

## Uniting Forces To Improve Education

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### Better Programs Through Combined Efforts

JUST AS neighbors borrow a cup of sugar over the side fence, so do the school system and the City Recreation Department of Sylacauga, Alabama swap talents, facilities, time and efforts. Sometimes it's hard to tell which belongs to the schools and which to the recreation department, but, after all, it really doesn't matter. We work as neighbors.

The schools use the auditorium of the recreation building, with its records and record player, for folk dance classes; while the recreation department uses the school gym for the city basketball league. The cement multiple-use area, which was built by the recreation department, is used for physical education classes, and parts of the schools are used weekly for community night programs, teen clubs and game nights.

The 1953 Folk Festival was one of the major events which was produced through this cooperation. Folk dancing was taught to members of eight teenage clubs, which are sponsored by the recreation department. The teen-agers became so interested in square dancing, they decided to use American folk music throughout the festival. The music department worked out the songs, and the physical education teachers, together with a member of the recreation department, taught square dancing to members of all the physical education classes. The festival, with the music, dancing and colorful costumes, was proclaimed such a success by parents, students and all who participated in it that it has been made an annual event.

After the best team wins a football game, nobody wants to go straight home—even if he isn't happy with the decision. So "after-football-game dances" are held for all teen-agers—winners and losers—at the City Recreation Building.

### A Successful Evening

Of course, all the students don't dance. Some sit on the side enviously eyeing their more graceful friends and worrying because they have two left feet. During the months the school is making preparations for the Junior-Senior Banquet and Prom, the recreation department gives the guests-to-be free instructions in dancing and dance etiquette. The only rule is that everyone who comes to the class must try.

The activities are not confined to teen-agers or high school groups, but reach into the elementary schools as well. A sixth grade graduation party is held in the school and a member of the City Recreation Department is in charge of the entertainment; the playgrounds have a circus with a parade and the school band leads it; the PTA has a social and the recreation department plans the program.

These are just a few examples of how the school system and recreation department combine efforts and have better programs. After all, why shouldn't they work together? They are both working with the same people and toward the same goal.

—BETH WALLACE YATES, superintendent of recreation, City Recreation Department, Sylacauga, Alabama.

## The Public Unites for the Schools

THE WORD "public" in "public schools" is taking on a new meaning these days. More and more American citizens are beginning to accept their primary responsibility for the institutions which educate our young. To a majority of citizens in the past, the word "public" has indicated that the schools are open to *all* children. Today, it indicates also that *all* the public has a part in the planning and improvement of our schools.

This phenomenon of constantly increasing public interest in the schools can be traced back to the end of World War II, when public apathy toward the schools had become widely evident. Increased birth rates of the war years were then beginning to manifest themselves in overcrowded schoolrooms. Teachers were scarce—many of them having left the profession to serve in the armed forces, others to take jobs in defense industries. This overcrowded, understaffed condition of the over-all public school system was critical—but for a few years it was ignored by the average citizen.

Finally, the daily reports of the schools' pressing problems could no longer be overlooked. Action was indicated, citizen action, and—with the encouragement of administrators—this action began on a small scale. Citizens committees, groups made up of a cross-section of representatives of the community began popping up across the nation.

Impetus to this movement came in 1949 when the National Citizens Commission for the Public Schools was formed as a nonprofit organization to work for the improvement of the public schools.

A group of citizens not professionally identified with education, religion or

politics, had carried on a series of exploratory meetings to discuss the problems and opportunities of public school education in the United States. They concluded that there is an urgent need for lay citizens as well as educators to participate in efforts to improve the schools; that a broad and active public interest in the schools must be evoked to achieve the kind of schools needed. Encouraged by a group of distinguished educators—headed by James B. Conant, then president of Harvard University, and Paul R. Mort of Teachers College, Columbia University—they formed the NCCPS under a six-year charter, with Roy E. Larsen, president of Time, Incorporated, as chairman. Henry Toy, Jr. is director.

### Two Goals Are Set

With financial backing from the Carnegie Corporation, the Fund for the Advancement of Education, the General Education Board, the New York Community Trust Company, the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation and the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, the commission members set for themselves two immediate goals:

- 1) To help Americans realize how important our public schools are to our expanding democracy; and

- 2) To arouse in each community the intelligence and will to improve our public schools.

Both goals are predicated on the Jeffersonian principle of local autonomy. To achieve these goals the commission launched a program designed to encourage the formation of citizens committees in towns and cities across the nation.

Today, four years after the formation of the commission, it is estimated that there are some 8,000 of these local

groups working for their schools, 2,000 of them in constant touch with the NCCPS. They are getting before the public the facts of overcrowding and of building needs; they are getting out the vote on bond issues for school construction; they are trying to alleviate the teacher shortage; they are interested in curriculum, school organization and finance; they are helping to conduct surveys to determine the wishes of the community; and they are translating the policies of their boards of education to the general public. These groups are at various stages of development and are looking constantly for ways in which they can assist and work with their local school authorities to improve their schools—from facilities to program.

Just what is a citizens committee? And how is the National Citizens Commission achieving its twin goals?

The first question gets to the heart of the citizen movement. According to the commission, it has, over a period of four years of studying and working with citizens committees of all kinds in all parts of the country, come to the conclusion that the effective groups have these three characteristics in common:

1) They are broadly representative of the entire community. They reflect as fully as possible all parts of it, all viewpoints, and all interests—economically, geographically, occupationally, culturally, politically, etc.—rather than any one part exclusive of the others.

2) They base all their recommendations upon a study of all available relevant facts. They do not have an axe to grind.

3) They are independent in thought and action, but they always take steps to establish and maintain a cooperative working relationship with the legally established authorities.

The second question—"How is the commission achieving its twin goals?"—

can be answered by looking at two facets of the commission's work.

*Publicity:* In cooperation with the Advertising Council, the commission (along with the U. S. Office of Education) conducts the Better Schools advertising campaign which focuses public attention, through newspaper, outdoor advertising, radio and TV and other media, on the needs of the schools and encourages citizens to take an active part in finding solutions to school problems. A booklet entitled, *How Can Citizens Help Their Schools*, which traces the development of citizen activity for the schools and describes the commission's services, is offered as a write-in give-away.

*Community Services:* The commission's New York office at 2 West 45th Street and its six regional offices across the country are clearinghouses of information on what citizens groups have done and are doing. Case histories, written by the citizens involved, and describing how specific goals were met, are sent out to those interested.

A monthly news bulletin, "Citizens and Their Schools," is sent to active citizens giving up-to-date information on what citizens are doing. A series of "working guides" are distributed to help citizens study specific areas of public school improvement. Details on how to obtain free showings of educational films are given to interested persons.

Through a stepped-up program of publicity for the schools, the commission is this year attempting to keep public interest in the schools high and to recruit even more communities into the school improvement movement.

"The need," says Chairman Larsen, "is great. The problems of public education concern all of us and it's time for all of us to do something about them."

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