

# The Student Voice

Teachers must learn to really listen to their students.

By John G. Kerbs

“**T**hank you for your talks. I appreciate them, but there’s one thing I’m disappointed in. . . .” A young student proceeded to point out a deficiency in the speaker’s presentations. The nerve! A mere student, many years his junior, giving him advice on how to speak! He went to his wife for sympathy. After hearing the student’s complaint, she affirmed seriously, “I think he’s right!” Adjustments were made that later brought positive comments from both critics. One can learn a great deal from those much younger and less experienced.

## Let Them Talk

Administrators seldom believe that there is a real need for student help in school government. Student suggestions are often heard with an amused tolerance, with the paternalistic attention given to the prattling of a child. “Let them come in; we’ll listen to anything,” said one administrator. “Let them talk; it will make them feel good.” True, it will, but has

the administration and faculty nothing to gain? Is the indulgence of a student’s desire to be heard merely an accommodation to *his* needs for self-expression?

Davis lists ten reasons for the participation of student groups in school government.<sup>1</sup> Some of these are: that the student may learn democratic processes and develop leadership abilities, to better orient new students, and improve student-faculty relationships. The major emphasis is the training of the *student*—developing his skills by participation in school management and other “worthwhile projects.” Nowhere is it stated, except by implication, that administrators and faculty will benefit from student involvement, that the school will be *better managed* as a result.

## Students Are Wise and Insightful

The basic problem is this: Administrators need to discover that students are wise and insightful, even in areas where administrators and faculty may be blind. They need to know that these “inferiors,” if genuinely appreciated, will often contribute ideas superior to their own. Until it is actually believed that a school can be better run by involving students

in its government, the feeble attempts to “let them help if they want to” will only bring frustration to the students and cheat administrators out of valuable assistance.

In a 1969 survey only 35 percent of teachers and 20 percent of parents called for more student participation in policy making.<sup>2</sup> Apparently many elders feel their only mission is to create situations where the young can learn from them!

## A Game Called Student Council

One principal sums up the situation thus:

Most principals are involved in a game called “student council” where they give the student council very little authority and they let them discuss only the peripheral concerns of the school. It’s a kind of hoax they have perpetuated; these principals convince the students that the councils are doing something important when in reality, the councils are just going through the motions of considering and acting on trivia.<sup>3</sup>

On a teacher-effectiveness survey, a prep school student wrote, “Why don’t you get out from behind that pulpit and stop preaching?” The teacher did. He relegated his lectern to the basement and joined the circle of students. How thankful he was that he had asked for student opinion!

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## **Middle-ear Illness Impedes Learning**

*“Repeated middle-ear infections during the first three years of life—the critical period in speech and language development—may be to blame for some youngsters’ later learning disabilities, two Univ. of Tennessee researchers suspect.*

“Intermittent bouts of middle-ear illness, accompanied by temporary hearing loss, can interfere with the young child’s ability to make order and sense out of spoken information, Drs. Peter W. Zinkus and Marvin I. Gottlieb, of the Univ.’s Health Science Center, propose.

“Their study of 60 seven-to-eleven-year-olds with learning problems revealed a difference in the kind and extent of disabilities experienced by 20 children with a history of chronic middle ear infection (otitis media) and those shown by the 40 youngsters who had few or no such episodes. Children whose medical record revealed approximately five middle-ear infections per year during their first three years had been much slower to develop language skills. Their scores on IQ tests were lower than the other children’s and they lagged further behind in reading, spelling, and arithmetic.”—*Today’s Child*, November, 1980. Reprinted by permission from *Today’s Child* newsmagazine, Roosevelt, New Jersey 08555.

## **Free Breast Cancer Manual Available**

*The Breast Cancer Advisory Center has announced the publication of “If You’ve Thought About Breast Cancer . . .,” a how-to manual for women who have symptoms of possible breast cancer. This consumer-oriented manual con-*

tains information from detection and diagnosis to surgical procedures, prevention, and where to call for help. The information in the brochure has been approved by experts at the National Cancer Center Institute.

