

Partners in Education

Under what conditions can school people and lay citizens together examine educational ideas and implications in order to create a superior program?

THE ROLE of lay participation in educational affairs requires additional scrutiny and implementation by professional educators who seek to improve the school curricula. Educators must not be deaf to the complaints of citizens who protest the seeming obsolescence of the curricula of American schools. Since the successful launching of the first earth satellite by Russia, American education has received derogatory analysis. Repercussions emanate from all quarters of the country, criticising the status quo and crying for a reappraisal of curricula.

The American public has been alerted to think seriously about making drastic changes in the areas of science and mathematics education. Revolutionary developments are predicted in medicine, chemistry, physics, astronomy and other related areas.

Lay citizens have taken the initiative in this appeal for reappraisal of American education. As soon as possible, educators should develop realistic techniques for the utilization of lay citizens' interests, their experience in related fields, and their knowledge and talents in the preparation of space-era curricula.

Laymen Speak

Referring to education in the space era, the President of the United States said, ". . . this is for the American

people the most critical problem of all." A newspaper editor invited anyone to express his views on the weaknesses of the schools and the present curricula. He wrote, "The curricula in our elementary and high schools need drastic changes. . . . The *Observer* presents another in a series of articles on the weaknesses of our educational system. We will be glad to publish your views."

This was followed by an article written by a clergyman who advocated public meetings to publicize the deplorable state of the schools. In his introduction, he said, "The group which arranges the meetings must be independent enough to gain the confidence of the public, and sympathetic enough to gain the confidence of the school administrators."

Another newspaper asked, editorially, for a partnership between citizens and educators, as follows: "It is obvious that those directing education have a problem which to solve they will need the cooperation of the public."

Recently, U. S. Congressman John E. Fogarty said, "You must reach out and make the community participate in your school program. . . . You will never have a good school planning program without

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broad public participation." He was, of course, speaking to educators.

Even before the advent of sputniks, this idea of utilizing the aid and talents of citizens for the improvement of school curricula had been termed by James B. Conant as ". . . potentially the most important move taken in the last 50 years for the advancement of public education."

Such quotations could be voluminous. Those cited here illustrate the appeal to educational administrators for a lay voice in the formulation of curricula, and also demonstrate the unusual interest citizens are expressing in this area of education. Now, it is not a question of whether or not educators should encourage and espouse the lay participation idea, but how this concept of educators and lay citizens working together can best be implemented for the improvement of school curricula, an area which is usually reserved for school people.

Historical Precedent

Historically, the concept of lay participation has precedent. The American public school is founded upon this idea. The name indicates that the schools belong to the public. All school board members are lay persons representing the public. Financing and other school legislation reflect the contemporary wishes of the people and imply the kind of education they want. Other areas such as curricula making and teaching methods have been considered technical matters reserved for professional development.

Today's public is more fully educated and informed than were people a generation or two ago. The line between educators and many lay citizens is often very thin and indistinguishable. Lay

persons have varied backgrounds, naturally, and many are engaged in fields which are closely related to education. They have gained compatible experience and knowledge which have certain practical implications for public school curricula. This well of knowledge should be tapped by educators.

Educator-Layman Relationship

Five eras can be identified in the field of educator-layman relationships. For simplicity, they may be listed as follows: the "intimate" era; the "hands off" era; the "selling" era; the "interpretation" era; and the "participation" era. This paper is especially interested in the last era.

Let's go back to the beginning. The home was the first school and it still is. Early education in America was not far removed from the home. Such education was intimate and cooperative in nature. The home, school and community each knew what the others were doing and all were directly involved with the public education of the child. The curricula, repeated year after year with little or no change, was simple but adequate for the times. Decisions were made cooperatively.

Trustees and/or visitors came to school occasionally and checked the progress of the pupils and the state of the school. Later, schools became larger, curricula expanded and became increasingly complicated. Indeed, just definitions of "curriculum" could fill a volume or two, at least. Persons had to be hired for the sole purpose of administering the schools. Thus, the people delegated their authority to specialists in educational administration. Parents and other taxpayers left the planning and operation of the schools to the professionals. Many of these administrators

failed, or thought it was unnecessary, to keep the citizens informed in educational matters. The people got used to knowing little or nothing about their schools.

