

Parents Are a Valuable Resource

MARY NORRIS LLOYD

If curriculum is broadly conceived to be what is done for children under the influence of the school, parents and other citizens can and should play an important role in its development. This article shows how one school has capitalized on the resources of parental help and intelligence in improving its program.

CAN parents help in curriculum planning? Can parents and educators come to a mutual understanding and agreement as to what should be taught and how?

A fine tradition of parent-teacher cooperation exists at Skokie Junior High School in Winnetka, Illinois. However, Winnetka parents have assumed that certain fields are reserved to the professional educator and that their activities are limited to encouraging and supporting the administration in projects usually initiated by school people. The Lay Participation Project just concluded at Skokie has proved effectively that parents can help in areas traditionally considered to belong to members of the school staff.

Actually the Lay Participation Project described in this article was not conceived specifically to find the answers to the question of parent participation in curriculum planning. Rather, it came into being in an attempt to find solutions to certain perennial instructional problems that nagged at the staff, the parents and the community in general: Why isn't my son a better

speller? Why aren't my children required to read the classics that I read when I was in junior high school? Why don't schools give grades nowadays? Is my child being properly prepared for high school? Why can't the schools teach children to respect private property?

Donald Cawelti, principal of Skokie School, believed that parents and teachers were equally concerned in resolving the problems implied by these questions. He discussed with members of the school staff during the fall of 1950 ways and means of securing the counsel of parents.

Children's Unmet Needs

The staff members agreed that parent participation in seeking solutions to these problems would be healthy and constructive. They decided to invite the Parent-Teacher Association to select several parent representatives to meet with a committee of teachers to study how unmet needs of junior high school age children could be met more adequately. They were also to recommend possible solutions to the problems raised.

At its first meeting the parent and teacher committee faced the task of designing a technique to encourage par-

Mary Norris Lloyd is a parent, a secretary of the PTA, and a member of the Steering Committee in the Skokie Junior High School in Winnetka, Illinois.

ents and other members of the community to participate in discussing the unmet needs of their children. This initiating committee took for itself the rather formidable title of the "Steering Committee of the Lay Participation Project Studying the 'Unmet Needs' of the Junior High Children in Winnetka." Since such a lengthy title defies even alphabetizing, the group became familiarly known as the Steering Committee. It decided to ask groups of parents to come together to define what they felt were "unmet needs" of their children.

The Steering Committee concluded at once that if parents responded with enthusiasm to the project, there could be two results: First, greatly to be desired, constructive searching and later action; and second, lots of talk without any direct benefits. Therefore, the Steering Committee spent many hours devising methods and techniques for harnessing for constructive purposes the potential reservoir of parents' ideas. A series of five meetings for parents was opened with brief orientation sessions led by Mr. Cawelti. Then the parents were divided into smaller groups of about twenty each under the leadership of one member who had received, from the Steering Committee, suggestions for conducting the discussions. These leaders made a special effort to encourage wide participation in the discussion groups. A specified length of time was set aside so that each individual participant could express what he considered the most important "unmet needs" of his own child or of other children of junior high school age with whom he came in contact. Each person's statement was followed

by general discussion, which helped to define the needs more clearly. At the end of the meeting each person wrote an analysis of what he considered to be "unmet needs." These papers (later called "green sheets") were collected by each group leader and were used by the Steering Committee in determining the subsequent problems to be discussed.

Every parent in the school was invited to come to one of the discussion sessions. Five were held, with an average attendance of 100. There was always a good representation of fathers at these meetings. Several community groups—the village library, League of Women Voters, church school directors, and parents of children formerly at Skokie—sent representatives. By dividing each of the meetings into smaller discussion groups every participant had a chance to speak and there was no attempt to fence off areas "out-of-bounds" to lay people. Some parents actually felt that curriculum should be sacred to the staff and became nervous at the trends of discussion in a few of the groups, but the school people encouraged frank discussion in all areas. Two or three members of the school staff were present in each group.

An analysis of the "green sheets" showed that in all groups discussion had centered about six major fields: (1) Curriculum, (2) Teaching Methods, (3) Social Activities and Attitudes, (4) Community Planning, (5) Physical Facilities and (6) Educational Counseling and Guidance. The Steering Committee organized study groups in each of these fields.

Parents found it more difficult to come out for a series of evenings to

study the problems raised by defining "unmet needs" than to come for one evening to discuss what these were. Nevertheless, enough parents were interested to make possible a good study group in each of the five areas and in each of two areas it was necessary to organize two groups. Again, the Steering Committee tried to organize leadership and techniques with great care, so that these study sessions would be fruitful. Each study group planned its own time and place of meeting and worked out its own approach to the study.

The study group on Teaching Methods found itself dealing with, among other things, the ticklish question of reporting. This group made a study of the Skokie system of report cards and compared it with the system used at the Township High School and with other systems. The study group decided that although many "green sheets" carried criticisms of the Skokie method of reporting, these were too vague and too contradictory. It concluded that further reactions of the parents were needed before the group could consider making a recommendation in the field.

A questionnaire was sent home with the next report card. On the basis of the returns of this questionnaire, carefully analyzed by two fathers participating in the study group, the staff is now in the process of devising a method of reporting that will give parents the benefit of standardized test information which the school has about the child, along with more specific information about current progress. This new method is being tried with a small group of parents and children this year and, if its use is successful, it will be

extended to all. Interestingly enough, despite a great deal of talk over the years, no great enthusiasm was found for returning to the old system of reporting with A, B, C and D.

