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PRINCIPALS MUST FACE THE ISSUES AND MEET THE CHALLENGES OF IMPROVING THE READING PROGRAM

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The principal has a vital interest in the reading program in today's school. The complexity of our social order, coupled with parental anxiety about reading, has forced the principal to become deeply involved in a knowledge of the purposes and techniques of reading instruction. More than ever before the community wants to know what happens in its school.

They are concerned about their children's chances for success in school; some of these have cause for concern. According to a study conducted by the University of Illinois, 48 per cent of American high school students are seriously handicapped by poor reading. The National Council of Teachers of English reports that 4,000,000 elementary pupils have reading disabilities. In the early grades, poor reading causes almost 100 per cent of school failures.

A recent study by the American Personnel and Guidance Association on School Failures and Dropouts stated that the way to dropping out is paved with failures. Particularly significant is failure to learn to read; three times as many poor readers as good ones leave school before graduation.

Recent studies show the following findings:

1. As many as 16 million Americans are functional illiterates. They cannot read above the 4th-grade level.
2. Eight million adults over the age of 25 cannot read the equivalent of a daily newspaper.
3. Twenty-seven per cent of army draftees fail the mental examination because they are disabled readers.
4. Fifteen per cent of our high school graduates are seriously handicapped readers.
5. Twenty-five per cent of the students in the elementary grades cannot read as well as their potentials would indicate they should.

Certainly it is easily agreed that reading is the most important, the most useful of all learning tools in the school. In fact, it has been estimated that 80 to 90 per cent of the study activities in the average school require skill in reading for successful achievement. The average

school student can learn to read actively with both speed and intelligence, only if we will help him.

Points for Consideration by Principals

Principals must remember that reading skills are the very heart of the school program. The reading program is composed of many skills which are woven together for the benefit of the student. There are four growth areas in reading skills—word identification, speed, meaning or comprehension, and study skills. Each area entails many skills and sub-skills.

The principal must keep an open mind and withhold judgment in regard to all the innovations; there are many methods and materials coming out concerning the reading skills, and the principal should be slow to choose. He should use extreme care and much careful thought before he goes to one method or the other.

Work for more adequate training of teachers; the in-service education program should be adopted to increase the knowledge and improve the performance of the teachers in the school. Television and audio-visual devices and demonstrations should be used. The employment of a special reading teacher to go to various rooms and demonstrate the skills that are used in subject matter areas is recommended. Also, a committee of teachers to examine any new literature that comes from the press should be appointed.

Perhaps a few cautions against misuse of the basal reader are in order. Flagrant misuses include these: considering the basal reader itself as the basis for the whole reading program; using one grade level of the basal reader with an entire class regardless of the different instructional levels of the children (for instance, everyone in the second grade reading the second grade reader when some should be reading in the third grade reader and some in the primer); setting up the goal of having children cover all pages in a certain reader as the end point objective of a semester; insisting that the children not work with a reader higher than the grade represented in the classroom in order that that particular book would be fresh for the next teacher; permitting children to keep their basal reader in their seats or desks or taking them home thus providing an opportunity to become familiar with all the material before the teacher develops it; using the teacher's guide either as a prescription to be followed doggedly or ignored entirely; confining reading instruction largely to reading stories from the reader without a sufficient number of interspersed periods of practice devoted to the skills; using workbooks indiscriminately with all children; requiring purposely the rereading of books, using the

content of readers which is mostly literature as the basis of developing all of the study skills needed in the different study fields.

Maturation levels should be considered in reading. There is much pressure from parents and other groups and organizations to teach children to read while in kindergarten, because they have heard or read about various programs where three and four year old children are being taught to read and want this done for their children and in their schools. There is no question but that this can be done, as has been proved by recent research, but the question is should these two, three and four year old children be taught to read? Specialists have wondered whether the child is mature enough to be taught. Will these skills still be with him when he is old enough to practice them again in school? If he is able to pronounce the words, is he able to grasp the content of what he is reading? All these things have to be taken into consideration.

Another consideration for principals is to develop a better taste for reading worthwhile material. They should take a strong stand for the kinds of materials they provide and waken enthusiasm in teachers in trying to overcome this problem. Instructionally we have made excellent progress in increasing the amount of reading, but are we making equal progress in regards to what they read?

Principals should put thought into what the student is encouraged and taught to read and like. A recent survey shows that students (high school and college level) and adults as well are reading comics, way-out science fiction, police and crime stories, sports and so on in preference to good literature.

Problems Facing the Principals

The challenges or problems that are before us if we are to have a sound reading program are these.

First challenge: The need for a systematic program of professional stimulation, study, and teacher growth within the school. It is to be noted that the most gains in this program have been made where the principals have been working behind the scenes to stimulate, guide and direct a program of professional growth on the part of their teachers. Greatest gains are made where teachers are working as a team for professional improvement and toward specific goals. These goals for improvement are sought in all areas.