The schoolmen assumed that it was their business to operate the schools and the public should keep its "hands off." Such a dogmatic approach was not diplomatic but seemed effective until the administrators needed material assistance or attempted to initiate revolutionary educational ideas or techniques. The public, under such circumstances, was not prepared to understand and accept the same. Possibly, this instigated criticism and resistance to school programs which may have otherwise improved the schools.

To merit a reasonable amount of success for support of school program expansion or acceptance of changing curricula, educators had to "sell" their programs to the public. Propaganda or publicity campaigns were waged each time something was needed in order to convince the citizens of its worth.

To overcome such a frustrating state of affairs, educators developed public relations programs to inform the public of their objectives and educational destinations. So, today, public relations programs are prevalent for the purpose of "interpreting" the schools to the people. This has been a sincere effort to keep the people abreast of educational trends. The interpretation approach is often referred to (probably erroneously) as a two-way communication channel between educator and layman. Too often it is still only *telling* the people what the educators are doing or plan to do and the public passively continues to listen. The educators are never sure (they have no way of knowing) that what they are telling the people is what

they actually hear or want to hear. There is very little reciprocal communication. This is an improvement over the "hands off" and "selling" philosophies but it is yet inadequate for satisfying the demand for two-way communication.

The current and probably most optimistic educator-layman relationship philosophy lies in the concept of lay participation. The aim of lay participation is to involve lay persons directly in planning the curricula and other educational affairs. It is a method of capturing a reservoir of contributions from lay persons. It is a way of taking the pulse of the public, regarding school matters, and permitting the public an opportunity to be heard. Lay persons would be additional consultants available to educational administrators at no extra expense. For these reasons, the concept of lay participation must expand considerably for the benefit of educators as well as school children.

What Can Be Done

Many schoolmen are probably saying, "Everything is going along just fine, why should I bother with lay participation?" School people have much to gain and little or nothing to lose by furthering lay participation. By accepting such a program they will find their school or school system strengthened commensurately.

Generally speaking, there are two major areas involved in lay participation. One has to deal with informing the public and the other with utilizing lay resources. A good public relations program is the foundation for effective lay participation in educational affairs.

Thomas Pullen, Jr., Maryland's state superintendent of public education, has written that, "The people have a right to know what kind of education is available in every school and how closely

it approximates the standard education in its field."

To inform people, public relations are necessary. Public relations must be a continuous thing. It must follow a pre-meditated plan. It cannot be left to chance or administered half-heartedly or haphazardly. People want to know what their children are learning in their own particular schools, today. They want to be told about the curricula, plainly and specifically. Philosophies, objectives and goals are broad and vague generalities with which most people are impatient. Talk about reading, writing and arithmetic and how each is taught, right now; right here, in this school. Parents want to know how they can help. And they *can* help!

Administrators should plan their public relations program for long term periods as well as for short or yearly periods. Principals, supervisors, teachers and pupils should plan exactly what should be done for public relations in a particular school and for a particular year. It must not be sporadic or something that pops up its head during Education Week (when many schools are careful to invite parents for a very definite day and *hour*, often hoping they will not come) or Parents' Night, for example. Above all, the public relations program must not be a sugar-coating process or a selling campaign but an honest, outright attempt to inform the public of the true state-of-the-schools. Such knowledge will provide better understanding of the education the children are getting. Also, it should provoke and stimulate the public to question, evaluate, and be ready with constructive suggestions for improvement if and when any of them are invited to participate in such activity.

The public relations program will do

the telling for the schoolmen. They, in their turn, must be ready to listen to the public. Facilities for two-way communication must be developed by the administrators. Techniques for encouraging a flow of communication from the public to the school must be devised. Educator and layman must talk directly to each other. There is no place here for ambiguity, equivocation or innuendo.

Specific communications emanating from the local school are probably as important as general communications from state, regional or national sources. Schoolmen have the responsibility of teaching lay citizens how to use these avenues of communication.

Whatever the techniques employed, they must be organized. Forums, workshops, leadership training institutes, study groups, community-school councils, questionnaires, mass communications media or whatever vehicle is used must be planned for a long period of time. They cannot be used as firemen to be called out during a crisis only. Then it is too late. Preventive measures are more effective than remedial ones.

Important channels of communication lie in the plethora of already existing religious, social, civic, fraternal, business, and other organizations in the community. The Parent-Teacher Association is probably the most convenient and congenial avenue available to schoolmen. Here are literally millions of people ready to assist, but not to interfere, in public school administrative affairs. Service clubs are extremely avid for the welfare of schools and enroll many community leaders who would be willing and capable of making worthwhile contributions in curricula making or other school business. These organizations could form a community-school council representing nearly all of the

groups and people in the community. In turn, members of this council would relay information to their original organizations. Thus communication would follow a chain reaction trail.

