

A State Looks At Its Supervisory Program

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In their organized attempt to evaluate their state program, supervisors in West Virginia find that one result of their common endeavor may well be the gaining of information and experience that will enable the state, the counties and the colleges to work together in a spirit of cooperation and service.

HOW ARE you supervisors getting along?" "What gains have come to children because of your efforts?" The West Virginia State Supervisory Association had been meeting regularly as an organized group for three years when these disconcerting questions were thrust at them by a county superintendent. Since they worked within the county unit framework, supervisors from all parts of the state were present to hear these penetrating and disturbing questions. As individuals and in small groups they had wondered what the answers to such questions might be. But no real effort had been made to determine such information. The superintendent was not through yet, however. He went on: "How do you know how well you are getting along?" "What do teachers like about your work?" "What do you *not* do that teachers wish you *would* do?"

Sobering, these questions. "What are the answers?" the supervisors asked themselves. With this challenge they decided to find out.

The association asked its executive committee to devise a research instrument that might prove helpful. Eager to serve, the committee hastily built an

objective questionnaire which was circulated to a random sampling of 1600 teachers. Two hundred twenty-eight responses came back. A summarizing committee's study of this meager return and of the instrument itself could only conclude that the questionnaire had served to prompt further questioning. To begin, for example, why hadn't more teachers answered? Procrastination? Busy lives? Perhaps! Yet speculation without concrete evidence (a rare form of literary art in which members of the teaching profession seem especially gifted) led the committee to a different conclusion.

Possibly the questionnaire had lacked sound promotion and follow-up, or it had been too difficult to answer, or it was not discriminative, or it had failed to arouse interest. Or could it have been that the teachers associated it with a hard-hitting attack on supervisors in general which had recently appeared in an educational publication? Speculation may be satisfying, but it does not ordinarily arrive at factual conclusions.

Nevertheless, certain valid conclusions could be drawn from the experience. The *timing* had been poor. Teachers *are* burdened with a wide

variety of questionnaires. The committee which had prepared the instrument had been composed largely of supervisors and thus was not widely representative. Finally the committee circuitously arrived at the obvious: the blanket questionnaire approach is not the way to arrive at the facts that are needed if supervision is to profit.

In addition to the several conclusions that could be drawn from this rather disheartening experience, it was clear that the committee was ready to face more realistically the problems at hand.

First, the general situation had, of necessity, to be re-analyzed. Supervision in West Virginia is of many patterns and varying degrees of intensity. County systems are widely divergent, depending upon the point of view of the administrator, the type of supervision, the size and geographical characteristics of the county, and the size of the schools involved. In one county the supervision may come from the county superintendent only, or from an assistant superintendent; in another the teacher may have a general supervisor, a music, art, and two or three other special supervisors, as well as a supervising principal. Certainly any research instrument would have to discriminate sufficiently to indicate the types of supervision which existed. Almost certainly, other weaknesses in the questionnaire could be tabulated: among them its length, its failure to identify the level on which the teacher worked, and its inability to exact spe-

cific answers. In all probability the sampling process, in which every tenth teacher in the state directory had been circularized, had contributed to the lack of effectiveness.

To be more specific in method, the committee realized, would prove difficult, since the security of some members of the profession might be threatened. In spite of such dangers, however, the study was re-launched along different and, it was hoped, sounder lines.

Realizing that one mistake inherent in the first attempt was the failure to involve all groups who were concerned with the supervisory services, the committee decided to broaden planning participation by including elementary and secondary principals, classroom teachers, college faculty members, county superintendents, and the state education association. Of equal importance was the securing of outside guidance, at least in the early stages. Dr. J. Bernard Everett, research specialist with the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, NEA, readily agreed to serve in this capacity.

The new committee took a hard look at the purpose of the study. After thorough discussion it became clear that the only possible reason for pursuing a research program of this type would be to promote growth. Furthermore, if the job was to be done properly, only the recipient of supervision, the teacher, could properly evaluate that service.

The sharing of experiences from the twenty representatives of ten counties and colleges of widely different supervisory situations led the group to the decision that the problem of evaluation

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should be approached with a long-range point of view and should be on a county-by-county basis. It was further decided that the study should be voluntary on the part of each county and should be planned by a widely representative group within the county. Each county would decide on how to collect data, how to summarize the data, and what uses were to be made of it. It was hoped that this procedure would remove several of the elements of the questionnaire study—the random sampling, the threats to security, and the danger of attaching significance to too little evidence.

