

Jerry Debenham and Michael J. Parsons

The Future of Schools and Families: Three Scenarios and a Recommendation

In the most likely scenario, schools become more like families and homes more like individually based learning centers. Parents in the future will be required to make a special commitment and take special training, and the distinction between professionals (educators) and amateurs (parents) will be blurred.

For perhaps 150 years there has been an increasing tendency for schools to take over functions once reserved for the informal interaction of the family, church, and community. This trend was virtually unchallenged in the mainstream of academic or popular thought until the late 1960s. Today, however, there are widespread doubts whether the schools can or should play as large a role as they were promising only a few years ago. There is serious debate, for example, whether the schools should aim to provide values education and vocational education or only "basic" education, and whether the family needs further economic, legal, or professional support. Such questions are not usually discussed in a context wide enough to reveal what the real issues are. We seem to be at a moment of indecision and confusion concerning the relation of the child and the parent to the public schools. A brief overview of the long-term trend affecting family and school will help to explain this view.

The Long-Term Trend

One can identify three forces that have affected the long-term trend: 1) deteriorating family environments, 2) rising social expectations and de-

mands for greater equality, 3) increased need for social control as accelerating technological and social change bring multiple instabilities.

The school reformers of the early 1800s designed public schools to produce youth with political homogeneity, technical skills, and basic knowledge. In no other way were the schools to assume parental or church responsibilities. Districts were small and parents exercised considerable control through local boards of education. Modernization and urbanization, however, slowly diminished the socializing influence of the traditional extended family and rural community. This created a vacuum into which the schools, representing modern scientific knowledge, and its specialists, were pulled.

By the early 1900s the technological revolution had so weakened the American family that the Progressives proposed to reorganize the schools on an extended family model. Schools would be more personalized and child-centered. At the same time, they would use scientific knowledge to upgrade and professionalize many functions previously considered to be family responsibilities. These responsibilities included much now called vocational and character education. Implementation of the new philosophy was made possible by a fundamental shift in the power structure. "Scientific management" was substituted for local political influence in policy decisions. In effect, it was an expansion of the role of the expert — i.e., the superintendent and his specialized assistants — at the expense of the board, representing lay control.

JERRY DEBENHAM and MICHAEL J. PARSONS (University of Utah Chapter) are associate professors in the Department of Educational Administration, University of Utah, Salt Lake City.

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Progressive programs were promoted in the thirties and forties by academic and business interests, which had increased their influence through the professionalization of educational leadership. These largely upper-middle-class interests recognized the threat to social stability produced by higher aspirations, deteriorating conditions in the urban family environment, and the accelerating rate of social and economic change. Hence they backed efforts to extend public education to more people and to enlarge the curriculum to include such courses and services as personal counseling, training in nutrition, health education, physical education, social education, parenthood training, sex education, and driver education. Ironically, this response further weakened the influence of the family and helped accelerate the rate and expectations of social change.

Some of these expectations had to do with equality of opportunity for all. The egalitarian motive had always been present in educational reform in America, but it burst into prominence with relative suddenness in the 1960s. Professional educators were not reluctant when the nation turned to the public schools to effect a major social transformation. Most of them believed that the schools could make up for social inequalities due to family and neighborhood differences. They believed that if all children had equal (and later, compensatory) school learning environments, they could be brought to relatively equal educational achievement; and this would in turn lead to relatively equal economic opportunities.

The Present Crisis

The present crisis in educational policy stems directly from the apparent failure of the schools to reach these expectations. If the schools have raised the educational achievement of the poor, they seem also to have raised that of the privileged. Hence the difference in credentials between the classes has not much changed. Educational requirements for jobs have increased while there has been little change in the actual skills that are needed. The result has been an inflation of educational credentials. For a while this inflation maintains the occupational advantage of the higher classes while appeasing the expectations of the lower; but it does not seem to provide greater economic equality. This analysis, if correct, shows that the schools, rather than promoting equality, are partially responsible for maintaining inequality of economic opportunity.

More important, perhaps, the schools have not been notably successful in raising the educational levels of the underprivileged as a group. We have gradually come to learn the overpowering importance of the child's home life in the early years and the relative impotence of the schools, as they are presently set up, to compensate for the great inequalities between families. The Coleman survey of the mid-sixties was the first important study to point in this direction; there have been others since, and their effect is still being digested. One may conclude that the schools are locked into a total social environment that severely limits their powers.

Attempts to achieve greater equality by such means as busing have brought vociferous disapproval in some quarters and a serious reduction in financial support. The movement to restrict the schools to more purely "educational" goals, or to "educational plus vocational," has considerable strength. The future strength of the egalitarian motive does not seem at all secure.

