

A Suggestion for Restoring Public Support for Public Schools: Learn to Invite Patrons

Flora N. Roebuck
*Texas Woman's University
Denton, Texas*

Gene Russell
Professor of Counselor Education, Retired

Mack Wedel
Professor of Education, Retired

Former Secretary of Education David Matthews (1996) and others have noted that public education is in danger of losing public support which is critical to its quality and survival. Suggested causes for declining public enthusiasm range from apathy to financial shifts in the culture. This article proposes that the increasing disavowal of public schools results from experience with day-by-day disinventing behaviors. The suggested remedy is for educators to evaluate their on-the-job responses to their patrons. Wherever subminimal interpersonal conditions are identified, participants should learn how to invite people to education.

With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in: to bind up the nation's wounds.

Abraham Lincoln

In his book, *Is There a Public for Public Schools?*, David Matthews (1996), former U.S. Secretary of Health, Education and

Welfare and currently president of the Kettering Foundation, commented, "Unhappily, many Americans no longer believe public schools are their schools" (p. 2). Unfortunately, there is a large number of patrons who support Matthews' stance. Why would some clients of public schools generate a stream of negativism about those institutions? As painful as it may seem to educators, there must be some credible evidence underlying their critics' claims. Educators may benefit from accepting the challenge to explore the issues raised by their critics.

Traditionally, educational analysts have been inclined to focus on major outcome indexes such as test results, drop-out rates, and behavioral patterns which have yielded interesting data. But, few of them have produced significant improvements in those schools which continue to manifest alarming difficulties. This suggests that some of the major reasons for the public's alleged lack of support for public schools may lie in the interpersonal domain. Writing in the December 1996 edition of *Phi Delta Kappan*, Parish and Aquila said:

Even when national priorities were clearly stated and significant funding for reform was available, America's urban schools remained essentially unchanged . . . data also show that transformed schools do not have long lifespans. They appear on the scene, bloom, and rather quickly revert to the old school culture. (p. 303)

It is interesting that in his response to Parish and Aquila, Marshall (1996), principal of Mather Elementary School in Boston, said:

I share with Parish and Aquila the sense that schools fail to change the pattern of inequality of their entering students. In fact, as they progress through most schools, the rich get richer, and the poor get poorer. (p. 307)

It is reasonable to contend that the barriers between education and some of its patrons are erected by minuscule day-

by-day failures to respond effectively to requests for help by patrons who come to view schools as insensitive bureaucracies. In those instances, the school's inadequate responses generate a latent backlog of resentment which later is expressed in resistance to public school initiatives such as taxes and curriculum changes.

The contention that public schools are disinviting to many of their patrons is not an unrealistic notion. Serious investigators of school climates have concluded that education ignores substantial amounts of cognitive and emotional input from students. Darling-Hammond (1996) wrote, "teachers and administrators often find it difficult to develop settings that are both learning-centered . . . and learner-centered—that is, attentive to the need and interests of individual learners" (p. 9). Clinchy (1996) said, "these lower-school people ask, why is it that we are still being required to teach an outmoded, essentially 19th Century, almost entirely academic curriculum?" (p. 269). In 1990, Lounsbury and Clark reported that, in the typical middle-school classroom, "passive learning prevails" (p. 130).

In psychological terms, public schools may well be experiencing the effects of the public's *retroactive inhibition* against education. For example, when a former student mentions "going back to school," some of them immediately recall painful memories of past school experiences (John Doble Research Associates, 1995). These recollections render them unable to respond facilitatively to schools. In short, if public education is to enhance its level of public support, it will be well advised to at least consider conducting a wholesale reconciliation with its patrons in order to cure those past slights. This is not to demean schools but rather to suggest one path to educational progress is through better human relations.

Therefore, in Abraham Lincoln's words, "With malice toward none and charity toward all," the remainder of this statement asks the readers to pause and to enter sensitively the real world of education in the 1998-99 school year to review one of the

“smaller,” but prototypic, incidents that can germinate into a substantial core of disinvasion to public education. The following story moves the reader through the tedious experiential details that are necessary to understand the real flesh and bones of the disinvasions that too often remain unremediated. It asks inviters to be patient enough to grasp the meaning of the experience to the participants.

A True Tale about a Disinviting School Experience

The main character of this story is a 13-year-old young lady whose average grade is 96% across 8 years of schooling. Teachers never have made a single negative comment about her school behavior on any of her report cards. On Parent Nights, teachers have nothing but praise for this girl. In short, she is what most of us would call a top notch student. In fact, that is exactly what her current principal said about this person we will call Anne.

The teacher is Mr. Fox, a middle-school instructor. Anne is one of his students who also participated on the Quick Recall team coached by Mr. Fox. This is her third year on such teams for whom she has been a successful and enthusiastic member. She usually is 1 of 4 members her coaches have selected to open the competition. She's a first stringer.

