Helping the Public Participate in Curriculum Development

Orderly patterns of public participation can help give school people “a small chance to influence the choice of worthwhile content and a big chance to explain why we teach as we do.”

PUBLIC interest has done more than professional initiative to improve the curriculum of the American public school. Time and again over the years—as often today as ever—current public concerns have split the narrow frame of the curriculum, eagerly poured in new ideas, reluctantly subtracted old ones, then left us to shape a structure around the whole.

As a profession we can honestly boast that our schools are marvelously responsive to the emerging needs of our society. We cannot with equal honesty claim that we have often pioneered major changes in curriculum content. Even our best schools have been little more than willing followers. Any pioneering we have done in curriculum has usually been a matter of clearing land after someone else has driven off the Indians and established a settlement. Left to our own devices, we might never have traded Latin for driver education as the public has done; might never have started pre-flight training during the war, or, having started it, most certainly would have clung tenaciously to it.

Principles and Practice

The road to a better curriculum must be laid over a public right of way. Often a new route is opened by enthusiastic citizens even as we steer the schools down the old roads. Sometimes we peer along the new roadbed, aghast at its direction, wishing we had walked with the surveyors. We are learning that one way to accompany the citizens who are thinking up new directions for the school is to organize their interest as soon as it develops. The patterns will differ in each community, but here are some useful principles along with some examples of practice.

_Principle 1._ The Board of Education is the “citizens committee” which must stand at the central filtering point for all curriculum improvement. However, direct intervention by the Board in the perpetual process of change is not necessary as long as the shifts are in keeping with the Board’s clear intentions for the curriculum.

_PRACTICE._ Review the Board’s role with the staff occasionally. Write an annual news story on the Board and its work which will remind the public of the Board’s relationship to the curriculum. Don’t let even a long tradition of direct,
friendly cooperation between staff and laymen on curriculum change—much of which may not have involved Board members directly—obscure the Board’s ultimate responsibility.

**Principle 2.** The Board should establish clearly its general intentions for the schools and in this manner extend its influence over all efforts by laymen to improve the curriculum. It should also set forth the relationships which should exist between citizen groups, the Board and the staff.

*Practice.* Adopt a sound set of written policies governing types of problems citizens will be invited to study, kinds of study groups to be used, appointment of members, powers of committees, etc. Then send some short-lived groups to dig out facts, collect opinions, think things over, and suggest curriculum improvements. Send longer-lived groups to act as miniature Boards of Education to oversee the curriculum for adult students or working teen-agers. Use others to help special departments such as health, music and guidance interpret their programs to the public.

**Principle 3.** Citizens can begin by helping survey student needs. They can continue by suggesting what might be taught to meet those needs. Later they can join the teacher in the classroom as rich sources of knowledge and insight, can even freshen the teaching itself by taking a turn.

*Practice.* Keep a Human Resources File of willing and able people, listing their jobs, their specialties, their travels, their strengths. (Try the hand-sorting punched cards like the “McBee Keysort” system if you have a lot of names.) Dip into the file when the Board wants a group to look at elementary mathematics; when the senior high principal wants a follow-up of college entrants; when a teacher wants an expert on Antarctica.

**Principle 4.** The problem to be studied should be selected by someone in a position to see and weigh all needs. A momentary flare-up of public interest should not set off a full-scale study while larger problems go unsolved.

*Practice.* The principal with his faculty council, the superintendent with his advisory cabinet, and the Board with its administrative staff should anticipate citizen interest and should know in advance what aspect of the curriculum should be studied next. At the first stirring of active citizen concern about the program of one building or of the entire system, the staff or the Board, as appropriate, should invite the laymen to start in, or stand by, to study a significant problem.

**Principle 5.** The structure of the group should grow from the character of the problem.

*Practice.* A hundred employers can be polled for suggestions on practical pre-vocational training for terminal graduates. Forty mothers can meet in small groups to trade ideas with teachers on who should teach what about sex to fifth and sixth grade youngsters. A dozen thoughtful citizens can weigh what is happening to the gifted and decide whether it is good enough. One scientist can meet with the junior high department to work out plans for a laboratory approach to teaching seventh graders. Take a day or take a year, but fit the method to the problem.

