

## Principals:

# Call for New Breed Of School Leader

These are hard times for the urban school principal. He is caught in a crossfire of demands by students, parents and unions for new answers to old problems. Yet he is confined by an inflexible system.

In many cities where decentralization has been introduced—including New York, Detroit and Washington—the principal has been exposed to community pressures without the protective cover of the central school headquarters. In some cases a principal chosen by local forces has been advanced past candidates considered in line for the job, causing more friction.

Last week one of the voices of the principals urged a change in the situation. The National Elementary Principal, a publication of the powerful National Education Association, called for a "new breed" of school leaders.

In a special issue on "Perspectives of the Principals," the periodical admitted what critics of the schools have long charged—that the system is organized in a way to reinforce and reproduce attitudes and procedures which simply fail to respond to new needs.

### Reasons for Decline

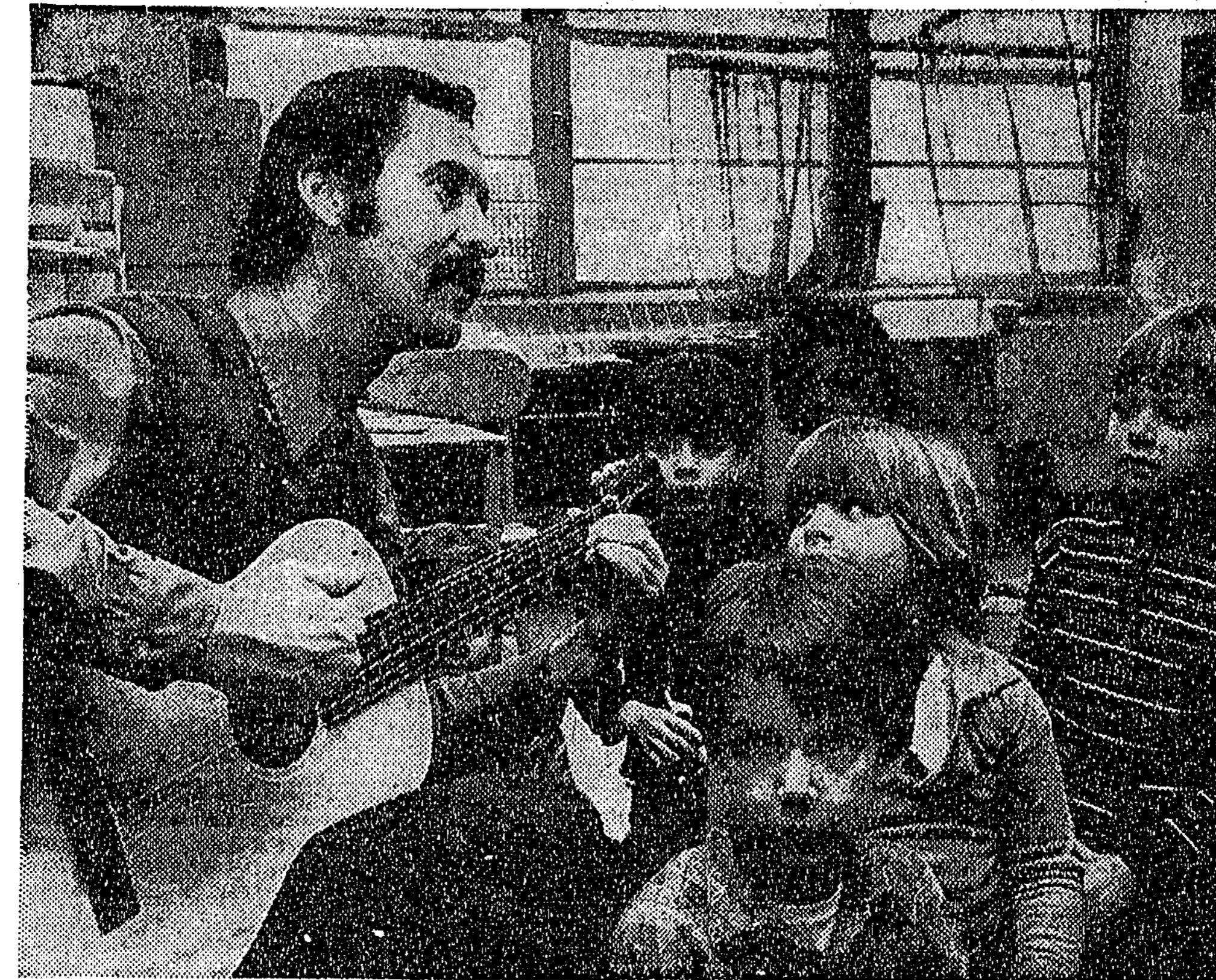
William W. Wayson, director of urban education at Ohio State University and a former principal, cited in the lead article the following reasons for the decline in the principals' effectiveness:

- There has been little change in the academic preparation of those who rise to principalships.

