

# Uniting Forces to Improve Education

Column Editor: Francis L. Drag  
Contributor: Melvin W. Barnes

## A Lay Committee at Work

**W**E ARE LEARNING never to underestimate the power of a lay committee.

For the past two years some five hundred lay persons in Oklahoma City have been hard at work on all phases of the school program. Each of our one hundred schools has been visited for at least a full day by teams of citizens organized to study with teachers the quality of education being offered and the means for improving it. We are clarifying purposes, evaluating services, and reporting to the community about the findings.

This cooperative effort began with a study of citizenship education. Four years ago, the Oklahoma City schools undertook to strengthen the teaching of citizenship. This was an effort to look closely at our teaching practices and to seek ways of improvement. The community became interested in the schools' need for better community understanding and participation. The result was the formation of a Citizens' Committee on Citizenship Education. The following notes describe some of the committee's characteristics and work.

### Membership

The invitation to membership from the superintendent and the Board of Education stipulates that the term of service is one calendar year. It is under-

stood that the life of the committee is limited except as it may be extended through yearly reappointments. Each January the committee is reorganized. Members are selected from all walks of community life. To insure fair geographical representation, members are chosen from each neighborhood in the school district. Each member represents only himself as a citizen and is the spokesman for no group or organization. The membership includes doctors, ministers, housewives, veterans, salesmen, laborers, public officials and managers of private industry. In addition, ten or twelve teachers, principals, supervisors and the superintendent work regularly with the committee.

### Purposes

The purposes served by the committee are several: First, the committee has informed itself as to what the schools are doing in the broad field of citizenship education. This group has taken time to listen, learn and observe. It knows what is going on.

Second, the committee serves as a liaison between the schools and the public. Its meetings are open to the public. The press covers its activities. Occasionally, the committee joins with school officials in explaining to the community the details of school policies and problems.

Third, the committee helps to eval-

uate teaching aims and techniques in citizenship education.

Fourth, the committee keeps alert to subjects and issues that are highly controversial, to new teaching ideas, teaching aids and materials, community resources for learning, and attacks on schools.

Fifth, the committee creates an avenue between school and community for involving students in community problems and activities designed to make citizenship training for youth active and realistic.

As a representative group of citizens, committee members provide a buffer against unreasonable attacks on the schools.

### Activities

The following list of reports heard from subcommittees at one evening meeting will serve to illustrate the range of studies covered by the committee:

1. Soil conservation project (a joint activity of several high schools)
2. Teaching controversial issues—the instructional policy
3. Student participation in political campaigns and activities
4. Teaching about socialized medicine and public utilities
5. Teaching about United Nations and UNESCO.

Sample activities include such items as the following: When a certain textbook was under attack in neighboring cities, committee members volunteered to read the book. They examined the validity of the charges against it and found them unsubstantiated. They have done the same for other textbooks and materials under criticism. The

committee is dead opposed to the “eliminate-it-first-and-investigate-it-afterwards” approach to handling criticized materials. They have yet to recommend that anything be barred from schools.

When teachers asked for help in teaching controversial issues, the committee studied the problem, reviewed current practice in other cities, and stated, in part, that “any teacher who is giving instruction in fields involving controversial issues, should be assured of the support of the Citizens’ Committee.” The total committee statement was submitted to the Board of Education and approved as established instructional policy.

When the city was flooded with material condemning UNESCO, a subcommittee was chosen to study the attacks, their nature and, more important, their sources.

After several meetings, a report was drafted and submitted to the total committee which classified information about UNESCO and United Nations into four categories: (a) documentary or source material, (b) official studies, (c) special study material, and (d) questionable publications. Each was described, with suggested criteria for making judgments. This gave teachers and principals assurance that they had responsible public support.

Some of the most constructive work of the committee has been concerned with the problem of getting students out of the classroom and into community affairs. For example, members of the committee accompanied a delegation of students to the City Council to request use of the Municipal Auditorium for holding student

conventions. The visit ended with the council members themselves subscribing the \$500 necessary to rent the hall. Hundreds of students have participated in political meetings and in get-out-the-vote efforts. Members have appeared with students on TV programs, and have thus facilitated teaching-learning efforts.

### Why the Committee Succeeds

The successes of the committee are probably due to the following factors:

1. Committee members are willing to take time to learn. The committee is constantly educating itself and therefore is steadily growing abler and more useful.

2. Committee members work closely with teachers, the school board and superintendent. They are clear as to their tasks and term of service. They concentrate on issues and leave administration to school officials.

3. They think that the best time to solve a problem is before a crisis strikes.

4. When a crisis does arise, they look upon it as an opportunity to improve education.

In summary, several lasting values to education are derived from the activities of the Lay Committee at work in Oklahoma City:

1. Everyone involved seems to benefit. Certainly lay citizens know much more about problems of school people than they did and, hence, are more than willing to help solve these. They now know school people personally.

---

### PINKING SHEARS

**ONLY \$1.95 POSTPAID.** Chromium plated, precision made. Manufacturer's Christmas overstock. Guaranteed \$7.95 value or money refunded. Order by mail. **LINCOLN SURPLUS SALES**, 1704 W. Farwell Ave., Chicago 26, Illinois.

---

2. Through the activities of the committee, the community understands better the purposes and activities of the schools and stands more firmly behind the effort of the schools.

3. Teachers know that their administrators, their school board and the lay committee believe in good education and in their efforts to teach fairly all sides of the day's controversial issues which, though sometimes touchy and dangerous, are part of our history in the making.

4. A respected group of citizens serves as a kind of lightning rod. Such a group draws questions, complaints and public reaction of all sorts that school leaders might never hear about. A group of this kind is often in the best position to explain school problems and policies to other community groups.

5. The committee also serves as a "divining rod" for it reveals what the public expects of its schools, and assists in translating public expectations into sound educational practices.

—MELVIN W. BARNES, *assistant superintendent in charge of instruction, Oklahoma City Public Schools, Oklahoma.*



Copyright © 1955 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.