Meantime, the other two forces — those produced by deteriorating family environment and by the need for social control — seem stronger than ever. Violence is rising among the young, both in school and out. School vandalism alone costs hundreds of millions of dollars every year. There has been a rapid rise in runaways and in suicides. Crime rates are spiraling. There have been huge increases in the number of unwed mothers, an epidemic of sexual diseases, widespread use of drugs, and the spread of various occultisms.*

The response of the education establishment to this simultaneous demonstration of failure and increase in pressures has taken three different directions: 1) to argue defensively, saying that the schools are accomplishing more than ever before, though the challenges today are much greater, and that expectations became unrealistically high during the 1960s; 2) to restrict school programs as a result of declining budgets and to refocus on discipline and basics; 3) to regain federal and public support by redirecting attention from classroom reform to the need for restructuring the family environment.

In more detail, proponents of the third direction are saying: It is not the schools that are failing, it is the family. Children are locked into total environments. We cannot hope to change the one without changing the other by means of a total and voluntary reconstruction of their social environment. A coordinated national effort on many fronts may be required. With a new focus on family disorganization, national and state governments may seek to merge the educational system with social services to individual parents in order to form an entirely new environment for rearing children.

This third response gives further momentum to the long-term trend.

Three Scenarios

What can we say of the future? Will the long-term trend be halted or reversed? What is the range of possibilities? And what, among the possibilities, ought we to prefer?

It is necessary, of course, to oversimplify somewhat if one is to answer such questions in the space of a brief journal article. With respect to the long-term outlook, there are three possibilities: that the trend may be reversed, that the status quo may be maintained, or that the trend may continue. We do not think the maintenance position worth discussing, since no one seems to favor it and since it is inherently implausible. With respect to the importance of the egalitarian motive, the same three possibilities exist: that it should grow, diminish, or

*All of these developments were documented in the January, 1978, *Kappan*.

continue in its present ambiguous status. Combining these, we come up with three scenarios.

First Scenario

Let us assume that the long-term trend is reversed and the present conservatism concerning schools is extended. Schools are increasingly made "accountable." Their goals are increasingly cut back to "basic education" (the three Rs and the rudiments of the sciences and arts) and to vocational preparation. Closer links are established between schools and the world of work. The present struggle for power between professionals and lay boards is won by the lay boards. The egalitarian motive, though not disavowed, loses its strength; i.e., the ambition to reconstruct society via schools disappears. Various attempts are made to hand power back to the family, especially with respect to value education and in the early years. This might be done through passage of new tax laws or via voucher schemes, for example. The schools slowly become a less important institution, subordinated to both the family and the world of work.

One cannot deny the possibility of such a future. It is the direction in which much of the current conservative reaction points, and it has a number of advantages. It would, for example, make sense of some of the dysfunctionalities into which credentialism has brought us, especially the distribution of jobs in terms of school credentials that are only dubiously related to them. Setting up clear, limited, and attainable goals for the schools would make them more efficient and relieve them of the burden of ambiguity and ambition from which they now suffer. Furthermore, the family in America has always been regarded as an intrinsically valuable institution; the school, rarely.

On the other hand, we are dubious of the ultimate viability or desirability of such a future. If we consider the three motives for the long-term trend previously discussed, they seem to be no less (and perhaps more) salient than before: 1) deteriorating family environments, 2) rising social expectations and demands for equality, and 3) increased need for social control because of the tempo of social change.

With regard to 1), the traditional extended family, which was evolving into the urban nuclear family during the Progressive years, now appears to be evolving into a serial parent or single parent structure. Even if this trend goes no further, the social and moral control that parents once had over the young continues to deteriorate in a world of absentee fathers, working mothers, isolated grandparents, individualized transportation and recreation, peer-group culture, and media/television dominance. Ironically, most of the schemes to restore competence to the family actually involve further contact with the schools, e.g., parent education, home visits by professionals, family guidance and counseling, early childhood programs. Such schemes promote rather than reverse the long-term trend.

The point is still stronger when we consider motive 2) above. Parental incompetence is clearly

linked with the later social deviance or psychological inadequacy of the child. In an era when crime rates have been almost doubling every decade and when mental instability rates approach frightening levels, there is an increased need for social control measures. Every society has its level of casual violence; in ours that level is not only high and rising, but the destructiveness of the means available has increased enormously. (When will we have our first nuclear terrorist?) The alternatives to increasing the powers of the school to create social personalities include governmental control of the mass media, especially TV; crime prevention measures such as limitations on movement; and greater use of mental hospitals, drugs, and law enforcement measures, including enlarged police powers and more penal institutions. None of these seems very appealing; all of them would be aggravated by the effect of 2), i.e., rising expectations of the poor and greater demands for justice. In short, the tendency represented in this scenario is toward a repressive society. It is not a suitable goal, we think, for public policy.

"[The first scenario assumes that] the present struggle for power between professionals and lay boards is won by the lay boards."

