

Bedroom Communities and the School

*The new suburb
creates both problems
and opportunities.*

POPULATION mobility since 1950 has generated profound changes in the American way of life. One of the most significant is the trend of population to disperse from concentrated urban centers and diffuse over broader geographical areas. This has resulted in the growth of bedroom communities in staggering proportions. Available evidence suggests an increase rather than a decrease in this population shift toward penetrating the rural and encircling the urban.

The rapid and unprecedented transition from city to suburbia has created changes in the political, economic and cultural fabric of the community. Since the schools are an integral part of the community, it is trite but important to point out that they are directly affected by such changes.

The explosive nature by which bedroom communities develop creates a

chain of related problems for education. No segment of the curriculum or administration escapes the pressure of accelerated growth. The effect of cultural shifts on the purposes of the school, the problem of faculty disunity, the need for personnel, the demand for insightful leadership, and the financing of schools are a few of the important and more difficult problems inherent in the schools of the bedroom community.

Cultural Shifts

The infiltration of a large number of new families into a small suburban area in some instances has had a disorganizing effect. The leadership structure of the old community may be threatened by the invasion of new families with different backgrounds, interests, status and orientation. There is a tendency for lines of social stratification to develop rapidly. Purchasers of the project homes may be thought of as "invading foreigners" by the older residents. Community problems created by rapid growth, such as the need for recreational facilities, additional utilities, improved streets and more schools, may become symbols of attack on the old community. Consequently, conflict, disunity and social fermentation are likely to develop.

Paul Zintgraff is assistant superintendent, curricular services, San Diego County Schools, San Diego, California.

The older residents of the community may look at the newcomers as being disloyal to the traditions which have been established over the past years. This feeling may be reflected in their attitudes toward school growth and curricular change. They recall the good old days when the school was small. The curriculum was simple, for it grew out of the needs of a largely rural society. Now they have pupils in their schools with many different educational plans, career aspirations, and abilities. The once simple curriculum no longer fits the needs of the new community. The school program must be broadened to encompass many more facets if all of these demands are to be met. This involves the modification of old purposes and the inclusion of new ones. Problems arising out of these changes in purpose can easily become emotionally lashed to the conflict of the old versus the new.

This situation can be a real challenge to the school, for it has the opportunity to serve as a rallying point for the community. The school is the one common ground on which large groups of both factions meet in PTA, lay citizens' groups and other school-community activities. Such school activities afford many opportunities for all groups in the community to sit together—yes, and work together on school-community affairs. The activities of these groups can lead to the development of an understanding and appreciation for each other's point of view. For example, the organization's program might include from time to time buzz sessions on the responsibility of the school to the community and the community to the school, or know your community better, or the role of the PTA in school and community. Leaders of such groups should direct the discussion away from prob-

lems that have already become emotional issues identified with individuals or groups. A calm discussion of common problems can bring about a deeper appreciation of each other's concerns.

Another approach to solving community differences might be made through individual teachers. Each teacher spends much time making aids for teaching arithmetic, reading and science. Parents can be of considerable help if included in this activity. It affords the opportunity for members of the community to work together on a project—one which is significant and worth while. During such activities parents share experiences and desires for their children. In so doing they can discover common interests upon which they may develop new relationships. At the same time they develop more insights into the school program.

The problem of social integration is not limited to adult lay members of the community, but extends to the teaching faculty and to the students. The latter reflect the attitude of their parents. Thus when changes are made in parental predilection, the children's point of view likewise is altered.

Conversely, a well-informed child may bring about modification of his parents' prepossession by introducing ideas and information that the parents may have failed to consider in developing their bias. This can be a challenge to the school in the development of their social studies curriculum. The program might include community surveys by students directed toward the evolution of a better understanding of the community and the development of a feeling of community pride.

Frequent use of community resource persons in the classroom might also broaden the comprehension of commu-

