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Viewpoint: Moving into the 1980s

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Viewpoint

Moving into the 1980s

The beginning of a new decade always presents the opportunity to reassess the past and to anticipate the future. For professional educators this could be either a depressing or an exhilarating experience depending on individual perceptions of the events that shaped education in the 10 years just past.

In retrospect, public schools came of age during the 1970s. Social issues were confronted directly in the schools as the politics of confrontation of the 1960s continued to challenge the goals, practices and expectations of public education. The courts and federal legislation had a pervasive impact on the governance of education.

If any one theme or dominant notion can be ascertained from the plethora of events influencing the public schools during the 1970s, it would have to be the continued quest for equal educational opportunity. This quest has been manifested in decisions of the courts, federal legislation and regulations and state education mandates. While we may disagree with definitions of or the veracity of the idea of equal educational opportunity, it has become a dominant theme in American public education.

The *Tinker* legacy that neither students nor teachers shed their constitutional rights at the schoolhouse gate served to establish new legal relationships among students, teachers, administrators and school boards. Due process became the guiding principle and served to make school officials more responsible for their disciplinary decisions. In succeeding cases the United States Supreme Court clarified and extended due process protections for students and teachers and provided remedies when it was denied.

As the 1970s began and ended many schools districts were grappling with desegregation issues. Busing was a super-charged, emotional issue with children caught in the political battles. The focus of court challenges had shifted from the South to other regions of the country as *de facto* segregation was confronted. The promise of *Brown* awaits fulfillment in a society where housing patterns frustrate the dream.

At the midpoint of the decade, P.L. 94-142 was enacted to specify and guarantee the education rights of handicapped children. Mainstreaming, due process, individual education programs and financing became new challenges. In concert with Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, P.L. 94-142 holds the potential for major reorganization and operation of the education enterprise.

Title IX and affirmative action established the place of women in all aspects of public education. Athletics, curriculum and employment practices have been altered to bring women into the mainstream of school life. These changes will continue to be made throughout the educational system to provide new possibilities and opportunities for women.

Certainly, there are many other aspects of public education which deserve mention as significant influences in the past decade. Collective bargaining and strikes, accountability, malpractice, discipline, decline in public confidence, financial woes, competency testing, school finance and many others are possibilities.

But, on the whole, most of these issues do not seem to have had the fundamental or pervasive impact on public education as those previously cited. This is not to deny the importance of such issues but does not suggest that there were several watershed events that set the tone for the 1970s as a decade characterized by the continued quest for equal educational opportunity.

In anticipation of the decade of the '80s, I am concerned that the quest for and commitment to equal educational opportunity will be sidetracked and the gains reversed rather than consolidated. Energy, defense and inflation will be critical issues demanding rational solutions. Certainly the resolution of these critical national problems will extract a high price from all of us. I am concerned that some leaders simply will ignore other social issues which must be confronted.

I have no quarrel with those wishing to rethink what we are about as a society, or for that matter, what the role of public schools should be. After all, this represents the best of the democratic tradition in the United States. I submit, however, that we as educators cannot and must not remove ourselves from the debate and process of setting social priorities. Our social agenda must include a continued quest for the illusive goal of equal educational opportunity.

We have an important and challenging task in the 1980s to insure that the voice of professional educators is heard. We no longer can afford the fragmentation that has characterized public education. In the issue of social priorities, the voice of students, teachers, administrators, local and state boards and others must be one.

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