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## The Challenge of School Board Membership

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THE CHALLENGE OF SCHOOL BOARD MEMBERSHIP

When your President asked me, some months ago, to speak on this program she suggested as my subject -- "The Challenge of School Board Membership." When I inquired as to what specifically she had in mind, she demonstrated her understanding of human nature (and especially of those who venture to make public speeches) by saying that this subject would permit me to talk on anything I pleased. This latitude was irresistible, and here I am.

But, as is always the case when one accepts a speech to be delivered several months off, the day of reckoning finally came. The comfortable feeling of being able to say anything I pleased disappeared rather quickly, especially when I realized that I would be talking to fellow school board members -- to an expert audience who knows as much or more than I do about public education. Nor has my task been made any easier by the presence of my own Superintendent, Hi Willett, who presumably came to Roanoke to be sure that I did not stray too far from the reservation.

In any event, and with obvious misgivings, I will talk tonight about the position of the local school boards in American



education, some of the forces which may be working to undermine this position, and what school boards must do if they are to continue to occupy their present vital role in American life.

### The Position and Importance of the American School Board

At the outset, it might be well to indicate the magnitude of the responsibilities of the school boards throughout America. There are a total of some 173,000 school board members; local boards employ some 13,000 administrative personnel, and an instructional staff of 1,455,000 teachers. School boards direct an educational enterprise involving billions of dollars in capital investment and operating cost. They set the educational policies that affect the extent and quality of the education of some 36 million pupils.

The implications of these responsibilities are staggering. Correspondingly, the opportunities of school boards to influence the future of our country possibly equal those of any other segment of American society.

It may be worthwhile at this point to recall that the American local school board has no counterpart in any other country. Indeed, our system of free public education is so unique that experts from foreign lands simply cannot understand it. In most other countries, public education is controlled by the national government and authority at the local level is nominal or non-existent.



Possible Threats to the Independence  
of Local School Boards

In recent years, perhaps as never before, our unique educational system has been under attack. These attacks have come from varying sources and for varying reasons.

It may be useful to take a look at the nature and sources of some of this criticism. There has been a stream of critical books and articles in recent years -- typified by the best seller, "Why Johnny Can't Read." There will always be critical comment on anything as important to the American people as public education. A certain amount of criticism is no doubt wholesome and constructive in a democracy.

It is not this type of criticism which gives me concern. I am more disturbed by the less publicized, but more dangerous, forces which could undermine the educational independence of the local school board. This independence from political and partisan pressures is a hallmark of our free public school system, and we must be zealous to preserve it.

Virginia has a notable tradition in this respect. Local school boards are provided for by our State Constitution, and have always enjoyed a large degree of autonomy.

But recent developments in Virginia give some cause for concern. The perplexing issue of desegregation has resulted in



significant changes in Virginia educational policy; many of our statutes have been revised; and there has been a shift in the emphasis as between state and local control.

While we all understand the forces which brought about these changes, the end result has been to increase the role of the legislative bodies -- both state and local -- and correspondingly diminish the authority of the local school boards. I refer, for example, to the State Pupil Placement Act, the scholarship law, and the Fund Cut-Off provisions.

It may be that these laws are necessary for this period in our history, and therefore I do not criticize them. I merely suggest that they do detract from the independence and authority of local boards, and this in itself is an unwelcome trend.

#### The Challenge of Federal Intervention

Let us turn now to the relationship between the Federal Government and public education. Here, in my judgment, we are confronted with an even more portentous challenge. This is the challenge of Federal intervention and control which in the long run could reduce local school boards to inconsequential satellites of a Federal bureaucracy.

The Federal Government has already moved significantly into public education. It provides subsidies of various kinds,



from financial assistance under the National Defense Education Act to school lunches. It is increasingly active in scholarship programs, and both national political parties are now committed to the principle of substantial Federal aid for school construction.

Much of this seems desirable and beneficial, up to this time. And yet, this type of action creates a major dilemma.

How far can the Federal Government go in aiding public education without reaching the point of objectionable intervention and control? The <sup>concern</sup> difficulty is that a political trend, once started, is difficult -- if not impossible -- to check.

The current Presidential campaign affords an illustration of this danger. Both parties are for increased Federal aid to education -- of course without any professed aspiration to intervene or control. But the platforms and candidates of both parties go further than past Administrations, and the Democratic candidate is now urging Federal aid specifically to increase teachers' salaries.

Regardless of our personal choices for the Presidency, I am confident that most school board members -- in Virginia and throughout the country -- are opposed to specific Federal subsidy of teachers' salaries. Once the National Government assumes responsibility in this area, it will never withdraw. On the contrary, the politicians will tend to compete with each other



to increase Federal contributions. And with these increases, the long hand of Federal bureaucracy will gradually subvert the independence and authority of state and local boards of education.

There would also be other disturbing consequences. As the Federal Government moved in, the states and localities would be inclined less and less to meet their own responsibilities.

Of even greater concern would be the possible erosive effect upon the independence of our teachers. This is no criticism of our fine teachers. It merely reflects the experience of mankind down through the ages to the effect that he who controls the purse strings can, if he will, control almost everything else.

