

Teachers Look at TEACHERS MEETINGS

"Teachers meetings"—what do teachers really think of them? This article gives findings in one study of this prevalent supervisory technique.

OF ALL supervisory techniques one of the most common, and one of the most likely to be reluctantly tolerated or even resented by teachers, is the teachers meeting. There are some good reasons for teachers' attitudes toward this supervisory technique and at the same time some valid reasons why it continues to endure.

The past history of the teachers meeting in many communities has been that the supervisor scheduled the time and place of the meeting, selected the content, prepared a more or less informed, scholarly presentation, delivered it, asked half-heartedly for comments and closed the meeting when few were offered. The time was usually after the close of the school day. The place was some central point in the school system and the topic might or might not be of real concern to anyone but the supervisor.

Teachers can hardly be blamed for a rather general lack of enthusiasm about attending such meetings. Indeed sometimes an unwritten code of behavior kept all but the uninitiated silent at such meetings in order that the sessions might be terminated as quickly as possible. An "eager beaver" who felt stim-

ulated to ask a question or enter into a professional discussion with the supervisor soon learned that this must be done personally *after* the meeting was dismissed—if at all—unless he or she was willing to exist in a climate of disapproval on the part of co-workers.

In spite of such unfavorable conditions many good meetings have contributed much to the in-service education of teachers. This is due, undoubtedly, to the really fine supervisors who have understood some of the problems confronting both beginning and experienced teachers and have been able to offer some concrete, helpful suggestions. How much more might have been accomplished in a more informal atmosphere of free discussion, one can hardly say.

With the rise of the principles of group dynamics and "democratic" supervision many supervisors have tried to transform the teachers meeting into an opportunity for exploring problems together and for sharing experiences. There is a tendency for the supervisor to be present as a resource person while the meeting is conducted by a non-status person. In some instances, the time, the place and the agenda are de-

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terminated by the group or by a steering committee of its own selection. Whenever possible, meetings are held wholly or partially on school time. The supervisor, as a resource person, is resourceful enough to provide a convenient and comfortable meeting place (with chairs large enough for adults!), some simple refreshments *and* some ash trays.

Whenever a supervisor attempts to achieve change in the use of an established supervisory technique he must realize that such changes come gradually, almost imperceptibly, at first. It is necessary to take into account the normal resistance to change—and such resistance is normal—even when the change is believed to be in the direction of improvement. In a situation where teachers meetings have generally followed the old pattern, as described here, one cannot expect a free expression of ideas or a free exchange of experiences to leap into being. It may take years of patient encouragement and awkward periods of silence at meetings, even on the part of the supervisor, before former spectators are ready and willing to become participants.

Sharp says,¹ "The traditional teacher is very likely to view curriculum meetings—as 'a lot of talk that gets nowhere.'—He tends to believe that for every problem there exists an answer.—He fails to see that before a problem

¹George Sharp. *Curriculum Development As Re-education of the Teacher*. New York: Bureau of Publications, Teachers College, Columbia University; 1952. p. 55.

can be solved it must be defined and that the quickest way to define a problem is to bring together all those involved so that all aspects of it may be seen. A corollary to this is that a problem involving a group can only be solved by the group. It cannot be solved for them by others." Believing wholeheartedly in this last statement, the director of junior high school instruction has tried in the three years of the present curriculum study in Passaic's junior high schools to change the character and improve the conduct of meetings.

It is not always possible to bring together "all those concerned." Honest attempts have been made, however, to bring together those whose concern with various problems was sufficiently deep to cause them to be willing to meet to seek ways of working on these concerns. Meetings were no longer called simply because it was Tuesday, or only because the director of instruction felt a deep concern about some problem. The development of non-status leadership was encouraged. Free flow of ideas and broad participation of members were fostered. The director of instruction felt that progress had been made in these directions but did the teachers think so? Were they aware of the changing pattern of their meetings?

To test the teachers' perceptions of these changes, the director of instruction sent out a brief questionnaire to 48 teachers of academic subjects who would normally attend meetings called by the director of instruction.

A copy of the instrument and a report of the results of checking it follow:

QUESTIONNAIRE TO ACADEMIC TEACHERS
PASSIAC, N.J., JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOLS

To the Teachers:

Your cooperation is solicited in answering this questionnaire. *Do not sign your name.*

We want to know how *you*, as an individual, view meetings held by the director of instruction today as compared with such meetings held some years ago. Situations will vary for different persons so please answer in terms of the meetings then and now *as they appear to you.*

Topic: Teachers Meetings Held by Director of Junior High School Instruction.

