriculum—there was time allotted for it, a course of study developed for it, and teachers prepared to handle it as a curriculum field. It was not uncommon in those days to find such character traits as honesty, fairness, and bravery emphasized on a schedule throughout the curriculum—honesty in February, thankfulness in November, generosity in December.

Came the day when those responsible for the curriculum decided that that was not the way to develop desirable behavior. Instead, they believed that all the activities of the school day should be conducive to the development of good character traits. Marking one's own papers, reporting faithfully on what happened on the school grounds, telling about one's own experiences, assisting other children, carrying on in the teacher's absence—all such situations were the materials out of which the study of desirable behavior could be developed and practices could be modified. Following this change of theory, character education as a subject dropped out of sight in courses of study and report cards. Uneasiness arose in the minds of many people: "Aren't the schools teaching character education any more?" Without an explanation of the change in philosophy and the consequent change in procedures consistent with it, no wonder that uneasiness should develop.

Similar uneasiness has developed over the situation in regard to discipline. Time was, and in the memory of most present-day parents, when the discipline at school was designed to develop respect for authority, willingness to conform, and acceptance of imposed standards. But with the change in philosophy as to the sources of desirable behavior, changes have taken place in the school's methods of discipline. The idea that desirable behavior comes from sharing in the establishment of standards, right feeling toward those standards, and desire to respond to them is a new one to many parents. The idea that discipline comes from within instead of from without is not an easy one for some adults to accept. Such changes in theory and practice—if unexplained—are the stuff out of which misunderstandings arise. They set up confusion and frustration for both children and their parents.

¶ Finally, parents have a feeling that they personally should help children do well in school work. What their responsibility is, is interpreted differently. Some people think of it as merely getting children to school on time, clothed, fed, and with a handkerchief ready for use. Others believe that it includes membership in the parent-teacher association, keeping up the room percentage, and so on. Others believe it means that parents will see that homework is done, helping if necessary, but not too obtrusively. Others believe that it includes taking an exacting interest in what the report cards say.

Responsibilities of Home and School

It all comes down really to deciding what the parents' role is and what the

schools' role is. What are desirable home-school realtionships? There are still some schools that appear to act on a sort of assembly line theory; that is, if homes will deliver the raw product to them, they will fashion some sort of finished article—with as much finish, that is, as the material will take, and then will send it on for distribution.

Another school of thought might be designated as the "take your parents with you" school. Those who accept this theory think that parents should have the school program explained to them carefully, that letters or news notes should go out periodically to parents. They think that the public press should carry articles about different aspects of the school program. Any extreme change in procedures should be explained; that is, a shift from cursive to manuscript writing, or a change in the mathematics requirements, or the organization of interest clubs at school.

To help parents understand such things and to secure their cooperation in carrying them out, schools use a variety of devices—room meetings of parents, parent's nights at school, a public relations department, and a school newspaper. It is hoped that such understanding and support will help to reduce the amount of criticism from parents or the public generally, to prevent the development of opposition groups, and to create, in general, a favorable community feeling within which modern programs can develop and to insure adequate financial support.

There is, of course, another and chronologically later concept of parent-school relationships. Simply stated, it is that homes and schools together with other community agencies make a team to plan cooperatively and to carry out the plan, each in the way appropriate to his resources and abilities. In schools which operate on this theory, parents share with teachers and administrators in curriculum discussions; in planning the school calendar; in making the school budget; in providing learning opportunities greater than those the school can provide by itself—in music, dramatics, clubs, crafts, hobbies, excursions, and celebrations; in revising administrative policies and procedures bearing on the health and welfare of children. This kind of team relationship invalidates many of the better-known public relations techniques of selling an idea and convincing the crowd. It's probably a much harder theory to live by, but it has the sound advantage of appropriateness to the job we face as a profession.