THE WEALTH BEHIND THE BELL--THE IDEA BEHIND THE ACT

BURTON BLATT

I. Introductory Commentary

A. A folk story of THE WEALTH BEHIND THE BELL--there must be substance to back the gesture, there must be an idea behind the act. Where are the ideas here?

1. The local superintendent of schools who wants "teeth" in truancy law, by labeling truants handicapped.

2. Bill Page, author of "A Classroom Guide To Grading Without Judgment."

3. What goes under the guise of professional seminars, in-service education, continuing education.

4. How decisions are made--not only in education but, for example, in medicine--in psychiatry.

5. How people invest their resources; and the corollary question: How society invests its resources.

6. Professional double talk--even (especially?) by distinguished leaders.

7. The hoopla --and they can't even get the simple numbers straight.

8. It's tough doing a good job--ask Peanuts.

9. There's even foolishness in the University "Mother Theresa doesn't publish." There is something wrong in the society when its most educated members act stupidly.

10. I better go on. Timing is everything. Somerset Maugham at 88 in the hospital, called by a friend, "Would you like food or flowers?" "It's too late for food and too early for flowers".

B. What's the fuss about.

1. We are a School of Education and a Research University surrounded by a national crisis. We are a school engulfed by a national responsibility. There have been very strong arguments to significantly change educational policy in the United States. For convenience, I'll classify them in six categories:

a. I thought there was no basic theory which tells us that if you put more resources in education you will get more educated people.

b. That a little bit of education is a dangerous thing; consequently, it's better to cut deeper than thinner, better to do well with a few than provide mediocre preparation for the masses (essentially, this has been the European argument, and a nineteenth century American argument).

c. The "hard hat" argument, that kids are getting too much today, and things are much too easy for them. The sub argument here is that there is a "teacher's conspiracy" and, that the teaching profession is a monolithic union bleeding the taxpayers dry.

d. The "marginal utility" argument, that "over-educated Americans" deprive us of best utilization of our resources, which could be better used elsewhere.

e. The "cultural imperialism" argument, which is that education is simply a means by which a dominant class upholds its dominance; the sub argument here is that "we've gone too far in providing opportunities for minorities and others in the underclass.

f. The "horrible lesson of Watergate" argument, that high level of knowledge and skills do not produce virtue and good judgment. Also, when that argument is made we learn that achievement has dropped off badly.

Of course, there is truth to some of these arguments. But we might also remember what rumors Dumas Malone said a couple of years ago at the 15th Anniversary Celebration of the National Endowment for the Humanities. Of course, quoting Jefferson, he reminded us that "the world will be saved by knowledge". We're not doing all that well with the education enterprise, but we know for sure that the world won't be saved by ignorance.

II. The School of Education in 1983.

A. At one of these meetings a year or so ago, I was asked by the Vice-Chancellor to write a paper on the development of a missions statement for Syracuse University. Well, I wrote the paper, sent it around, didn't get any reactions. Consequently, it was either terrible, inexplicable, obvious (although the smartest people I've known always take the obvious seriously), or boring. And notwithstanding the imperfections of my argument on the university mission, there was a point I made which has relevance for the School of Education. There are lots of mission statements around campus--each school probably has one. The university has a motto, "knowledge rewards

those who seek it", which isn't a terribly wrongheaded mission comment (if not statement). That a mission statement isn't merely for us to understand. The final test of a mission is whether it is obvious to those outside the school or university. What's wrong with the university's motto is that it's neither known nor understood inside or outside of the university. It's less than dysfunctional, less than mythical, it's irrelevant--at least to Syracuse University. So our School of Education went about developing a mission statement--exactly three months after I became Dean in 1976. To make a long, probably not terribly interesting story, bearable, after months of debate and talk (more talk and less debate), we reluctantly agreed that this School of Education is fundamentally concerned with children and their schooling, that we are going to fulfill our responsibilities to both our profession--education--and our lives as scholars. Of course, that's not exactly how we stated our mission, but that's what it all meant. Well, our mission statement has about as much relevancy to the School of Education as the university's motto does to Syracuse University--maybe a bit more. There's something else I suggested in

