

A Community Organizes to Help Itself

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This article tells the story of an experimental program of community improvement organized by the citizens of Stephenson, Michigan. The authors are Joseph B. Gucky, executive secretary, and Herbert Corey, general chairman of the Stephenson Community Coordinating Council.

EVERY COMMUNITY has inhabitants who have suggestions for community betterment but who lack the techniques of organization for changing ideas into realities. It was in the spring of 1946 that the citizens of the community of Stephenson, through the inspiration of the Michigan Department of Public Instruction, held a mass meeting to lay the foundation for a community organization that would be democratic and endeavor to improve the quality of living for all the inhabitants in all phases of community life.

The seed for the experimental program for community development was sown when Lee Thurston, state superintendent of public instruction in Michigan, visited the Stephenson area and expressed a willingness to have his department cooperate with any community that showed a desire to lift itself up by its own boot straps. The board of education of the Stephenson community accepted the challenge and pledged its efforts to discover newer techniques of community improvement.

THE EXPERIMENTAL PROGRAM

The experimental program came to be known as the Community School Service Program. Edgar L. Grim of the Department of Public Instruction was director of the program, which

was partially subsidized by the Kellogg Foundation. Five Michigan communities, namely, Stephenson, Mesick, Rockford, Concord, and Elkton, were selected by the Department of Public Instruction as experimental centers for community development.

The Stephenson board of education was assured of receiving technical and consultant services and leadership training techniques from the Department of Public Instruction for any plan of organization chosen by the community.

The Stephenson area which subscribed to the original plan for community development comprises a geographic area of 552 square miles of rural economy with a total population of approximately 7,500. The village of Stephenson with a population of 800 persons is strategically located in this area and serves as a trading center. Smaller villages in the Stephenson area include Carney, Daggett, Wallace, and Cedar River.

The first problem in organizing the Stephenson area for action was to sell the general public on the idea of community self-help. The board of education had the conviction that any community can and will improve its quality of living in all phases of community life if latent leadership is discovered and motivated. It felt that the

school system represented one of the major social agencies in the community and that it should assume the leadership in the development of the Stephenson Community School Service Program.

The board selected community leaders and met with them in small groups. The philosophy of community self-help was discussed with each group to determine their views. By far the greatest majority of the community leaders were eager to give their time and energy to a plan that was designed to make the Stephenson community a better place in which to live.

A mass meeting representing fifty-two social, economic, civic, and religious agencies was held. A temporary steering committee was organized to write a constitution for a community organization of self-help.

The constitution was written and adopted at a subsequent meeting. The community organization was known as the Stephenson Community Coordinating Council composed of representation from every social, economic, civic, and religious agency in the community. An executive committee and officers were elected by the council to act as a steering committee.

The superintendent of schools, or someone appointed by the board of education, was to act as the executive secretary. The Council felt that the school administrator was in a strategic position to be of great service in any plan for community betterment.

STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

The community organization, to be known as the Stephenson Community Coordinating Council and which would sponsor the Community School Service

Program, agreed on the following general objectives:

- ♦ To promote cooperative efforts of all of the community organizations and of the citizens in making the community a better place in which to live
- ♦ To coordinate, on a voluntary basis, the efforts of the existing community agencies and individuals to meet more effectively the needs of the community
- ♦ To encourage community surveys to determine local resources, conditions, and needs
- ♦ To inform the public of conditions that need improving
- ♦ To train leaders and encourage democratic action in meeting the needs of the community through the legal and established community agencies.

The proposed organization was to enlist the support of persons of all ages from all walks of life with varied interest in suggesting ways and means of improving the quality of living. It was to study and propose the solutions of community problems to the existing agencies which had funds and legal jurisdiction for action.

COMMITTEE MEMBERSHIP AND SHARED RESPONSIBILITY

Seven problem-study committees were organized, namely, Education, Healthful Living, Community Services, Trade and Industry, Religious Life, Farm and Land Use, and Home and Family Living. Any community problem could be channeled to one of the problem-study committees for consideration.

The membership of the problem-study committee was purely voluntary and not limited as to number of members. The Religious Life Committee began with a membership of twenty-six; the Education Committee

had twenty-seven members. When a committee studied a community problem and was ready for some action, a small committee of from three to five persons was appointed by the parent committee and became known as the action committee. For example, the Education Problem-Study Committee studied and carried on research on the feasibility of providing public library facilities for the community. Much evidence was secured that the library facilities in the Stephenson area could be improved by moving the County Library, which was located in a neighboring city at the extreme end of the county, to the village of Stephenson.



Courtesy Stephenson, Michigan
The new library better serves

A Library Action Committee of three persons was appointed to approach the proper legal authorities and determine what could be accomplished. The Action Committee held conferences with the Menominee County Library Board, the Stephenson Township Board, and the Stephenson Village Council, and in the course of six months had the county library moved from the city to the village of Stephenson. The new library now serves the

village of Stephenson and better serves the entire county. The same procedure was used for numerous action committees. The action committees remained intact only long enough to carry the problem to a satisfactory solution.

