

When We Work Together

WILLARD E. GOSLIN

ON DECEMBER 7, 1941, the democratic nations of the world came suddenly face to face with a world situation which threatened their very survival. For over twenty years each of these countries had traveled its own isolated road with little concern for the common goals and needs of all nations. During the months immediately after Pearl Harbor, the United States and her allies realized their desperate position. Things began to happen. We began to *plan and work together*—driven together by a common threat.

The United Nations had to get together in order to survive. The emergency in education is not so dramatic. However, the need for the teachers of this country to begin to work together more effectively may be quite as critical from the viewpoint of the long-run welfare of education and our democ-

racy as that facing the United Nations.

America needs *now* as it has never needed before a generation of citizens who are able to actively participate in democratic processes—citizens who have an appetite for democratic living because they have had a taste of it. We as teachers cannot possibly understand the implications of living in a democratic society if we do not have daily experience in living and working in a situation where democracy operates.

► This makes imperative the need on the part of school systems all over the country to break away from the traditions which have bound us in the past—traditions which have set administrators apart from classroom teachers and high school teachers apart from elementary teachers—traditions which have tended to make all of us willing to accept a type of organization or approach which invites dictation in its operation and which is frequently, therefore, destructive of the finer capabilities of those working within the organization.

The Sum Is Greater . . .

The faculty of a school system is something more than the sum total of the abilities, experiences, and personalities of the individuals who make up that faculty. It *can be* a great deal more. A group working together—planning its programs and pooling its resources—can make a contribution over and be-

Willard E. Goslin, Superintendent of Schools in the Webster Groves (Mo.) School District, reports here on a school program for cooperative action which, having already operated successfully for several years, is much more than a plan-on-paper. In describing group participation in the Webster Groves school system, Mr. Goslin points to the philosophy of mutual understanding and appreciation which must underlie any earnest attempt by members of a school staff to work together and explains the mechanics of the organization upon which the Webster Groves program has been built.

yond the contributions of the respective individuals acting alone. A group working together with the benefit of such intelligent leadership as is available will stimulate the flowering of initiative, imagination, creativeness, and leadership on the part of *all* members within that group.

► Working together is an art. It requires certain techniques and understandings, but the patterns will vary. There has been enough experimentation in this field to define sharply certain of these approaches and to point toward others. We can now find good examples of cooperative action in industry, in government, in community life, and in school systems.

A School Staff Works as a Group

The Webster Groves Public School System has for the past several years done considerable work in this whole area of group participation. We hasten to add that many of our attempts, due to our own inadequacies, have been failures. As we look back over these attempts the most significant group undertaking which looms up is that of the evolution and maintenance of an inservice training program which is called the study program. This development has been described elsewhere in more or less detail.¹ We will deal with only certain phases of the program at this time in order to illustrate the techniques which have emerged as being basic to the success of group action. We realize

¹ See Willard E. Goslin: "The Inservice Training Program of the Webster Groves Public Schools," *National Elementary Principal*, April, 1943, pp. 154-158, and *Leadership at Work, Fifteenth Yearbook of Department of Supervisors and Directors of Instruction*.

that this program has not succeeded in all of its undertakings and that there have been many other programs in this country of a similar nature which have had wider group participation than this one. We use this program as only one example of the zest which working together can bring to a group.

The leadership of the school, in cooperation with many members of the staff, had attempted over a period of years to create a working situation wherein the members of the group felt they had a stake in the total school program and wherein *every individual* had an opportunity to influence the decisions which affected him in his daily living. The various jobs connected with the running of a school system, such as the selection of textbooks and teaching aids, the development of the budget, the evaluation of a policy concerning sick leave, etc., were participated in by the group as a whole or by representatives of the group.

► Experience thus accumulated over a period of years leads us to believe that the best approach to working together is in terms of the numerous and varied jobs that are to be done in a typical school system. We believe these jobs are uniformly better done if the points of view and the abilities of all persons who are affected are brought into the picture.

A Working Plan Is Developed

During the years when the members of the organization were attempting to evolve some type of machinery which was conducive to group participation, there gradually emerged from many different points in the system—from a teacher in an elementary school, a

special teacher, a member of the supervisory staff, and sometimes from the administration—a consciousness of the need for a system-wide cooperative study program.

The leaders of the organization tried to evaluate the contribution which such a program might make to the school system and decided to present the matter to the members of the group for their decision. The superintendent of schools presented through a series of two or three meetings what seemed to be some of the major problems confronting American democracy and public education in particular. Following these meetings all members of the organization were given opportunity to register their attitudes toward some sort of cooperative approach to a system-wide study and evaluation of public education in Webster Groves. The faculty was almost unanimous in its desire to see some such program evolved.

From the very beginning members of the group had a feeling of ownership about the program. They realized that it had grown out of their expressed desires and that whatever form it took would be influenced by their suggestions.

The faculty asked the administrative and supervisory staff of the school system to present to them a plan or plans for organizing and carrying on such a program. In setting up these plans this leadership group realized the importance of placing everyone in the school system in a situation wherein he felt free to discuss his problems without possible censor. At the same time it was felt that if progress were to be made there would have to be a small number of

individuals representing all of the various interests and levels of the school system to actually assume the leadership of the program.

