

Austere School Opening . . .

As the city's schools open for more than a million pupils today, the official mood is far from jubilant. The vast system and its decentralized community districts must operate under conditions of budget austerity; staff reductions, particularly in elementary school teaching positions, constitute a threat to the quality of instruction. Perhaps the most serious risk is that some of the gains in reading, laboriously achieved in the last two years, may be erased.

Yet, it would be misleading to usher in the new school year with a predominantly negative view. There is much evidence of determination to move toward new understandings—between young and old, schools and communities, black and white. What at first seemed merely a truce of mutual exhaustion gives signs of turning into a new rationality, even if still short of consensus and partnership.

Neither the paranoid foes nor the euphoric hucksters of decentralization have been proven right. Rather, reasonable expectations have been borne out that decentralization could become the foundation for confidence through community involvement. This is not in itself sufficient answer to all the just demands for better education, but it is a prerequisite to concrete reform.

Chancellor Harvey Scribner, with no magic wand to wave, has nevertheless sounded the appropriate note of faith in unorthodoxy and new approaches. Building on the success of John Dewey High School in Brooklyn, the city's first major venture into institutionalized heresy, he has opened the way for similar reforms in other schools. If principals respond to the Scribner mandate, this year should see the creation of "minischools" within schools, of expanded independent study and of courses taught outside school walls.

In the same spirit, the Chancellor has promised to open the first "learning cooperative"—an informal facility to be run for and by teachers together with other experts to test new ideas of instruction and to retrain the instructors. The spirit of such innovations is more important than their details. It is an antidote to resignation, though something more than a psychological lift will be needed to revitalize all the moribund elements in this barnacle-bound system.

Fortunately, Dr. Scribner seems abundantly aware that being in favor of peace and progress is not enough. Even an effectively decentralized system requires decisive leadership. Such an understanding, at the start of a new school year, was properly symbolized by his instant support of Ocean Hill-Brownsville's imaginative community redevelopment plan and by his firm warning that a district school board has no right arbitrarily to dismiss school administrators.

Austerity places on the entire educational enterprise a special responsibility for inventiveness and cooperation, and also redoubled vigilance to keep vested interests from interfering with the schools' only legitimate interest—the children's education.

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