my paper on the university mission which may have meaning here--at least I want to believe it. THE MISSION OF SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY (AND OUR SCHOOL OF EDUCATION) is to provide opportunity for the development of intellectual excellence. Our Syracuse University isn't Harvard University, the analogy is that the School of Education isn't the School of Computer Sciences. This business of rankings is very insidious, but you and I know that the University is not near the top among university rankings and the School of Education is not near the top among college rankings within this university. But ours (the University's and the School of Education) can enjoy a profoundly more important mission than Harvard (on the one hand) or the School of Computer Sciences (on the other hand, please excuse me, Warren Semon). We maximize opportunity. We take risks--with faculty as well as with students--risks which Harvard (and the School of Computer Sciences) do not take. This is to say that our mission is to give reign to human potential. The people around here speak about "steeples of excellence". That's true. There are steeples of excellence here at Syracuse, but also foothills of very good work. And that too is the

point! We are not Harvard, but we are not East Snowshoe State. We are not the School of Computer Sciences, but in every ranking of major schools of education and departments within schools, we come out at or near the top. And don't tell me that's like being the tallest midget in America (of course I've heard that too). So what we're trying to do in the School of Education, and what I'd like to advise my colleagues at Syracuse University to attempt also, is the development of mission statements which is something more than another affirmation of devotion to teaching, scholarship and service--which every university and, for that matter, every college and junior college has in some fashion a commitment too. And we must develop mission statements which do more than agree to polish excellent students, that seek to nurture the development of people. We seek to provide opportunities for faculty and students to become intellectually excellent. We take chances with people, but not merely to make them competent but to help some of them to become great. The Harvards of the world do indeed have great professors and excellent students, but they select them. We should work harder to find ways to grow them.

III. Our Vision.

We are an all-University School of education. I hope there will be time to discuss with you what that comment means--or comment that is bandied about so much that it's almost a meaningless slogan in peoples' minds. Our vision is to be able to offer opportunities for talented undergraduate and graduate students to study here--regardless of their ability to pay for education at a private research university. Our vision is to encourage America to take more seriously than we ever have before the idea that there is the most intimate connection between what goes on in the kindergarten and who wins the Nobel Prize, and at the center of such connections is the teacher. Our vision is to create new partnerships and enlarge the ones we've begun with local school districts, public agencies, the university medical center, and business and industry.

Several weeks ago we had a meeting on high technology. We learned that computers are now entering their fifth generation (whatever that means, I got lost at the third generation). But so too has education entered a fifth generation. Universities once educated the few teachers needed for the secondary schools and higher education. And with the coming of

universal education in the United States, we developed normal schools for the preparation for elementary teaching (where once there was only apprentice training). And by the end of World War II, the normal schools were transformed to state teachers colleges, and by Sputnick the state teachers colleges became multi-purpose state colleges, and with the explosions of the mid-60's and 70's the state colleges became state universities--but many of those so-called universities maintained their primary function as teacher-training institutions.

Syracuse University School of Education has always had a unique role in the higher education community (that's not a redundancy) to educations (that's not a redundancy). Most teacher-training institutions are "long" on training and contribute little to the scholarships in the various educational fields. A few are "long" on research, and do very little (if anything) in the way of training practitioners. We've always tried (some tell us successfully) to bridge that chasm between practice and theory, between the clinical ethos and the scholarly vocation. Have we always been successful? Is the Arts and Science School always successful? Or the Engineering School? Or Harvard University? Yes, we have had "mindless" courses, but that's not part of our vision, rather the nightmare.

We must remember that there is a difference between what a school stands for and what a school puts up with.

Maybe because there is this tension between scholarship and practice, when a number of major research universities found out that their schools of education were no longer supporting their medical and law schools, they jettisoned them. Maybe those university presidents also believed that education must be bought "on the cheap" or it's not worth the effort.

But Syracuse University did not excommunicate the School of Education. Rather, it has kept faith with its commitment to this school and to what virtually everyone at least verbalizes today as a national priority--our children and the future society. And because Syracuse University has continued to support us, today we probably enjoy the strongest reputation of any School of Education in New York State, possibly one of the strongest reputations of any School of Education in the United States. Without doubt, our programs in Special Education and Rehabilitation, Reading and Language Arts, Instructional Technology, and Foundations are exemplary national models.

