

# Choices

Public Education for the 21st Century

*Don L. Fuhr*

UNIVERSITY  
PRESS OF  
AMERICA



# Choices

Public Education for the 21st Century

***Don L. Fuhr***

*Educational Administration*

*Clemson University*

*Clemson, South Carolina*

UNIVERSITY  
PRESS OF  
AMERICA



Lanham • New York • London

Copyright © 1990 by  
**University Press of America®**, Inc.

4720 Boston Way  
Lanham, Maryland 20706

3 Henrietta Street  
London WC2E 8LU England

All rights reserved  
Printed in the United States of America  
British Cataloging in Publication Information Available

**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Fuhr, Don L., 1934—  
Choices : public education for the 21st century / Don L. Fuhr.  
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references

I. Education—United States.

I. Title.

LA212.F8 1990 370'.973—dc20 90-38140 CIP

ISBN 0-8191-7879-9 (alk. paper)  
ISBN 0-8191-7880-2 (pbk. : alk. paper)



™ The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of American National Standard for Information Sciences—Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI Z39.48-1984.



## Acknowledgements

All books are collaborative efforts, for our thoughts and beliefs come from those who influence our lives. I thank my many colleagues in the field who have enlarged and clarified my perceptions and insights regarding the modern-day world of public education.

It is difficult to single out those who have contributed to the completion of this work. However, this book became a reality due to the dedication and shared commitment of Joyce Farr who provided her clerical talents, energy, and support to keep things moving along from beginning to end.

My gratitude goes to Elaine Lesley who contributed her editing skills and suggestions throughout the manuscript. My deep gratitude is especially extended to John Wade, principal of Edwards Junior High (selected as one of the outstanding junior high schools in the country in 1989), who served as a sounding board for many of the ideas and practices suggested in the following pages.

My thanks also go to the following individuals: Kathy Brazinski, Joel Evans, and Mark Rowe who in one way or another contributed their ideas and time towards the completion of this book.

I extend my gratitude and deep appreciation to my mother, Ruthie (who at ninety-one can carry on a lively discussion on any topic), for her love, discipline and advice along the way; to my late father who taught me dedication and hard work pays off; and to my three children - Janet, Donna, and Mark - who made parenting a joy and an honor.

Most of all, I am grateful to my wife, Annie, who was always there when I needed her--reading and motivating me to keep plowing ahead. Her unselfish giving and love helped bring this project to completion.

-----

Most of the single-page quotes were taken from a special edition of Business Week magazine by Dennis P. Doyle, 1989, pp. E4 - E122, entitled Endangered Species: Children of Promise.

## Preface

Legend has it that long ago and far away there lived a kind, loving and much respected wise man. In the same land was a rich prince who hated the wise man. He saw the wise man taking from him the love of the people. The people listened to the wise man but not the prince and that angered the prince beyond belief. One day the prince said to his followers, "I have a plan whereby I can discredit the wise man - a way in which I can make him appear to be a fool. Each day the wise man goes to the market place where he speaks to people and gives them advice. Tomorrow I will go as a peasant. In my hand, I shall hold a white dove. When the crowd has gathered, I will raise my voice and say, 'Wise man, I have a simple question. This dove that I hold in my hand, is it alive or dead?' If he says alive, I will crush the bird in my hand and let it fall dead to the ground. If he says dead, I will open my hand and let the bird fly away. This surely will discredit the old man and the people will once again turn to me."

The next day as the crowd gathered in the market place, the rich prince, dressed as a peasant, waited until the crowd gathered and then he shouted, "Wise man, I would ask a simple question. This dove which I hold in my hand, is it alive or dead?" The crowd grew quiet and all eyes turned toward the wise man. The wise man paused, then looked at the prince disguised as a peasant, and said, "That which you hold in your hand, it is ... what you make of it. The choice is yours" (Mamchak, 1983).

The American people have the "dove of public education" in their collective hands, and they have the power to make the necessary changes. They too need to know what the problems are before they can make intell-

igent choices about the kind of schools they want for their community. This book will present certain information that may be common knowledge for those employed by school districts, but not well known by the people they serve. The goal is to present current issues confronting public education, to submit some practical suggestions on how to handle these pressing issues, to motivate the readers (taxpayers) to get involved by actually acquainting themselves with the needs of their schools, and to make the necessary choices to raise the standards in their own community schools. As with the dove, we can choose to support and upgrade our public school systems and watch them soar to great heights; or we can choose to keep a tight grip, resisting needed change, and watch our schools slowly decay.

