



Courtesy Florida State Department of Education

Do We Over-Sell the Schools? _____

ALEXANDER FRAZIER

In too many instances the failure of schools to gain the type of public support which is so vital to them is directly related to the way schools work with the public. In this request for more adequate programs of public relations, Alexander Frazier, curriculum consultant in the secondary schools of Phoenix, Arizona, advises that schools share with the entire community an honest statement of needs, and he suggests ways in which such programs may be implemented.

AT PLACIDBURG there hadn't been a bond issue voted on for twelve years. Last spring, when it was finally decided that in all decency something had to be done for the students who were bulging from classroom windows, the superintendent joined the board in expecting a quiet vote of approval. However, two days before the election, the *Evening Herald* carried a long and mildly critical editorial, pointing hesitantly to the lack of public information on the need for the bond issue and referring to the shortage of building materials and the acute housing problem. On Thursday, after the polls had been closed on a vote

that was considerably larger than expected, the legal majority was found wanting. Dead for two years, at least, was the bond issue.

The surprise of the administration was exceeded only by its feeling of irritation. There was annoyance at the inconvenience that the delay would mean, the herding of students into the cafeteria and auditorium. There was concern for the general lowering of student and teacher effectiveness. More than anything else, there was a sense of hurt at the blindness of the public in not having accepted the need as announced. Perhaps in the mind of the superin-

tendent there was, as well, a vague feeling of irritation at himself—an awareness of failure somewhere in the lines of communication. However, the superintendent thinks he knows now just what there is to be done before the next request for public support. He expects to be ready next time; he had merely taken too much for granted.

The Evidence of Success

What the superintendent at Placidburg does not realize—at least not fully—is that the failure of his bond election was symptomatic of a failure in his long-term public relations program. The local newspaper, sincere enough in its mild questioning, had only to glance back over its own stories on the local schools for the past several years to be able to raise doubts concerning the need for all the money that was being requested. Where in any release from the school had there been any kind of hint that conditions were not all that they should have been? In fact, where in any story during the past ten years had there been any indication that the local school had either unfilled needs or unrealized ambitions? The press book on display in the superintendent's office was thick with reports of the victories, the awards, the words of commendation that seemed to have been showered as generously upon the Placidburg schools as they could have been upon any.

There may be little doubt that Placidburg will vote the bonds next time. But there may be little doubt, also, that it will require a particular effort then to persuade the community to do something that it would have done, gladly and much sooner, *had it been continuously aware of what its schools needed.*

The superintendent does not realize

it consciously, but he had delayed asking his community for what it would have been quick to give, had it understood the need. As far as the school patrons had any reason to suppose everything in the school system was more than satisfactory. When he decided that conditions could no longer be ignored—or concealed—he had hoped that the election would go off quietly in the general run of affairs, as no doubt it might have except for the fateful editorial.

The temporary fiasco at Placidburg is scarcely typical of what happens in school bond elections. Oftener, the public is prepared for the election with what amounts to a kind of counter-propaganda laid down deliberately against the usual run of "blurby" news stories. Skillful handlers of bond issues can even keep both kinds of stories running concurrently without perplexing the public. The American public knows that it has good schools; but it wants them to be better, if they need to be.

But the question that can be raised is whether it is not possible to educate the public *consistently*, and perhaps we should add *honestly*, as to the needs of the school without, at the same time, endangering public confidence in the wellbeing of the school system. If it is possible, we would save not only the occasional embarrassment of such incidents as that at Placidburg, but the far more general and unhappy practice of delaying needed action far past the point where our professional judgment tells us that something should be done.

Highlight the Needs

As an instance of the kind of situation that we are inclined to tolerate inexcusably long, we may cite the over-

crowding of our schools. War shortages and population shifts have permitted us, in some cases, to put the blame for overcrowding on forces outside the policymaking of school authorities; but in the main the responsibility has been ours, individually and collectively, for tolerating the gradual increase in teacher-pupil ratio to a place where we knew it to constitute criminal neglect. There can be no justification, except bankruptcy, that could permit the presence in one room of forty-five, fifty, and fifty-five first graders. We know it. We are ashamed of it. But we have let it creep up on us—we have not told the public about it. So we are hard put now, after having evaded the issue for so long, to know how to come out with the kind of forthright admission of neglect that it will take in some communities to promote the enormous building program and increase in teaching staff required to relieve the condition.

The part that a misguided public relations program plays in such a sorry situation is plain enough. Reporting the successes of the school without reference to its needs does not prepare the public for the story that has to be told some time. As for direct concern in forming school policy on the part of the lay public by which these needs might be made manifest, participation is limited in many communities to inspection by a few well-meaning if occasionally confused patriotic societies and certain scarcely disinterested tax groups.

In general, we are more responsive to these few agencies and their criticism than we are to the unexpressed will of the great body of parents whose first concern we know to be that their children shall have all the opportunities that

we let them suppose our students do have. How often do we keep our tax rate pared too close because a tax association is watching us? We get caught, in such an instance, between an inflated program of newspaper publicity and a conciliatory attitude toward the only source of organized pressure. The problem of the public school, to restate it, is to reach its patrons with the story of its needs and to gain the protection of informed and even organized approval, while at the same time maintaining the high confidence that almost every community has in its schools.

