

El Paso Surveys Its Schools

BYRON ENGLAND

Byron England, Director of Instruction, reviews experiences in self-appraisal during the past year in the El Paso, Texas, Public Schools.

A COMPLETE SELF-ANALYSIS of the public schools in El Paso, Texas, was inaugurated and carried out during 1949-50. The finished report marks El Paso as perhaps the largest city in the nation to evaluate its entire school system under the general plan of the *Evaluative Criteria* (1950 Edition). "General plan" is specified because the *Criteria* is a measuring instrument for secondary schools only; the elementary schools were also evaluated in El Paso, necessitating an additional set of standards by which to measure. In this case, the *Handbook for Appraisal and Improvement of Elementary Schools* was used.

The *Handbook* (1948 Edition) is a publication of the Texas State Department of Education in Austin. It was prepared by elementary school people over a series of years, being printed in its present form after two years of try-out. Although the *Handbook* and the *Criteria* are designed to measure the efficiency of elementary and secondary schools respectively, they differ in their approach to this objective. Both deal with evaluation, however, in terms of the educational philosophy enunciated in individual schools, and both are designed with the purpose of measuring each factor in school operation.

Basically, the *Criteria* sets forth a description of an ideal situation in a given area, and the evaluator is to work

out his own interpretation of how well the ideal is reached, in terms of ratings 1, 2, 3, 4 or 5, one denoting "superior" and five denoting "very poor." The *Handbook*, on the other hand, sets forth five scales of possible conformity to the item under consideration. The evaluator is expected to check his interpretation of accomplishments in terms of the descriptive scale most nearly conforming to actual practice. Each instrument provides for a careful analysis of buildings, business management, administration, instruction, professional preparation and other factors of school operation. Perhaps each in its own way represents the best type of measuring device yet devised.

Three Steps in Evaluation

Now, there are three basic steps in evaluation, the last of which is prescribed by the accrediting agencies under which Texas schools operate: (1) The school system must agree upon and set forth its philosophy of education; (2) It must evaluate each of its practices in terms of its statement of philosophy; (3) An outside or a "visiting" committee must be called in to check the local findings, as well as to make its own evaluation of accomplishments in terms of the stated philosophy.

The successful survey, therefore, must be concerned first with providing for full participation of every individual

connected with the school system. This means the detailed organization of committees for every phase of school operation. Since the two measuring instruments used were prepared independently, no provision is made for inter-relating elementary and secondary committees; nor do the instruments provide for exactly the same types of committees, which fact makes inter-relation more difficult.

Workshops Plan the Study

In order to make the local analysis as nearly a cooperative effort as possible, a part of the 1949 summer workshop was devoted to planning the essential outlines and procedures to be used to institute and complete the study. The workshop group first set up the organization for evaluation, which involved planning for the establishment of all committees, together with a timetable for the various phases of analyses. Results of this pre-planning were mimeographed under the title, *A Guide to a Self-Evaluation Study for the El Paso Public Schools*, and distributed to each teacher in early September.

J. G. Umstattd, Professor of Secondary Education at the University of Texas, was employed as consultant to the project and his several visits during the year were helpful and inspirational. His advice and counsel prompted several innovations that smoothed the course of self-appraisal.

Seminar for Leaders

The first serious problem was the provision of sufficient time for each individual to discharge his committee and personal obligations to the program. What was thought to be a fortunate so-

lution was agreed upon. Texas Western College, a branch of the University of Texas, is located in El Paso. Officials of this college offered to set up a seminar in evaluation to be conducted by the administrative and supervisory staffs of the El Paso Public Schools.

The seminar sessions were held evenings, with 240 teachers enrolled. Six consultants were assigned to further group work and cooperative effort. Those enrolled in the seminar subsequently served as committee chairmen, committee advisers and group leaders, and in other positions of responsibility in providing for the 550 teachers who were not enrolled. This arrangement made it possible for some teachers, at least, to spend an amount of time sufficient for the thorough exploration of many phases of evaluation.

Statements Developed

First, the seminar group engaged in intensive study centered upon the purposes of education. For more effective work, it was thought expedient to divide the schools into four areas according to secondary schools, a secondary school with its feeder elementary schools comprising an area. Second, a general philosophy for the entire system was prepared, although the groups insisted on writing a separate one for each area, since it was contended that each area had problems not common to any other particular area.