I don't want to minimize the problems--both the external problems which everyone faces in our society concerning education, as well as those we face here in the School of Education and at Syracuse University.

We're very difficult to create and maintain that balance between involvement (which all professional schools must have) and reflectiveness (which all great universities must be characterized by). There truly is a difference between those whose mission it is to reveal and possibly understand the problem, and others whose work it is to solve a problem. Because of our place in the research university, we must devote ourselves to both understanding the world as well as controlling it (or at least dealing with it). And yet, those of us who have spent our lives in the University know that one task is almost inimical to the other. But we also know that there are reasons why many great poets, for example, don't work in universities--not only because they can't gain university appointments, but because they must be part of the "real world" to write great poetry. And we must be part of the real world to understand the processes of education and to know better how to teach our young as well as our university students.

IV. What We Do

A. I've already mentioned that we prepare teachers, clinicians, school administrators (more superintendents than any other university in New York State, by the way). We also examine the rhetoric on

education, the policies emanating from Washington and Albany and elsewhere, and we write lots of books and papers about the philosophy and the practice of education. We worried about the advice from the recent special commissions. If possibly, during these next couple of days at least a few of us can debate merit pay (when the average beginning salary for teachers in the United States is less than $13,000--when a fifty or sixty thousand dollar loan to come to Syracuse University for four years would virtually consume the take-home pay of the first year teacher, and that would only be meeting interest payments, not principle). We worry about an extended day in the absence of a fundamental philosophy, much less curricula innovations. We too worry about illiterate teachers and "fluff curricula", but we don't think the solution is either voluntary prayers in the schools (unless there is the promise to pay for brighter teachers and more rigorous curricula). Illiterate teachers and fluff curricula are not the causes of our problems: but the consequences. The causes of our problems are low status of the teaching profession, poor pay for teachers and other school personnel, and low national

priority for what should be a most vital national concern. Going back to our high-tech meeting, I can't conceive of a future technological society in the absence of a better educator citizenry. Our School of Education has solved some of the toughest problems that has faced the schools on human service agencies since World War II--autism, institutionalization, illiteracy. But we couldn't have accomplished our work without the support of this university--without this newly renovated Huntington Hall, without the faculty we enjoy, without your commitment to Education. And we're not going to be able to progress further without your continued support--without some way of bringing bright (oftentimes poor) students to study with us. And you should know that most teachers come from a lower-middle economic class. We need to strengthen the concept of the all-University School of Education. I think all of you Deans are good friends of mine. How many of you--other than those involved in our duo programs--thought seriously about preparing teachers, so that when you receive your freshman in 1990 they will be better prepared for your rigorous university curricula.

V. What We Are Doing About Becoming A Better School.

We want to be more of an experimental School of Education. In the past, we created a Center on Human Policy, a unique Psycho-Educational Clinic, model teacher centers, model programs for reading in the content areas. In the past, we created programs which have been appropriated by many colleges and universities across the country--in instructional technology, adult education, rehabilitaiion counseling. But we must even more vigorously seek to experiment with new ideas, new ways to train better and to know more about education. There is a profound difference between an educational problem and what people are screaming about today. We are mainly concerned with educational problems--how children learn better, how children speak better, how children get along better. Merit pay, longer school days, school prayers, regent examinations, aren't educational problems. We're good at what we do, and we believe we prepare clinicians and scholars. Yet the educational system is a mess. And I think that's the way the situation will continue, at least in part. A lot that goes on in our School of Education doesn't depend on the state bureaucracy. And if we had stronger commitment, or greater resolve, or

more courage, we might even be more independent of the state bureaucracy. In a way, all Schools of Education are in the hip pockets of either the state commissioner, the Board of Regents or--possibly in New York State--the legislature. We must escape the bureaucracy, if we're to do good and honest work. I'm not suggesting that we refuse any longer the certified teachers, but we may want to create a new program which doesn't certify anyone--possibly a program which we might call "experimental teaching". The idea of experimental education may even be as important as experimental education itself. I sometimes think that when Carnegie Mellon required all of its students to own computers they pulled off the greatest public relation coup of the academic century, rather than anything of genuine academic substance. After all, not every student needs a computer. But it's wonderful for parents to think that, "at my son's or daughter's school everyone must have a computer". That university is at the "cutting edge" etc.

