

# Communities Survey Their Schools

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VAN MILLER

Van Miller, associate professor of education, University of Illinois, describes four participatory school surveys recently completed in the state of Illinois with the assistance of the College of Education. A participatory survey, writes Mr. Miller, is one in which primary responsibility lies with the local participants—professional and lay—and outside consultants are responsible for giving expert help.

A PARTICIPATORY SURVEY is generally considered one in which local citizens and staff members play an important role. Actually there is no real division into "participatory" and "non-participatory" surveys; surveys vary all the way from having virtually no outside help to having outsiders do the complete survey. A dividing point might be established between surveys in which local people assist outsiders who have been charged with responsibility for the survey and surveys in which the outsiders help local participants who have real responsibility for the survey. The real test lies in the question of who has the responsibility.

When the responsibility rests primarily on the outsiders, the survey report becomes the primary objective. When outsiders have written such professional diagnosis and prescription, the local staff must determine how much is acceptable and how to "sell" that portion to the local community. When primary responsibility rests with local participants, the report is incidental and is but one of the intra-community means of communication. The determination of how much and how fast to "buy" is accomplished as the survey is conducted.

## We Chose the "Local" Plan

With interest in this latter thesis, developmental work in participatory surveys was undertaken by staff members of the College of Education, University of Illinois, replacing in increasingly larger degree the "expert" surveys formerly conducted. Through such participatory surveys it was expected that:

- ❑ in a meaningful setting, maximum factual information about local schools would be distributed to a maximum number of citizens
- ❑ participation would develop interest and support for a desirable program and adequate staff and building facilities
- ❑ sound proposals for the school program would be made on the basis of facts and professional opinions balanced by the most realistic approach possible to public sentiment
- ❑ a procedure of working together continuously to solve local community problems might be developed.

At present, four such participatory surveys have been completed and reports are available in the Illinois communities of Danville, Charleston, Urbana, and Moweaqua. Three similar surveys are currently under way in Wabash County Community Unit School (Mount Carmel), Normal, and Geneseo.

Some of these surveys were oriented specifically to school building needs, whereas others were general school surveys. The first of these to be undertaken was the one at Danville, which the writer helped organize.

The College of Education staff, through its Bureau of Research and Service, agreed to provide technical assistance and consultative service when called upon. It designed the tentative organization of the survey, provided techniques of study and evaluation, and assisted in compilation of the final report. The Board of Education at Danville authorized the survey, appropriated funds for conducting it, and approved a tentative plan of organization.

#### **A Hand-Picked Committee**

A central survey committee of eight—seven citizens with no official connection with the schools and the superintendent of schools—was appointed by the Board of Education. While an attempt was made to pick representative citizens, the selections were actually based on what individuals could do rather than on what they represented. The tentative organization for the survey was turned over to this committee and funds were made available for its work. It was given the responsibility for informing the public about the survey; settling problems of policy and procedure; appointment of other committees and authorization for such committees to appoint sub-committees and request technical help as needed; coordination and timing of all committee work; receiving, editing, synthesizing, and releasing reports; and making final recommendations to the Board of Education.

Study committees were established on population, buildings, program, and finance, and a panel of students was organized as an adjunct to the program committee. Members of the central survey committee served as chairmen of the study committees. Other study committee members were drawn from interested and able citizens, including teachers and pupils. For ready access to pertinent information and relationship to the present program, at least one member of the Board of Education and one member of the local professional staff were appointed to each study committee.

*The population committee* was concerned with determining for the years to come the number and location of pupils for whom physical facilities would be needed. They had professional advice on the various ways in which needed information could be collected and had technical assistance with the necessary statistical procedures for estimating. They made wide use of building principals, teachers, pupils, and PTA members in the collection of data.

*The building committee* was concerned with scoring the present facilities for adequacy and flexibility, and for determining priority for alteration and expansion of plant facilities including proposals for new buildings. Sub-committees were established in each attendance unit, and a special school for the hundred people this involved was held in which the outside specialist gave instruction in the scoring of school facilities. All existing buildings were scored by the specialist and by the local committees, making available two sets

of scores for use by the building committee.

By having citizens from all areas of the school district participate in a common appraisal of the total school plant, there was hope that more Danville citizens would come to consider each school building as part of an entire physical plant for all Danville youth rather than as a separate and relatively independent school whose interests might be pushed even at the expense of other school units. In the Wabash County Survey many individuals are being asked to help in the scoring of other buildings in addition to their respective attendance units as a means of promoting district-wide viewpoint.

*The program committee* in Danville considered desirable program developments and their relationship to the need for physical facilities. Sub-committees were established as interest was expressed in such areas as kindergartens, recreation, vocational education, adult education, arts, and fundamental subjects. In preparing the final report, an eleventh-hour attempt was made to include program areas not covered by earlier appointment of committees. In the Wabash County Survey an attempt was made to start with comprehensive coverage by organizing program study groups initially on a division of program organized according to age levels. At the time of organization it was planned that these sub-committees would eventually reorganize in terms of educational objectives.