There are many excellent books and articles published proclaiming the need for upgrading our schools. Television and newspapers offer get-smart-quick remedies for students who desire to improve their test scores. New curriculum packages are offered every year in valiant hope to stimulate both the teacher and the student. Educational reform packages call for extending the school year with more time being devoted to the teaching of reading, writing and arithmetic. Everyone is jumping up and down over the concern for public education in this country, but very few are moving ahead. The improvement that needs to take place in public education will come from the choices that are made in the next few years. The responsibility for those choices and changes are in the hands of every taxpayer; most specifically, the parents of the students in the classrooms.

Some communities have seen what is happening nationally: an ever-increasing dropout rate, schools producing graduates who are ill prepared and unable to take over the reins of a new century with its new demands. They are getting involved in their schools; volunteering their time to act as teacher aides; donating needed visual aids, computers, equipment; and, most importantly, supporting their children's teachers and school administrators. For some communities, the reverse is true. In spite of all the books that have been written crying for reform and all the protests of overburdened teachers, much of the public still has the

attitude, "well, good ol' P.S. 41 was good enough for me, it's good enough for my kids." The fact is, folks, that what we learned in the classroom twenty years ago will not prepare our children today for the demanding, high-tech jobs in this computer-oriented world. Everyone is aware of the fact that the outside pressures - changes in the culture, the impact of single-parenting, drugs, latch-key kids - have tremendous impact on what happens inside the school. Throwing money at the problems will not make them go away. There are some basic changes and choices that must be made not only to prepare our children for their future jobs, but to instill in them a love for learning, a respect for their teachers, a desire to grow intellectually through all of their lives, and a longing to know more.

I must say at the outset that there are many, many quality schools in this country with outstanding leadership, tremendous community support, and enthusiastic teachers and students. The problem is that this is not the norm. What do these "ideal" school systems do that make them work where other schools fail? The one thing that the thriving, healthy schools have in common regardless of where they are located or the amount of resources that are available, is strong, effective, assertive leadership at the top combined with the respect and visible support of the community. To the taxpayers it means consciously making the choice to learn what's happening in their schools today and then choosing to make a commitment to support the endeavors that lead to educational excellence as we near the beginning of the 21st century.

It is my hope that this book informs you, the reader, about what is going on in public education today. It is my goal that after reading, you will choose to hold the dove in your hand and help set it aloft in order that our public schools will soar to greater heights.



# Contents

Acknowledgements . . . . .	iii
Preface . . . . .	vii
1. The Challenges of Public Education: How Extensive Are They? . . . . .	1
2. Can Administrators Administrate? . . . . .	21
3. Can Teachers Teach? . . . . .	51
4. What About School Boards? . . . . .	81
5. Who's Teaching Our Teachers? . . . . .	111
6. Self-Interest Groups: How Powerful Are They? . . . . .	141
7. Where Do The Stockholders Fit In? . . . . .	167
8. Your Choice: Private or Public Education? . . . . .	199
9. The Curriculum: Where Is It Heading? . . . . .	225
10. What Are The Choices? . . . . .	249
References . . . . .	273

---

## Chapter 1

---

# The Challenges of Public Education: How Extensive Are They?

*"Just as it is necessary for individuals to accept and even welcome challenges to their maps of reality and modi operandi if they are to grow in wisdom and effectiveness, so it is necessary for organizations to accept and welcome challenges if they are to be viable and progressive institutions."*

--M. Scott Peck  
The Road Less Traveled

Public education is big business. During the school year 1988-89, 40.2 million students were enrolled in elementary and secondary schools in the United States. The average spending for each student in public elementary and secondary schools has improved, rising from \$3,988 per child in 1986-87 to \$4,509 during the 1988-89 school year. Total expenditures for elementary and secondary education, including capital outlay and interest, accounted for 185.9 billion dollars in 1988-89. With an estimated instructional staff of more than 2.6 million (classroom teachers, non-supervisory instructional staff, principals and supervisors), effective management at local, state, and national levels of public education becomes an enormous challenge (Data Search, 1989).

