

Portrait of Gordon Cawelti

Gordon Cawelti, ASCD's Executive Director for 19 years, has guided the Association through a period of phenomenal growth and productivity. As he steps down this year, he looks forward to future contributions in the curriculum field and expresses the hope that ASCD will always be "the conscience of education."

MARK F. GOLDBERG

In July 1992, Gordon Cawelti will step down as Executive Director of the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. In 1973, when Cawelti accepted the position, ASCD rented a small suite of offices in the NEA Building in Washington, D.C., with a staff of 21 and a membership of 13,000. Today, approximately 152,000 members are served by a headquarters staff of 130, who occupy ASCD's own four-story building in Alexandria, Virginia.

Without question, ASCD came to maturity during Cawelti's 19-year tenure. During those years, he has worked diligently, traveling over two million miles in

the cause of the Association's mandate, which he describes as "to improve curriculum and teaching and provide leadership." In the early years, Cawelti strove to make the organization visible to the educational community — rarely turning down invitations to speak around the country, particularly at ASCD affiliates.

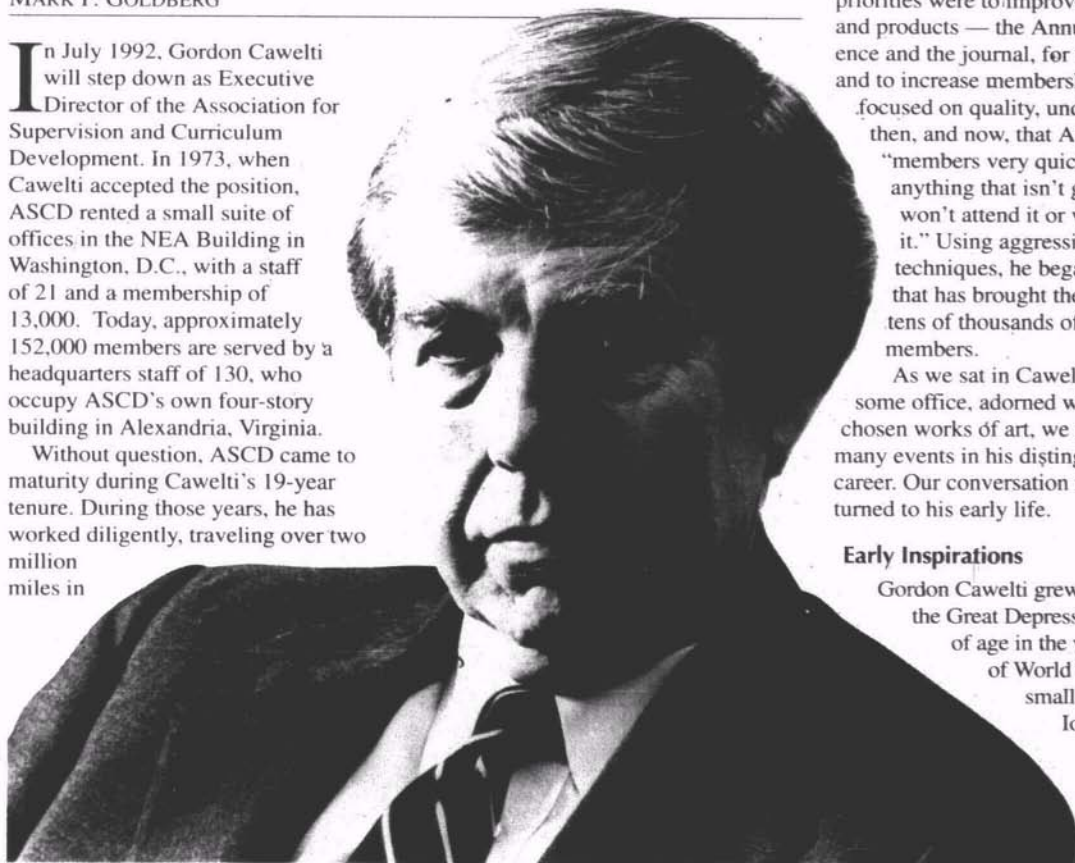
As Executive Director, his first priorities were to improve the services and products — the Annual Conference and the journal, for example — and to increase membership. He focused on quality, understanding then, and now, that ASCD

"members very quickly discern anything that isn't good and won't attend it or view it or buy it." Using aggressive marketing techniques, he began an effort that has brought the organization tens of thousands of new members.

As we sat in Cawelti's handsome office, adorned with carefully chosen works of art, we talked of many events in his distinguished career. Our conversation naturally turned to his early life.

