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An Editorial Statement

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An Editorial Statement

by David R. Byrne and Alfred P. Wilson

Will Rogers, the famous American humanist and social critic, once said, "the schools are not as good as they used to be and they never were." Rogers' statement is as apropos in the early 1980s as it was in the 1920s. It is an important point because it cuts to the heart of social reality for American public schooling. That is, the schools reflect the ideology and social agenda of the political group which has most recently controlled the essence of public policy. The schools provide the best vehicle for building attitudes and values which support an ideological prescription for the "good society." Equally, the schools offer the most vulnerable target for those who wish to challenge the social course charted by those in power. In the middle and late 1950s, the schools' failure became the explanation for Russia's ability to beat the U.S. into outer space. In the middle '60s and early '70s, the schools stood as the symbol of what countercultural zealots labeled "the system" and/or "the establishment." The schools perpetuated the values of racism, bigotry, sexism, and economic elitism. In the early '80s, critics castigated the schools for failing to build a cadre of intellectually elite graduates who could fuel our drive for economic, technological, and military world dominance. Doubtless you will not find it surprising that little public praise for the schools accompanies the facts that since the early '60s the U.S. has led the world in space exploration, or that by the late '70s and early '80s the basic skill achievement scores of ethnic minority students had significantly improved.

Will Rogers' insight into public perception of the schools fits nicely with the analytic conclusions of Max Lerner on American culture. That is, we are a country caught on the nub of a paradoxical doctrine, the commitment to individual pursuit of liberty and the guarantee of social equality. Public political debate in this country tends to focus on one point of the paradox or the other as the first order of policy priority. The public schools are a major prize for the side which persuades the most votes and they will be a prime area of attack for the "loyal opposition." All of this seems reasonably obvious. Yet the media characterizes our nation as in shock with the findings of "A Nation at Risk." The case seems to be that the ideology and concomitant values and beliefs of those who lose an election are always at risk. We would argue that the motive for characterizing the educational situation as shocking rests in selling political candidates and media services. Apparently, to sell news or candidates you must create a sense of uniqueness rather than regularity, regardless of the facts and lessons of history.

Any person who regularly reads or listens to the news must note a disparity in the pre-election 1984 and post-election 1985 attention to matters educational. A president and Congress concerned with national survival based upon performance of the schools in 1983 and 1984 seem far less concerned in 1985.

This issue of **Educational Considerations** focuses upon the future nature of the principalship and principals cast against the backdrop of what has been named the "era of educational reforms." We hope the ideas and activities reported in the following pages serve as catalysts for sensible and sane thinking for schools and universities. The sort of thinking that will arm school leaders with the tenacity and ability to extend schooling practice to the direct educational advantage of students and beyond the satisfaction of narrow political egos.

As a final note of editorial license, we offer a caveat to consideration of the points in this journal. These articles are written in the shadow of "A Nation at Risk" and other major works.* They speak to the topic of "quality schools." One needs to be mindful that quality exists as a matter of definition relative to a set of values and beliefs. As we have argued in this statement, one person's idea of good schools may well be another person's example of what is wrong with the schools.

* Among the recent "must" reading for the principal, aspiring principal, or those working with principals are:

Against Mediocrity: The Humanities in America's High Schools by Chester E. Finn, Diane Ravitch and Robert T. Fancher, editors, Holmes and Meier Inc., 1984;

Horace's Compromise: The Dilemma of the American High School by Theodore R.Sizer, Houghton Mifflin Co., 1984;

Necessary Lessons: Decline and Renewal in American Schools by Gilbert T. Sewall, The Free Press, 1984;

The Persistent Problems of Education, by Paul Woodring, Phi Delta Kappa, 1984;

Schooling in America: Scapegoat and Salvation by Seymour B. Sarason, The Free Press, 1984;

High School: A Report on Secondary Education in America by Ernest L. Boyer, Harper and Row, 1984;

A Place Called School: Prospects for the Future by John I. Goodlad, McGraw Hill, 1983;

In Search of Excellence: Lessons for America's Best-Run Companies by Thomas J. Peters and Robert H. Waterman Jr., Harper and Row, 1982;

A Passion For Excellence: The Leadership Difference by Tom Peters and Nancy Austin, Random House, 1985.

The last two books are not directly written for the educator audience.