Anne has enjoyed her Quick Recall activities immensely and has attended practices faithfully for the entire time she has been a member of those teams. Anne is a serious academic student with hopes of attending an Ivy League type college, and eventually, of becoming a physician.

In preparation for the Quick Recall matches, Mr. Fox conducted motivational sessions where he urged the members to win. The atmosphere was similar to an athletic pep rally, and Anne liked the enthusiasm and high expectations.

Mr. Fox appointed Anne co-captain of the 8th-grade team, and she entered the year's first match with considerable resolve to win. However, the team lost badly which upset Anne who thought her teammates did not make a full effort. Additionally, she believed the coach was remiss in allowing members to "volunteer" for various events. As a result, Anne was unable to participate in her stronger areas while others also were competing outside their strengths. In short, Anne was embarrassed by the team's poor performance. She believed they could and should have done better.

The lopsided loss depressed Ann who made it known primarily via nonverbal behavior such as sitting alone and being silent during the bus ride home. She didn't feel she could express her anger and disappointment to anyone without suffering undue recrimination. Her loneliness was palpable.

Immediately after the match, Mr. Fox noticed Anne's "down" attitude and reported that he patted her on the shoulder during the award ceremony adding, "We'll get 'em next time." Some of Anne's teammates later told her that, after the match, Mr. Fox advised them he was going to "talk" with Anne about her "attitude." But, he did not tell Anne of his intentions.

The match took place on Saturday, and Mr. Fox made no attempt to contact Anne's parents during the weekend. Monday morning, Anne attended Fox's class where he made no comments to her until she was ready to move to her next assignment. At that time, Fox told Anne he wanted to see her after school that day. Since he gave no reason for the conference, Anne assumed it was a routine matter.

As agreed, Anne reported to Mr. Fox's room at 2:30PM at which time he asked her to have a seat. Unexpectedly, he announced they would be joined by Mr. Wolf, the school counselor. Fox started the conference by telling Anne he was concerned about her excessive distress over losing the match and indicated that she had a situation serious enough for the school's

counselor to be included in the meeting. Thus, without warning and alone, Anne was confronted by two male school officials who indicated she had a “personality problem” that needed professional help.

Anne resented the implications of the accusations made by both Fox and Wolf but felt afraid to express them for fear of reprisal. She started to cry—not out of intimidation or even sadness, but as the only acceptable outlet for her fury at what she saw as a grossly unjust circumstance.

Meanwhile, Anne’s father waited for her in the school’s parking lot. He had met her there regularly for several years, and she never was more than 5 to 10 minutes late and that only rarely. The father had not been notified about Anne’s conference with Mr. Fox and Mr. Wolf although he had been home all day where he could easily have been contacted.

The father waited for 20 minutes with mounting concern in light of the numerous national reports of crimes committed against teenage girls. Finally, after 20 minutes, he went to the school’s administrative office where he told the school’s receptionist that he was concerned about his daughter and asked her to make a general announcement to call Anne to the office. The receptionist complied immediately.

Anne did not come to the office where her father waited 5 more minutes. Finally, Fox called the school office to say that Anne was with him and that she would be coming to the office soon. Anne’s father waited 5 more minutes outside the office and, when Anne did not show, he went to the receptionist to tell her to inform Mr. Fox he wanted to see Anne “immediately.”

Five minutes later, Anne came walking down the hallway very distraught—crying uncontrollably and somewhat incoherent. Her father took her to his car to comfort her before driving home where mother, father, and daughter spoke about the afternoon’s events. The father called the school to speak to Mr. Fox, but he

had left the building. The father immediately called the school a second time to tell Mr. Wolf that Anne's parents wanted to speak to both Mr. Fox and him as soon as possible. Wolf scheduled a conference for Thursday with Mr. Fox and himself.

At the Thursday conference, Anne was represented only by her mother, a professional educator. After the usual greetings, Anne's mother ask Fox if there were objections to her tape recording the meeting. He responded, "Yes! And I resent the implications of such a request." Anne's mother made it clear she only wanted to clarify the facts about the incident under question.

When Anne's mother asked a series of prepared questions about the incident, Fox became very emotional and stood while yelling at the visiting parent. Wolf made no attempt to restrain Fox. After a short time, Fox precipitously dashed across the hall to get the school's principal to "help" with the conference. Soon, Anne's mother found herself in conference with *three* school officials—the ratio was 3 to 1.

The principal, somewhat surprised, listened to the details of the conference while Fox continued to make very emotional responses such as telling Anne's mother that she didn't really care about her daughter. Finally, Fox left to teach his next class, and the principal and the counselor remained to negotiate the issues that had been raised.