Second Scenario

The other extreme from the scenario just presented is one in which the demand for equality, both economic and educational, resumes its full force. This we regard as about as unlikely as the first is undesirable. It would require the further deliberate use of schools to achieve equality of educational attainment, presumably including greater doses of compensatory education, more emphasis on the early years of life, compulsory integration, much more parent education, perhaps more skillful use (control?) of TV, and free boarding schools for the poor. This would in turn necessitate the further growth of the federal government in control of school policies and the decline of local or lay powers. And of course it would be very expensive. Along with this would have to go federally inspired changes in other institutions, since we appear to have learned that producing cognitive equality will not produce economic equality. Some more egalitarian method of distributing jobs might be thought of, though it seems implausible. Tax policy might be used to weaken the link between jobs and income differentials. Housing policy would need to be changed, established power elites displaced, and so on.

There are many advantages to this scenario, including satisfaction of the motives we have discussed. But there may be doubts about its economic efficiency. (Is any industrialized society today economically efficient?) Altogether, it seems to us implausible that America will take the road to what might be called democratic socialism, and we will say no more about it here.

Third Scenario

The scenario we favor lies somewhere between the two described. It represents an extension but not the culmination (as in the second scenario) of the long-term trend, with some modification. It is

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predicated on a redirection of focus from equality to social stability issues (a war on crime and child abuse rather than a war on poverty) and an emphasis on the direct involvement of parents in educational programs.

These two emphases are already with us, though in the confusion we may not realize their importance. The shift of interest from equality to social control issues is a part of the present conservative reaction to the reform sixties. It is important to see, however, that this is not a new nor necessarily an ultraconservative interest; it is rather a change of relative emphasis within the mainstream tradition that has produced the long-term trend. Educators have always been in favor of social stability (even the Progressive reformers). As John Dewey argued, the social use of intelligence is the best and most efficient form of control in a society. Common aims and understandings are necessary for stability in an industrial society, far preferable to police and penal measures. Furthermore, an intelligent approach to social stability will include concern for the satisfaction of expectations. Hence what we are seeing is the translation of the problem of achieving greater social equality (representing overt social reconstruction and covert social stability) into the problem of assisting parents with their child-rearing responsibilities (representing overt social stability and covert social reconstruction). It may be that this change of emphasis is necessary as a matter of policy in order to secure the support of the middle classes, who presently appear to be balking.

The second emphasis represents the further voluntary involvement of parents and educators, in reaction to the threat of further federal control such as emerged in our second scenario. It is not so much a replacement or domination of families by schools as a further growing together of the two, with much local variation. In general, we look for teachers to assume roles more like those of parents (highly individualized attention, concerned with the whole person in his social setting, relatively informal in interaction); while parents become more like teachers (more knowledgeable, more program-oriented, more objective). Schools will become more like family environments; homes more like individually based learning centers.

We will mention just three straws in the wind that seem to exemplify this direction. In Boston, a public school board has started to screen children for health and learning problems almost as soon as they are born. Every few weeks a trained advisor visits the home to help parents rear their children until they enter kindergarten. In Chicago, “Operation Higher Achievement” elicits direct involvement of parents in the schools through special committees and with a contract pledging to provide a special, teacher-directed home environment. California has begun to implement one of the most massive statewide educational reforms ever undertaken, by merging schools, families, and social agencies into a single unit at early childhood levels.

In imagining this scenario, it may help to think of three possible stages of progression. In the first,

running perhaps from 1978 through 1988, there is a renewed interest in preschool services for children, early childhood education, and many voluntary services to parents. These include parent training workshops, home visitors, toy-lending libraries, further free health and medical services, and the gradual integration of other aspects of social services with professional educational concerns. In schools there is further increased emphasis on programs for exceptional children, “values” education (both of which are forms of personality management), career education, and involvement of parents in advisory and possibly governance roles. Universities continue their growth with adult students of all ages.

The second stage would occur as various governments — local, state, and federal — begin to support such efforts through tax rebates and direct financial payments to participating parents. We feel this is a necessary step in the blurring of the distinction between professional (educator) and amateur (parent), if the parent is in the end to have equal status with the educator. As this occurs, public attitudes and propaganda will emphasize the awesome responsibilities of parents and the benefits to society of the competent parent. Perhaps this stage will last a decade, from 1988 through 1998.

The last stage can occur when the public sees parenthood as sufficiently difficult, honorable, and beneficial to society, and when perhaps 80% of the target population has participated in programs such as those mentioned. At this point such programs can become mandatory. In effect, special training and commitments would be required of parents. Special resources would be offered to them, and a sizable (though perhaps not a total) income provided, in recognition of “parenting” as a specific social occupation. There might well be a legal distinction between marriage and parenthood, the one being (among other things) probationary to the other. Professionalizing the family in this way would mean the creation of millions of new jobs and would serve to redistribute income usefully while upgrading family life across the nation. In a sense, much of education would return to the family, as much of home life is rationalized and professionalized. Parents would have more control of their families and more actual power to affect them. At the same time, the responsibilities of the schools would meet the needs that seem apparent, and the schools would be structured so as to be able to meet these responsibilities. In effect, at least for early childhood, the functions of the two would merge. The long-term trend might result in some more reasonable cooperation between the two institutions rather than in the domination of either one by the other. □

