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Compromise to the Fourth Power

Washington, D.C., has recently been the scene of an unusual, sometimes irritating, and probably very influential meeting—the White House Conference on Education. From every state and territory some 2000 delegates came together to talk about the nation's schools. For months beforehand, a staff had been preparing for the conference; for months beforehand, preparations had also been underway throughout the nation, for all 53 states and territories and 3600 communities, counties, and regions had held meetings to discuss their school problems and to prepare for the big national meeting.

The problem of giving 2000 delegates an opportunity to express their own views was solved by dividing them into 167 discussion groups of about a dozen members each. All groups discussed the same problem at the same time. Each chose a chairman. Later the chairmen got together in 16 groups to pool the considerations of the 167 primary groups. These 16 groups each elected a second-order chairman, and the 16 individuals so elected met in two groups of eight each for a third round of discussion. The two tables of eight each elected a third-order chairman, and the two persons so honored prepared a final report that one of them presented to the entire assemblage of 2000. Thus the conference considered six aspects of elementary and secondary education: What should schools accomplish? How can they be organized more efficiently and economically? What are school building needs? How to get enough good teachers? How can schools be financed? And how can public interest be maintained?

The procedure followed was intended to make the final report a distillation of all preceding discussions. In that purpose, the procedure was probably successful. But, it quickly became evident, only the heaviest platitudes can withstand so much distillation. Someone quipped that since the report represented the fourth power of compromise, one should not expect much that is new and startling in it.

Even so, worth-while recommendations did get in, such as the plea for greater support for research in the U.S. Office of Education, a recommendation that states give greater attention to such special subjects as science and mathematics, and general recognition of the necessity of more generous financial support.

But criticism that the conference did not produce a wealth of new ideas misses its major effect. A great many people, from many walks of life, spent several days thinking about the increasingly severe problems of the nation's schools, teachers, and school children. Half a million people participated in local meetings. Further conferences are planned. The thinking of many people has been affected. A southern judge remarked that he had thought his state was doing a pretty good job; now he knew that much more needed doing. A midwestern state senator planned to go home to work for improved school organization. A scientist who had long been interested in school affairs said he was now much better informed on some of those matters. State governors and legislators, businessmen, club women, school officials, teachers, a few students, a few scientists, and others met together to consider the nation's interest in how its children are taught. Millions of other persons read or heard news reports and had their interest stirred a bit more than usual. Even if the formal report is thrown away, the simple fact that the conference was held can be of lasting benefit to education in the United States.—D.W.