The Total School Approach

The individual school is the natural unit for curriculum revision. This conclusion represents one of the major generalizations growing out of the five-year study of citizenship education conducted in the Detroit Public Schools. The belief that each school is a unique social organism requiring a total school approach to get effective curriculum change is an important by-product of methods employed in the Citizenship Education Study. In this study, Detroit schools were selected to participate. These schools consisted of one elementary, two junior high, and two senior high schools.

The geographical location of these schools was such that a fairly typical cross section of Detroit life was included in the study. One school was located in the heart of the downtown blighted area, adjacent to Detroit's Skid-row. Two schools were situated ten miles from the central section in upper-middle-class residential neighborhoods. One school was in the center of a factory district. The remainder were located in four different areas in which racial and nationality patterns are constantly changing.

To each of these schools a team of staff members was assigned to assist the school faculty in developing improved citizenship education programs. These teams helped teacher work-groups to get organized so that they could define citizenship problems and work toward the solution of these problems. Substitute teachers were employed to release teachers from regular school duties to participate in many work-group sessions. Many groups, however, held dinner meetings or met during coffee hours.

A variety of problems arose as a result of the diverse cultural environments of these eight schools. For example, the realization gradually emerged that subject-matter approaches, while helpful with some problems, are not too beneficial with others. Which teachers should assume responsibility if conduct in the cafeteria is repeatedly listed by teachers as a major citizenship problem? How does one handle a situation in which student government representatives report that many teachers will not allow time for discussion of student affairs? What can be done when a large bloc of teachers opposes a specific action program initiated by a principal? Who decides how and when a traditional method of school organization shall be replaced? These and similar problems seemed solvable only as entire faculties were mobilized for school improvement.

Total School Involvement

In this process of gradually moving toward total school involvement, the following suggestions have proved helpful:

Encourage educational leadership to function.

In the study, leadership developed from three sources: administrators, teachers and the study staff. The principal, assistant principal or department head held positions in which leadership was expected and often found. There
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were teachers who had natural leadership qualities or who developed these when they had the opportunity to share in the cooperative solution of school problems. Staff members in their roles as consultants were frequently expected to occupy leadership positions.

The educational leader was essentially a teacher, a stimulator and a coordinator of others' activities—one who was trying to grow in understanding and to help others to grow. Sometimes the leader was a democratic administrator who gave major attention to curriculum problems. Sometimes the leader was an outside consultant who provided encouragement and guidance. Always the leader was a person of vision, one with a good sense of direction.

Underline the importance of communication.

Participation by a total faculty is still more of an ideal than it is an accomplished fact. It is a goal toward which to move. The process may begin, nevertheless, with a small group’s or an individual’s advocating an idea or trying an experimental approach. As this advance beach-head becomes established, a consolidation of forces supporting this new advance must be achieved. Here communication becomes of extreme importance. If several teachers feel left out, or, if an entire department thinks its work is neglected, trouble lies ahead unless these teachers are constantly kept informed of the progress being made. Teachers and others want to know “what’s going on around here!”

Oral reports, mimeographed bulletins, research results and notices are helpful—but they do not guarantee satisfactory communication. Even face to face discussion may not always convey needed ideas. Good human relations are threatened and action is blocked when individuals concerned in
a program are not kept well informed.

During the study, total faculty communication improved as new devices were tried. As work-groups realized that part of their task was to bring about better understanding, they experimented with new communication media: sociodrama, demonstrations, group reporting and panel discussions.

Emphasize the importance of the faculty meeting.

As the curriculum process approached more nearly the involvement of the total school, the faculty meeting increased in importance and changed in nature. The routine administrative meeting of other years was now transformed into a high-level professional session. Meeting time lengthened, interest deepened, participation increased.

At the study’s end, those schools which had moved furthest toward a total school approach were using faculty meetings for three purposes. First, to assure faculty participation in planning, decision-making and evaluating. Second, to communicate the activities of work-groups and committees. Third, to provide training in the special skills necessary for effective group work: problem solving, discussion leadership, role playing, planning.

The heart of curriculum revision lies in the concept of teacher growth. The Citizenship Education Study found that an improved curriculum for citizenship education required that an approach be used which would enlist the support of as wide a number of teachers as possible. In this, the total school approach proved its value—for noticeable results in improved citizenship became apparent only as the total faculty became a part of the program.—Stanley E. Diamond, University of Michigan.

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