The committee examined several methods of procedure. In every step it was emphasized that the positive aspects of supervision should be stressed. But whatever the structure of the study within a county, the committee agreed on three guiding principles: (1) that emphasis be placed on the discovery of the most helpful supervisory practices now in use; (2) that the study should not back-fire on participating teachers or react on any supervisor; and (3) that the study should lead to the discovery of areas in which more help is needed.

Various Possible Approaches

While the structuring of the study was to be left entirely to individual counties, the following approaches were discussed at length.

1. The Group Interview

A county might choose to have a study-group situation in which several teachers would come together to talk through with a trained interviewer the supervisory services which they found most helpful. Two teachers in the

group would serve as recorders. One recorder might categorize the comments while the second recorder would write, wherever possible in the words of the person speaking, the sentiments expressed. Majority and minority statements would be important and the recorder should ask the group from time to time, "Is this what we are saying?" The size of the group and the number of meetings might vary and a county could choose to gather data on schools in general or for one type of school. It would be important that all teachers in the county understand the objectives of the study, regardless of the schools being studied.

2. Individual Interview

A county might decide to have individual teachers, democratically selected, interview personally a given number of teachers concerning the supervisory services rendered them. The number and the method of selection of interviewers and the teachers to be interviewed would be matters for group decision. In this method the questions would focus on "what" and "why." (What do you like and why? Are there problems in your classroom with which you need help?) The interviewer would attach no names to the reporting. The county would decide what uses were to be made of the data. The interviewing teams would need to be trained carefully so that they could use the same consistent approach with all teachers interviewed.

3. The Subjective or Open-Ended Questionnaire

A county could choose, in a meeting for a selected group or for all teachers, to write for an hour (or for any agreed-

upon period of time) on a few broad questions related to supervision. The ideas of teachers on helpful practices and felt needs would be sought in such a procedure and the questions agreed upon by the group would point to the securing of such answers. A selected and trained group of teachers could then summarize the responses. A county group composed of a cross section of all professional personnel should interpret the results.

4. *A Structured Questionnaire*

A county might choose to build a questionnaire which could be answered in the light of the supervisory services rendered in that county. The questionnaire would be circulated among the teacher group.

5. *An Informal Study Group*

Any county could test the value of a teacher-led study group, which could be organized as part of a county workshop. Such a group might focus its attention on the helps available and the helps to be desired. The leader and recorder could work without any special training. A report from this study group (or groups) would likely not yield definite data but might reveal teacher feelings toward supervision. In this study it would be important for the group to be composed of teachers only.

So that there would be an on-going steering and coordinating committee, the Association of School Supervisors, the State Department of Education, the Association of School Superintendents, the Classroom Teachers Association, the West Virginia State Teachers Association, the Association of Elementary School Principals, the Association of

Secondary School Principals, and the Association of Higher Education were asked to appoint members to a permanent committee. This group will serve in an advisory capacity to counties already studying the problem, will help new counties as they wish to start, and will receive any information which counties wish to share with others.

It was agreed that the following suggested outline might be followed in launching a county study: (1) commitment by two or three interested people in the county; (2) commitment by a cross-section committee in the county, perhaps an executive committee already in existence; (3) have the county committee or a representative of the state steering committee present the idea to the county-wide professional organization; (4) plan the structure or build the approach with the county committee (In preparing questions it was felt that teachers should have the predominant role, and that a member of the state committee should be present when this step is taken.); and (5) the completion of the instrument to be used and the training of the personnel who will collect the data. The state committee and college personnel will be available for this latter task.

At this time five counties are carrying on pilot studies, one for each of the techniques outlined above. Neither the supervisory association nor the state committee is anticipating possible results. The experiments are being tried and may be discarded or retained as experience dictates. Other techniques may be suggested from time to time. Yet it is hoped that effective ways of working with local groups on vital problems will be discovered.

Will the counties share with the state group, and, if they do share, what can be done with the data?

Whatever the results of the pilot studies, the basic problems remain and must be solved if progress is to be made in the supervisory program in this state. It is hoped that county people, working locally, may be able to provide the necessary insight. In this way the answers to problem situations may be found. Out of the program may come the information and experience that will enable the state, the counties and the colleges to work together in a spirit of cooperation and service.

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nate the local studies of different researchers, with different conditions and methods, and draw sound generalization? Who will do the generalizing? Do we propose to have some individuals who confine their research efforts to seeking common elements in the various action researches and the results obtained by them? If so, how can we insure the objectivity of interpretation?

And to further confuse the situation we are beginning to encounter the terms cooperative research, evaluative research, and service research. Are these not merely attempts to describe in the title the method used? Does action research fall in this category?

Let us be sure of the odds before we place our bets. Let us further clarify the meaning of the label and its implications before we give our wholehearted endorsement to "action research."

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