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From The Editor's Viewpoint

the new seriousness: to what purpose?

To the perceptive educator, and even to those not so perceptive, it is clear that the nation has begun a serious in-depth reassessment of American public education. Of course, dissatisfaction with our schools has existed for years, but it has been most pointedly expressed by special interest groups—an elite of the concerned. The breadth of the current seriousness is what is new. As long as education was the preserve of an elite it was not the concern of the many. That has changed, and now everyone, regardless of calling, appears interested in educational reform, or at least the rhetoric of reform.

The mounting acrid criticism of public education and the basic assumptions underlying its practice have been both beneficial and injurious. They have been beneficial in that the problems confronting education have been redefined, the assumptions demythologized, and the need for assessment and planning confirmed; injurious in that the clamor for reform, accountability, frugality, and efficiency often disguised a rather crude attempt to make public education into something it was not intended to be, that is, a super-efficient vehicle for vast and far-reaching social change. Educators and critics who claim that public education must be all things to all people do everyone a great disservice.

In purely quantitative terms, American public educators are attempting at the present time a vastly more ambitious and complex undertaking than ever before. The schools increasingly are being called on to assume social responsibilities that cannot, as so many would have us believe, be dealt with by other agencies in our society. An undertaking so boundless is certain to be both inefficient and lacking in human effectiveness. Pressures for consolidation of educational effort to achieve efficiency and facilitate accountability too often operate to submerge human values.

Traditionally, Americans have been apathetically or actively willing to accept a certain degree of operational inefficiency rather than completely crush out diversity—considered a major strength in American education—or end local control—viewed as a shield against ruthless centralized domination. Now, however, we see inefficiency—and human ineffectiveness—increased by polarization of educators into self-centered power groups, however justified by an exploitative society. We see continuing attempts to repress and direct students rather than to involve them in joint educational responsibilities. A case could be made that our schools are often too efficient in the control of students and not efficient enough in the use of funds and personnel. When we speak of efficiency in education we should distinguish between the two.

The current excessive reliance of many educators on methods concerned with control, power, and efficiency, methods borrowed from the world of big business for the sake of more control, are, we suggest, the very determinants of the crisis in our classrooms. Not until growing numbers of us act to develop cooperative educational directions based on such positive values as acceptance of others without fear, encouragement to develop individual talents, and humanistic utilization of those talents for complementary accomplishment will we begin to resolve that crisis.

C. E. L.