

# FROM THE WINDOWSILL



## EDUCATION OR ELSE...

By Frank Bryan

**I**t was September, 1964, and I stood before my first class in a small Northeast Kingdom high school. I was without practice teaching, twenty-three and terrified. Just before the bell was to ring a colleague came into the room, took me gently by the elbow and turned me away from the students toward the blackboard.

"How do you feel?" he whispered.

"OK," I lied.

"Want some advice?"

A friend! A fellow professional had stopped to share his years of wisdom with me at the very moment my teaching career began.

With gratitude and relief I said: "Sure."

His eyebrows arched toward the students.

"Don't give these little bastards an inch!" He walked away and the bell rang.

Just what I needed.

I didn't give any inches. At first. After a few months, however, I realized I could. By June I was in love with my students, the job. I liked the principal and my colleagues. I still have the 1965 Yearbook, signed by all. It marks

the close of one of the happiest years of my life.

Public education. It is one of the great strengths of America and of democracy itself. In Vermont, especially small town Vermont, the school has been the magnetic center of community life — the "village green" of social dynamics. School and community, community and school, hand in hand, holding on for dear life.

Two forces have been hacking away at this connection in Vermont. Both believe in power over reason, big over small, autocracy over democracy. One crusades for buildings. The other, teachers' salaries. One is the state government. The other is the Vermont Education Association.

In the 1950's and 1960's the state government forced the consolidation of school systems. Little schools disappeared. Human scale education gave way to "systems" education which involved long bus rides, shining new buildings, and equipment — lots of equipment. About the time that revolution was over and Vermonters had coughed up the tons of money required, educational philosophers

began to say that, well, perhaps the neighborhood school wasn't so bad after all. But that's another story.

The Vermont Educational Association is the most powerful union in Vermont. Politicians are scared to death of it. I'm not. The VEA's line is predictable. To be anti-VEA is to be anti-teachers and to anti-teachers is to hate kids. My response: bull. The VEA, through its strident cries, unreasonable demands, thirst for power and insensitivity to human scale schooling is pushing public education over the brink.

There are two ways to get money out of the public; adversarialism or consensus. Those that use adversarialism in a democracy, those that say pay up "or else," had better have the votes. You live by the sword. You die by it. So far the VEA has dipped into the reservoir of good will that Vermonters have for teachers and education. Education is sacred in these parts.

But what if the public patience wears thin? What if the public begins to play hard ball too? What if they finally catch on? Worse, what if those that catch on (I think most have already) begin to refuse to go along any more?

Catch on to what? Catch on to the fact that good teachers are underpaid so that bad ones can be overpaid. It isn't only the damage done to students by teachers that don't care, that read newspapers while their class has a "free period" or "study day." It's the spin off harm that comes with the loss of morale when those that do care watch those that don't get away with it. Catch on to the exaggerations: like most teachers take work home every night. They don't. Besides, lots of professional people take work home at night, are required to do in-service training, face jobs everyday that are psychologically difficult, drain the spirit, and provide precious little positive feedback.

There is more. Teachers want to be treated like professionals, yet they belong to a union that defines their every work requirement right down to the finest detail. Vacations are extensive: over a week at Christmas, one in February, one in April, and at least nine in the summer. If the truth be known, very little of this vacation time is spent working for recertification.

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The VEA dearly loves to compare Vermont's teachers' salaries to national averages. They forget to compare Vermont truck drivers' salaries or secretaries' salaries or the salaries of our state government employees. Vermont gives nearly everyone the shaft. It is all those other "nearly everyone's" that may get fed up with teachers pretending they are particularly abused.

There are school districts in Vermont where teachers are truly underpaid. The salaries of grade school teachers, especially, need improvement. They are the most important in the school system and that includes, for sure, college professors. But what we don't need is the VEA riding into town and demanding that the townspeople cough up salaries that are comparable to richer towns nearby — to pay up or else.

Unions were a product of the urban-industrial revolution. This is the age of work place democracy. I, for one, would rather see each community empower the faculties of their schools than encourage them through local inaction to sign on to the concept of professionalism by force. The union model, which features incessant exaggeration, picket lines, slogans, fear, hostility and the threat of repercussions, is a conservative anachronism of the 1930's. Vermonters have always bellied up to pay for education. They won't long stand for the macro-insults handed them by the leadership of the VEA.

We must insist on local control of our schools and then enhance the teachers' influence over their management. Teachers can govern themselves. They don't need the VEA to tell them how. But, as long as the VEA looms like a Sherman tank on the horizon, local school boards will find themselves compelled to react in kind. And the public — the folks that foot the bill — will look more and more toward private sector options.

I am one, for instance, who has argued against the voucher system. I fear the impact it would have on public schools and the poor and disadvantaged. As the years go by and the VEA grows stronger, that case becomes harder and harder to make. In the end, and overall, if public education endures as it should and must, teachers' salaries will depend on the good will of the commonweal, not the clenched fist of a centralized mega bureaucracy. My advice to teachers: Tell the VEA to sit down and shut up. □