To obtain a free copy of “If You’ve Thought About Breast Cancer . . .” write to: The Office of Cancer Communications, National Cancer Institute, Bethesda, Maryland 20205, or call toll free (800) 638-6694.

## **Schools Stigmatize Children From Single-Parent Families**

*“The number of single-parent families in the U.S. has increased dramatically during the last decade. But a new survey conducted by the National Committee for Citizens in Education (NCCE) indicates that schools continue to stigmatize the children and their family situations as abnormal—not only in school policies and practices, but also in the attitudes of school personnel. . . .*

“According to Census Bureau figures, one family in five—a total of nearly 6 million—consists of a single parent with children under the age of 18.

“NCCE’s survey of 1,237 single parents in 47 states showed that:

“Nearly half of the parents said they had had the experience of hearing school personnel use terms like ‘broken homes,’ or other pejorative language, when they were referring to single-parent families.

“More than 40 percent of the parents said that their children’s schools planned social events for only the mother or father to attend with their children, and 64 percent said their children

had been asked to make gifts in school for the absent mother or father.

“More than 45 percent of the parents believed that the personnel of their children’s schools assumed that any problems their children might have were related to their single-parent status.

“More than a third of the parents said that their children’s textbooks did not show as ‘normal’ any family style other than that with two parents present in the home.

“Only about one in 20 schools informed the noncustody parent about school activities or sent them report cards.”—*Education Summary*, March 15, 1981. Reprinted by permission of the publisher, Croft-NEI Publications. Copyright © Bureau of Business Practice, Inc.

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## **The Student Voice**

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Surely we could learn a great deal more than we do from students in many important areas. If only we could make ourselves more vulnerable, if we could overcome our sensitivity and defensiveness, and accept gracefully—no, *gratefully*, even comments that hurt.

## **Student Criticism and Protest**

First, we must recognize the legitimacy of, and necessity for, some forms of student criticism and protest. Sometimes this seems the only way to effect change, even change that is long overdue. If someone had not screamed in outrage, we might still be reading in some school handbook: hair “must not touch the ears, be at least one inch above the collar, and two finger-widths above the eyebrow!”

We must not brand the pro-  
testor a troublesome rabble-  
rouser, except in the rarest  
cases. It must never be threaten-  
ing, or foolhardy, or even be  
labeled inappropriate, to ques-  
tion a school rule or policy.

### A World of Make-believe

As one group of educators  
put it:

It seems to us that there is much that  
is positive in what students say and there  
is reason to consider their concerns. To  
deny student rights to present demands  
is to seek comfort in a world of make-  
believe. Asserting the preeminence of  
administrative authority or professional  
expertise as reasons for not responding  
to student concerns will only encourage  
students to be more vigorous in their  
protests. . . .

Many student demands to change  
schools are evidence that efforts to  
teach young people to think critically  
and care about their future have been  
successful. . . .

While we regard student activism as  
an essentially positive force, we do not  
want to be misinterpreted as condoning  
student violence or calling for general  
acquiescence to student demands. Nor  
do we believe students should be free to  
disregard school rules in dramatizing  
their protests. We do urge that student  
demands be treated as the concerns of  
sincere clients unless their manner of  
presentation indicates otherwise.<sup>1</sup>

### Why, Not Who

Nevertheless, is it wise to take  
lightly even improper, cowardly  
forms of protest? Is it in good  
judgment to ignore a note or let-  
ter simply because it is anonym-  
ous? Whether a protest or  
criticism is found in an "under-  
ground paper," or on the rest  
room wall, or written with eggs  
on the front door, we should  
never be so preoccupied with  
*who* that we fail to also ask  
*why*.

If a teacher seems the object  
of frequent abuse, with his  
name appearing in uncomplimentary  
verse or other "art"  
forms, there may be a reason.  
Interviewing a student, or two,  
or three, will often reveal an  
answer—perhaps a more accu-  
rate one than the teacher  
himself would give.