- The principals' powers have been further reduced by contracts with teachers' unions and other organizations, negotiated not by them but by the central school board.

- Those who are dissatisfied with the schools tend to turn to the principal for change, but traditional training, promotion and selection procedures are not geared to finding many men with new insights.

- Traditionally, school administrators are trained to



Michael Gold  
Sidney Morison, principal of P. S. 84 in Manhattan, typifies a "new breed" of principals advocated last week by a leading education publication. Today the urban principal "is caught in a crossfire of demands . . . yet he is confined by an inflexible system."

tailor their priorities to what is acceptable to the profession, without much concern for current social demands.

Dr. Wayson, however, blames the system rather than the principals. This is how he describes the process of conditioning:

"Ways of doing things gain validity with longevity: the length of their utilization is cited as proof of their effectiveness . . . Newcomers enter as novices and are taught by tribal elders 'how it is done around here.' . . . By the time they are eligible for promotion, they have incorporated these priorities and taboos into most of their thinking. . . . When new and creative responses are demanded, the bureaucrat looks inept, feels paranoid, and becomes defensive."

It is, Dr. Wayson adds, a virus that infects schools just as it does armies, governments, churches or traffic courts.

Yet, virtually every city today has at least one school—large cities like New York have at least several—where a new type of principal has emerged, usually as a result of changes brought on by decentralization.

The new breed of principals, the report says, are not introducing revolutionary ideas but are rather "seeking to make the rhetoric that has prevailed in education since 1900 a part of the daily operation of the schools."

This means a curriculum attuned to actual needs, a student-centered approach that stresses individual differences instead of trying to mold all to the same schedule and requirements. It means a humanizing of schools, with improved communications between children and adults and, perhaps most important, acceptance of the uncomfortable concept of holding oneself and the staff accountable for the success of the enterprise.

### 'Never Ask Permission'

One of the key tenets of the "new" principal is—"never ask permission" of the system. If it appears useful to ask some parents to come in and teach some classes—go ahead, without asking a bureaucrat who is likely to say "no." The "new" principal sees himself as an autonomous executive, while the "old" considers himself a member of middle management taking orders from above.

The new principal, the report said, is less likely to be chummy with other principals or their associations because he senses that acceptance "into the club" interferes with initiative. Instead, he is likely to make use of the environment outside the school, as in the extreme instances of recent "schools without walls" experiments which have much of the

instruction parceled out to museums, laboratories, industry and community agencies.

Such operations are not without risk. They require political sophistication in creating power bases outside rather than inside the bureaucracy. Thus, while some may see the new men running such operations as charismatic, courageous and flexible, others may regard them as ruthless, unethical and disorganized.

Dr. Wayson admits that there are too few of the new types to describe them as the wave of the future. To increase their number greatly would require far-reaching changes in training, promotion, and selection. New York City's Board of Education took a step in that direction last week. In an apparent effort to speed the influx of new men, the board voted to reduce the years of previous experience needed to become a principal.

The selection process of principals varies, but most frequently, particularly in cities, the requirements include specified years of teaching and supervisory experience and completion of course credits in educational administration, guidance and community relations. In some cities, as in New York, civil service-type examinations, classroom demonstrations and interviews are required. In suburban systems, the

rules tend to be more flexible and subjective.

There are other problems which go beyond those cited in the N.E.A. publication. The new men often must work under a cloud of suspicion on the part of their colleagues. One young principal in New York, who helped institute a new, informal classroom organization, is still under court challenge because he was selected outside the regular civil service process.

A department chairman of the highly unconventional John Dewey High School here, where students select their teachers and spend much of the day in independent study, said that administrators in other schools often question that plan because "you can't know where the kids are" at any given moment owing to the flexible schedules.

### Tensions

The fact that many of the new men are young tends to increase generational tensions with older teachers and principals; and because many are of the non-white minorities, they sometimes add to racial tensions. The failures of the new men get magnified, while their successes are not readily acknowledged and adopted by their older colleagues. It is also true that unorthodoxy is hard to translate into mass-operations because to systematize it is to suffocate it.

There are more fundamental difficulties. Excessive concern with administration is deeply embedded in the American public school tradition, and union contracts have reinforced this. (It is also true that bureaucratic insensitivity toward teachers' rights brought about unionization in the first place.)

Another limitation is that urban schools have become too big, too problem-ridden with overcrowding, with the result that principals have ceased to be what the title still implies—the principal teacher. Moreover, the principal has virtually no spending money at his disposal, making him almost totally dependent on the system.

Finally, there is the obstacle of a population—adult and adolescent—with few self-restraints. This tends to strain community relations and detracts excessively from the educational concerns.

Yet, despite these obstacles, the obsolescence of the old approach is so widely recognized today that the search for the new breed of principals, as the king-pins of change, is now a major concern inside and outside the profession.

—FRED M. HECHINGER