In the Danville survey it was recognized that various studies and discussions touched off by consideration of desirable program changes could be virtually

unending. It was anticipated that the work of the committee would continuously involve more and more people and thus serve to activate community-wide participation in program development. It was also anticipated that the program committee would be compelled to draw tentative conclusions rather than to hold up the work of other committees in the compilation of the final report. The help of the youth panel was considered especially valuable to the program committee.

*The finance committee* was concerned with determining the fiscal ability of Danville, its willingness to support a building program, and the proper timing of various steps of the program. This committee included among its members the mayor of the city, a representative of tax-objector groups, and a certified public accountant. It was thus hoped to give consideration to the relationship of school costs to other costs of local government, to the adequacy of assessment and of tax-collection procedures, and to thinking through the real issues of tax objection early in the study-committee stage rather than at the turbulent level of election campaigning.

*The central survey committee* met regularly. Their final report and recommendations were printed by the Board of Education for distribution in the community. It is interesting to note that two members of the central survey committee developed sufficient interest in the schools to consent to run for school board membership. Their election by substantial majorities indicates the approval of participatory procedures

by the local citizens and their confidence in individuals so intimately acquainted with the facts and opinions relevant to the school program. One survey staff member observed that few school board members have ever had such effective pre-service training!

### **The Three That Followed**

In the surveys at Charleston, Urbana, and Moweaqua, three central committees were established—a citizens' committee, a staff committee, and a student committee—the latter two being elected by their respective groups. In operation, the citizens' committee appointed by the board acted as the executive committee for the survey. Organization of the other two committees provided regular opportunities for representative staff members and students to discuss survey procedures and findings. It also made more readily available to the various study committees the assistance of staff members and students.

### **Communication Problems Solved**

Even with the wide-spread participation provided in these surveys, many of the participants knew only the specific portion of the survey on which they worked, and other citizens knew less about the total project. Participants may have had some pride in their own contribution, but the whole citizenry did not possess the entire survey except as it was finally given them in the report of the central committee. Hence, in Danville, Charleston, and Urbana there has remained a real problem of distribution, once the survey report was ready.

Copies of the reports were made available to various community organizations and their leaders. Copies were

placed in public places. They were circulated through PTA homeroom mothers to parents of pupils. Members of the central committee and other individuals have been available to PTA chapters and community organizations for discussions of the report. Professional staff meetings have been devoted to studying the reports. In all three cities newspapers ran a popularized version of the survey as a series of feature articles.

### **The Survey's Final Stage**

A prior problem encountered was the question of who should write the report. It has seemed easier, generally, for the professional staff from the University to talk through the survey with the local people and then to write the report for them. For the most part in Danville the survey was talked through with the local people and then written by various local people in an attempt to keep it in the language and style of Danville citizens, to whom it is addressed.

In the Wabash County Survey an attempt is being made to overcome the first of these difficulties. It is hoped that all of the people in the county can be kept informed on the survey throughout its development so there will be no need for a further period of educating the community on its own findings after they have been finally put together.

Among the special committees established by the central survey committee is one on public relations. This committee plans to release news stories, run a speakers bureau for community groups, and hold open meetings to tell at the outset how the survey originated, who the committee members are, how they were chosen, how they plan to work, and why. As the results of the

population study and the ratings of buildings become available, they will be released. Findings of other committees will be reported through these channels as they are available. Recommendations will be routed through the Board of Education for release at the conclusion of the survey. It is possible that much of the material produced in this way can be used as text in the final report.

### Putting the Survey to Work

Putting participatory survey recommendations into the form of action proposals for adoption and execution presents another difficulty. Some classification of items for immediate action and for further consideration and development should be made. The participatory procedure should eliminate the need for long promotion campaigns propagandizing in favor of survey recommendations. If the community has really been in on the survey, the priority items should be

promptly submitted for vote. Action could be taken on the immediately acceptable proposals and the rest could be continued for further study and planning.

At the initial organization meeting of such central survey committees the citizens generally express a feeling of the importance of the job and the inadequacy of the committee members. Such feeling of inadequacy can be helpful as the motivation for seeking additional help from more and more people in the community, thus expanding the fellowship of participation. In this very issue of adequacy of such people lies a real test for democracy. If local people are not able to consider local school problems realistically and to arrive at decisions about them, there is no occasion to criticize mounting bureaucracy in central government. If local people will not and cannot make these decisions, we need more bureaucrats to make the decisions for them.

## *The School in the Community* \_\_\_\_\_

EDGAR FULLER

Edgar Fuller, executive secretary of the National Council of Chief State School Officers, Washington, D.C., writes on the role of the school within the community and public relations techniques which can be employed in keeping the community informed and cooperative. Mr. Fuller worked extensively with lay groups while he was State Commissioner of Education in New Hampshire, 1946-48.

DO TEACHERS and others connected with the schools have uppermost in mind at all times the welfare of their pupils in every way attendance at school can affect these pupils? If this attitude

does not prevail, parents and the general public will soon sense its absence, and any public approval gained by skilled professional techniques in public relationships is likely to be transitory.

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