Anne's mother presented a prepared statement that contained three specific conditions she wanted addressed: (a) Anne was to have no more after-school conferences unless her parents had prior notice; (b) Anne was to have no more conferences with two school officials, especially males, without prior notice to her parents; and (c) There were to be no recriminations against Anne because of this incident. The principal readily agreed to all three points.

The principal asked Anne's mother if she could think of other things that might be appropriate for this situation. The mother replied that an apology from Mr. Fox to Anne would be fitting. Both the counselor and principal rolled their eyes at the very thought that Fox would even consider such a thing. Without further discussion, Anne's mother shook hands with the two school officials and left.

One would suppose that the incident is over, but that hardly fits the realities of the situation. First, even though she enjoyed the Quick Recall team immensely, Anne resigned from it because she didn't want to risk having Fox hassle her further. Second, Fox has not apologized to the father, the mother, or Anne. Third, so far as any of them know, Fox has not been censured by the school.

What more can the parents do? If they press the school for further action, they run the possibility of becoming involved in a long and expensive legal battle in which the staff probably would be represented by attorneys from both the union and the board of education. At the informal level, Anne, who is a logical candidate for honors, could become the subject of "faculty lounge conversations" that could diminish her chances for awards.

The main point is this: Patrons who approach a school to address issues of justice are confronted by a huge bureaucracy with a multitude of resources for absorbing their inquiries. To be sure, patrons may achieve some success if they "pay the price" just as the father who waited anxiously for Anne; the mother who was insulted by Mr. Fox; and Anne who was both "ambushed" by an accusation and deprived of the joy of participating on the Quick Recall team. By contrast, Mr. Fox who precipitated the difficulties has yet to recognize any responsibility.

Conclusion

There is reason to believe that the supposed lack of public support for public schools is partially attributable to a residue of

disinviting behaviors that various patrons have incurred during their long-term association with schools. The majority of those negative learnings are outcomes of seemingly small incidents in which the school is not fully responsive to the patrons' needs (Aspy & Roebuck, 1996). This chain of circumstances generates an effect similar to retroactive inhibition in which a number of relatively insignificant insults (invitationalists call them oranges) accumulate and finally emerge spontaneously as disruptive acts that are either openly hostile or passively aggressive. Simply put, schools can create their own detractors by being disinviting to their patrons (clients) in a variety of small, apparently minor, ways. Governmental bureaucracies are notorious for generating client hostility via insensitive responding. In medicine, they call it the "white coat syndrome" which causes patients to display symptoms of anxiety when they enter a physician's office. If these situational responses are not remediated, then patients may well avoid essential, even life-saving, treatment.

A solution to the problem could follow a three-step approach. First, (confession) schools could acknowledge that some of their actions, however well-intended, are not fully responsive to patrons' needs. Second, (change) schools could stop issuing disinvitations to their patrons. Third, (growth) schools could learn how to invite their patrons (Purkey & Schmidt, 1990). This process is predicated on the assumption that educators have a sufficiently high level of professionalism to facilitate the positive growth of an endangered, but essential, relationship with their patrons.

In brief, schools and their patrons need at least a quasi-therapeutic relationship because in certain instances the ongoing disinvitations are producing negative outcomes. In real life, educational gridlock is non-productive for everyone. As Wadsworth (1997) said so well, "The public's fears are fundamental; [but] at the core are very real concerns about the future of the children they love" (p. 48). Educators can be curative by tapping into the reservoir of patrons' positive feelings by rigorously inviting them into schools.

References

- Aspy, D., & Roebuck, F. (1996). From human ideas to humane practices and back again many times. *Monograph to education*. Chula Vista, CA: Project Innovation.
- Clinchy, E. (1996). Reforming American education from the bottom to the top. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 78(4), 269.
- Darling-Hammond, L. (1996). The right to learn and the advancement of teaching: Research, policy, and practice for democratic education. *Educational Researcher*, 25(6), 5-9.
- John Doble Research Associates. (1995, April). *Summaries of five research projects*. Dayton, OH: Kettering Foundation Press.
- Lounsbury, J., & Clark, D. (1990). *Inside grade eight*. Reston, VA: National Association of Secondary School Principals.
- Marshall, J. (1996). No one ever said it would be easy. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 78(4), 307.
- Matthews, D. (1996). *Is there a public for public schools?* Dayton, OH: Kettering Foundation Press.
- Parish, R., & Aquila, F. (1996). Cultural ways of working and believing in school. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 78(4), 303.
- Purkey, W., & Schmidt, J. (1990). *Invitational learning for counseling and development*. Ann Arbor, MI: ERIC Counseling and Personnel Services Clearinghouse.
- Wadsworth, D. (1997). The public's view of public schools. *Educational Leadership*, 54(5), 48.

Flora Roebuck is a professor at Texas Woman's University in Denton, TX. Gene Russell and Mack Wedel are retired university professors.