

MASSACHUSETTS ASSOCIATION
OF
SCHOOL COMMITTEES
AND
SCHOOL SUPERINTENDENTS

OCTOBER 17, 1980
HYANNIS, MASS.

My topic this morning deals with Teacher Competency. I would like to approach this issue in terms of its very special importance at this time; not just this year but in the decade that is before us. We, in education, live in a context that is very different from that of the 50's or the 60's or the 70's. Unless we recognize the changes in the world around us and the problems that we are about to face, we may very well be living in a period which historians will record as "the last decade of public education in America."

Decline in Power

The first major change is a very substantial decline in the power of public education as an institution within our society. One of the major reasons is the decline in enrollment. We have fewer "customers," and therefore there will be fewer citizens out there pressing for support for public education. It shouldn't be that way; every citizen should be concerned with providing a good education for every child. But human nature is such that, if I have children in school, I have much more concern with quality of education than if I don't have children in school.

Not only do we have a very substantial decline in enrollment but the percentage of voting adults in the population who are directly concerned with education has taken a very rapid nose-dive. Only a few years ago, the majority of voting adults in this country had a member of their immediate family attending elementary or secondary school. A few years ago, that percentage

fell to 40; last year it was 24; two years from now it is going to be 19 percent.

Added to that is the fact that about 40 percent of the people under 45 tend to vote. About 65 percent of those over 65 tend to vote. This means that, in addition to the numbers changing in an absolute sense, the participation in the political system varies according to age group. Therefore, we are likely to see a period of time in which questions of social security, facilities for retirees and all of the issues that are of concern to those who are over 60 and 65 will assume greater and greater importance. There is likely to be a shift in the emphasis and a shift in the allocation of funds to the area which had greater "political sex appeal" and that is, at this time, the aged, the aging and the retired.

Standstill in Standard of Living

There is a second set of problems with which we must deal. For the first time in the history of this country, we are facing a long period during which our citizens will not do better and better each year. The figures that you read in the newspaper about people feeling that they are moving backwards or that they are standing still is not a temporary situation due to some fluke in economics. There are now certain elements in the structure of the economy of the United States as it exists today and will exist over the next decade which means that there will be either a standstill standard of living or perhaps even a declining one. If there is some forward movement, it is going

to be very, very tiny in comparison with the progress which Americans saw in previous decades.

The reasons for that are pretty clear. The first big one is the energy crisis and what it is that we, as a nation, are sending to OPEC. The amount of money that we will send to OPEC this year is about \$90 billion. If you took all of the corporations listed on the Stock Exchange and added up their combined value, you would get \$900 billion. We are shipping out \$90 billion a year. If the flow continues, in ten years, every corporation listed on the stock exchange will be owned by some other country. Not a single one would be American-owned. That is a tremendous flow of money out of this country which would otherwise be used to enhance our own productivity and our own private purchasing power.

Decline in Productivity

There is a second element to our declining economic fortunes. We have, for many years, used our roads, our bridges, our companies, corporations, factories and machines to produce goods that would make us feel better. We bought more radios and television sets and clothing and vacations. We bought as much as we could. What has happened as a result is seen in the headlines almost on a weekly basis--recently every one of our major news magazines had a front cover story on "declining American productivity." Essentially what has happened is that we have not done research and development, we have not re-tooled our factories, we have not rebuilt our roads, we have practically no railroad system left, half the bridges have to be rebuilt.

We are living in a society which is very much like living in a house where for years we have decided to spend every last nickel and not to invest in painting or taking care of the windows or taking care of the heating system or doing anything else. It is no surprise at all to find that the Japanese are outproducing us, the Germans are outproducing us; countries that are considered third world and rather backward in many ways are more industrialized than we are today. We have a concept of "re-industrialization" that is emerging. This essentially means instead of buying all kinds of things for ourselves and using them up, we've got to buy less and a good amount of the money that we used to spend on ourselves (whether for public goods or private goods) will now have to be spent to re-tool, to rebuild, to do the job that we should have done all along.

Militarization

The third major element in this change in economic fortunes is that it is quite obvious that the United States will, in the next decade, have to devote a much greater percentage of its gross national product to remilitarization. There is absolutely no doubt that the other major power in the world has been vastly outspending the United States. Furthermore, since they have a conscript army and we have a voluntary army, a major proportion of what we do spend goes to salaries. Given what is happening on the international scene, there is no doubt that the overwhelming majority of Americans now favor an increase in military expenditures.

