

Consolidation: Barrier to Development of Community Schools

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What should be the criterion for judging the possible effects of consolidation upon the community school? The author speaks from a rich background of experience as he develops this topic.

FOR MANY years, you and I have been exhorted to broaden our horizons, to get a larger view, to extend the limits of our world. We have been urged to be state-minded, regional-minded, national-minded and world-minded. This advice has been appropriate and well meant. But in our enthusiasm for an ever-enlarging horizon, we have sometimes forgotten that new broad visions are more meaningful when they are related to our immediate living, to our local community.

If the extension of a person's horizon involves a lessening of his interest and responsibility in the community of which home is a part, he is just as unbalanced as is the man who is justly referred to as an isolationist. Some of the unfortunate results of premature horizon-extending are now being recognized. One manifestation of this recognition is the new interest in the concept of the community school. The community school is seen as the institution which can revitalize community life and thus counterbalance the trend toward state and national and world

orientation. The community school, on the other hand, gives meaning to the extended horizons, to the world view. It supplies this meaning by providing the base from which the new horizon can be viewed with real understanding.

The inclusion of local-mindedness along with state-, regional-, national- and world-mindedness is an important consideration in any discussion of school consolidation. Because I believe so strongly that America needs community schools, I urge that all school consolidations be evaluated by this criterion: attendance districts should be consolidated only when the enlarged district does not become a barrier to the development of a community school.

Nature of the Community School

Perhaps we should be more specific concerning the concept of education referred to as the community school. This kind of school has often been defined and described in the literature of education. Some of the elements that appear in most of these statements are worthy of mention here.

In the first place, education in a community school is understood to be a power—a power capable of aiding communities and the people in the communities to solve their problems. Thus,

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a community school centers its program on problem-solving. The automobile industry in its current advertising campaigns is emphasizing the idea of power—power steering, power brakes, power window-openers, and even power front-seat adjusters—with a touch of a button your seat not only moves forward and backward but up and down. I wish we could be as effective in convincing the American people of the power of education as the advertising experts are in selling them power driving.

A second element in the concept of a community school is the recognition that the power of education is made active when the educative process relates resources of the people and of the community to the needs of the people and of the community. When this relationship is established, students and teachers and parents see and understand the vitality of education. They realize that education actually makes a difference in the lives of people.

A third element in this concept of education is the provision of educational services to persons of all ages, not merely to children and youth. The community school does not assume, of course, that it provides all the educational services for all age levels, but it seeks to make its contribution to the total educational program of the community, recognizing that many other agencies have legitimate educational aims. Underlying this educational policy is the basic belief that education is a continuous process—from cradle to grave—and that the school should serve throughout a life-cycle.

A fourth element in this concept of education is the accomplishment of the desirable aims of education in a more

effective manner. The fundamental skills, the understandings and attitudes of citizenship and of international relations are emphasized and actually taught more effectively in community schools.

A fifth element of the community-school concept is the use that the school makes of the community. The interdependence of the school and the community implies not only that the school is capable of contributing to the solution of the community's problems but that the school should be a beneficiary of the community's cultural and productive resources. This is an old-fashioned two-way street—the school serves the community and the community serves the school.

Applying Criteria for Consolidation

As we consider the possibility that consolidation can be a barrier to the development of community schools, we must differentiate clearly between the merging of administrative units and the consolidation of attendance units. The first type of reorganization would seldom be a barrier to community schools; indeed, it is often an aid to the development of community schools within a system. It makes possible a larger and more effective administrative and supervisory staff, an equalized and fair tax burden, effective recruitment and placement procedures, well-planned in-service education, and flexibility in organization and program.

On the other hand, the consolidation of two or more attendance units into one large attendance unit may create a situation which definitely thwarts the development of a community school. Such reorganization may lead to the development of a school with a very large

enrollment but with no sense of community belonging, a school with great emphasis upon subject matter but with no consciousness of the relation of the subject matter to real problems, a school with extensive diversification in program but with little concern for general education, a school with high idealism with respect to national and international goals but with a record of achieving only superficial understandings since it has no local community to which it can relate the larger geographic concepts, a school that is emotional over the role of community life but actually sees this role as a nostalgic exercise.

To promote the development of community schools, a consolidation program should apply, along with other criteria not discussed in this article, a standard which would assure a local community for each school. The meaning of the term "local community," of course, would be defined by the school or school system involved. Since the community school bases its programs upon real problems of the community, many difficulties would arise if the school were attempting to serve two or more local communities. Though located adjacent to each other, communities are different; their resources and their needs are different.

The location of the school plant is an important factor in the development of a community school. Many school consolidations of the past have resulted in the selection of school sites which are in reality great barriers to the development of community school pro-

grams. These sites become in fact "dead hands" on progress.

Advocates of school consolidation have frequently rested their case upon the fact that a large school can offer a greatly diversified program. Today this is not as convincing an argument as it used to be, for we now believe that greater emphasis should be placed upon general education for all and that there should be less specialization until completion of secondary education. Many large schools are attempting to regain the advantage of smaller units by organizing on the "campus plan" and by emphasizing core programs and common learnings.

A Warning

Obviously, a full discussion of consolidation would include other important considerations. Because of space limitations, I am here emphasizing only the one thesis: attendance districts should be consolidated only when the enlarged district does not become a barrier to the development of a community school.

Yes, we want new horizons; we want to develop understandings of national and world problems. But we also want to give our students an understanding of community problems. Fortunately we have discovered that we can most effectively accomplish all these goals by developing community schools. Let us not allow over-enthusiasm for school consolidation to deprive us of the power for revitalizing our communities that is inherent in the community school.



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