

Citizens Organize To Meet Attacks on the Schools

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Can citizens organize successfully to meet attacks on the schools? Archibald B. Shaw, superintendent of schools, Scarsdale, New York, tells how the citizens of one suburban community have so far confined and blunted attacks on their schools.

THIS IS THE LAND of organizing. From the Mayflower Compact down to the latest state constitutional convention we have organized and reorganized to establish representative democracy as our chosen form of government. We have built the tradition of organization to secure the rich blessings of liberty in enlightened self-government. But more than that, we have discovered the inherent fruitfulness of cooperative organization. It is no accident that we have become and remained a nation of joiners, of committees, of conferences, of conventions. Far from being a shallow Babbitry, of which it became popular to accuse us, this organizing is a fundamental expression of our belief in democracy. It has become one of the stoutest guarantors of the continuance of our way of life.

Instinctively then, and on demonstrably sound instinct, we spring to organize against attacks on, as well as for the preservation and improvement of, our great American institutions. Across the land today there is a still-rising flood of attacks on our free public schools. It is not my purpose to analyze or to prescribe remedies for these attacks, even though there are

some discernible patterns, of course, and evidences here and there of destructive organization. But there may be some interest in how one suburban community has so far confined and blunted the attack; some value in a case study.

A TRADITION OF ORGANIZATION

Scarsdale, New York, is a residential community of prosperous commuters to nearby New York City. There are about 3500 well-kept single family homes in the village (with no factories and with little shopping center), in a majority of which live families who have selected Scarsdale for their home, in part at least, because of the fine public schools.

There is a tradition of organization, of responsible citizenship, which reaches its culmination in the non-partisan nominating committees which nominate (draft would be the more descriptive word) its village and school district trustees. Busy and successful executives, with a leavening of mothers and wives, accept such assignments seriously and carry them out competently under the trustful yet vigilant eye of their neighbors and fellow citi-

zens. P.T.A.'s are popular and powerful, since practically all parents of elementary school children belong to one of the three elementary school P.T.A.'s and an unusually large number are active in the High School Parent-Teacher Association.

The P.T.A. Council president joins the president of the Woman's Club and the president of the Town Club to form a nucleus committee, which by elaborate and predetermined procedures enlarges itself to constitute a highly representative nominating committee of nearly a score of men and women (some without children in school). This non-partisan committee's nominations (drafts) have for twenty-eight years maintained a uniquely competent and representative School Board whose membership is rotated so that never does a person serve more than two three-year terms.

The Woman's Club has about a thousand members active in a confusingly rich array of committees and sub-organizations. The Town Club is a unique men's organization, also of about a thousand members, which meets only three or four times a year, but whose more than twenty committees are study and surveillance groups for every activity from County Government to Girl Scouts.

A picture of the community would not be complete without reference to another powerful institution—*The Scarsdale Inquirer*, a local weekly newspaper owned by the Woman's Club, which has a long history of competent and public-spirited editorial direction. There is an active and alert League of Women Voters; there are strong church groups, neighborhood

groups and many of the other more usual organizations.

A NEW COMMITTEE APPEARS

In June of 1949 a new organization came into the picture—a self-styled Committee of Ten whose announced membership had never exceeded nine before it changed its name to the simple yet grandiose title: The Citizens Committee. Since the change in name its broadsides have been signed by three co-chairmen, although as many as twenty different individuals have spoken in its causes from time to time. It is difficult to sum up the issues on which it attacked the schools, and only a long recital of statements and rebuttals, of moves and counter-moves could fairly picture its activities. Its earliest semi-public statement, at the time of the retirement of the long-term Superintendent of Schools in 1949 was by strong implication an attack on Deweyism, progressivism, and secularism in our schools, made in a letter to the School Board not publicized at the time. Next, a group of twenty or so individuals appeared at the July Board meeting to oppose acceptance of Federal lunch aid as "state-ism." Their appearance caused little furor, however, since the Board's own sub-committee had recommended against entering the Federal lunch program.

Then in September 1949, at the first Board of Education meeting, attended by the writer as Acting Superintendent of Schools, the storm broke. Objections were raised to the inclusion of certain books in the school library and request was made for the revelation of the name of the individual in the school system who had abetted and fostered

the insidious growth of Communism by recommending purchase through the years of the books cited to be by authors of Communist affiliations and subversive intent. Letters to the editor occupied more and more space in the local paper. At the October Board meeting passionate accusations of neglect of duty, of blindness to the Communist menace and counter-accusations of witch-hunting, of un-American censorship, were exchanged. The issues had been truly joined.

Citizens Express Confidence in Schools

In the next month three important developments took place. The school staff prepared detailed statements of the procedures and criteria used in the selection and purchase of library and textbooks, and a Board sub-committee prepared a clear and stirring report recommending approval of these procedures and criteria. At the same time the Committee of Ten was using every means possible to publicize its case. Letters and statements got into nearby newspapers and the New York papers. Speeches were made at the local Legion post and at luncheon clubs in the neighborhood. Telephones rang, and commuters put aside their newspapers on the trains. But the biggest gun of all was being quietly primed and loaded by a dozen or so community leaders—presidents of the local organizations previously mentioned and others.

