Professional Organizations Aid In-Service Growth

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How can voluntary professional organizations foster most effectively the in-service growth of their members? This topic is treated by Vernon E. Anderson, associate professor of education, University of Connecticut, Storrs.

ONE of the traditional roles played by professional organizations is that of an agent for improving working conditions of the teacher for tenure, retirement, salary, and the like. There is no doubt that this will continue to be an important function of such organizations as the N.E.A., state education associations, and teachers' unions. Another function, that has grown in significance in recent years, is that of in-service education. Numerous groups, such as the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, Association for Childhood Education International, and the National Council for the Social Studies, have made this their primary objective. How then can our professional organizations—whatever they are—perform a real service in our continued professional growth?

PRINCIPLES OF GROWTH AS CRITERIA

Experience in curriculum development programs, workshops, college courses and other types of in-service activities has taught us that certain principles operate in a situation in which maximum in-service growth occurs. These principles can, therefore, be used as criteria to evaluate the effectiveness of professional organizations in promoting this end.

Active Participation of Members

Good in-service programs are known for the widespread participation of all members of the group. A professional organization that is top-heavy with decision-makers, can by no means be considered effective in reaching its members. We may enjoy reading a bulletin from our national office, but if we have taken a part in determining the policy expressed by the bulletin we are more likely to carry out that policy.

In the past few years the ASCD has undoubtedly been a pioneering organization in changing the pattern of national, state and regional conferences to one of greater participation. The traditional pattern of presenting speakers in both general and sectional meetings was no longer satisfying to people who were actively engaged in doing a job that required effective small-group work. As a consequence, ASCD members have been learning through experiences in national conferences to use more effective group procedures. One significant result of the use of this technique in the national conference is the increasing attention to group dynamics in regional and state conferences, local in-service programs, and college courses.

The effect has been that many or-
ganizations are critically examining their conference techniques in order to encourage more conference members to take an active part. Some still, however, do little to experiment with new procedures.

Consideration of Problems

It is an accepted principle of in-service study that the group must be working on its own problems, not those handed it by someone else. In their conferences, many professional organizations provide for small group meetings. However, where the problems are selected and delimited before the conference without membership participation, this principle is violated. Sectional meetings in some state education associations, for this reason, are deadly affairs where the main concern of members seems to be getting away for an afternoon of shopping.

The longer conference period of three days to a week has permitted groups to define their own problems within an area and to use the resources within the group in order to arrive at some tentative solutions. The area itself is selected through suggestions sent in by members. The evidence of the effectiveness of this type of conference can be found in the deserted hotel corridors during group meetings. The exhibitors even complain that no one finds time to view their exhibits!

There is a tendency in our own organization as well as in others to assume that educators are not concerned with problems of a wider social nature. It is doubtful if such an assumption can be made. Experimentation is needed in developing group study of problems in such fields as anthropology, sociology, psychology and economics.

Provision of Useful Materials

Professional organizations have perhaps performed the most effective service for all their members through the publication of yearbooks, periodicals and pamphlets. Periodicals and yearbooks have long been used extensively in college courses in education. The kinds of pamphlets published by the Association for Childhood Education International, the ASCD, and the National Council for the Social Studies are often even more useful to curriculum committees that need up-to-date material on a specific topic. Curriculum libraries are increasingly receiving more calls for this type of pamphlet material than for the course of study bulletin.

Production of these materials for in-service education is in itself a significant contribution to professional improvement. However, there is another angle that should not be overlooked. The very fact that members participate in writing these materials means an opportunity for in-service growth. Even more significant may be the procedure used by some organizations in developing materials. Groups in near-by areas get together several times a year in order to explore and discuss the problem for the yearbook or pamphlet.

Opportunity to Work with Others

Good in-service programs have recognized the need for inter-group activity within the school system. Elementary and secondary teachers achieve mutual understanding by tackling mutual problems. Superintendents and principals roll up their sleeves and dig into committee work side-by-side with teachers.

Educational Leadership
Possibly this principle may seem to be inconsistent with the principle that a group should work on its own problems. However, particularly in the regional and state meetings of the ASCD, supervisors, administrators and teachers from various levels and fields have demonstrated that they have problems of mutual concern. In our New England ASCD regional summer conferences, for example, teachers have taken a prominent part.

