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Parents and Schools: The 150-Year Struggle for Control in American Education

William W. Cutler, III

Why aren't schools more responsive to parent and taxpayer demands for improvement? Because they are a monopoly and they just don't care? Because they are increasingly influenced by unions and put member interests ahead of the public interest? Or, is it, as the schools claim, because they can't do better given their resources?

William Cutler's new book implicitly suggests another possibility: Is it because they aren't making a good faith effort to change? If history is a guide, the answer is yes. Cutler shows that schools and parents have been at odds for a very long time. Instead of acting to fulfill the expectations of parents and the public, the schools have historically sought to shape and reshape the views of parents and the public to suit their own ideas about education's aims and purposes.

Since at least the nineteen twenties, the public schooling establishment has systematically sought to steer parent and public opinion. Early Initiatives concerned pragmatic issues such as gaining public confidence and financial support. For example, in 1919, the American School Board Journal encouraged schools to team up with parents as a means of building support for school tax levies. According to Cutler, public relations successes "gradually turned into arrogance among . . . instructional leaders, transforming the idea of an equal partnership between the home and school into the bureaucratic concept of a professionally managed relationship."

In subsequent decades, educators and experts in family life generally presumed that parents needed to be taught how to rear children and that child-rearing practices should harmonize with the latest pedagogical trends. The notion of teachers as experts in child development, whose role it was to update parents with the latest in research in child-rearing appealed to educators and was enthusiastically embraced by leaders of the National Congress of Parents and Teachers--the forerunner of today's Parent-Teacher Association. Today, such activities are accepted aspects of school outreach programs and parent education.

Organized public relations programs became the norm for urban school systems in the 1920s and '30s. Institutions such as Teachers College, Columbia University offered courses in educational publicity, and Professor Arthur Moehlman's textbook Public School Relations advised a comprehensive strategy for building local support. It included cultivating relationships with local newspapers, maintaining a well-manicured school lawn, and the use of ceremonial gatherings such as convocations to further school publicity aims. So-called "vitalized commencements" have been a routine feature of school life since 1930.

Parent-school relations were the key to an aggressive public relations strategy Moehlman dubbed "social interpretation." It called for teachers and principals "to take advantage of every opportunity to sell themselves and their work to the American people, enlisting parents to the cause by drawing on their intrinsic need to believe in the high quality of their children's schooling." Contacts with parents regarding their children's education afforded an ideal opportunity to solicit parent support.

Although parent-teacher associations were an especially useful tool for harnessing parent support, educators were ambivalent about parent involvement. Parental support was welcome but parent's attempts to influence the workings of the school were taken as interference. The parent-school relationship was termed collaborative but, in truth, parents were much the junior partners. Julian Butterworth's *The Parent-Teacher Association and Its Work* (New York: Macmillan, 1929) advised educators not to get overly excited about parental suggestions or complaints. He wrote, "... parents had to be made to understand that they were in no position to rule on the merit of their own ideas."

The role of educators and parents in today's parent-teacher groups has changed little from that of the twenties and thirties. "Public relations" is now called "public engagement"--"jargon that implies more parental participation than is usually delivered." Educators still act as the pedagogical and child- development experts and they subtly steer parent-teacher organizations while "maintaining the illusion of parental independence." The expected parent role is to trust, appreciate, and support the school and its efforts.

Most school systems seek to build a favorable public impression of their performance through a steady barrage of announcements, events, and media releases. Strengths are emphasized and deficiencies are downplayed. Given that what the public knows about education mostly comes from the schools themselves, it is little wonder that most parents and communities retain a favorable impression of their local schools despite objective assessments to the contrary.

Considering the education community's traditional response to public sentiment, school reformers will likely remain frustrated. Contrary to their desire for orderly classrooms and measurable results, educators are likely to continue viewing disagreeable expectations as wrongheaded opinion to be countered by public relations, parent education, and political action.

The Education Consumers Consultants Network is an alliance of experienced and credentialed educators dedicated to serving the needs of parents, policymakers, and taxpayers for independent and consumer-friendly consulting. For more information, contact J. E. Stone, Ed.D., at (423) 282-6832, or write: professor@education-consumers.com