Directions: Check Column 1 if you think the situation described was more common 10 years ago than now.

Check Column 2 if you think the situation described is more common now than 10 years ago.

Check Column 3 if you feel no appreciable change has taken place over the years.

	1 More common 10 yrs. ago	2 More common today	3 No appreciable change
I. Number of meetings attended: More	9	35	1
II. Bases for grouping at meetings you attend:			
Grade levels	32	3	4
Subject areas	18	19	3
Appointed committees	8	24	5
Voluntary committees	0	24	3
Persons with common interests, concerns or problems	2	29	5
Total JHS personnel (city-wide)	3	27	4
III. Attendance at meetings:			
Voluntary	0	15	8
Required	18	6	19
Few persons excused	13	5	7
Readily excused	0	14	4
IV. Apparent purposes of meetings:			
To discover common interests, concerns	0	30	4
To discuss ways of working together on common interests, concerns, problems	1	33	5
To tell teachers how and what to teach	35	1	3

To inform teachers about rules	21	0	4
To inform teachers about or demonstrate new techniques	14	14	8
To share experiences	1	29	4
V. Conduct of meetings:			
A. Leadership:			
In hands of director of instruction	29	0	12
Provided by classroom teacher	0	29	1
Moving from person to person	1	16	3
Strongly apparent	12	5	6
Present but unobtrusive	0	25	1
Attempts made to develop leadership in group	0	32	1
B. Participation by members of group:			
Very little	22	1	4
Some	4	8	3
Rather general	0	32	4
Comments always directed to leader	18	1	4
Comments usually directed to leader	10	11	10
Interchange among members of group	0	32	3
VI. Viewing as a whole the last few meetings you have attended, how would you evaluate them?			
Of no value		1	
Of slight value		8	
Of medium value		16	
Of considerable value		16	
Of great value		5	
VII. If the last few meetings you attended were very uneven in value, check here 9.			
Please check below			

I am a member of one or more of the presently operating committees:

Yes	39
No	8

Interpretation of Results

Apparently the teachers perceive:

1. A trend away from grade level meetings and in the direction of meetings of committees, groups with common interests, concerns and problems and toward city-wide, total junior high school meetings which cross departmental lines in an attempt to interest all in a program of curriculum study.

2. No marked change in regard to meetings centered around subject areas.

3. Some trend toward voluntary membership on committees and voluntary attendance at meetings. There still exists, however, a disbelief that there is a complete absence of coercion. [NOTE: This feeling is probably justified. Some principals do exert pressures (subtle or otherwise). Also, the

long history of required attendance is a potent factor. It has not been possible to move too fast in the direction of completely voluntary membership and participation for fear of setting up comparisons with other levels of the school system where attendance is still required.]

4. A trend toward changed purposes of meetings. Many meetings in past years were for the dispensing of information about rules and about what and how to teach. More recently the purposes have been (a) to discover common interests, concerns and problems (b) to discuss ways of working on these and (c) to share experiences. [NOTE: It was good to see that teachers realize that all through the years attempts have been made to acquaint them with new techniques and to demonstrate their use as a part of the in-service education program.]

5. A trend toward a newer concept of leadership—that such leadership does not always reside with status personnel, that attempts are being made to discover and utilize latent leadership potential and to provide opportunities for the development of leadership skills in many persons.

6. A trend toward participation by status leaders as resource persons rather than as oracles.

7. A trend toward general participa-

tion by group members with much of the discussion passing from member to member. However, there is still a noticeable tendency to direct comments to status leaders in the group.

8. A sincere attempt to operate democratically with a real respect for the beliefs and opinions of all.

9. A belief in the value of group process and an attempt to develop skill in using it.

10. A regard for teacher morale and security.

11. An honest belief in the value of the experimental approach to curriculum change.

Because the junior high school teachers in Passaic do perceive that changes have taken place in the character and conduct of teachers meetings, they are now less reluctant to attend these meetings. Whenever possible, meetings are held at least partially on school time, refreshments are served, smoking is permitted, and a comfortable meeting place is provided. Some meetings are held in the individual buildings, and some at the administration building, which is rather centrally located and provides ample parking space.

Our sincere and continuing effort will be directed toward making teachers meetings more palatable and better designed for meeting the in-service needs of teachers.

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