In one late evening session this group's editorial committee labored into the small hours on the phrasing of a statement while the others worked out a list of influential community citizens and leaders, many of whom were of national repute, who might be counted on

to declare themselves on the fundamental principles which this group felt were involved. A statement was finally polished to the point where all present felt that it said, simply and unequivocally, what needed to be said. Somehow, between adjournment and early morning, this statement was typed out and duplicated, and the next day (Columbus Day) the original group went out to call on their prepared list. Finally 81 signatures were obtained before nightfall (and the deadline for the local newspaper). Copies of the statement and the signatures went to the New York papers for simultaneous release. Both the statement itself and the names attached were news. Outside newspapers played up such names as Charles E. Wilson, then president of the General Electric Company; Sigurd S. Larmon, chairman of the board of Young and Rubicam; Harry E. Humphries, president of United States Rubber Company, and many other figures of national interest. Local residents gave at least as much attention to the names of "Committee of 81" members known to them as former mayors, village trustees, school trustees, presidents and leaders of nearly all the varied important village organizations.

Both locally and nationally the statement itself drew much attention. It was extensively quoted. Even a year later one of the Boston papers made editorial use of it. It said, in part:

"We are the inheritors of a tradition that has encouraged a dynamic development in our intellectual as well as our material life. That tradition has been based on a tolerance that has not feared to permit inde-

pendent thought. A state that fears to permit the expression of views alternative to those held by the majority is a state that does not trust itself. . . .

"Any sensible person would agree that there are risks involved in allowing young persons relatively free access to a wide range of reading material. Of course there are risks. But we believe there are greater risks in any alternative procedure. Surely we have not, as a people, lost the courage to take the risks that are necessary for the preservation of freedom."

The Committee of 81's statement and the unanimous adoption of the Board's own Committee's report calmed the general public, even if they did not alter the opinions or position of the Committee of Ten.

New Attacks Are Made

In January the issue blazed again. At each Board meeting thereafter there was a large attendance. When finally the Board ruled that it would hear nothing further on the issue, shouts of gag rule were heard, and the issues were taken still more intensively and extensively to the local paper and those of surrounding communities.

The Non-Partisan Nominating Committee announced its nomination of the incumbents for a new term of the Board. At least one of the nominees made clear his position, urging that he would consider a vote for him as an expression of confidence in the Board and staff. A telephone campaign by the P.T.A.'s and by members of the Non-Partisan Nominating Committee re-

sulted in a whopping attendance at the Annual District Meeting (as contrasted with about 75 present the year before). The atmosphere was charged, but only a dozen or so of the 1100 voters failed to vote for the non-partisan nominees.

Again it seemed to most of the community that the issues were settled. However, at the very next meeting of the Board, members of the Citizens Committee (successors to the Committee of Ten) insisted that they had new evidence of Communist infiltration into the schools and sought a private hearing with the Board. For the first time, doubt was cast by implication on the loyalty and Americanism of some unknown teachers or staff members. The Board rejected a private hearing, but urged the group to substantiate its charges with any real evidence, at a public hearing.

In June 1950, once more a tremendous number gathered to hear a two and a half hour presentation of largely familiar charges, with some specific textbooks attacked by quotation. At the conclusion the superintendent spoke briefly, if somewhat dramatically, calling attention to the quality of the teachers, in whose hands the American way of life, and Scarsdale's children, were safe. A tremendous ovation bespoke the confidence of those present in the teaching staff, and a month later, the Board voted unanimously to reject the call for an investigation.

Again there were some who, perhaps wishfully, considered the issue closed. But in September there came a slashing attack on the Board, its policies, and particularly on the superintendent, from a gentleman who had nominally at least assumed the chairmanship of

the reorganized Citizens Committee. There was no attempt to answer this speech, and at the next meeting the Board announced that it would hear no more verbal attacks.

New charges arose in connection with the appearance of a distinguished young dancer at school assembly programs. The Citizens Committee finally mailed an "Open Letter" to every resident to press its charge of Communist infiltration into the schools. But the denial of the sounding-board which Board of Education meetings had earlier provided now confined the furor largely to the papers.

For an annual district meeting in May of 1951, another over-capacity crowd turned out—an estimated 1700 this time. Once more present Board members were nominated for a new term, but this time an exasperated citizen broke a twenty-year precedent by nominating from the floor two of the leaders of the Citizens Committee, in the expressed hope that such a contest would fairly reveal the sentiments of the community. One of the names was withdrawn, but the name of the other nominee finally went on the ballot, over vehement protests of the Citizens Committee adherents.

When the votes were counted, it was found that this nominee, so thoroughly identified with the attacking group, had polled just 38 votes against 1150 for the Board members re-nominated. With the announcement of the vote, a resolution endorsing the Board's position, urging it to ignore the criticisms, and expressing gratitude for the Board's hard work, long patience and faithful service was proposed. The roar of "ayes" apparently awed any opposition,

for, with no one voting "no," the resolution was unanimously adopted.

ONLY A COMMUNITY'S CONFIDENCE CAN PROTECT ITS SCHOOLS

It would be pleasant to report that there the matter ended. But realists would know that few, if any, of the Citizens Committee have changed their minds, and few have yielded to their fellow citizens' impatience with such attacks. Indeed another letter mailed out to all citizens in November has renewed the charge of Communist infiltration. But for the time at least, the community's confidence has been expressed so strongly that it will not quickly nor lightly be shaken.

If there be a lesson of general application, it is that organizing to meet or to defend against attacks is not enough. In Scarsdale, it was not the hastily mustered Committee of 81 that was decisive, nor yet the vigorous P.T.A. telephone chains, valuable as they were. Rather was it the long intimate association with and fact-founded confidence in the schools by so large a number of Scarsdale's citizens. Rather, too, was it the long tradition of non-partisan civic and school government, the unusually active and effective organizations of men and women, the vigorous neighborhood associations.

The citizens of Scarsdale have organized so effectively for better schools and a better community that the extra effort of organizing against attack was prompt and equally effective. The community's confidence in a very real sense did not rest on its acknowledged respect for the high ideals and attainments of its school staff, but rather on its self-respect. For truly the Scarsdale

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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