

# When School and Community Cooperate

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In the preceding article, Mr. Roy Larsen wrote convincingly of the need for lay participation in the public schools. What actually happens when parents and other citizens play an active role in developing better schools is told by J. Bernard Everett, director of instruction in the Newton, Massachusetts, schools; Kenneth E. Oberholtzer, superintendent of the Denver, Colorado, schools; and Francis L. Drag, curriculum director of the San Diego County, California, schools.

## PARENTS—POTENTIAL SCHOOL LEADERS

J. Bernard Everett

A GROUP OF PARENTS in one of our city's elementary schools felt the need for a better understanding of the school program. They were dutiful parents. They attended PTA meetings regularly and listened attentively. The mothers came on visiting days and waited their turn to talk with the teachers. They sponsored a clothing exchange, which annually raised over a thousand dollars to enrich the school program. They provided transportation for school journeys and contributed generously to school "drives."

Yes, they were dutiful parents, but they were also worried and somewhat

confused. *School seems to be so much fun—there are scarcely any failures—and so many different activities, seem to be going on at once. What is this "experience" approach to reading? Is it better than the alphabet method? Are the children getting a solid grounding in the fundamentals? Will they be properly prepared for college? As parents are we doing everything possible to cooperate with the school in developing desirable habits and in providing a well-balanced program of out-of-school activities?*

These questions worried the parents



to the extent of becoming the subject of conversation at bridge parties and over the dinner table. So they decided to do something about it. Two or three spokesmen for the group went to the principal and talked things over. A study plan was gradually evolved. Three joint committees of parents and teachers were appointed to tackle different aspects of the problem, and they set to work. Meetings of each committee were held regularly at least once a month.

The study was a decided success from the start. It transformed a group of potential critics into ardent supporters and interpreters of the school program. It culminated in the publishing of their findings in a series of news letters, written by the parents themselves. The combined reports, with the story of how the study was carried on, eventually became the subject of the superintendent's annual report in order that parents and teachers in other schools might profit from it.

There were several distinctive features of this study which contributed greatly to its success.

- ☛ It capitalized upon an initial dissatisfaction on the part of the parents.
- ☛ Husband and wife teams served on all committees. (Father is too often the forgotten man in school-community relationships.)
- ☛ All meetings were held in the homes with parents taking turns acting as hosts. This informal atmosphere probably had much to do with the good feeling which was engendered.
- ☛ Comprehensive study outlines were developed jointly to serve as guides for discussion and research. These served to keep

the discussion on the beam and provided a basis for the reports which followed.

☛ The chairman and real spark plug of the venture was a parent—an intelligent, tactful, and highly successful businessman with a greater-than-average understanding of human relationships. His probing into the educational issues involved always seemed to shed *light* rather than *heat* on the problem.

If our schools are to solve the problems raised by increased enrollment, inadequate building facilities, and the shortage of trained teachers, they must have public support. However, such support depends to a great extent upon how well the people understand and approve of what their schools are trying to do. It is recognized that the foregoing illustration may not represent the highest level of school-community relationships. Yet from it certain inferences can be drawn.

- ☛ Thoroughly enlightening a few parents at a time may be better than confusing a lot of them at once.
- ☛ Capitalize on dissatisfactions rather than be annoyed by them.
- ☛ Remember that *big* meetings often shed little light on a problem and leave many questions in peoples' minds.
- ☛ If we can't explain our procedure so that it makes sense to reasonable people, there may be something wrong with us or with what we are doing.
- ☛ It is more effective to talk *with* people than to talk *to* them or *down to* them.
- ☛ The potential leadership in certain parent groups may be superior to that in many school staffs.
- ☛ Differences of opinion and misunderstandings should be explored in small groups rather than in public meetings. The severest critic is at a disadvantage in his own living room.

