

# The Listening Post

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*This regular feature continues under direction of C. Glen Hass, associate superintendent and director of instruction, Arlington County Public Schools, Arlington, Virginia. He is also chairman of ASCD's Legislative Committee.*

*As this year's first contributor, The Listening Post presents Dana P. Whitmer, assistant superintendent, Public Schools, Gary, Indiana.*

## It Pays To Train for Leadership

THE GARY Public Schools in recent years have been involving all teachers, administrators and many parents in the development of policies and plans for the schools. Essential to the success of this venture has been a program of leadership training by means of which teachers, parents and administrators have increased their skills and techniques in discussion group leadership. While a few persons are "born" leaders, the experience in Gary indicates that a high percentage of persons become effective group leaders if they have an opportunity to study leadership techniques and then to assume group leadership in problem situations. Experience also indicates that leadership skills thus developed have additional value in that they are used in classroom teaching and they give participants psychological ownership of plans made.

The structure for in-service education in the Gary Schools has been three-day camp and home workshops. In the workshops, small discussion groups of from eight to fifteen persons are formed. Each group works for the three-day period on a problem (curriculum, administrative or policy) in which it is interested. The leader of the group is chosen by the group and may be a parent, teacher or administrator. Status

positions are not observed in discussion groups, and the value to the group of any individual lies only in his ability to contribute to the group. Decisions by a group are made on the basis of consensus, with the opportunity for a minority report in cases where consensus cannot be reached in the time available.

## Role of the Leader

The role of the leader in these discussion groups is not to give answers or convince the group that a particular plan is desirable. It is, rather, to guide the process of discussion so that all members have opportunity to contribute, and so that consensus is reached on the problem which the group has chosen to discuss. The leader provides an atmosphere in which there is freedom to discuss and to disagree. His skills are not necessarily factual, but lie rather in guiding the process of discussion to a worth-while conclusion.

The leadership role sketched here is not one with which most persons have had experience. The normal reaction of a teacher who has been chosen to lead a group is usually phrased in the question, "What do I do?" In Gary we have attempted to provide an answer through leadership training meetings in which all leaders meet together sev-

eral times to discuss and to practice techniques of leadership. These leadership training meetings are organized on a discussion group basis. Discussion begins with questions from the newly chosen leaders. The questions are discussed, new questions arise, and principles of leadership are identified. Usually after several such discussions, each member of the leadership discussion group "practices" being leader. Following the practice period, the entire group analyzes the techniques used by the practice leader. After three or four such meetings, leaders usually feel confident that they can take the leadership role for which they have been chosen in the forthcoming workshop.

### Plan for Leadership Training

While each set of leadership meetings follows an individual pattern, it is possible to identify some of the problems of the leadership role which are common to all groups. Some of these are:

- The step-by-step process through which a group passes in reaching consensus on a problem is similar to this pattern:

Identification and clarification of the specific problems to be discussed.

Presentation of relevant data or experience that bears on the problem.

Suggestion of the various possible solutions or plans.

Selection of the plan or solution which seems most desirable.

Evaluation and summary of the work of the group.

- The role of the leader in each phase is to assist the group in accomplishing each step and to see that the group is not too hasty in reaching a conclusion. For certain complex problems it is valuable for a group to plan just how it will attack the problem before proceeding to the second step of presenting relevant data and experience.

- At the initial meeting of the group, the leader should see that each group member gets acquainted with each of the other members. A short "get acquainted" period prior to work accomplishes this.

- Specific techniques for limiting the contributions of loquacious participants as well as for drawing out the reticent member are developed.

- Use of periodic summaries to focus the discussion on the problem, or to clear the air when discussion becomes confused, is found to be very valuable.

- Use of the "straw man" solution in reaching decisions is helpful when a complex problem is discussed. Frequently, after considerable discussion, a small sub-committee can be detailed to propose such a plan to the group. After modification by the group, the tentative proposal may become the conclusion of the group.

- The need for and desirability of consensus in reaching decisions receives consideration. The urge to solve problems by voting is strong, and the consensus concept needs examination by the majority of persons.

This sketch in broad outline illustrates the content of the leadership meetings as they have been conducted in Gary. It should be emphasized, however, that the practice period which follows is an important aspect of leadership training, and for most people is the most valuable activity in the leadership program.

Involving parents, teachers and administrators in planning and problem solving will pay rich dividends in any school system. It is good for morale. Support and understanding of plans are increased in this way. Participants get to know one another with accompanying improved human relations.

—Dana P. Whitmer, assistant superintendent, Public Schools, Gary, Indiana

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