Schools are the product of searching analysis, constructive criticism and organized support—are in fact the community’s schools.

The community that organizes to meet attack may easily be too late with too little. Only where school and community leaders organize the great power latent in an informed and participating citizenry; where professional staff and parents and citizens join determinedly to make both the schools and the community more effective servants of the welfare of its citizens and its children—only when this force is organized, and the schools are the community’s, will attacks on the schools automatically be attacks on the community’s own wisdom and pride—and thus most certainly fail.

**Organizing School-Initiated Citizens’ Committees**

H. M. HAMLIN

The place of school-initiated citizens’ committees in the movement for wider public participation in public education is discussed in this article by H. M. Hamlin, professor of education, University of Illinois, Urbana.

**THERE IS** a healthy and growing determination on the part of the American people that public school affairs shall not be left exclusively to schoolmen.¹

Seven major types of public participation in public education have been developing since the public schools originated.

- **Boards of education and associations of school boards.** Boards of education involve more than 300,000 laymen. They provide, everywhere in the country, a minimum of public participation.

- **Parent-Teacher associations.** Organized only to help the schools, these associations involve professional workers as well as laymen.

- **Lay groups that support particular school activities.** These include groups supporting extra-curricular activities, such as sports and bands.

- **Community organizations formed for purposes other than working with the schools.** Churches, service clubs, women’s clubs, and chambers of commerce are examples of voluntary membership organizations which often participate in school affairs.

- **Community councils.** There are about 11,000 community councils in the United States, each made up of representatives of community organizations

¹ This article is adapted from *Citizens' Committees in the Public Schools*, a book by the author, published January 1, 1952, by The Interstate, 19 N. Jackson, Danville, Illinois.

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and agencies. They are nearly always interested in schools and at times they give all of their attention to school affairs.

- Independent citizens' groups organized to assist or influence the schools. These groups usually arise when some citizens are convinced they cannot get what they want from the schools without applying pressure to them.
- School-initiated citizens' committees. Since shortly after the turn of the century, there has been increasing use by the schools of committees of laymen invited to share in school affairs, usually in an advisory capacity.

Types of School-Initiated Citizens' Committees

School-initiated citizens' committees can be classified in five ways:

- Temporary and continuing committees. The most prevalent way of starting to use citizens' committees is to establish temporary committees of laymen. The most common use of these committees has been in raising funds for the schools. There is increasing use of continuing committees, whose members serve for terms of stated lengths, usually three years, and in which rotation of membership is provided.
- School-wide and specialized committees. Committees of laymen have long been used in vocational and adult education. They are being used in health education, social education, and in almost every other school field. Recently there has been an extensive development of citizens' committees which serve school systems.
- Neighborhood, community, county, and state committees. Neighborhood communities are in use in rural communities and in cities. Organizations at the community level are most common. County committees are found when schools are organized by counties. Most states now have some sort of educational council.
- Committees with differing functions. Some committees are restricted to studying and giving advice regarding school problems. Others perform other functions in the schools. Some are agencies for community action.
- Committees with differing memberships. A major difference among committees is that some are made up of representatives of agencies, while others are composed of individuals who are not obligated to agencies.

Purposes and Advantages of School-Initiated Committees

Well-conceived school-initiated committees perform two principal functions: (a) Study of school problems leading to recommendations to boards of education, administrators and teachers; and (b) Two-way communication between the schools and the public.

Many other purposes have been well served. The best conception appears to be that school people and laymen should work together in whatever ways are mutually advantageous.

All of the forms of public participation which have been mentioned are needed and will probably continue to be utilized. School-initiated committees have certain unique advantages and certain unique weaknesses in comparison with other types of public participation.

School-initiated committees should not be set up unless they are genuinely
Organizing School-Initiated Citizens' Committees

The most common causes of failures and difficulties in school-initiated citizens' committees are inherent in the ways these committees have been set up. Out of long and extensive experience with these committees, with their failures and successes, the following recommendations for steps in organizing these committees have been evolved. The general principles apply, whether a specialized or a school-wide committee, or a network of committees, is being formed.

- Authorization and policy statement. School-initiated committees are creatures of boards of education. They should be authorized by boards after careful study. The first committee set up in a school should be a desirable precedent for any committees to follow. Boards will consider adequately what they are getting into as they shape a statement of policy dealing with such matters as the following: (a) the field of the committee; (b) its functions; (c) the number of members; (d) the manner in which members are to be chosen; (e) the terms of members; (f) the manner of replacing members whose terms expire and of filling vacancies; (g) the relationship of the committee to other citizens' committees; (h) the procedures to be used in maintaining relationships and communicating with the board; and (i) the relationships of the committee to administrators, teachers, students, parents and the community.