Another method which can help is for the principals to encourage the teachers to look into past data concerning information on ability, adaptability and so on in an effort to make an honest appraisal. This will inform the teacher where the strengths and weaknesses are and

they will know better where to put forth more effort or try a new technique.

One goal a principal might have is for all to work together in some specific area where there is a need.

How Well Do Principals Help the Reading Program?

There are four parts to any reading program in a school. The first part consists of the regular developmental reading which teaches the basic reading skills of word recognition and comprehension. The second part is the remedial reading program which is necessary for the child who simply did not achieve to his capacity in the developmental program or missed it entirely, and it is necessary and essential for him to have this work. Reading difficulties can sometimes be remedied by a little extra effort. The third part is the application of these skills in all the content subjects, whether they be math, science, English, history, or literature and done by a single teacher in elementary school or by subject area teachers in junior and senior high school. The fourth part of the reading program is supplementary reading that is provided for through access to an extensive number of text books as additional reading to basic studies as well as a varied supply of library books that are used in connection with the content subject as background and as unrestricted free reading. This practice should take into account the books in the local public library as well as the books the child has access to at home.

Do principals help this program? In mentioning some points on both sides of the question, I will first take a negative stand. They often have teachers who are poorly prepared and who do not have good techniques; and the principals do not help when these teachers do not have adequate help to improve themselves. I think that any teacher can become a better one with proper help from the administrator, principal, supervisor, or superintendent.

Another way in which I think principals hurt the reading is when they require a teacher to teach outside his field of preparation. Often an English teacher is asked to take charge of the reading program even in junior and senior high school though he is not prepared to do so; while another teacher who is competent and has had training in the reading program is not given the opportunity. Of course, if principals do ask for and assign reading teachers to supervise and carry out the reading program and give them the help and assistance that is necessary for a successful reading program, they will indeed help the reading program.

Another abuse occurs when administrators pinch the budget and

refuse to approve money for the materials which are necessary for a basic reading program, or when they waste money on expensive machines or gadgets instead of getting the necessary books and materials which the reading teacher has asked for. Too often these machines wind up collecting dust in the basement and the money spent on them does no one any good. Every school, elementary or otherwise, needs a library that contains a wide variety of books as well as sufficient number. Where this library is available and accessible, children will read books in connection with the reading course and other books as well; they will thus broaden their outlook on other subject areas.

Another failure in building an adequate reading program occurs when principals buy a specific system for teaching reading that teachers cannot teach, that is not adapted to the age and kind of children who come to the school. Some of these systems that are being sold have the teacher doing thus and so on the first day and thus and so on the second day and so on in a simply impossible sequence. Children are individuals and have to be taught and respected as such. The reading program has to be geared to their speed, intelligence, and ability to carry it out.

The foremost way in which the principal can help the reading program is by providing a time and place for teachers to teach. While this prerequisite sounds like something that is taken for granted, it is not necessarily so. With the crowded conditions of today, the place for teaching may not be the principal's fault, but the time may be. There are continuing interruptions: someone comes in with a message, a child needs to go some place for speech correction or music instruction, or the loud speaker blatantly says "now hear this." The teacher should have an uninterrupted period of time in order to put across the point she is trying to make. Other things such as the drive for funds for various campaigns, taking care of lunch money, taking care of milk money, etc., should be handled by someone other than the teacher. She should have her time taken up by teaching if we are to get proper benefits from her program. Only principals can alleviate this situation.

Principals can also help if they have the knowledge of the methodology of how reading is taught. Principals who merely think they know how to teach reading do not actually help the reading program. Those principals help the reading program who get themselves qualified by taking courses on reading, or by reading research, or by asking their teachers who know how to give them the necessary information.

Another way in which principals can help their school and thus the reading program is not to allow pressure groups to run their

schools. When principals protect the teachers, they protect professional standards.

The principal can help the entire school program by backing up the teacher's method of teaching and discipline so that students, parents, and community will know that complaining to the school board about a teacher will not help them. Otherwise the teacher is placed in an untenable position, and principals will see the result in lowered morale and internal strife.

Principals who allow teachers to attend meetings are helping the teacher to help himself; or allowing the teacher to attend a session at another school that will help him in some particular aspect of his work. Assistance such as this not only helps the teachers, but allows for a much closer relationship between teachers and principals by which both mutually benefit.

Here are some questions that each principal needs to answer. First, are you completely sold on the importance of reading in an age of mass media? Or, do you believe that it is foolish to spend so much time on a skill that will be outmoded in another 20 or 30 years? The literary experience is one of the most profound in the life of man. It keeps cultures alive, makes instruction from such books as the Bible and famous philosophers possible; it joins the minds and times together for the better management of our world today.

Do you believe that it is necessary for reading to be taught at all levels, elementary, junior and senior high school by qualified instructors? Is it not just as important to keep abreast with the reading program as it is the math or science program? After all, a good reader will better understand all other subject matter.

Do you believe that all subject area teachers have a responsibility to teach reading as it affects their subject?

