

Overview

Knowing When to Speak Out— And When to Listen

Ronald S. Brandt
Executive Editor

Anne Meek
Managing Editor

Al Way
Art Director

Jo Ann Irick Jones
Associate Editor

Scott Willis
Assistant Editor

Teola T. Jones
Advertising Coordinator

Marjorie Weathers
Administrative Assistant

May 1988

Volume 45

Number 8

Educational Leadership is intended primarily for leaders in elementary, middle, and secondary education but is also for anyone interested in curriculum, instruction, supervision, and leadership in schools. ASCD publications present a variety of viewpoints. The views expressed or implied in this publication are not necessarily official positions of the Association. Copyright © 1988 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.

ISSN 0013-1784
May 88/Stock No. 611-88016

In March I attended an invitational seminar in Chicago at which the topic of liveliest discussion was the school's role in teaching values. The 25 participants agreed that today's youth face enormous temptations and distractions and that schools—like it or not—must act. When some parents neglect the moral education of their children and when community influences are negative, schools not only have to make up for it; they need to form partnerships and work for change.

What we did not agree on was whether educators have a right to teach *particular* values. We were very much aware of cultural diversity; to some Americans that may be an abstraction, but teachers and principals confront it daily. And we were less sure of ourselves than earlier generations might have been; a teacher questioned whether the values that served us in the past will continue to be appropriate for the future. One participant suggested that, because of this uncertainty, schools can only "teach *about* values" and not "teach values."

An ASCD panel appointed to examine the issue (p. 4) takes the opposite view. Unequivocally they urge schools, with wide community participation, to define a set of values and actively seek to inculcate them. They do not propose specific methods—that is not their role—but several authors in this issue do. Richard Paul (p. 10) explains the essential role of critical thinking in helping students develop reasoned moral positions. Two teachers, Carolyn Sweers (p. 20) and Steven Landfried (p. 32), tell how they lead classroom discussions. Merrill Harmin (p. 24), a panel member, offers some useful guidelines. He concedes that

values clarification has sometimes been misunderstood and misused, but insists that it remains a valid approach.

Harmin's advice that teachers should challenge students in some situations but not in all reminds me of my best teacher, my father. Although he had never read a book on teaching values (he dropped out of school in 6th grade), he somehow knew when to be noncommittal. We children had no doubts about what he believed. He could have shoveled a few extra bushels of corn from the landlord's bin to his own, but that was out of the question; his honor was his most precious possession. He was never ambiguous about that.

Even so, he seldom criticized when, at the supper table or while milking the cows, we told him about our exploits. But a few days later—maybe Saturday morning when we were cleaning out the barn or fixing fence—he might refer, very indirectly, to something we had said and start a conversation about the right thing to do.

Advocates of values clarification have been attacked because they advise teachers sometimes to remain nonjudgmental in order to encourage young people to express their real views. Parents and teachers must never be neutral, these critics say; it sends the wrong message. But when my father chose not to take a stand, he was not being wishy-washy; he was being a sensitive moral educator. Like Mark Twain, when I look back on what my father "learned" as I grew up, I am impressed by his uncommon common sense. □

Ron Brandt

Copyright © 1988 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.