- Publicizing the proposed citizens' committee and the board's statement of policy. If there is any doubt about
community reactions, the board may submit its proposal for establishing a citizens' committee and its proposed statement of policy regarding the committee to the widest community criticism. Usually the reaction of a community is: "It's about time something like this were done." The kind of committee to be described also meets with community approval. Announcement of the project at this stage provides a desirable background for the next steps in setting up a committee.

- **Choosing the members.** Boards of education are best advised when they select a process for choosing members of a committee and a committee to carry out the process, instead of naming the committee members or asking community organizations to name the members. The process which has worked best, but which will probably be greatly improved, is as follows: (a) Independent suggestions of members for the committee are secured from a fair sampling of the public or that part of the public most affected by the committee that is to be provided. (b) The nominations are screened with especial attention to the general ability of those proposed, their interest or potential interest in the work of the committee, their insight into education, and their skill in working with others. As many as possible are selected, without getting an unrepresentative group, who have children in school or who are themselves attending adult classes. (c) From those who would apparently be good members, there are selected persons who have congenial contacts with as many different elements in the community as possible. (d) The exact number of persons the board wishes for the committee is recommended by the nominating committee. A reserve list is prepared from which other nominations may be made if, which is seldom the case, the board is not satisfied with the first panel.

The committee to carry out the nominating process is made up of representatives of the board, the administration, the teachers, the students, and the public. A committee of five to seven persons is ordinarily needed.

It is all important that all groups in a community feel that there is someone who understands and appreciates each of them. To have a representative from every group that thinks it is important would result in an unnecessarily large committee. Fairly small committees can be used if each member has contacts with several groups. For example, a certain member may come from a particular township, be a Legionnaire, a Methodist, a Republican, a farmer, a Farm Bureau member, and a representative of a particular age-group.

We are still finding ways in which a committee should be representative of a community. The following are some of the considerations that must usually be taken into account: (a) geographic location; (b) age; (c) sex; (d) race; (e) nationality; (f) occupation; (g) years of schooling; (h) social class; and (i) political, organizational and religious affiliations.

Care should be taken that there are: (a) parents and non-parents; (b) town and country people; (c) new and long-time residents of the community; (d) large and small taxpayers; (e) veterans and non-veterans; and (f) persons favorable and unfavorable to present school policies.
All of these groups should be represented approximately in proportion to their numbers in the community. No one should be a member by virtue of his position in the community as pastor, chamber of commerce secretary, or officer of an organization.

• Notifying the members chosen. An official letter requesting each member to serve is sent by the board of education or its agent. A copy of the board’s statement of policy is enclosed. Each prospective member is visited, usually by a team of two from the board, the administration, and the teaching staff, who further assure the individual that he is wanted and who answer any questions he may have. When the process indicated has been followed, it is common for all invited to accept; the percentage accepting seldom falls below 90 per cent.

• Conducting the first meetings of the committee. At the first meeting, the president of the board of education presides at the start. Representatives of the administration and the teachers may speak briefly, indicating their desire for the committee and some of the functions it might serve. Sometime during the first meeting the group is put “on its own,” to meet under a temporary chairman, provide opportunity for members to become acquainted and to express their interests in the project, and to decide upon the time of the next meeting. Election of permanent officers, adoption of general governing rules to supplement the board’s policy statement, and selection of agenda for the next few meetings can usually be accomplished at the time of the second meeting.

It is very desirable that, in these early meetings, the members have freedom to talk about the community, its educational needs, and the impacts of the school upon it, for they know most about these matters. They should not be given the impression that their only function is to deal with issues referred to the committee by the board of education. They also need early to learn about the work that the citizens’ committees are doing in other school systems. They must learn the privileges and responsibilities of committee members. They must become familiar with the school system or with that part of it with which the committee is to be concerned. Help from outside the system can often be used advantageously in outlining the possibilities of citizens’ committees and the duties and the ethics of committee members.

There are very satisfactory ways of organizing school-initiated citizens’ committees. There is no justification for much of the rash experimentation with methods of organization which have already been proved inadequate that is going on in the country today.

Of all the movements for public participation in public education, the movement for school-initiated citizens’ committees is most likely to produce good results. The time may be coming when every school will be expected to provide channels for citizen participation. Citizens’ committees would then constitute a sort of “fifth estate,” along with boards, administrators, teachers and students in the management of school affairs.
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