When the teachers in the school are not qualified, do you believe that the school should provide an adequate in-service program for them?

Do you believe that effective reading programs are predicated upon a sound grouping policy?

Do you believe that adequate materials must be provided?

Do you believe that special reading classes should be staffed by reading specialists for children with reading problems?

These are some of the questions that principals should ask themselves when thinking about the reading program in their school.

Some Answers to the Problems

Here are some steps that have been taken by principals who have successful reading programs in their schools.

1. The principal, superintendent, and teachers should acquaint themselves with the various types of programs, materials and techniques that are available. Then a study should be made of the children in the school to determine the learning habits of the students and their present capacity to read. The results would possibly determine the type of program for the particular school. Most tests will show that the reading problem is an all-school problem and an all-school developmental program would best help this situation. This would enable the slow, normal, and gifted students to all become better readers.
2. Everyone needs to become interested in reading: the parent, teacher and the principals. We need to keep stressing the fact that every teacher is a teacher of reading until this fact becomes a reality and reading becomes, in fact, the concern of all—the teacher, the pupil, the parent and the community. Developmental reading is not the same as remedial reading. It is for all students regardless of ability because it helps to improve reading skills. One thing that must be remembered is that students are individuals. As such some will be below, some at, and some above the academic level. And the need is to develop a concept of teaching that adapts to differences in reading and in capacity to learn.
3. The principal must evaluate his present program with the help of his staff to discover the areas of success or failure and to discover the teachers who are leaders in the reading program.
4. The principal must set up a program of in-service education of teachers. Lack of professional preparation in reading at the pre-service level on the part of many teachers enrolled at elementary, junior and senior high school levels is evident. The amount of training in reading provided by school systems at the in-service level needs expanding. While most teachers have had some training to teach reading, they often feel inadequately prepared to teach reading effectively. Unless help is provided they become confused and discouraged. Also teachers who received their training many years ago need help in the new methods of teaching reading.

For the principal to promote better learning: We should try to the very best of our knowledge and ability to educate children in the elementary school by, first, placing about 20 pupils, not more than

25, with the best-educated teachers we can find; we should provide a learning materials center in the school that would be a joy to behold; we should provide consultant help for the teacher, specialists who could help them with particular children and with particular instructional problems; specialists in teaching remedial reading and in teaching other things as well as specialists in teaching in all areas encompassed by the school program; but the classroom teacher should be the basic organizer and planner for the group and the individual in the class. This radical plan will cost money, it may even double current expenditures for education. I am prepared to state that I believe Americans will pay their share of the cost because they believe that our children today have to have a better education than that promised by other countries across the sea, who are working for our downfall. I think that the education of today's children is much more important than getting to the moon first.

We need to replace teachers who after a year or two of trial are obviously not qualified by background of culture, educational level, personality, drive and dedication to be members of a highly qualified professional team. We need to do so even if they do have husbands living in the community.

We should employ in every elementary school an instructional secretary to serve the teachers. While principals need secretaries also, it is more important for teachers to have secretaries. A secretary should not be assigned to more than 12 teachers. Professional persons need highly trained assistants. That is to be noted in the validity of the teacher aide idea.

We need to group children on a multi-age, multi-grade plan, the placing of about 7 or 8 six-year-olds, 7 or 8 seven-year-olds, and 7 or 8 eight-year-olds in a classroom with a teacher. We need to organize two-teacher schools in other words, thus children would stay with the same teacher for three years. In this arrangement, they make more progress. Even if the task is harder on the teacher, it is better for the children.

We need to provide the basic classroom teacher with other kinds of assistance and materials such as audio-visual aids, taped T.V. shows that could be used by small groups as well as large ones, listening tables, models, space and equipment so that several different groups or individuals can proceed simultaneously.

In my opinion there is great validity to the self-contained classroom in the elementary school. If we do not overload the classroom with too many children, if we provide consultant and resource help for

the teachers, if we employ well-educated, interested, cultured, professional persons as teachers, if we quit trying to pinch pennies at the most crucial point in our national survival, the education of our children will reap the benefits.

The heart of the educational process is the interaction between human beings, the teacher and the pupil. What we need to do if we want to improve education is to improve the possibility and quality of the action: better teachers working with fewer children.

Education of high quality costs money, lots of money. Good teachers, teaching a maximum of 25 pupils, backed by good and substantial materials, with a good secretary, still offer the best means of providing a good education, particularly at the elementary-school level.

In summary, the answer to our original question depends upon whether or not principals hire teachers who can teach; furnish adequate materials in order to teach children how to read; support methods based on sound principles; provide adequate libraries; arrange for adequate space and time to teach the basic aspects of the reading program; maintain an open mind about methods of teaching reading, and make judgments on the basis of information, not opinion; withstand irresponsible pressure groups; support teachers in their methods and discipline; and provide an in-service program for the improvement of reading based upon what the teacher needs. The result will be a constant and enriched reading and learning atmosphere for the children.