The second challenge facing leaders of our present day public schools involves funding. There is no question that inadequate funding has hurt public edu-

cation. State and federal governments have played political games at the expense, rather than the benefit, of public education. This country spends twenty times more annually to keep a person in prison than it does to educate a student in our public schools. To achieve a better product in public education, we must be willing to pay for what it costs to hire good administrators and teachers. Marc Tucker, executive director of the Carnegie Forum on Education and the Economy, stated, "If we're going to be competitive, it's going to cost more." Tucker's recommendation calls for a 50-percent increase in teachers' salaries bringing the average up to \$35,000 a year. This increase would make public school teachers in the United States stand slightly above that of Japanese teachers. The average public school teacher's salary (1988-89) in the United States is \$29,567 (Data Search, 1989, pp. 1-10); and experts, such as economist Lester Thurow, are predicting that it will take \$20 billion to raise teacher salaries \$10,000 a year. Thurow states, "Talking about raising teacher standards without raising wages is to talk about the impossible. In a capitalist economy, Americans get the quality that they are willing to pay for" (Education Week, 24 July 1987, p. 14).

The third challenge facing our elementary and secondary schools involves the present-day responsibilities of the school administrator. No longer are school administrators looked upon as those with easy jobs. Administrators are faced with ever-changing "issues of the day" which involve more and more demands on their time. Some of us can remember the day when our principal or superintendent could walk into the classroom and not a sound was heard. Gone are the days when school administrators had total support and respect without outside interference from the community and special interest groups. In comparison to present times, the education profession in the early and mid-twentieth century was a protected position for school administrators. State and federal governments had not yet invented the modern bureaucratic machine, so school administrators enjoyed opening school in the fall and closing it in the spring without the hassle of insurmountable meetings, paper work, and work stoppages. The scene has changed drastically. I am not aware of any other group of management personnel in private or

public sectors that has had a more radical change in responsibilities and duties than public school administrators. The problems connected with this rapidly changing role for public school management personnel are compounded by sub-par salaries and a lack of training to cope with the societal changes that affect public education. Although more will be said about school administrators in Chapter 2, let us briefly take a look at one aspect of school administration, the position of superintendent of schools in the United States today.

The average length of service for a superintendent of schools in a large urban school system (50,000 plus student population) in this country is slightly more than four years. The job of superintendent of schools is a perilous position. An increasing number of superintendents annually search for top-level positions in other school systems primarily because they trust a new location will offer added stability and security over their present position.

The fact is, the system cannot build a solid management team to lead an organization such as a public school system when top level administrators only stay long enough to discover the streets that lead to each school in their district. Until recently, certain school districts in Georgia and South Carolina, for example, selected their local school superintendent by popular vote. In one Georgia district, the grand jury appointed the school board members and every four years the superintendent was, and still is elected by popular vote. As a result, the position of superintendent of schools in such districts is shaky. One can easily see how "playing politics" might take precedence over effective management. For many, July 1 each year signals the changing of the guard. Some school boards offer only a one-year contract to their new superintendent so they can assess performance for one year vs. granting a three-year term. If they don't like what they see at the end of one year, the recently hired superintendent is out and the search is on again. Accountable leadership cannot exist in our public school systems when there is constant mobility on the part of chief school executives.

The fourth challenge facing public education today relates to the largest professional group in this country - public school teachers. Walk into any elementary or secondary classroom today, and you will immediately understand the challenges facing teachers. Teachers are torn between attempting to cope with behavioral problems facing modern-day youth on one hand, while on the other, attempting to motivate them to learn in order to meet state mandated achievement requirements. Teaching is a demanding profession, and the outcry is for less bureaucratic paperwork and more time to teach. Teachers from rural, suburban and urban school districts are constantly in search of materials and programs that will work in their classrooms enabling them to deal with monumental social changes.

Consider these findings that appeared in the Principal, January 1986, a monthly publication of the National Association of Elementary School Principals, about today's children:

- . 14 percent are illegitimate
- . 40 percent will be living with a single parent by their eighteenth birthday
- . 30 percent are "latchkey" children
- . 20 percent live in poverty
- . 15 percent speak another language
- . 15 percent have physical or mental handicaps
- . 10 percent have poorly educated parents.

Many teachers who teach under these conditions can do little more than maintain order in the classroom. The end result is a bogged-down educational system, which is unable to meet the needs of students who must be prepared for a new century of living.

The fifth challenge facing public education relates to the top governing body of public school systems: school boards. The primary responsibility of a board of education is (1) to formulate policies and (2) to see that the policies are implemented within the school district. However, with the enormous complexities of public education today, school boards in this country are constantly searching for ways to cope with the governing of their respective school districts.