In order to become a better school we have to work harder at not only more adequately articulating our mission, but remembering it (tell a story about space ship to distant planet). We must find better ways to communi-

cate with our colleagues in the larger university. We're not indifferent to scholarship, but the standards of scholarship that are employed in the rest of the university won't materially improve education. There must be an educational value to what we do. To say this another way, even if reading had no instrumental value, the schools would still have to teach reading. We're not unhappy that the schools are criticized today. In fact, we welcome it. It will probably bring more resources to the schools and, quite possibly, even to our own School of Education.

I've been speaking about our vision, our interest, our mission. What's your vision of the School of Education. I don't want to speak for you, but some of you probably don't expect much. If not here, then that's the national psychology. People don't expect much from education, so they don't get much. For the last 80 years, possibly longer, education has been ignored. In a way, we're going to ignore education for the next several years--with high technology (with the emphasis on science education and math education). No high technology has value until it is understandable to fifth graders. The telephone, the typewriter, you name it, didn't mean much until they were understandable to ordinary people and

could be used by ordinary people.

The School of Education is concerned with practice. And quite simply, the standards of excellence in Arts and Sciences are not the standards which we judge excellence. The School of Education is the last remaining refuge in the University where there is freedom to find a liberal education. Again, to state this another way, moral philosophy is different from moral education. Moral philosophers debate what is good or bad. In moral education, we try to find ways to make people good. You and I know that taking a course in Ethics doesn't make a person better. So ours is a very difficult job, work which seeks to liberate as it educates people.

But of course, people don't cooperate (that's the way we hire people). We're all on different tracks. It isn't that you don't cooperate with me. I don't particularly cooperate with you. The only hope is that, in a last analysis, we all recognize (usually before it's too late) that people are people. We're all vulnerable, we're all mortal, we're all uncooperative, and we all need each other. And we all know that.

VI. In Conclusion

I've said that our code of scholarship is different from the code in Arts and Sciences, not because we're superior (although some educationists may make that climb). But we are closer to people who actually do things. We can test our ideas better than those who don't get out in the so-called real world. Our proofs are more meaningful in that we can test what we do more directly. That's the difference between a professional school and a College of Arts and Sciences. Our strength is always our problem. While we can think about solving problems better because we actually engage in trying to solve them, there are so many areas to successful solutions. We're in that real world. Most professors in the Arts and Sciences are supposed to be irreverent and skeptical. The goal of a professor in a professional school is not to be irreverent or skeptical, is to believe that people can make a difference, is to make people better. Of course we foul up because we become too zealous. We sell ourselves what we develop. We too are captured by the fads. Again, our vision is to find our right balance between believing and being irreverent. We're not Harvard. We're not Cortland. And we must deal with those contradictions which the rest of the university might be dealing with but rarely does.

Of course, this is terribly self-serving, but I truly believe that you are missing something when you don't permit us to be part of the university, when we are not an integral part of much of what's going on here. By the way, we've known about these presidential reports--long before they were published. We've known about the Gardiner Report, the Goodlad Report, the Sizer Report. Some of our people have even contributed to them. But rarely do we get asked about these matters until it's too late--until everyone has made up their minds about them.

We're very vulnerable--to dollars, to grants, to our own rhetoric. And we have a service to sell--we train teachers, we run clinics. We're different from some of you in the Mathematics Department or the Physics Department. It's very hard to be a good School of Education.

VII. Last Story

Tell about my paper on Dean's Lying, and Bob Bogdan. Then, "four greatest lies".

1. Trust me (car salesman).
2. The check is in the mail.
3. Of course I'll respect you in the morning.
4. I work for the state and I'm here to help you.

Believe it or not I've tried to tell the truth today.