Besides using the already existing organizations, school administrators should encourage the formulation of lay study groups or commissions, assisting and guiding them to function for the purpose of improving curricula. Such groups would prepare lay leaders to work with educators in planning curricula. It is possible to have many such groups or commissions.

Workshops or leadership training institutes could be conducted by school personnel or by laymen, or jointly. Among other things, they could develop the necessary techniques for keeping people informed about their schools and how to utilize the special lay talents available. Such meetings, in themselves, would be an important manifestation of lay participation.

A school system could have a committee of educators and laymen which continually evaluated the school curricula. Such a committee would attempt to design measuring instruments.

Another committee would continually evaluate the lay participation program and prescribe new ideas and techniques which may be tried. Criteria for effective lay participation could be drawn. Such a committee would be on a school-system level. This committee would be different from the one above because its chief interest would be in the *function* of lay participation, *per se*, and not in curricula.

Each school, also, could have a lay committee, council, or study group (the name is not important). School trustees, parent-teacher personnel, or service club members would make a good nucleus for

such a committee. School teachers and principals would also be members. This should be more than a "paper" committee. It would meet regularly and file reports with the board of education.

People who attack the schools or have gripes should have a chance to be heard. A clearinghouse to hear all grievances could be set up by the board of education. Grievances about the curricula could be received and considered, systematically and intelligently. A record would be kept of all complaints and continually evaluated. This is where people would be invited to write rather than to the editors of newspapers who seldom or never respond or make editorial comment. They would be getting their answers from the "horse's mouth," so to speak. It should terminate much of the beating-about-the-bushes and controversial issues would receive authoritative and professional clarification. It could avoid much unpleasantness.

Teachers associations and educational fraternities have a responsibility also of exploring the possibilities for initiating educator-layman teams to deliberate on the problems of curricula. Classroom teachers, especially, should be receptive to the idea.

Universities which are not already doing so could include teaching the techniques of implementing lay participation, in their courses, whenever appropriate. Students who have been exposed to auspicious possibilities of lay participation would accept the idea more readily, confidently, and treat it more effectively.

Summary

The public is appealing for drastic changes in the schools' curricula. Generally, schoolmen should encourage and accept the thinking of lay citizens on

matters of curricula and other school affairs. Lay participation should be practiced on all levels: local, state and national. It should be especially evident in each school. Administrators would develop rapport by acting as coordinators, synthesizing the ideas of laymen and their professional staff. With his knowledge and training, the educator would seek consensus in curriculum making. He would, of course, know how to separate the chaff from the grain.

Educators should foster effective public relations programs to inform the people about their schools. They should encourage the formation of lay groups which would evaluate the curricula. Laymen and educators should meet to discuss and plan adequate school programs. Techniques for two-way com-

munications with provisions for interpretation and recommendations would be devised. The public would be encouraged to question, evaluate and offer suggestions for improving the curricula or other school matters.

Through lay participation the educational administrator should expect some enlightenment from the expressed, representative, lay point of view. Citizens should be better informed and school programs better understood. Improved relationships between schools and public should ensue, manifested in stronger support. Most important of all, the efficacy of lay participation would be measured in better curricula and more effective schools for the children of America. Educational statesmen are needed to do this job.

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When Lay Citizens Object

"As long as there are communities and parents and schools, there will be objections; and this is a hopeful sign. Without objections there would be fewer changes and less rapid growth of service."

I MAY AS WELL confess that in discussing the objections of lay citizens to education today, I am going to have great difficulty in staying with one viewpoint. As a parent of a father of one of today's families and a mother of another and as a former president of a state Congress of Parents and Teachers, I realize full well how parents view the schools. At the same time, as a teacher of an earlier day and again as one drawn back into service at the present time, I am equally aware of some problems of the profession and the answers of educators

to parents' objections. Hence, if I don't slip from the angle of parent to educator and back again several times, it will indeed be a miracle.

I know a president of a teachers' college who says frequently when addressing parent groups, "You are stockholders in the world's biggest business, that of educating our children. You pay the bill, and you should be concerned about how the business is run." He might well add to his comparison that, like other stockholders, parents are usually not experts in this field and that as long as those

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