**"If I've learned one thing,  
it's that the answer to  
virtually all our national  
problems--from  
international competitiveness  
to improving our standard  
of living to the very  
security of our nation--  
ultimately rests on  
one word ...'education'."**

**--Robert D. Kirkpatrick,  
Chairman, CIGNA**

For example, in November 1983, the majority of school districts in Illinois (1011 total school districts) had a minimum of four seats out of a total seven-member board up for re-election. The final outcome of the elections caused many changes to occur in school systems throughout the state. Superintendents were dismissed, division existed among old and new board members, and politics dominated local school districts more than anytime in the history of the state. In addition, teacher unions became stronger in the state during this same period primarily because the governor signed a collective bargaining bill which granted public employees the right to strike. Therefore, the need for school boards to cope with the rapidly changing times of public education by incorporating modern day practices of positive management techniques infused with future planning and goal-oriented self-evaluations of their individual performances is a must. Failure to incorporate such management procedures by boards of education will cause school systems to decay rapidly.

The sixth challenge facing public education today involves our administrator and teacher training institutions. Dr. Derek Bok, President of Harvard University, in his 1985-86 address to the members of the Board of Overseers at the University, stated the following regarding educational training institutions:

Few undertakings in higher education have been so consistently maligned and generations of effort have failed to produce any persuasive evidence that formal training produces more effective instructors. Still it is hard to imagine how a professional school of education can fail to include some program for training those who stand in front of the young....unless education faculties accept this challenge they will turn their backs on a problem of central importance to the profession they are meant to serve.

The image and quality of many of our teacher training institutions throughout this country are below

par. Keep in mind the teaching profession is the foundation upon which all other professions have their origin. But the practice of teaching is generally looked upon as a second-rate profession by the public as well as other professions. We are not attracting the "best" into our education schools primarily because of low salaries and lack of accountability within the present structure. There is a demanding need to salvage what is good and build toward a new vision of accountability as well as respectability. In order to meet this need, many school districts and administrator/teacher training institutions are two separate entities in this country.

The seventh challenge involves special self-interest groups within school districts who crusade for any topic imaginable in order to gain control of decision and policy making. Their motives are often selfish compared to common interest groups who attempt to consider the needs of the majority. Special self-interest groups have been forming at an alarming rate throughout the majority of school districts across our country. Their influence is especially felt during the selection of school board members, the removal of school board members, and the hiring or the dismissal of superintendents.

During my administrative years attending Board of Education meetings, the following sample of statements, recommendations, and questions were brought up by special self-interest groups resulting in lively, but not necessarily healthy, debates between school officials and the public:

1. Why doesn't the school district food program include chunky peanut butter in the student's sandwiches?
2. The superintendent should be more careful in selecting his "fishing buddies."
3. It's time to fire the superintendent because having been in the district for six years he has outlived his usefulness.
4. To show their support for those who attend board meetings, a snack should be served to the public by the Board of Education.
5. There should be more emphasis at the junior



- and senior high schools to show girls how to not have babies as well as how to have them!
6. There should be included in the senior high physical education program the fundamental exercise program patterned after marine boot camp training.
  7. Teachers should be paid more than administrators.
  8. Administrators should fire more teachers.
  9. The superintendent should be more visible.
  10. Why do certain board members frequently visit a local bar after each board meeting?

For many years, faced with similar questions and items, school administrators and board of education members have been over-responding and over-reacting when special self-interest groups have demanded special concessions from the school. This can cause excessive division of the educational program in any school district. In some cases, special interests have overtaken the common interests concerning the education of the child. This weakens the foundation upon which education is built within any school district. Public education has been listening too much to the special interest groups and not enough to its own conscience and the broader public mandate of public education. This is not to condemn public input. Certainly legitimate concerns and issues need to be brought before boards of education to enable superintendents or presidents of the board of education to be aware of all the major happenings or events taking place in their school district. However, the board of education and the superintendent must provide leadership and proper organization to allow people to be heard but not to take over.

The eighth challenge of public education today, and one of major concern, especially to school administrators, is the bureaucratic machine. The common joke told many times by experienced front-line administrators is the one where an "old time" superintendent tells a new principal: "Do you know what the three greatest lies in the world are?" "No," said the new principal. The "old time" veteran superintendent said, "(1) Let's stop and have one beer, (2) Your paycheck is in the mail, and (3) I am from the