## A PROGRAM OF COMMUNITY EDUCATION

Kenneth E. Oberholtzer

NEW SCHOOL BUILDINGS are under construction in all parts of Denver. To be completed before the end of five years are thirty projects. Among them are additions to seventeen elementary schools, replacement of five obsolete elementary school buildings, and erection of four new elementary schools in recently developed residential districts. Two of the present junior high schools will receive additions of classroom space, and two obsolete junior high school buildings and one old senior high school will be replaced with modern structures.

This total building program involves expenditures of \$21,000,000 met through a bond issue approved by Denver citizens in October, 1948. In the face of mounting local taxes, assuming a \$21,000,000 debt for the school district meant that the people of Denver were thoroughly convinced of the need for more school buildings. This realization, reflected in a seven to one popular vote for the bonds, was the result of a program of community education.

Built on three simple premises, educational materials and methods stressed:

- the impact of an increased birth rate on school enrollments
- the development of new residential districts miles away from any existing school buildings
- the obsolete and near dangerous condition of many old school buildings.

A citizens' committee of more than one hundred community leaders was the first group to hear the story. Then the three-point message was told through every available medium of publicity: newspaper stories, moving pictures in

local theaters, pamphlets, filmstrips, billboard space, automobile stickers, window cards, paid advertising space, and a speakers' bureau. Thus citizens of Denver read the story through printed materials, heard the story in organization meetings, and saw the entire problem portrayed in various visual materials.

The publicity program covered a period of approximately five months, so that by the time the school bond election was held citizens of Denver were well-informed with regard to school needs. All information given was based on actual facts substantiated by research figures. Birth figures secured from bureaus of vital statistics and block surveys by the Business and Social Research Department of the University of Denver, cooperating with the Denver schools, were the basis of the predicted increase in school enrollments.

Conditions in the schools were related in terms of number of children in present classrooms. Obsolete buildings were described in detail; and, certainly, no imagination was required by parents living in the new residential areas where no nearby school service was available to understand the story.

Cooperating in the campaign was the PTA, which worked with principals of schools in bringing information to parents and conducting necessary campaigns before the election and on election day.

A summary of the activities carried on is as follows:

- ▶ Development of a citizens' committee
- ▶ Organization of the PTA to "Get-Out-the-Vote"
  - Analysis of voting lists
  - Telephone campaign
  - Door-to-door calls
- ▶ Publicity campaign
  - Pamphlets
  - School Review
  - Speakers' bureau
    - (Talks were given to 250 organizations aside from the PTA. Members of the speakers' bureau were given mimeographed materials with all information regarding school problems.)
  - Filmstrips
    - (Fifty frames together with scripts were provided for use by the speakers' bureau and by the PTA.)
  - Newspaper stories
    - (2,000 column inches and 153 stories.)
- Series of stories in each of 20 neighborhood weeklies
- Paid newspaper advertising
- 105 radio programs
  - (Most of them five-minute dramatizations and spot announcements; some round tables.)
- 58 billboards
- 2,000 window cards
- 20,000 automobile stickers
- Moving picture short shown in 36 theaters
  - (This was produced and financed by local representatives of a moving picture chain.)
- Exhibit at Home Planning Show in City Auditorium
- Endorsements from various organizations
- ▶ Paying the bill. A lay committee was organized to secure funds from interested citizens.

## BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN SCHOOL AND HOME

Francis L. Drag

NO RESPONSIBILITY rests more heavily upon educators today than that of bridging the widening gulf between the public understanding of what schools should do for boys and girls and what educators agree should be the essentials of good learning situations.

One county school system has made a beginning in bringing the school and the home into closer focus on the needs of young children and what is to be done for them, as described in these selected illustrations.

### Reporting Pupil Growth

An effective means for gaining parent cooperation and understanding is the use of pupil growth reports. For three years San Diego County schools have

used a report form embodying the generous use of written messages to the parent. Emphasis is placed on positive accounts of the child's capabilities, his problem areas, his progress, and what the school is doing to help him grow.