### Are We Listening?

Can we give attention to this  
kind of protest without encour-  
aging malicious or destructive  
protest? Is it possible that more  
acceptable forms of complaint  
will be utilized if we clearly pro-  
vide them, showing the students  
that we are not only willing, but  
eager, to listen? There will no  
doubt always be some unprovoked  
vandalism, but students  
must never think that it takes a  
fire to get our attention.

Student concerns about the  
curriculum, the quality of  
teaching, assemblies, or chapels  
must be heard with genuine  
interest and appreciation, and  
must not be dismissed with the  
attitude, even if unexpressed,  
"What do they know about  
teaching?" or "Who's running  
this place, anyway?" Perhaps  
there could be a suggestion box,  
with students being encouraged  
to use it frequently. We should  
make it clear that we really do  
wish to hear from our youth.

### Team Spirit Can Develop

Anonymous notes should be  
welcome; after all, the writers'  
desire to remain unidentified  
may be more our fault than  
theirs. This timidity may disap-  
pear as the atmosphere of open-  
ness and team spirit develops.  
And let us never fail to take  
careful note of the complaints  
of the "bad kids" as well as  
those of the good students.

Monterey Bay Academy has  
periodically conducted a "town  
hall" type of assembly when the  
students can dialog with the  
principal. There must be "con-  
tinued refinement of mecha-  
nisms which allow students to  
be heard and exert influence in  
the policy-making process to  
the limits of their responsi-  
bility without disrupting that  
process."<sup>2</sup>

Innovative developments have included  
establishing a student ombudsman,  
involving students in curriculum  
studies, placing students on advisory  
committees, involving students in the

selection of . . . principals, and allowing  
students to elect a representative to the  
board.<sup>6</sup>

### More Than Acquiescence

To achieve productive stu-  
dent participation in levels  
higher than the student associa-  
tion or class activities will in  
most schools demand more than  
acquiescence on the part of  
administrators and faculty. It  
will often require effective tech-  
niques and plans to tap the  
capable and creative mind of  
our youth.

And once the student voice  
has been heard, we must be will-  
ing to make changes when they  
are warranted. Further, we  
must develop methods for  
accomplishing these changes.  
Either to hear without acting, or  
to act without hearing, will per-  
petuate alienation, frustration,  
and disillusionment. Education  
administration will thus con-  
tinue to be robbed of one of its  
most fertile and helpful sources  
of advice and assistance—the  
student voice.

The words of Dr. Joseph  
Manch, in 1969 the superinten-  
dent of schools in Buffalo, New  
York, neatly sum it up:

. . . we have witnessed a responsible—  
though increasingly vocal—demand for  
a more active role in school affairs. The  
easy and dangerous solution to these  
demands is to promise everything and  
deliver nothing, a pattern sometimes  
followed with disastrous results. Once  
you recognize that students will be  
inventive, responsible members of the  
school community, you begin to deal  
with problems effectively, drawing  
youngsters into the mainstream of  
education.<sup>7</sup>

### FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup> E. Dale Davis, *Focus on Secondary Edu-  
cation* (Glenview, Illinois: Scott, Foresman  
and Company, 1966), p. 207.

<sup>2</sup> "The Life Poll: Crisis in the High  
Schools," *Life*, (May 16, 1969), pp. 22-42.

<sup>3</sup> Allan Glathorn, et al., "Students and  
Principals Discuss Today's Issues," *The Bul-  
letin of the National Association of Secondary  
School Principals* (February, 1968), 52:22.

<sup>4</sup> Roald F. Campbell, et al., *The Organi-  
zation and Control of American Schools*  
(Columbus, Ohio: Charles E. Merrill Publish-  
ing Company, 1975), p. 296.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 297.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 294.

<sup>7</sup> Quoted in *Nation's Schools* (March,  
1969), 83:65.