



## Eleanor McMahon: Education Pioneer

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The history of American education is rich with great icons from Horace Mann through Clark Kerr and Bart Giamatti. They established important principles, set standards or forced changes that transformed our system of education. Then, for each of us, there are great individuals, teachers and mentors who left an indelible impression on us personally. Eleanor McMahon was one of those rare and talented individuals who did both. Eleanor passed away this summer after dedicating 52 years to the field of education and public policy.

Eleanor was also a pioneer. Some of her accomplishments, often ideas before their time, did not receive the praise they deserved. But that never dissuaded her from pushing forward.

Eleanor began her career in 1950 teaching tenth grade at Pawtucket West High School in Rhode Island. She soon was asked to be the school system's statistician and charged with the job of analyzing the performance of students and teachers. She quickly recognized an undeniable—but up to then generally ignored—correlation between student performance on the one hand and teacher qualifications, professional development and pedagogy on the other. She recommended that the city develop teacher performance standards based upon student results, a novel idea

in 1954 with what was then a novel name: Outcome-Based Management.

When Eleanor married Dick McMahon in 1955, she ran straight into an antiquated policy that banned married women from teaching in Pawtucket. That made her Irish blood boil. She appealed the policy, the first to do so, and she won. Her challenge to the policy presaged a major shift toward gender equity in education—another trail blazed by Eleanor McMahon.

Eleanor recognized that leadership often is controversial. An early supporter of teacher unions, she believed in a balance of professionalism and activism. A long, bitter teachers' strike in the early 1950s posed a difficult choice for her. State law banned such strikes, yet, as an officer of the teachers' union, she was expected to walk the picket line. Eleanor decided to oppose both policies; she opted not to return to the classroom until an equitable solution was agreed to, but also not to join the picket line. It was a lonely but courageous response.

Eleanor's pioneering days were many. In 1955, she introduced the first "modern math" curriculum in the Pawtucket schools. In the 1960s, she initiated Rhode Island's first early childhood program and designed the first Head Start program in the City of Providence. In 1982, Eleanor became

Rhode Island's first and only woman commissioner of higher education and in 1996, she became the first woman chair of the New England Board of Higher Education.

Eleanor's academic credentials and accomplishments were remarkable. A graduate of the College of St. Elizabeth, she also received a master's degree in economics and education from Brown University and a doctorate in early childhood education from Harvard University. She was honored with nine honorary degrees and numerous public service awards. She held many education positions throughout her career, including first grade teacher, professor, dean, provost, college vice president, fellow and distinguished professor. She was a dedicated New England Board of Higher Education delegate for two-and-a-half decades and a frequent contributor to the pages of CONNECTION.

While she received many accolades, held many lofty positions and shouldered great responsibilities of leadership, Eleanor was always, *always* the teacher. We have lost a pioneer, a great woman, a dear friend.

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