Early Inspirations

Gordon Cawelti grew up during the Great Depression, coming of age in the waning days of World War II in a small town in Iowa. At that time, Toledo was a "typical mid-western



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community, a place of real regularity and continuity." Cawelti's father was a railroad agent and his mother a teacher. While both parents influenced him, it was his mother's profession that attracted him. In fact, young Gordon had a tacit understanding with his mother that he would be a teacher, never seriously considering any other profession.

As a teenager, he was impressed by Harry Sherer, his high school science teacher and basketball coach. Cawelti recalled that he "brought an outside perspective" to the classroom, one that placed issues against a large background. Another early role model for the teenager was his uncle, Don Cawelti, who taught in the Winnetka schools outside of Chicago. Don showed his nephew that "education could be interesting." Administrators and teachers like Don "were inventing things that were good for children such as individualized education or setting up small corporations for kids." Winnetka was a place of "wealth and prominence and reputation," recalled Cawelti, a place of "progressive ideas; they even pioneered in designing facilities that were imaginatively integrated by color, layout, form, and function."

Cawelti's first teaching position was at Lytton High School in Iowa, where he taught secondary school science and coached basketball and football. At 26, this talented teacher became principal of the high school. In his new position, Cawelti worked with Dick Lashier, a superintendent whose characteristics he continues to admire: "He was thorough, conscientious, and smart. He cultivated a family sense among the faculty."

Focus on Change and Innovation

From Lytton, Cawelti went to Spirit Lake, Iowa, as the principal of a larger secondary school. During this time,

he earned his doctorate from the University of Iowa, and in 1962 he became Executive Secretary of the Secondary Commission for the North Central Association of Colleges and Secondary Schools. His work in schools from the north-central region of the United States to Department of Defense Schools in Europe and the Far East awakened his "interest in innovation and change . . . as well as writing and speaking on the topics" — themes and activities that have absorbed his attention for 30 years.

It was an exciting time analogous to today's restructuring movement. Flexible scheduling, team teaching, and several new technologies such as educational television were in vogue. But Cawelti was not always pleased with what he saw: "Frequently things were not thought out, or the purpose wasn't clear, or the utility not apparent."

In April 1967, with a grant from the Kettering Foundation, Cawelti published a report on innovation, a study that examined the adoption and abandonment of new techniques in 6,000 schools. In the report, he expressed considerable disappointment, for instance, at "the rate at which television had been tried and dropped." Cawelti learned about the critical interplay among curriculum, technology, and organization, but just as important, he became fascinated by change and innovation. His interest in how to accomplish and foster these twin concerns has been an enduring theme of his career as a superintendent and at ASCD.

In 1969, when, at 37, Cawelti was selected as superintendent of the Tulsa, Oklahoma, schools, the city had many problems. Although he was hired because of his "interest and work in reform, innovation, and instruction," those were not the issues of most immediacy in this city of 80,000 students and 100 schools. New schools needed to be built, and — of paramount concern — the courts were demanding a clear plan for desegregation, integration." Working countless hours with the school board, politicians, school staff, and community leaders, Cawelti helped devise a plan to "eliminate all racially identifiable schools. We used almost every tool that anybody knew about — magnet schools, paired elementary schools, and elongated districts."

In the end, Cawelti presented a plan that "resulted in improved opportunities for all kids." He also learned some enduring lessons, for example, about the importance of having "a minimum of disruption, but lots of involvement and argumentation." You have to take leadership in issues that are not popular, he added. Although Cawelti knew to a certainty that "we did better than lots of communities on working through it," he added that not all the constituency would agree with that appraisal. Perhaps the most powerful lesson was that "when people have a very clear mission and are persuaded of its merit, they'll work night and day to get it done."

Leadership, an Absorbing Concern

The 19 years at ASCD are, of course, the capstone of Gordon Cawelti's career. While the Association's techniques have been various, its mandate, according to Cawelti, is clear and unwavering. The "centrality of matters of curriculum and instruction as our mission" has been the focus.

Education will become a true profession, Cawelti commented, when it is firmly planted on an ever-developing knowledge base.

He added emphatically, "When you pick up our journal, you know it's not going to be about impact aid or about buses or other such things."

Reason, intellect, thoroughness, steadfastness — the continuing hallmarks of Cawelti's career — led him quite naturally both to practice and ponder his most absorbing concern: leadership. Gordon Cawelti admires authors Rosabeth Kanter and Tom Peters, who have written cogently on "leadership behavior." To him, the relevant question is, "Why can't organizations do better what they want to do?" The Iacoccas and Pattons interest him less than whole organizations because of Cawelti's conviction that it is "less fruitful to study the leader himself or herself than to study the interplay between the leader and the organization."

