

## **Do We Have the Will To Change?**

**By John Sikula**

Enduring solutions to the ten educational problems posed are, for the most part, known and are in sight. What is not known is if the American people and our leaders have the will, the resolve, and the commitment to change how resources are allocated in this country and to do what we know needs to be done to improve teaching and schooling in America today and in the next century.

The national Association of Teacher Educators (ATE) and Macmillan published in February, 1996, the Second Edition of the *Handbook of Research on Teacher Education*. The volume summarized much of what is known to work successfully in teacher preparation programs of the past, present, and future varieties. Unfortunately, much of what we know works is short-changed or is not implemented for political, economic, personal, or a variety of other reasons. Changing from common to best practice in teacher education and schooling will take more enlightened leadership and greater future resolve and resources than are apparent today.

### **(1) Quality vs Quantity**

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Improved schooling in America must begin with a stronger teaching force. Academically talented people must be attracted to and retained in teaching. Working conditions have to improve for this to happen. Most educational institutions in America today have passed the point of diminishing returns;

they can no longer continue to do more with less. Infrastructures, equipment, buildings, and morale have broken down to the point that tokens and band-aids will no longer work. Quality education is related to resources spent, on teachers, equipment, buildings, instructional programs, and other tangibles obvious in productive learning environments.

The starting point for quality schooling is attracting and retaining high quality teachers. Our current needs for more quantity in many cases have compromised our quality. We are currently allowing many unqualified people to act as teachers in our schools. You get what you pay for in this world, and until we insist on both quality and quantity, which will require that more dollars be spent, we will continue to fight a losing battle. Currently, the incentives are not there to lure the large number of high quality teachers needed for American schools of today and tomorrow. Other employment options are more attractive to talented and committed people. Unless Americans change their priorities, and their purse strings, this problem will only get worse in the future.

### **(2) Majority vs Minority**

Successful schools reflect the communities they serve. As minorities increase in school populations, so must they in the teaching force. Generally, this is not happening today. Affirmative action backlash has stifled progress. This problem can only be addressed in part by growing your own teaching force utilizing the independent resources of all communities and private citizens knowledgeable of the importance of appropriate role modeling in schools. Surely further sensitizing of the vast Caucasian teaching force in America will help as well, but this is no substitute for the absolute need to prepare more minority teachers for American schools. In diversity there is strength. American schools have increasingly diverse student populations, ones best served by an increasingly diverse teaching force. The incentives currently are not being adequately provided to assure that such a diverse teaching force is actualized.

### **(3) Preservice vs Inservice**

There is no one best way to prepare teachers. Effective teaching is a change process occurring over several years. The national teacher shortage in the years ahead will cause many to rethink eliminating undergraduate education majors. This is currently happening in California where people simply cannot wait five or six years any longer for a certified teacher to be produced. The need for teachers is so severe that undergraduate teacher preparation is being reintroduced, for example, in the California State University System of 23 campuses, the largest supplier of licensed teachers in the state. This contradicts what has been supported in most of the reform literature of the last two decades, but the demand for more certified teachers has so outrun supply that shortened programs are considered a must.

#### **(4) Campus vs School Site**

This is not an either-or proposition; collaborations and partnerships that work are simultaneous, and they occur at both locations. Personnel exchanges must take place, as well as frequent activities cross-fertilized at both school and university sites. This simultaneous renewal has been an important theme of the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (AACTE) for several years. There is simply no good reason why public school and university personnel cannot work side by side in fashioning and implementing school improvements. This will require some changes in the university reward structure, but this is happening more and more in universities serious about teacher preparation and school improvement. In this area it is particularly important to have leadership from university presidents, provosts, and vice presidents for academic affairs.

#### **(5) Time vs Money**

Cutting the time required to fully prepare a teacher is shortsighted and counterproductive, if carried to extremes. Fully-certified, effective teachers take several years to develop. New teachers also require mentoring, supervision, and support. When such elements are not in place, many serious problems develop, and teachers in training become more likely to fail.

Providing qualified teachers for area schools is an important part of the mission of many universities. This helps justify their existence and importance. Teacher preparation programs should not be designed for profit. Where they are, students in training are shortchanged and, eventually, students in schools and society are diminished accordingly. Teacher preparation programs of quality allow plenty of time for practice, reflection, analysis, and synthesis before recommending candidates for teaching licenses. Mass production of inferior products must be avoided at all costs.