Leadership Is Representative

The plan finally adopted was one which called for the creation of a Representative Committee charged with the responsibility of leadership for the in-service or study program. This Representative Committee was composed of thirteen individuals representing all of the various units of the school system. Ten of these thirteen were classroom teachers; one represented the supervisory staff; two represented the administrative staff; and the superintendent of schools was an ex officio member. You will notice immediately that the Committee was composed predominantly of classroom teachers. This was felt to be important and in actual practice proved to be basic to the success of the program. In other words the Representative Committee was acting for the rank and file of the members of the organization.

The first move of the Representative Committee was to divide the entire faculty into discussion groups which met every two weeks to study and evaluate school problems. These groups proved to be the very heart of the study program. They made suggestions and recommendations to the Representative Committee, which in turn evolved a system-wide approach to the problems and then referred decisions back to the discussion groups for final action. These groups were effective mainly because they were small, usually numbering between sixteen and eighteen persons, and because each group represented a cross-

section of the school system, thus bringing a composite school appreciation and approach to each problem.

►If those of us in public education believe in democracy—if we understand what it means to live in a democratic atmosphere—then we will see to it that opportunities for a free exchange of ideas become an integral part of our school systems. Our men have been working and fighting for this right for the past two hundred years in America. We as educators have a responsibility to see that the free exchange of ideas becomes a reality in our schools and not just verbiage to be memorized by our sixth grade youngsters as a part of our Declaration of Independence.

Everyone Has a Part

The initial phase of the study program was carried on for a period of approximately two years. During this time the Board of Education cooperated in the program by attempting to remove those obstacles that sometimes cause the breakdown of cooperative enterprises. Funds were furnished for outside leadership, for books and materials. Some time was provided from regular classroom duties for discussion meetings. Two or three classroom teachers were freed part-time to serve as a general steering or research committee for the entire program. There were no compulsions used, other than those involved in group cooperation where interest and a desire to participate are the compelling factors, but an attempt was made by the Representative Committee in cooperation with the Board of Education and the administration to set up the program so that the staff would have the time and energy needed to

accomplish its objectives effectively and surely.

At the end of the two years the group emerged with a statement of the tentative objectives of the school system and general recommendations as to areas in which improvement should be made. The study, discussions, and general understandings that led to these statements furnished the personnel of the entire school system with what was probably the greatest impetus ever received from any single series of events. This was the case because every individual had a hand in its development.

Machinery has been set up for putting many of these group decisions into practice. The war has encroached upon the program, however, to a considerable extent and many members of the staff feel that progress has been too slow. The Representative Committee is making a particularly strong effort at the present time to make advances and to keep the way open for cooperative action whenever the need arises.

►Undoubtedly many of us in administrative and supervisory positions have been guilty of blocking the advance of group participation in the school systems of this country. We are frequently jealous of our real or assumed prerogatives. Administrators have the peculiar responsibility to see that the way is cleared for the classroom teachers of America to have the opportunity to participate in group planning, unhampered by all the unnecessary underbrush that is too often encountered when projects of this sort are attempted.

Leadership Through Participation

There are those who contend that group participation negates leadership.

Our experience proves the opposite to be true. Democratic leadership becomes possible for the first time when some plan is evolved for all to participate in the decisions that are made. The members of a group will develop more things that they want their leaders to do than any leader ever dreamed of taking to a group.

In this article we have limited our discussion of "working together" to a description of a single project participated in by one faculty. There are scores of opportunities for group participation within a faculty, such as the selection of textbooks on a cooperative basis, the orientation of the new teacher, the development of community-school relationships, etc. We would hasten also to call your attention to the numerous opportunities that group planning and group action offer to all the various participants sharing in the educational and community picture, such as students, parents, social agencies, and community organizations.

► During the years in which we have experimented in group participation we have found that every time the general teaching group has been brought into direct contact with the development of principles, policies, and programs for the school system the individuals involved have benefited. Furthermore, the quality of the programs developed has been enhanced, and their opportunities for success have been materially increased.

Fundamental Concepts

Finally, we would like to enumerate some of the kinds of fundamental concepts which we believe must operate if group action in a school is to succeed.

- Everyone to be affected by a decision should have a right to influence the nature of the decision.
- The need for group action must be felt by those participating in the project—not imposed from above.
- The best approach to working together in a school system is in terms of the numerous and varied jobs that are to be done.
- Cooperative action does not negate leadership. It really makes democratic leadership possible for the first time.
- A free exchange of ideas in some type of discussion situation is basic to group action.
- Representative groups in school systems need to be truly representative of classroom teachers as well as other groups.
- The board of education and the administration have a responsibility to clear the way of obstacles which may cause group undertakings to fail.
- It is the responsibility of the administration to act upon group decisions.

May we repeat: *A faculty may take on a strength and a personality over and beyond the sum total of its individual members.* It gains such added strength through the avenue of cooperation and the participation of its members in the great variety of activities of a school system. Learning the art of working together is a challenging and exciting activity. It is part of the warp and woof of life. There is something to the old notion that you can break sticks one at a time but, when you tie them together in a bundle, they have a strength and security that cannot be broken. Out of cooperation could come a greater America and a new world.

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