Roy E. Larsen, president of Time Inc., discusses the role of laymen in meeting the crisis faced by our public schools. Mr. Larsen is chairman of the National Citizens Commission for the Public Schools, a group of twenty-eight prominent laymen which was formed last spring to study the problems confronting public education, and to help arouse the broad general interest necessary for solving them. The group has received initial financial support from the Carnegie Corporation and the General Education Board. Dr. James B. Conant, president of Harvard University, has referred to this new organization as “potentially the most important move for the advancement of public education taken in the last fifty years.”

NOT LONG AGO a group of school superintendents came to New York to talk over their mutual problems. To facilitate the discussion each was asked to write down, in what he considered the order of their importance, the difficulties he faced in his community. When these lists were read it was found that almost all the superintendents present had the same number-one problem. This greatest problem of all was not how to get new schools constructed, not how to find more teachers, not how to raise more money—the problem most of these men considered most pressing was how to gain the active interest of laymen in the public schools.

The reasons these school superintendents gave for listing this as their number-one problem are obvious. Without the interest and understanding of the laymen in their communities, they knew it would be impossible to get the other things they needed. They knew the job of creating really good public schools is so great that the co-
operation of all the people is necessary
to do it.

Need for Lay Participation

When, as an interested layman, I was
asked by the editors of this journal to
give my views on the problems and
opportunities elementary schools will
face in the future, I immediately
thought of this meeting of school superin-
tendents which impressed me so
greatly. I found myself wondering
whether these same school superin-
tendents, if they should happen to meet
five or ten years from now, would again
agree on the prime importance of find-
ing ways to interest the public in the
public schools.

I don’t think there’s any doubt that
the need for citizen participation in
public school affairs will be at least as
great in the future as it is now. As the
census report, which tells us that seven
million pupils will be added to present
school enrollments during the next
seven years, is translated from columns
of figures to columns of children wait-
ing outside classroom doors, it is ob-
vious that a lot of new school buildings
are going to be necessary, as well as a
lot of new school equipment and many
more teachers. According to our dem-
ocratic procedures, the people will, in
one way or another, be asked to vote
either for or against great new school
expenditures. The plain fact is that
unless the public fully understands the
need for them, it will vote against them.

Cooperation Brings Results

It has been amply demonstrated to
me, moreover, that just as the opposi-
tion of the public to the expansion and
improvement of the public schools in
any community can be fatal, so can the
cooperation of the public bring about
the most tremendous achievements in
an unbelievably short time. As chair-
man of the National Citizens Commis-
sion for the Public Schools, I have
watched miracles worked by citizens
in many different communities. As just
two examples of many, I can name
Great Neck, Long Island, where the
school budget was more than doubled
a few years after a citizens committee
was formed to cooperate actively with
the school superintendent and school
board; and Arlington, Virginia, where
the whole legal structure of the schools
has been changed for the better, and
much new school construction started.

It has been the success of local citi-
zens committees such as these which
have made me and the other members
of the National Citizens Commission for
the Public Schools so confident that real
school improvement is a practical pos-
sibility, not just a dream, and it has
been the achievements of local citizens
committees such as these which have
shaped the initial program adopted by
our national group.

Local Community—
Center of Activity

The success of organizations such as
those in Great Neck and Arlington has,
for one thing, convinced us that re-
gardless of how much financial aid
comes to the schools from the federal
or state governments, the thought and
energy necessary for improving any
school must come from the community
in which that particular school is lo-
cated. From local citizens groups, we
have found, far more than the votes
necessary for fund-raising flows to the

Educational Leadership
schools. In communities where citizens are active on behalf of the schools, it is our observation that the most capable persons are willing and anxious to serve on school boards, and school board elections, rather than attracting the attention of only a few persons in the community, often become burning local issues.

One of the most interesting sets of figures I have seen is one showing the percentage of citizens voting in school board elections before the formation of local citizens committees and after. The increase is frequently one of several hundred percent, and I have yet to see a community where this multiplication of concern for the schools has not resulted in tremendous improvement. This improvement often extends far beyond better physical resources for the schools. After the necessary buildings have been constructed and a sufficient number of qualified teachers employed, citizens with an aroused interest in the schools often direct their attention toward the goals and standards of education. Working with citizens committees of this kind, many school superintendents and school boards have found themselves enabled to raise their sights, to work toward far higher goals, and to maintain far higher standards than ever before.

An Example of Lay Cooperation

It is our observation, however, that citizens groups usually realize that there are certain basic physical requirements which must be met before high goals of education can be pursued, and they accordingly often begin by working for school improvements of a tangible kind. As an example of how a very successful citizens group has functioned, it may be of interest to describe some of the methods used by the Council for Delaware Education, which Henry Toy, Jr., who is now full-time executive director of our Commission, started and headed in his spare time while he was a Du Pont Company executive.

Mr. Toy was one of a growing number of businessmen who, having attended a meeting of a parent-teacher association in a local school, soon found his interest broadening to the basic educational problems faced by his community and state. He established the Council for Delaware Education as a group made up of delegates from a great many fraternal orders, church clubs, parent-teacher associations, and organizations of many kinds. Much of the Council's work has been carried on by these member organizations.

One of the first projects undertaken by the Council was the summarizing in laymen's language of the state's school laws. This summary was printed in local newspapers, and contributed immeasurably to the popular understanding of school issues. The Delaware Council next secured the cooperation of the American Association of University Women, one of its member organizations, in publishing descriptions of every one of the 174 school buildings in Delaware. Pamphlets were published which stated the age and condition of each school plant, with many details concerning the school libraries and other facilities. These pamphlets brought to the public a realization of the need for better schools, and statistics which compared present school enrollments with those expected in the
future graphically portrayed the need for more schools. The result was the passage of legislation for more and better schools, including the allotment of $19,000,000 for school construction, besides increases in teachers’ salaries.

Arousing Public Interest

As executive director of the National Citizens Commission for the Public Schools, Mr. Toy brings to his task of implementing the program planned by Commission members the experience he gained with the Council for Delaware Education, but he realizes as well as the rest of us that the methods which worked in Delaware cannot always be expected to work in other states. At the present time the Commission is far more concerned with arousing a broader public interest in the public schools, and in encouraging people to find their own methods of improving their local schools, than it is in urging the use of any particular methods.

For this reason the Commission has been cooperating with the advertising campaign which is being conducted by the Advertising Council—a campaign which is concentrating upon describing the problems which confront the public schools in the belief that once the problems are thoroughly appreciated by the public, solutions will be forthcoming. The Commission supplies those who reply to these advertisements with materials to help them in their efforts to bring about school improvement. These materials include “case histories” describing the organization and programs of other citizens groups engaged in efforts to improve their public schools.

This work, of course, is to be only a part of our Commission's program. Embodied in everything we do, however, will be the realization that the job of making the best in education available to all American youth is too big for any single group of people, whether professional or lay.

Convert Interest Into Action

The job belongs to all the people in their own communities. Here the people work and live; here are the children; here are the schools. It is here, then, where the people will have to decide whether their public schools are responsive to the changing times and needs of a free people in a democratic society. Our Commission is but one small group of citizens among many, but we, as each of them, evidence a determination of many citizens to convert interest in our public schools into action, intentions into performance, goals into everyday practice.

Building Public Confidence in the Schools

Have you a copy of this new ASCD pamphlet? Building Public Confidence in the Schools deals with desirable characteristics of the process of lay-professional study, planning, and action in providing better instructional programs. Descriptions of five planning and action programs illustrate, in specific detail, what is involved in such cooperation in building confidence in the schools. $1.00—quantity discounts are available.