**Principle 6.** Many different people, representing the varied community, should be asked to help.

*Practice.* Ask for nominees (not volun-
teers) at PTA meetings, at School Board sessions, and through the school news bulletins. Ask those who have served to suggest others. Keep plugging the “waiting list” idea. Collect a hatful of names of people willing to help but willing to wait until needed. You need a well-stocked pool of talent in order to fish out a balanced string of people on short notice.

**Principle 7.** Study groups will need help. They may need books or postage or travel money. They may need a committee secretary, a typist, or outside consultants. They will need a place and a time to meet and reminders to be there.

**Practice.** Plan to provide the help. Budget the money and alert the staff. Tell the citizens group when it is formed what type of help it can expect and who will arrange for it. Appoint a member of the staff or the Board to provide personal liaison between the group and the schools.

**Principle 8.** The staff must take part, but not take over. This is a tender business. The citizen considering curriculum inevitably treads on the very boundary of professional prerogative. We meet him there, face to face, our toes tingling, watching. This is natural and good. But we must not dismay him with fearsome mien or by flaunting our superior knowledge.

**Practice.** Have a staff council, for one building or for the system as appropriate, review in advance the topics which will be explored by citizens groups. Keep the staff informed by occasional bulletins or announcements as the actual study progresses. After the citizens finish, tell the staff what they have produced, and distill staff reaction so that it can be considered before the citizens’ report is acted upon.

**Principle 9.** The citizens groups must report to someone who is in a position to take decisive action. Otherwise when the final report is announced the general nodding of heads may be followed by nothing more than peaceful sleep.

**Practice.** It is probably best for the citizens group to be appointed by the school official (or group) which will decide the fate of the citizens’ eventual recommendations. The Board, a principal, or a department head—whatever is directly responsible for the curriculum area under study—should be recognized by the citizens as a person or group to whom the final report must be directed.

**Principle 10.** Laymen who help in curriculum development deserve public recognition. The other source of satisfaction for the laymen is to see the schools improve. Although they may be denied the latter satisfaction, the former should always be provided.

**Practice.** Ask the group to meet jointly with the Board or staff to render its report. Arrange a PTA meeting at which the group can present its findings to the public. Announce the committee’s major conclusions in local newspapers. Publish its recommendations in the school newsletter, naming members.

All of this can help us on two fronts. Despite the vigor with which we insist that “Citizens should decide the what but not the how,” the fact is that the power of public preference touches both. Formal homework in the elementary grades probably has as little to recommend itself as homogeneous ability grouping. Teacher opinion conflicts and the research is enigmatic. Meanwhile homework is common and homogeneous grouping is rare in our elementary schools, not because of their established educative usefulness, but because
the American people remain convinced that homework has value but have decided that homogeneous grouping hurts more than it helps.

The reason we worry so much about "building public understanding" is simply that if the people don’t like what we are doing they won’t let us do it. We build only the curriculum and use only the teaching methods which the active school public has learned to accept. At the present stage in our evolution as a profession, educational research is still a ship afloat on the tides of public opinion—now awash—now lifted high—not without power of its own but ever moved by a larger force. We must still depend on persuasion rather than solid proof to convince the public that modern methods are valid. Orderly patterns of public participation give us a small chance to influence the choice of worthwhile content and a big chance to explain why we teach as we do.

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Three-Way Conferences Assist Lay Participation

The three-way conference brings together child, parent and teacher in a setting that induces greater understanding and confidence.

THE TEACHER’S classroom position is a most favored one for building and establishing working relationships with parents. He has the day by day contact with the parent’s most valuable possession—his child. Thus of all professional personnel, the teacher usually has a most favorable opportunity for communicating with the parents.

In order for the schools to guide students in terms of a common orientation, adults responsible for children at home and at school must reflect consistent ideas and values. Both parents and teachers can build an understanding of the life of the child at home and at school. In such an interchange the child’s aspirations, attitudes and beliefs become a working basis for establishing a more worthwhile educational program. Children are the benefactors when parents share in the development and functioning of the school progress.

In the program of parent participation one of the most significant ways devised for parent and teacher to exchange ideas and work together is the three-way conference. This contact with the home does much to develop better understanding and cooperative effort. The parents possess unique knowledge and understanding of their children and it is wise for the teacher to tap this resource. A

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