Numerous meetings were held in the individual buildings, as well as by areas, before the stated philosophies were accepted. From this study of the purposes of education came statements of directional goals for all instructional areas, which set the stage for the actual

measurement of accomplishment. The measuring instruments were studied and discussed thoroughly and related to the work already done.

The *Handbook* provides that the individual teacher appraise his own efforts, with separate evaluations placed on a comprehensive chart representing a cross-section of the accomplishments of a particular elementary school. The *Evaluative Criteria* comprehends evaluation by committees.

In actual practice, elementary teachers were asked to help secondary teachers evaluate their work; and in turn, secondary teachers assisted with the elementary evaluation. The self-analysis was completed finally by the marking of the measuring instruments. The superior and the mediocre educational efforts were now matters of record; the traditional and the praiseworthy were apparent. Perhaps each teacher had read an average of four professional books at this stage.

Visiting Committees Selected

By this time, the school year was more than half over. Already school people from the outside had been selected to come in for their part in the appraisal, and had been assigned specific responsibilities. Three days is the usual standard in assigning time to visiting committees.

Rather than endure the commotion and confusion of a single outside committee, El Paso hit upon the idea of having visiting committees work by areas. It was decided to have one committee evaluate two areas, and a second committee evaluate the remaining two, with one month intervening between the visits. In line with usual prac-

tice, this meant that each visiting committee member would have to remain in El Paso for at least six working days. Outside school people had become so much interested in El Paso's experiences that relatively little difficulty was encountered in securing committee-men.

Each visiting committee was composed of more than 40 specialists fully qualified in their respective fields. The El Paso Schools bore the expenses of each person who came. In order to provide for greater efficiency, each committee was asked to appear in El Paso on Tuesday afternoon for an organizational meeting. On Wednesday, Thursday and Friday the committees visited schoolrooms, interviewed teachers and pupils, and discussed and analyzed the local self-evaluation reports. They then composed and organized their own reports which were given orally during the morning, afternoon and evening of Friday.

The second area was handled by the same committee in the same manner on the following Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday. The first group came in March, and the second in April. There were superintendents, principals, teachers, college professors, building experts and other specialists from four states in the committee personnel. Because of El Paso's isolation, the average committee-man traveled more than 600 miles one way. Finally all of the written reports were compiled into a single volume, together with enough local reports to present a complete analysis of the El Paso Schools.

The method of evaluation described in the preceding paragraphs is prescribed by accrediting agencies in the

South, and perhaps by others. Compliance with such regulations, however, was only an initial motivating force in El Paso's self-appraisal.

Local Schools Studied

Local groups undertook to discover every strength and weakness of the local schools, and in the initial stages of planning agreed generally on the method of following through with all recommendations for improvement. As a matter of fact, the follow-up began before the reports were compiled. In late May of this year, Henry J. Otto, Graduate Professor of Elementary Education, the University of Texas, conducted a two-day conference with El Paso Elementary Principals and Supervisors.

The conference was geared to the evaluation and is perhaps unique in being the first of its kind to be held in Texas. The conference was really a conversation between Dr. Otto and one of the local elementary principals, and amounted to a step-by-step analysis of the curriculum in the principal's school.

The summer workshop began almost immediately and was devoted entirely to implementing some of the recommendations coming out of the survey. Also, a calendar was devised for establishing other improvements over a five-year period.

Many Values Evident

It would be difficult to overestimate

the professional improvement that has accrued already as a result of the study. In spite of tremendous expenditures of time and energy, almost every staff member has a new understanding and a new purpose concerning his job.

Many who never suspected the values of group dynamics now have a new conception of cooperation. Everywhere is manifested a disposition to try new ideas which give promise of more effective administration and teaching. Relationships between the elementary and secondary divisions are closer, and withal there is a new self-confidence which permeates almost every classroom. Those who had fears that secret shortcomings might be made public have received new assurance and have rejoiced that avenues to improvement have been opened.

When school begins in September, each teacher will devote a part of the three days set aside for in-service training to a full examination of the written reports. Each will see, also, the teaching aids prepared in the summer workshop as a result of the recommendations in the Report.¹

Admittedly, the project was difficult and, in El Paso's case, rather expensive. But the resulting attitudes and the already marked effects of the study far outweigh the drudgery and hard work involved in a year of self-appraisal.

¹ *A Comprehensive Analysis of the El Paso Public Schools: Reports of the Evaluating Committees* (mimeographed), 469 p., \$5.00.

Copyright © 1950 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.