Living on a Little Less

Why did I mention these three factors? I mention them because you cannot just print money; if you do it gets worth less and less. There is only a certain amount of it in terms of purchasing power and if we are going to spend our money by sending it to OPEC for oil, and if we are going to spend it for reindustrializing and rebuilding our plants, if we are going to spend it by increasing our military capability, then it means that Americans are going to be living on a little less each year than they lived on the year before. People will have to start cutting back, and cutting back a little further and a little further. Maybe there was some fat in their budgets at the beginning, maybe there were a few things that they didn't really need which they could cut out the first year and the second. But it doesn't take too long before you get to the point where you have to start making real choices. What is it that I'm going to do without this year that I was able to enjoy last year? One of the things that people are looking at are the taxes they pay for public services.

Decline in Confidence

The third factor overall (the first is our decline in political power, the second is the fact that we have immense competing demands for financial resources) is that there is a decline in the American people's support and confidence in the public schools. Until about 1960, the average person would say the public schools are one of the greatest inventions of man.

In a very short period of time we have built the richest, most powerful nation on earth. We have managed to preserve democracy longer than any other nation in history. This person would probably say that American schools and American public education are a major reason for this, a major part of the building of this country, its productivity and strength.

All of a sudden this has changed. It has changed and the feelings of the American people are more negative because of our own success in the field of education. Up until World War II, the overwhelming majority of American citizens were relatively uneducated. Teachers of 1939-42 were among the 5 percent of the most educated people in the country. That meant that 95 percent were "looking up" at the teachers because there was this tremendous "educational gap", this great distance between teachers and ordinary citizens.

Along came World War II, the GI Bill of Rights and everyone started going to college. Between 1948 and 1960, a revolution took place. We went from a period of time where 95 percent of the people in the United States felt that they were educationally below teachers to the point where they felt either equal or superior to the teachers who were teaching their children.

That's quite a package of problems. In terms of strength, we have fewer "bullets" at the ballot box. We've got this tremendous squeeze on money which means doing away with something-- education and other public services are on that list. And there is this declining confidence because we used to be held on a

pedestal and now we are looked down on.

There is not much we can do about the second batch of problems, at least not as educators. Basically the things that we have got to work on are the first and third items--the decline in power and the decline in public confidence in education. These are the two issues we can work on directly.

Organization

When the numbers are declining, the only way to hold on to your power is to see to it that you maximize your extent of organization. Up to now we were able to afford a good deal of internal conflict because 55 percent of the people had their kids in school. But now that we are almost down to 19 percent, we had better get ourselves organized in a way which we were not organized before. If we want to survive as an institution, we have to find ways of reducing the conflict between school boards, administrators, teachers, and of enlisting parents much more. It didn't make very much difference 10 or 15 years ago if 95 percent of the parents were active on behalf of education. But it's very important now. Unless we have three or four or five times as many parents organized on behalf of education as we ever had before, our powers are going to go way down. We actually might be able to maintain our power if we become better organized and reduce internal conflict.

But that's not the topic of my talk today. The topic of my talk is competency and how we can improve the services we are delivering and how we can help restore public confidence in education.

We will never again be in a position where we are respected because other people have not had the educational opportunities we have had. This is a turning point in American history. We now have to win the confidence, not on the basis of that differential status, but on the basis of something that we've got and that people believe we have.

Testing

The first thing that I want to talk about is the whole controversy that exists on testing. I am very sorry to say that your national organization together with the National Education Association, Ralph Nader and some other groups are engaged in a national war against standardized and other forms of testing. I think that for groups involved in education to carry out a war against testing is an absolute unmitigated disaster. We've got a public out there that thinks we're not doing a very good job. By arguing that we should get rid of tests, the public is going to believe that "They're doing a lousy job and they just want to get rid of the evidence. They don't want anybody to know."

Of course, there are things wrong with tests. Yes, there are children who do not respond well to tests. Yes, there are certain ambiguous questions. Yes, there are certain questions which someone from an urban area might not answer as well as someone from a rural area. But to say that because standardized tests aren't perfect, let's get rid of them, is ridiculous.

Truth in Testing

Tests do measure something, even if they are not perfect measurements. This whole movement against testing is something which further undermines the attitude of the public toward educators and toward public education. The same thing is true of the proposed "truth in testing" law. We have one in New York and there are a number of legislatures around the country that are toying with the idea. The idea is that any student who takes these tests has a right to get all the questions and answers when the test is over. What is wrong with that? What's wrong is that if you give out all the questions and the answers, the testing companies have to make up a brand new test every time. Right now we can tell that students taking the tests in 1980 are not doing as well as students who took them in 1970. How? Basically because they are taking the same test. If we do a good job 10 years from now, we can turn to the public and say that test scores are going up. We have a constant system of measurement and are able to know if we're doing better or worse. We will lose that if there's a different test each time. And if you think the present tests have ambiguities and problems, these are tests that have been carefully analyzed over many, many years. Ambiguous questions have been removed, questions that are culturally biased have been taken out. These tests have been pretty well perfected. If a new test has to be made up each time a student has to take it, will the test be better or worse? Will they have more or fewer ambiguities?