Parents are often invited to call at the school—not to discuss a "failure" but to enjoy with the pupil and the teacher some outstanding accomplishment and to plan cooperatively in terms of the pupil's greatest needs. Both child and parent seem to thrive on such treatment.

### Parents Lend a Hand

A second approach to improve parent-school relationships has been the extension of the Mobile Shop activities

designed to bring the industrial arts processes to small schools of the county. Fully equipped trucks and industrial arts consultants visit schools each week to work with teachers and pupils on social studies-science activities, and to give assistance in the processes involved in the arts and crafts using wood, metal, clay, and leather.

After-school and evening workshops have been organized for adults. In one such workshop a group of parents constructed playground equipment and furniture for the classroom. Not only have many parents personally profited from such activities, but they have come to have a better understanding of the child's interest and need for this type of educational experience.

#### Physical and Rhythmical Activities

Similarly, projects which are being used effectively to heighten parent interest and understanding of the modern elementary school program include folk dancing and community-school play days. Teachers, pupils, parents, and others during the past two years have engaged cooperatively in folk dancing activities in schools.

In some instances clubs have been started and continue to meet regularly during school as well as in after-school hours to engage in folk dances evolving from their social studies activities of Pioneer Life and Early California. Play days, cooperatively planned by the school and

the community, are yearly festivals in which young and old alike participate.

#### Conferences and Workshops

Large segments of the public are afforded opportunity to participate in projects planned to bring about understanding and cooperation in building functional elementary educational programs. Typical of such activities are joint meetings of educators and community groups to discuss current educational problems. Such meetings are arranged through the County-Wide Institute Committee and permeate the entire program of elementary education.

Another type of activity has to do with community leadership training conferences jointly planned and attended by representatives of community groups and educators. Such conferences are often held for two and three-day periods in mountain retreats where all have the opportunity to be-



come acquainted, to understand the problems of others, and to plan for improved school-community relations.

A third area is participation by lay and professional people in Conservation Education workshops. Such workshops provide for discussion of conservation problems, use of conservation materials, and field trips affording first-hand experiences in conservation practices.

A fourth type of activity is a series of seminar discussion groups of parents and teachers in child development. A fifth involves the cooperation of community people and educators in planning and carrying on conferences in rural education, with a special emphasis upon the cooperative study of community resources.

Two activities of this type deserve more detail in reporting because of their significance in fostering understanding and cooperation between the school and the public. The first involves planning and participation by lay and professional persons in regional institute activities. Regional institute committees composed of teachers and community representatives, such as PTA, civic associations, and forum groups, have jointly planned educational meetings of the lecture and discussion type which have been enthusiastically attended by parents and teachers. These have resulted in a much more wholesome outlook by all concerned on the needs of children in the modern elementary school.

A second group has to do with the participation by parents in activities of the several rural teachers' clubs in the county. These clubs have been successful in helping parents become acquainted with educational programs

and the needs of their children in rural districts.

For example, seventy-five parents made a forty-mile excursion with members of a teachers' club to visit the County Schools Service Center and Curriculum Laboratory. There they were given a conducted tour to help them become acquainted with the facilities and resources available to teachers and children of the rural schools. They visited the Curriculum Library and examined its resources of professional books, units of work, and its wealth of basic source materials for all grade levels. They saw the film center with its equipment and materials, and learned how such materials were selected, processed, and prepared for distribution to their schools. They saw the many thousands of books available to their children. They visited the workshops, the conference rooms, and they learned of the services available from the Service Center to improve the rural school curriculum.

#### **County-Wide Curriculum Planning**

Although the above accounts represent but random samplings, the accumulated results of many such relationships are sufficiently encouraging to justify continued effort toward refinement of our relationships with parents to build cooperation, understanding, and support of elementary education. To this end a County-Wide Curriculum Planning Committee, representative of all groups in the county, including lay citizens, has recently been organized. One of its major purposes is to bring about a closer understanding and cooperation of educators and parents on behalf of public education.

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