In my view the free public school system, financed and operated by state and local boards and essentially responsible to the communities it serves, is the single greatest bulwark of our democracy. It is a first duty of school board members to fight, whenever and wherever necessary, to preserve the political independence and educational integrity of this unique American institution.

State and Localities Must  
Meet Their Responsibilities

There are many of us, especially in the South, who talk bravely about states' rights and about our desire to avoid Federal



interference in our economic and political life. The trouble is that relatively few are willing to insist that the states and localities adequately discharge their responsibilities so that the need or opportunity for Federal intervention is minimized.

The question of teachers' salaries is a case in point. It is generally agreed that these salaries have not kept pace with rising wage and salary levels in other trades and professions. It is also agreed that teachers' salaries are not adequate to attract into the profession a sufficient number of highly qualified young men and women to meet our national needs.

The responsibility for facing this issue lies squarely on state and local governmental bodies. Ultimately, it lies on our citizenry who must demand that this responsibility be more adequately discharged. It is obvious that the greater our failure to meet this need, the greater will be the temptation for Federal action.

The Quality of Education Must  
Meet Our National Needs

From the viewpoint of the public interest, the level of teachers' salaries is a means toward an end -- not an end in itself. The end, of course, is improvement in the quality of education, and the assurance that the product of our schools meets the exacting demands of these perilous times.



Few speeches are now made on the subject of education without a recognition that the schools are in the front lines of the fateful contest with International Communism. Following my visit to the Soviet Union two years ago, I spoke widely in Virginia on the threat of Soviet education -- as it is being employed as a means to accomplish Communist domination of the world.

There is no doubt as to the reality of this threat, and equally no doubt as to the essentiality of our meeting it successfully if we are to survive. This means that the schools and universities of America must produce for the indefinite future the quantity and quality of trained citizenry which will enable America to remain free from Communist enslavement.

This is indeed a sobering responsibility -- not merely to our respective communities but to the entire country. Unless this responsibility is fully discharged at the state and local levels, it will be necessary in the national interest -- if it is then not too late -- for the Federal Government to intervene drastically.

#### Progress in Virginia

There is insufficient time to discuss tonight whether we in Virginia are meeting this responsibility reasonably well. I



will, however, make a few general observations. At the state level, we are making commendable progress. The State Board of Education has moved significantly to improve standards for teacher certification and to strengthen the curricula of our schools. The new state requirements for high schools, released in 1958, was a major step forward -- even though, in my judgment, it should have been more demanding.

The work of the Spong Commission on Education is especially notable. Its preliminary recommendations were heartening to all who believe that Virginia must press forward vigorously to improve our public education. It is gratifying that the General Assembly, at its 1960 session, acted favorably on some of these recommendations.

At the local level, it is obviously difficult for any one school board member to have an informed judgment beyond the area of his own responsibility. I have the feeling nevertheless that real progress is being made. This fine organization, through meetings of this kind and through many committees, is making a significant contribution. There is now a favorable atmosphere in Virginia for improvement in education, and this is attributable in no small part to the dedication of school board members as well as administrative officers and school faculties.

If I were forced to make a negative comment, it would be that school boards generally devote too much attention to



ministerial and housekeeping duties, and too little attention to the curriculum, the adequacy of instruction, and to other matters directly related to the quality of education itself.

A school board which neglects to face up to these responsibilities is failing to perform its most meaningful task. It is this sort of failure which justifies some of the criticism of our educational system, and in the long run may invite Federal intervention.

#### Conclusion

Having served on the Richmond School Board for more than ten years, and with my retirement scheduled for next June, I have the sentiment -- without the wisdom -- of an elder statesman in public education. I believe deeply in the basic soundness of the American public school system. I am unmoved by those who urge that the European or Soviet system is better. I believe that our free public schools, with all of their faults, have played a major role in the development of this great country of ours.

And although there are some who choose to disparage America and her leadership in the world, no person can deny that in a relatively short space of time this country has progressed from modest beginnings to the most powerful nation the earth has ever known.



We are not only the most powerful, industrially and militarily, but we have also attained the highest standard of living for the greatest number of people; we have shared our enormous wealth generously with less fortunate nations; and we have established and maintained standards of freedom which are the hope and aspiration of countless millions in other nations.

I say to Admiral Rickover, and other detractors of American education, that this country's unparalleled attainments -- both spiritual and material -- are hardly the product of an inferior educational system.

And yet the past is never so important as the future. I believe it was H. G. Wells who, as early as 1920, predicted that the world was confronted with a "race between education and catastrophe." I would have thought his figure of speech had little validity in 1920, but few would disagree with it today. The world does face catastrophe -- of unimaginable proportions. This catastrophe looms in two ominous forms -- nuclear destruction or dominance by governments that blot out the freedom of men.

I agree with Wells' implication that education, in America and throughout the world, is the best and almost the only means of avoiding catastrophe. Having this belief, it seems to me that taking some significant part in education is perhaps the highest form of public service. I commend each of you for rendering this service -- unheralded and unselfishly -- and wish you well.