The tests are racially and culturally biased. They are also biased against poor people because generally people from wealthier families do better and people from economically poor families do worse. Does that show that the test really discriminates? We have always known that children who grow up in poverty do worse. There is an educational dimension to that. Tests only discriminate against people who don't know math or who don't know how to read or who don't know how to write; they do not discriminate on the basis of race. Moreover, these tests serve a very useful purpose. The fact that we can show that people who grow up in certain environments are also educationally handicapped is a very strong argument for providing all kinds of enriched educational and social services to try to overcome the effects of those environments.

See what you can do to get your national organization off this kick. Talk to teachers, administrators, parents. You cannot have standards in any field without some system of measurement. And you can't go to the public and say, "We are doing well" and they say "How do you know?" And you say, "Well, there's no way of telling, there's no way of measuring."

Teacher Testing

I also believe that upon entry teachers should be tested into the profession. Doctors are tested, lawyers take a bar exam, to become a driver you have to take an examination, in some states you take an examination to sell insurance, to be a hairdresser, to do just about anything. The only thing you don't

have to be tested for is to be a teacher.

You cannot tell if a person is going to be a good teacher by giving him a test. But you can tell if he is illiterate. All the other qualities, performance characteristics and skills that are needed to be a good teacher--warmth, love, understanding, and everything else--are insufficient to overcome illiteracy or lack of knowledge in subject matter. Therefore, there is no doubt in my mind that such tests ought to be given.

We are given the argument by a rival organization that all these teachers have gone to college. Lawyers have gone to law school but they still have to take a bar exam. Other professionals have gone to their schools as well. If we believe that it's important enough to say that some people have the right to practice as teachers and other people do not and that society has a right to protect itself against practice from someone who is unqualified, then it seems to me that society ought to take that simple step of finding out "do you know your stuff?"

I would go a step beyond teacher testing and say that, of those teachers who are tested, we ought to select those who do the best. It's a good time to tighten up in terms of standards. Once upon a time, you didn't have any choice, you had to accept any warm body. There was a teacher shortage and you grabbed anybody who came along. Now there are a lot of unemployed people. Tough times, economically. Might be a good time for a school system; a good time to bring people of great substance and great quality into the system.

Internship

Generally, we bring teachers into a system and they sink or swim on their own. They develop their own styles, their own ways of surviving and we don't do very much. We ought to be looking at what fields like medicine, law, and others do to provide the equivalent of an internship program during the first two or three years on the job; not merely a probationary period. If management was tougher during the probationary period, we wouldn't be dealing with the question of competency fifteen years later. About 80 percent of the problems that turn up later could have been seen during the probationary period; the other 20 percent are people who were good earlier but they burned out or cracked up or something else happened to them and they changed.

You don't say to the beginning teacher, "We're watching you and if you do something wrong, you won't pass your probationary period. Out you go." You've got to give help and support and that's what an internship program is about. At one time it didn't make much sense to have an internship program because the professional life expectancy of teachers was three years-- they came and they left. But now teachers are coming in and are staying and we don't have the turnover that we used to have. It is now worthwhile to invest in an internship program because you are likely to be living with that teacher for a very long time.

Teacher Centers

One of the problems of trying to improve the skills of

teachers is that it is supposed to be done by principals, assistant principals and department chairmen. That system doesn't work too well because principals, assistant principals and department chairmen are the authority. You can't blame the teacher for not walking up to a principal and saying, "I never really did learn how to add when I was in elementary school and so I'm having trouble teaching that to kids. Could you sit down and show me how to do that." Any teacher who did that would not be too smart because the principal obviously could use that as a confession in proceedings later on.

So, the very people who are supposed to be helping, cannot. We have to build a different relationship, a colleague relationship, in which a teacher can go to a more experienced teacher. That is what teacher centers are all about. Again, I have my arguments with rival organizations because many of them think that teacher centers are going to replace both principals and colleges. Teachers no longer need management in schools and they no longer need a college education. You can learn everything from your fellow colleagues. That's something like the blind leading the blind. Unless you have some system that tells you which teachers are performing better, so that you can refer the inexperienced teacher to somebody who's really got something on the ball, the teacher center isn't worth anything. There's no point in sending an inexperienced teacher to an inexperienced teacher who is no good.