The Block of Mystical Trust

It would be simple of us to suppose that, once defined, the problem indicates its own solution. The reason that schools so often have relied almost wholly upon inflated publicity and display for establishing community rapport is not hard to find. It works a good deal of the time because the school is an institution in which the community has an almost mystical trust. To the parents in our democracy, the public school represents much of all that they can do for the future of their children. Parents place upon the school an obligation that deserves to be called a sacred trust.

It is not by accident that of all the institutions of our democracy the school is least often subject to political attack. Behind this hands-off attitude of a people that is committed as a democratic citizenry to the tracking down of civic ineptitude, there may almost be thought to stand an emotional block. The success of our schools is synonymous with the wellbeing of our children. Even to suspect that all was not well would be to open questions as to

whether we were insuring for our children the kind of future that by our very culture we are pledged to provide.

Examples of the weight that this emotional block imposes upon the thinking of school patrons can be found elsewhere than merely in reluctance to listen to our own periodic and tardy pleas. We have all seen systems in which a militant parent faction, sometimes informed, has tried to bring attention to the deficiencies in a well-established school. The rallying around the virtues of the status quo is surpassed only by the mushrooming of doubts that follows. The first impulse of parents is to deny that there can be any inadequacies in the schools through which their children have gone. Admission of imperfection is a direct threat to the security of the parent as the person charged by the democratic society with the provision of the best education for his offspring and its citizens. Once sown, however, the doubts will grow. Other children are coming up through the school system. If there are better ways of doing, needs that should be met, these children must profit. This secondary stage of community reaction, we know well enough. We have all said goodbye to school men who waited just a little too long.

Dare We Court Disaster?

In short, the temptation to string the public along with what it wants to hear and expects to hear arises from the very nature of the school as a unique public institution. The public expects successful operation of its schools. It demands it, in fact. To encourage doubts of any kind is consequently to lay ourselves open to questions very difficult to an-

swer. Yet not to have these questions raised is to court—or to delay—disaster. For finally, when conditions such as obviously inadequate housing can no longer be concealed, the questions must be raised. They should be raised by those legally and professionally charged with the welfare of the schools. Raising questions of need early and holding them consistently before the school public may involve certain problems in tactics, but the procedure is the only sound one professionally and the only safe one politically.

Assistance Is Available

Schools that wish to inaugurate an evaluation of their long-term needs will find many sources of assistance to support whatever their approach is to be. National statistics, as collected by the National Education Association and like organizations, are of great weight in initiating a program of local self-criticism. Not only can schools derive support there in bringing practices up to national norms but also in directing the program toward the achievement of ideal ends, as set forth in publications like *Education for All American Youth*.¹

From state and county services, there can also be gained the help necessary to conduct a system-wide survey of educational practices. Surveys by professional investigators outside the community and not connected with the school in any supervisory capacity may sometimes be used. The wisdom of inviting a school survey in certain instances may be debatable. Often enough the survey is requested by sources of disaffection; and even when it is not,

¹ Educational Policies Commission, NEA. 1944.

the comparison of conditions with ideal practices, in a situation where self-criticism is comparatively new, may be too much for the local patrons to grasp. They may decide to clean house and begin anew. Yet properly directed and prepared for, the school survey, whatever the agency making it, may provide the kind of over-all picture that is most useful in starting a program of self-improvement.

Evaluation—for What?

Again, a school may open its program of community education in school needs with an all-system testing program, self-imposed and well-grounded in direction. The survey of achievement by national norms is subject, like the survey of school practices in terms of ideals, to considerable misinterpretation. If it is to mean merely that the community becomes conscious of inadequacies without becoming conscious of causes as well, then the procedure can threaten to end a well-meaning effort. With the testing program must go a planned program of interpretation. The correlations between greater pupil achievement and improved teaching conditions, lowered teacher-pupil ratio, a more adequately planned curriculum, and expanded facilities must be made clear.

Unity Is the Capstone

Finally, and whatever its approach, the administration that means to fulfill its professional obligations to its com-

munity by keeping its community acquainted continuously with professional needs must itself be united, within the school, on the goals toward which it is working. The teaching staff must agree on its purposes, assay its successes and failures, and propose what is needed to further the ends of the school as an institution. The school must first of all be aware itself of what is needed—not merely today, and most pressingly, but for next year, for ten years from now, and in terms of the complete program of education to which the American school is dedicated.

New Schools for Old

The school that decides to take the public into its confidence continuously and by choice, rather than periodically and by necessity, will of course not be the same school that it was before. It will be a school that is newly self-governed yet self-critical; it will be a school that is newly allied with the community and responsive to it. Planning for future needs, instead of being forced and furtive, will become a matter of public concern and cooperation. The newspapers will carry the same old stories of minor glories, yes, but they will carry as well new accounts of needs and new descriptions of ambitions. And the increase in tax rate or the voting of bonds, when they come, will come not as something imposed upon the community but as something demanded by it.



Copyright © 1947 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.