Particularly in school work, where leadership skills are practiced in contexts that involve many independent individuals, it is not charisma alone that is needed but, rather, people who have a deep, precise understanding of an individual organization and its people and how they can best work in that context. Like many of us, he has seen "principals and superintendents who were big successes in one place and abject failures in another." There must be a match between the leader and the culture of the organization.

The earliest years with ASCD were not characterized by team leadership, Cawelti said. Some of his first initiatives were directive. "Sometimes in the course of an organization's life cycle, that is important." However, as the organization grew larger and more complex, his leadership style "evolved into a pattern of finding able people who are responsible for various Association activities" and giving them latitude. "Leadership," he believes, "is best characterized by providing experiences

that galvanize other people into action."

That concept is especially important in an organization that relies heavily on volunteerism among its membership. Cawelti has been consistently pleased with the "seriousness of people who volunteer their time in governance or with committees in ASCD." People elected to office give unstintingly of their time, frequently forfeiting weekends, even whole weeks, to serve on nonpaid committees that put in 10-hour days.

From Then to Now

The list of ASCD's accomplishments since 1973 is long and impressive. Last year, *Educational Leadership* received the Golden Lamp Award, the highest award presented by the Educational Press Association of America. ASCD's workshop program, first called National Curriculum Study Institutes and now Professional Development Institutes, reaches 5,000 people in 100 institutes around the world. As Cawelti explained, "We plan workshops that model good staff development practice" — and it shows in the very high ratings they receive. The Annual Conference, which attracts 8,000 to 9,000 people, is assertively devoted to "training, issue awareness, or new programs." ASCD's video development, which began modestly in Norfolk, Virginia, with a borrowed camera and Cawelti interviewing the speakers of the day, is 15 years later a highly professional and technologically advanced media department, selling

thousands of staff development tapes annually.

Indefatigable travel, including many trips abroad, has been a leitmotif of Gordon Cawelti's incumbency, as has been an international perspective. Cawelti made a conscious effort to internationalize ASCD "by seeking out people and information from other countries and by welcoming the presence of people on committees and in our governance structure who had an international point of view." International affiliates now include Germany, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Canada, the Caribbean, and Singapore, with plans for an affiliate in Japan now under way. There is "good research going on in other countries," Cawelti asserted, citing, for example, the experience Europe has had with the choice issue.

Out of this perspective grew a serious companion effort in global education. In a few months, a model curriculum will be released that gets at the question, "What particular skills and knowledge can students demonstrate to show a global perspective by the time they leave the 6th grade?" The constant aim of the international effort is to value "how issues are viewed around the world."

"But much work remains to be done," added Cawelti, speaking about the organization he nurtured for so many years. This bright, forthright midwesterner, who still moves like an athlete, clearly has an eye on the future. Education will become a true profession, he commented, when it is firmly planted on an ever-developing knowledge base. There is much evidence of what works in education and how to train teachers to practice it. Subject area research is important, and "that's the direction in which national certification of teachers will go."

Cawelti would like to see ASCD play

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an important role in textbook development techniques and even provide some sort of evaluative service on textbooks. The Curriculum/Technology Resource Center, in its first year, has received a remarkable response to its *Curriculum Handbook* released last December. This multimedia reference service offers educators access to information on model programs, curriculum topics, and research summaries. The Center will provide annual updates on the status and major developments in the various subjects and fields addressed in the *Handbook*.

The Conscience of Education

Gordon Cawelti has written more than 100 articles on curriculum, school reform, and leadership. He has spoken in all 50 states and in more than a dozen foreign countries. While he remains dedicated to issues in the field, Cawelti is unclouded about stepping down as Executive Director: "I welcome the opportunity to get out from under the responsibilities the job carries and hope to make a contribution in the curriculum arena." He is satisfied that ASCD is spangled with talent, that there will be an "orderly transition, and that the Executive Team will give good advice to whoever comes in. Making decisions, contrary to when I came in, is now the work of that team."

As our conversation drew to a close, I asked Cawelti what he hoped would become of ASCD in philosophical terms. He reflected a moment, then said, "I hope it will be an organization that is not stampeded by trendy things but instead will be thoughtful and analytical. I hope ASCD will always be the conscience of education."

Mark F. Goldberg is an Administrator in the Shoreham-Wading River Central School District, Route 25A, Shoreham, NY 11786.

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