

*William Raspberry*

# The D.C. Schools: Accountable to Whom?

All he wants, says City Councilman Julius W. Hobson Sr., is for the school system to be "accountable"—for it to establish educational objectives and then tell us how close it comes to meeting those objectives.

I don't know anybody who would disagree with that proposition. Even those educators who fight tooth and nail against any measure calculated to make them truly accountable will, nevertheless, insist that they favor accountability. Accountability is the position of the angels.

It doesn't follow that Hobson's Educational Accountability Act of 1977 is a good bill. The proposal is for the Board of Education to outline its goals along with procedures for determining how well they have been met—certain competencies at certain grade levels, for instance, with tests to see whether they have been attained.

That's great, of course. The trouble is that the statement of goals would have to be submitted to the city council, which, along with the mayor and the general public, would also get an annual report from the school board covering the performance of students, individual schools and the school system.

Hobson calls it accountability. School board members see it as an attempt to subordinate the board to the council, the opening wedge in what could be a council takeover of the board's school policy powers.

"I'm not trying to usurp the school board's prerogatives," Hobson insists. "But there needs to be some standard of accountability on teachers before you can improve the schools. I'm not interested in running the schools."

That's easy enough to believe. Hobson, who preceded his son Julius Jr. as a member of the school board, has taken great pains to show that his motives are benign. His report on the legislation describes it as an attempt to "support and enlarge upon" what the school system already is doing to improve education.

He would require that the board set minimum standards, but they would be the board's own standards. Testing and evaluation would be "as directed by the Board of Education." He even agreed to strike a part of his proposal providing for city council review of the board's plans.

By every indication, he really doesn't want to run the schools. But the school board isn't worried so much about Julius Hobson as about his successors in office. To present school plans and an-

nual reports of their implementation to the city council is to acquiesce in the notion that the council, not the board, is ultimately in charge of the schools, board members contend.

There already is some contention over how much policy authority the council has over the school board. School Board President Therman Evans says board lawyers have told him the council has no authority to do what Hobson wants. Hobson says the council's lawyers, as well as independent attorneys, have said exactly the opposite. In any case, the school board doesn't want to concede without a struggle. That is why Evans politely declined Hobson's invitation to testify at a hearing on the Hobson bill.

But he also has no wish to pick an unnecessary fight, which is why his letter is so conciliatory, stressing general agreement with Hobson's objectives. The board already has done some of the things Hobson wants, Evans wrote, and is planning to do some others.

That doesn't satisfy Hobson. "Sure, they tell us they had this in mind and they were going to do it," he said. "But they've been telling me that for years."

Hobson, when pressed, says he is willing to drop the section of his bill that requires the board to report to the council.

"I don't mind taking out the part about the mayor and council and let them report directly to the public," he said. "All I am trying to do is to get them to set up standards. As to the mechanics of who they report to and so forth, I couldn't care less. Let them report directly to the citizens."

"But there ought to be some standards and some accountability. Children coming out of the schools ought to be able to read a bus route map, or fill out a job application, or do grocery store arithmetic."

There's no one who will disagree with that. In fact, it would be enormously helpful if Supt. Vincent Reed, who already has made some major moves to improve the educational system here, would join with the board to do precisely what Hobson is talking about: state measurable goals, at each grade level and for each school, and then tell us at the end of the year how close they've come to the target.

But it ought to be done by the school authorities, not the council. After all, the same citizens who elected members of the city council to look after the city generally also elected members of a Board of Education to run the schools.