Opportunity to Work with Lay Groups

In our professional organizations we are still in the frontier stage in learning how to work with people outside of our own profession. Yet this is a principle that curriculum leaders consider of vital importance in local in-service programs. More attempts are being made to invite parents to meet with educators at some conferences. For example, one or two lay persons met with each group at our Detroit ASCD meeting. However, we need genuinely cooperative ventures for conferences, preparation of materials, committee work and projects initiated by professional or other organizations. In national and local conferences greater effort can certainly be made to study problems community-wide in scope in order to attract more lay participants.

Promoting Change of Behavior

Few would deny that what we do as members of an in-service group should result in improvement in our ways of doing and acting in our daily professional duties. But most of us have been so engrossed in evaluating conveniently-measured short-range outcomes (such as producing a bulletin) that we have paid but little attention to behavior changes among members of the group. It is difficult to change our ways of acting. Many of us can remember the grumbling and frustration that occurred at our national meeting in which group dynamics techniques were first introduced.

Whether or not such changes can be easily determined, a professional organization must have a genuine interest in these outcomes in order to justify its existence. It is doubtful that an organization without any such concern is worth joining. Teachers, administrators and supervisors would do well to pass by organizations whose chief purpose is to add yearbooks to the office bookcase, to provide good fellowship meetings, or to maintain special privileges for their own select group.

Searching for Better Ways of Working

By way of summary and as a forward look, a few specific suggestions are made as to how professional organizations can search for the most useful ways of performing their in-service function.

- Experiment with new techniques. This article has frequently used our own organization to illustrate a point. It has not been done with the intention of saying that we have “arrived.” Certainly, if we feel that the procedures we now use in our conferences are the final answer, we are then in default in our leadership in supervision and curriculum development. We, as well as other groups, need to be continually experimenting with new conference techniques, new types of materials and new ways of working with local groups.
Strengthen local groups. The state and regional associations within the ASCD are one of its greatest strengths. Local units are the backbone of state education associations. Future emphasis in professional organizations might well point toward building up local, state or regional sub-units, rather than more extensive national activities. Regional projects hold considerable promise.

Cooperate with other professional organizations. To the teacher and administrator who is urged to join this and that organization, the picture is often one of groups competing for his allegiance. The N.E.A. might well take the lead in promoting some type of joint membership in its many departments or associations. Separate fees for many organizations add up to a considerable sum. Why not try a package fee to encourage individuals to join a group other than the one specifically concerned with their own field? Such a plan may, in turn, result in desirable consolidation of groups with similar purposes.

Cooperate with lay organizations. Many organizations outside the profession have purposes in common with our professional groups. Certainly, such groups as the National Conference of Christians and Jews, the Anti-Defamation League, the Parent-Teacher Association, and the Urban League stand for an extension of democratic values in various areas of living, for children and for adults. In only a few instances has cooperation with these groups been tried.

Avoid domination by any one group. One of the real dangers to the vitality of any professional organization is domination by a small group within the organization. Such groups might be the "old guard," who are supposed to understand what the organization stands for; a particular university or college; or any one status group, such as supervisors, college teachers, or administrators. The practice of automatically electing the vice-president to the presidency of the organization, or any practice that does not make it clear to members that they have a part in selecting the policy-makers, enhances this danger.

Eliminate organizations that no longer serve a worthwhile purpose. There is a distinction here that is important. Organizations may have worthwhile purposes, but may have been superseded by other organizations that can more effectively carry out these purposes. In such a case, the former organization should be willing to join forces with the latter and voluntarily go out of existence.

Vested interests may prevent taking such action. An organization that plans conferences largely for the sake of gaining memberships does not deserve the support of educators. First of all, it should have a program of activities that people can evaluate as to its effectiveness, even though it is on a small scale.

Consider the broader social scene. Finally, our organizations might extend their sphere of effectiveness if in their conferences, for example, they consider more problems of wider social import. A few groups have taken steps in this direction. Perhaps this may be the beginning of a significant development in professional education organizations.