The secretary of each problem-study committee keeps a detailed record of all transactions, and a copy of the minutes is mailed to the executive secretary. This enables him to keep in touch with the whole program and to discover duplication of effort. For instance, the Farm and Land Use Committee decided to study the health conditions of the rural people. The Health Committee suggested the problem about the same time. The problem was discussed by the officers of both committees and it was decided to allow the Health Committee to initiate the study with the cooperation of the Farm and Land Use Committee.

The school building and its facilities are in constant use by the problem-study committees. Approximately 175 persons are members of the seven problem-study committees which meet at least once a month to study community problems.

The Michigan Department of Public Instruction willingly cooperated with the problem-study committees and Council Officers in supplying consultative and technical services and in motivating the community to action by offering opportunities for the inhabitants to participate in: (1) trips outside of the community to study community progress; (2) state conferences

and workshops on leadership training techniques; (3) scholarship to institutions of higher learning to study community problems; and (4) scientific surveys to discover community needs and problems.

OVERVIEW OF ACCOMPLISHMENT

The program has now been in operation for over three years. Approximately fifty projects of minor and of major importance have been completed to enrich the lives of the community folks. A complete and detailed report is published each year. A sampling of the projects completed by each committee follows:

Education Committee

1. Establishing new library quarters in the village of Stephenson
2. Enriching and vitalizing the school curriculum by introducing new units of instruction:
 - a. Course for junior high girls in baby-sitting
 - b. Noon-hour recreation program for transported pupils
3. Organizing core curriculum for junior high students
4. Establishing outdoor education camp for elementary and secondary pupils
5. Promoting community work experience projects.

Home and Family Living Committee

1. Assisting the school in organizing a unit of study on "Preparation for Family Living" with specific reference to marriage problems and sex instruction
2. Conducting course in "Home and Landscaping"
3. Sponsoring forums and panel discussions on many problems relating to home and family living.

Recreation Committee

1. Organized a summer recreation program with a full-time director

2. Promoting recreational activities to satisfy needs of all persons in all seasons of the year
3. Constructed new swimming pool.

Community Services Committee

1. Initiated long-term improvement of Shakey Lakes Park area
2. Sponsored institutes for elective officials
3. Erected new road signs in village
4. Cooperated with village to promote construction of a new bridge over river.

Religious Life Committee

1. Organized community choir for persons of all religious denominations
2. Completed census of all persons to determine extent of religious affiliation
3. Promoted campaign to reserve Wednesday evenings for home or religious activities
4. Promoted operetta with all churches cooperating
5. Organized classes in religious instruction for various age groups in respective churches.

Farm and Land Use Committee

1. Assisted organization of pre-school conference for teachers on soil conservation
2. Organized a Soil Conservation Field Day for Upper Peninsula attracting 2,500 persons
3. Organized a county-wide Artificial Breeders Association which now enrolls over 5,000 cows.

Health Committee

1. Initiated plan for blood-typing of all community residents on voluntary basis
2. Developed a Medical Loan Closet for public use
3. Promoted educational campaigns for TB X-rays
4. Encouraged board of education to have school cooks and bus drivers submit to physical examinations annually.

SOME GENERALIZATIONS

The school curriculum has been modified in at least five specific in-

stances and has been accepted by the general public particularly because of lay participation. The impact that the Community School Service Program has had on the entire school curriculum is difficult to evaluate. There are evidences that the curricular modifications have brought about a changed attitude on the part of teachers and have accounted for changes in the local environment.

The Community Coordinating Council periodically endeavors to evaluate the Community School Service Program. Each evaluation conference brings firmer convictions that if our democratic way of life is to succeed, more persons must become concerned with problems of everyday living.

The Community School Service Program operates on the philosophy that when people share, people care—then democracy grows. The plan is purely voluntary and represents grass-roots democracy.

Some generalizations may be made from our experiences to date:

❑ Communities can and will help pull themselves up by their own boot straps if given proper motivation and leadership. Much latent leadership exists in

every community. "Shot-in-the-arm" techniques are indispensable to assure maximum community effort toward progress. Visits away from the local environment to other communities have proven very successful. Leadership training conferences have given people greater confidence in their work.

❑ No set pattern of organization will fit every community. The organization must come from the people and be designed to serve their interests.

❑ The school is one of the major social agencies within the community and should play a major role in a community school service program. The job of the school administrator changes from that of a business manager sitting behind the desk to that of a social worker and consultant on community problems working with the people in the community. The building and its facilities should be open to the public when used for educational purposes.

❑ Parents will gladly participate in revisions of the school curriculum if given the opportunity.

❑ The community has greater respect for the school that uses the natural and human resources of the community in its educational program.

❑ The State Department of Public Instruction should motivate communities to action. State and federal agencies are in a position to render invaluable services to any community by giving technical advice and consultative service.



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