Management's Role

Part of the question of teacher competency is what does management do to improve teachers and their effectiveness. Educational management is back in the dark ages. We are doing a bunch of things for which there is not only no evidence that they are good but there is very substantial evidence that they don't amount to anything.

Most school systems require some very routine submission of plan books. And some monitor comes along and gets a whole pile of these and takes them down to some supervisor's office. Let's stop kidding ourselves. How many supervisors are there in this country who can spend any time on plan books with 100 teachers and a lot of problems. This happens to be one of the key relationships between a supervisor and a teacher. And yet it's all nonsense and ritual and it doesn't mean very much.

I frequently go to meetings of school superintendents and principals and I ask, "How many of you were originally classroom teachers?" Everybody's hand goes up. "How many of you, when you were a classroom teacher, were formally observed by your principal?" Everybody's hand goes up. "How many of you found that this ever improved your instruction?" Sometimes one person would raise his or her hand but usually no hand went up. "How many of you are now doing the same thing to your teachers?" Everybody's hand goes up.

I am not saying that there shouldn't be management. I don't think you could have schools without management. I believe in

management. I believe in fair, tough management; but I believe in intelligent management. If you are just doing something that you, out of your own experience felt was no good, why do you continue doing it?

The Schools Are Failing

I want to conclude with a few of the dangers that I see if we don't solve these problems. I'll just take the one which is before the Congress of the United States right now - it's called the Youth Employment Act. There's a billion dollars in there for public schools and I'll tell you how that billion dollars got there.

I was invited to a meeting last summer on youth employment. Here I am with an assistant secretary of labor, someone who is running a youth program in Baltimore, a president of a major corporation...and every one of them is saying, "We've got to have a couple of billion dollars. Kids are dropping out of school, they are not learning, and the only place where kids are going to learn is in these alternative institutions. We've got to put billions of dollars into them because the schools are no good, the schools are failing, and what we need are schools run by CBO's -- community-based organizations.

And so I turned and looked at this woman from Baltimore who they said is running the best program like this in the country. I asked, "How much do you spend on each child with these federal funds?" She said, "\$10,000 per child." "How many students do you have per adult?" "Six." "Do you have any truancy

problems?" "No. We pay the students \$50 a week to attend."
"Do you ever have any discipline problems?" "Sure." "What do you do about them?" "We kick 'em right out." I said, "And you're sure your program works?" She said, "Yes." I said, "How do you know? Do you give any tests?" "No." "Do you keep any attendance records?" "No."

That's it. And they have been getting billions of dollars for programs where they have a right to kick anybody out, where the expenditure is between \$5,000 and \$10,000 per child and where there are absolutely no standards of accountability or measurement. And all across the country, in town after town, there are tremendous scandals as to what happens to the money after somebody looks into it. Yet, they have the nerve to go from one national conference to the next and say that the public schools are failing.

I'll tell you why we are failing. Because we keep attendance, because we give tests, because we have to issue records and information to the public--because we are accountable. It is absolutely disastrous that we are now losing a major national battle. The United States government is establishing a set of publicly-funded private schools in this country that are not accountable to anybody. And the more of those schools they set up, the more people will be saying how rotten the public schools are and how wonderful their schools are. You are going to have a built-in massive public relations mechanism against public education.

Schools Can't Be Trusted

I came back from that conference and met with the NSBA, the NEA and AASA and we all went to the President and said, "If that happens, you are going to have a fight on your hands." And so they are giving us \$1 billion for schools and \$1 billion for community-based organizations.

However, there's just one little thing. The legislature says that schools really can't be trusted to use that money in the same way that a community-based organization can. Therefore, the House version of the legislation states (we're fighting it and there's a chance we may get it changed), that a school cannot get its share of the money unless a community committee approves of the program.

Does that tell you something about public confidence in education? Does it tell you something about what the politicians are thinking right now? Does it tell us something about how we ought to be dealing with the Congress? We ought to be going down there demanding that kids who are in community-based programs be tested. We have to test our kids. We know whether reading scores are going up or down. I don't think we've got anything to fear if we are going to compete with other institutions that have to meet similar standards. But we do have to worry if we have to compete with other institutions where the only standard we have to meet is their own advertisement about themselves and nothing else.

A New World

We are in exactly the same fight on vouchers and tuition tax credits. We may end up with those things. In a short period of time we may very well be in a new world in which we're out there competing for students to come to our schools rather than private schools because parents have a voucher and they've got a choice to go to either one. How many of us are spending our time thinking about what would happen if some private corporation settled in and started advertising on local radio and television: "Send your child here and we give each child a free trip to Disneyworld along with his or her education."

Are we getting ready for this new world? There's only one way that we can and that is through the maintenance of standards and competence.