#### **(6) Specialization vs Generalization**

This issue is a most serious dilemma. Given the reduced length of many preparation programs and the expanded number of accreditation and licensing requirements, it is increasingly difficult to forecast anything but more generic courses which attempt to better infuse technology, multicultural education, mainstreaming, etc. throughout. There is simply not enough space in the curriculum for separate specialization. Any real specialization will increasingly have to come later, after initial certification, in masters and additional licensure programs. Most states today do not allow enough time for much specialization in initial licensure programs.

#### **(7) Theory vs Practice**

The trend toward more practice and less theory has characterized teacher preparation programs for years. But successful practice is not effectively imple-

mented without a sound theoretical base and the understanding of why we do what we generally do in schools. To some extent this is a false dichotomy, but given the constraints and demands of initial certification programs these days, any in-depth theoretical instruction will probably have to occur later in masters and other graduate programs. Like specialization, theory has suffered at the hands of reformers pressed by expediency and the demands of a school system in crisis and politicians in heat to capitalize upon the moment.

### **(8) Professional vs Public**

This issue is unique to American education which literally puts everybody, and consequently nobody, really in charge of education and schooling. The future of schooling and teacher education in the country depends upon partnerships and collaborations across professional, lay, business, political, and other groups. In our many-layered system, no single element will ever be in complete control. This is by design. Our federal constitution delegates authority for education to states, which in turn promote local control of programs. Despite a movement toward national standards, the local control tradition of American education is not likely to change much.

In reality, local teachers control much of what happens in schools. If schools are really to change, teachers have to change. For several years now, I have argued that teachers need to become ARCs—American Reconstitutioneers of Culture—change agents willing to be more proactive in exerting more control in the “profession” of teaching. Without a truly “professional” teaching force, one with significant influence on what really happens in classrooms, the “profession” will remain splintered, divided, and controlled by others—laypersons and politicians alike. Teaching will be a true “profession” in the future to the extent that teachers themselves exercise more control over hiring, salaries, working conditions, standards, promotions, and other important aspects of all professions.

### **(9) Information vs Myth**

What we know from research which constitutes best practice is not always common practice in schools. We know what works in effective schooling, but we do not always have the resources, expertise, or will to implement it. Again, this is where ARCs are critical. Effective teachers of the future must base their practice on what works. For example, California politicians have recently been convinced that a 20:1 student-teacher ratio in the elementary classroom is more effective for reading and other educational purposes than a 30:1 ratio. Many educators/researchers have known this for years, but politically they had to educate politicians about what works in schools. ARCs will have to do more of this type of educating in the future if our continuing tide of mediocrity in American schools is to be reversed. Connections between resources spent on education and school performance and later productive citizenship need to be popularized. Again, research like that gathered in the 1996 *Handbook* is available to help document the case.

### **(10) Long-Range vs Short-Range**

In education, Americans have continually sought quick fixes. However, we have not invested, percentage wise, nearly enough of our resources in schooling and teacher salaries as other countries have. Among the 17 most industrialized nations of the world, the United States ranks last in the percentage of gross national product devoted to schooling. California, our richest state, likewise, ranks near the bottom of the 50 states on per-pupil expenditure in schools. Such spending patterns simply have to change for schools to improve.

We as a nation, obviously, have not yet realized that investment up front in education can prevent billions of dollars spent later on corrective programs. In the *Handbook*, we learn that \$7.16 is returned for every \$1 invested in high-quality preschool in which the curriculum facilitates active learning and promotes decision making and parent involvement. Yet in 1990, half of the states spent less than \$25 annually per child on the education of its youngest children. Such statistics must be further popularized before the shift in resources necessary to improve schooling in America will come about. The problems we have created for ourselves over the years will take considerable time to resolve, but they are resolvable.

When a crisis exists as a result of a natural disaster, billions of dollars are deployed immediately to address the issue. Where are the funds to address the crisis in American schools?

### **Conclusion**

The information is at hand on how to provide quality schooling in America. What is not present is the will of the American people and our elected officials to direct the resources required to make effective schooling universal in America. This will happen not by our asking further questions but rather by educators and others taking more assertive action to bring to the attention of those in control of resources the direct connections which exist between investment in education and productive citizenship. Improvement in schooling and teacher education in the United States will be successful to the extent that educators establish via research and make known to the public and to budget-controlling authorities the clear relationships that exist between investment in education and productive learning and citizenship. Until educators become more proactive, demanding, political, and willing to serve as American Reconstructioners of Culture (ARCs), our educational system will continue to drift with the tide of mediocrity as resources flow to other more visible and vocal areas.

### **Reference**

Sikula J., Buttery, T.J., & Guyton, E. (Eds.). (1996). *Handbook of Research on Teacher Education*, Second Edition. New York: Macmillan.