The study group on Social Activities and Attitudes tried to "see" the child in relation to his community. It began with these kinds of problems: What do storekeepers, restaurant keepers, the lady behind the counter at the ice cream store, the ticket seller at theaters think of our children? How do our children act at dancing school, at church school? Are our children courteous, respectful, law-abiding? The conclusion of a very careful study, based on material drawn from these various sources, was that parents should work with children, their own and others, to improve social standards, and that the best situation for this cooperation would be a project carried on jointly by groups of parents and groups of children. The village survey made by this study group was turned over to the Standards Committee of the School Council at Skokie, and the members of that committee invited representatives of the PTA to sit in with them to discuss how to improve the children's conduct in situations outside the home and school. Their joint effort produced a list of suggestions regarding social conduct and behavior which was published in the school bulletin. The PTA formed a new standing committee, the Social Activities Committee, whose special concern would be a continuing study of ways to improve private parties, social dances and square dances.

Some parents suggested at the early discussion meetings that far from hav-

ing "unmet needs" their children were over-organized and high-pressured into joining too many groups and activities. The Study Group on Community Planning found that, although there were pressures to join in some kinds of activities, there were also great gaps in the offering of other kinds. Summer programs for older children seemed uninspired and poorly coordinated. Then there were certain areas in which activities seemed to be offered at the wrong time. For example, there was a strong feeling in the group that entrance into the Cub Scouts and Brownies should be offered at a later age. This problem has been referred to Scout organizations for their consideration.

The Study Group on Physical Facilities mimeographed its report and circulated it to parents. Since the Winnetka School System was about to embark on an extensive building program, the findings of this group were helpful to parents as taxpayers and voters and to the administration and Board of Education in formulating plans for the improvements. This study group performed a specific service to the school in suggesting the establishment of a typing pool of parents to ease the load on the school office. Such a pool has been established and is proving helpful to the staff.

The recommendation of the Study Group on Educational Counseling and Guidance—that parents should be given more information on their school and on the department of educational counseling and guidance—has already been put into effect. The questions raised in the discussion groups give the staff a clearer understanding of what par-

ents want to know, and they have used the school publication, the "Skokie X-Press," for articles answering these questions and giving the philosophy of the guidance program. Handbooks on various school activities, their purpose and operation, have been prepared by committees of the staff.

Since the Study Group on Curriculum undertook exploration of fields most commonly reserved to teachers and administrators, the parent participants felt put upon their mettle to study their problems carefully and to get all the expert advice they could. Original discussions of "unmet needs" had indicated a strong concern with book lists. Why were children not grounded in the classics? Why did not teachers send home book lists so that parents could see that their children followed them? Two members of the Study Group on Curriculum volunteered to study whether lists of required books for outside reading were desirable at the junior high school level. The teacher participants in this group, one of whom had made a special study of the question, suggested several books on reading by experts in the field. Here, too, the study group found that some of the parents' expressions of concern on the "green sheets" were extremely vague and did not always reflect knowledge of the current practices of the school. Since English teachers at Skokie vary in their respective methods of handling outside reading, the group asked the teachers to describe their practices. With this information and the report from two members studying the philosophy behind book lists in general, the study group decided that the teachers' prac-

tices, even though varied, still adhered closely to the best methods described by the experts. Therefore they made no recommendation in this field.

Dramatics and its place in the school received more attention in this study group than any other phase of curriculum study. On the basis of a need expressed in the discussion groups and revealed in replies to a questionnaire sent to a sizable sampling of parents, the administration decided to add another dramatics course and also to give more emphasis to dramatics in a survey course offered to sixth graders.

Parents who participated in the project only in the first phase, the discussion groups, gained a deeper understanding of the philosophy of the school. Those who continued with the study groups have gained even more and are in a position to be of more service to the school and community. Here are a few quotations from parents active in the project:

A father new to Winnetka who took a leading role in the study groups said: "The value of the group was mainly in the interchange of ideas between parents and faculty. . . . With active participation by the faculty, the parents became informed and this in turn made parents' participation of more value to the school because they evaluated the program more intelligently."

Another father who spent many hours analyzing the results of a questionnaire used in one of the study groups reported: "The project was extremely valuable as a means of bringing parents and teachers together to arrive at a better understanding of family and school problems. My question is whether there will be any follow-up."

A social studies teacher put it this way: "I was stimulated to thinking about how our schools can bring closer together the standards that the young people express and the standards their parents hold for them."

Another teacher stated: "It seems to me that even in those groups which have not done anything beyond the discussion stage, many of us have found new ideas and increased interest in points of view other than our own."

A teacher now participating in carrying out the recommendations on reporting to parents made by the Study Group on Teaching Methods had this to say after her first series of conferences with parents: "I had a chance to get from parents some of the things that would help me to help the children. When I wrote a report and sent it home all I usually got was a signature in reply. With the profile-chart as a frame of reference, the parents and I together can develop a total picture of the child such as I have never before been able to get." (During each parent-teacher conference a profile-chart is used showing the child's abilities and achievements as shown by standardized tests.)

At present the project as originally planned is concluded. Positive gains are apparent in an improved program for junior high school children. New groups of children and new groups of parents are coming along each year and, as always, there will be old and new problems facing the school. In parents the school has a proved resource of energy and intelligence as the school seeks solutions to evolving problems and as it plans continuously to improve its program of instruction.

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