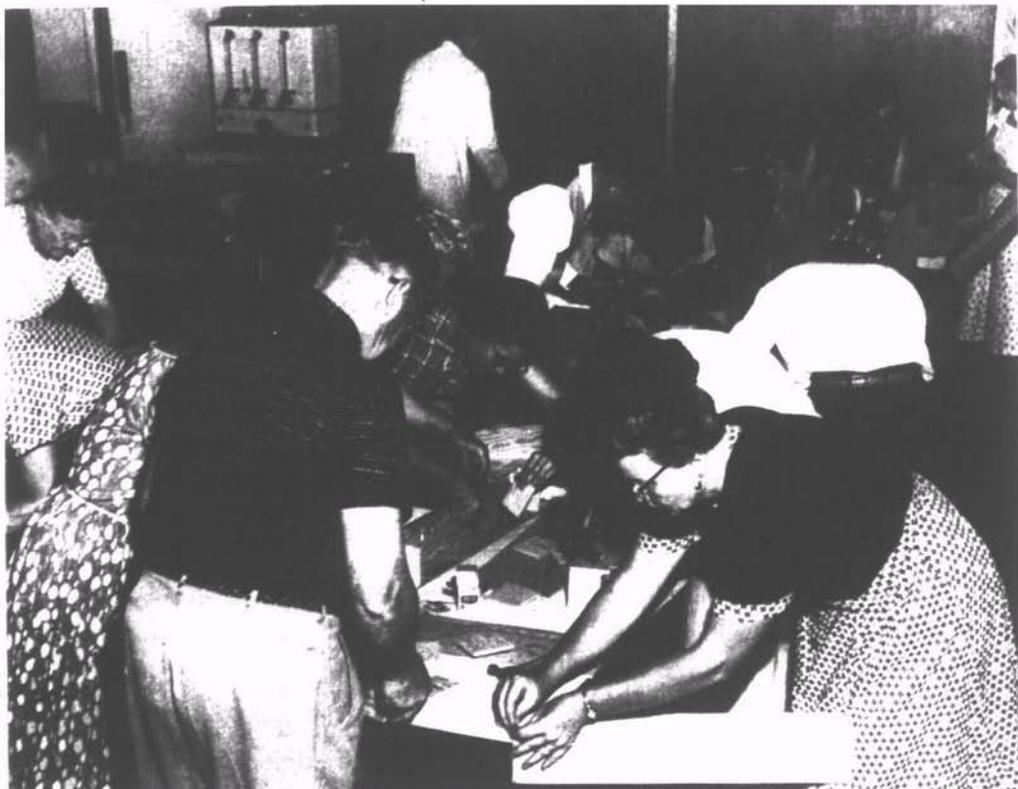


PHOTO COURTESY SUPERINTENDENT OF SCHOOLS,
SAN DIEGO COUNTY, CALIFORNIA

As they work together teachers and parents grow in mutual understanding.

nity problems. The need and the importance of individuals and groups in the community can thus be identified. Projects centered around community improvement tend to develop discernment and pride in community affairs. In this manner the school can use the community as a laboratory while at the same time serving as a focal point in unifying and integrating the forces in the community.

Faculty Disunity

Naturally this curriculum function cannot take place if the teachers are emotionally involved in the community disunity. In many situations this problem

exists because of the very way in which the bedroom community develops. When a flood of new teachers is added to the staff each year, a problem of adjustment develops for the teachers who have served the district for many years.

New teachers bring new ideas founded in the experiences they have had in universities and public school systems throughout the country. Coupled with this are the frustrating demands made by the influx of new students and their parents. These factors threaten the security of the teacher whose experience during the past years has been limited to the less impelling needs of a stable community. At the same time the new teachers have not yet found their place

in the community or the school and have variant points of view concerning the direction of the school program. This is fertile ground for the development of a serious split within the faculty—the old versus the new.

One solution for welding the faculty into a unified whole lies in a sound in-service education program. Such programs should be based on the development of teacher understanding of the changes taking place. The in-service activities should expand the teachers' perception of their role in relation to these changes. One effective way of accomplishing this is through faculty involvement in schoolhouse planning.

In the growing suburb new school buildings are going to be built. They can be designed after older buildings, from stock plans, or they may be built to house a school program designed for that particular community. Such a program should be based on the projected needs over the period of the next five, ten, fifteen, or twenty-five years. In order to plan a school building, a study should be made of the community and the school to determine their needs and to organize an appropriate school curriculum. All teachers and representative members of the community need to be involved in very serious long-range planning.

Committees can be organized to gather information on population trends in the district, its financial outlook for the future, new trends in teaching, types of guidance and counseling programs, and the future direction of the library and audio-visual program. The in-service activities should be directed toward developing a clearer understanding of educational purposes as they relate to this particular community and the role of the school. Information gathered by the

committees can be periodically shared with the total group involved in the study. Such a study should involve not only the philosophical aspects but also an analysis of the necessary details.

A problem facing the group might be that of the size of the classroom—25, 35, or 45 pupils. One may view this as a detail but the answer to this one question is deeply rooted in the philosophy of the school. It is extremely important for class size determines the number of classrooms needed, the number of teachers, and to some extent the methods of teaching to be employed. The information gathered and decisions made in developing the educational recommendations or specifications are invaluable to the architect. Not alone will the resulting product be a better school plant. As a result of the cooperative efforts of teacher, lay citizen, and administrator, a better understanding of the role of the school in this community will have developed. Individual teachers as well as members of the community will be aware of the need for making curriculum revision. It may be expected that resistance to change will be reduced considerably.

Need for Personnel

Unfortunately, an in-service program cannot be developed without an adequate staff to direct it. This identifies another problem of the enlarging suburb. Because of the financial demands, it is difficult and often impossible to find enough money to hire the number and caliber of needed administrative and curriculum assistants. For example, in one California county a suburban district of 970 A.D.A.¹ will hire more teachers next year than a stable neighboring district of 10,280 A.D.A. Yet the

¹ Average daily attendance.

latter has 13 district staff professional members while the former has two and a half.

Actually, in such a district the demand for help is greater while it is growing than when it has reached its full complement of students and teachers. This is true because problems occurring during a district's rapid growth are pressing and demand immediate decisions. Unfortunately they come at a period when personnel and time are extremely limited—yet such decisions become the policy for the future. Unless the chief administrator has the assistance of an adequate district staff, he can ordinarily give little attention to curriculum development. The urgency and complexity of administrative detail make it almost impossible for him to see the total program in proper perspective.

In some cases, this lack of attention to a district-wide program will result in individual schools' organizing their own program. This makes it possible for schools in the same district to go in many different directions. In other cases no attempt is made to develop a unified program and teachers are permitted to drift. In both situations this results in a disorganized program. To bridge the gap in some areas the services of the state department of education or an intermediate unit such as a county department of education are available. These agencies may offer general consultants, specialists and educational survey teams trained to give direct assistance to educational and lay groups. However, the amount of benefit to be realized often depends upon how well the local district is organized to take advantage of the services.

Another problem directly affecting the development of the curriculum of the suburban school district is that of ade-

quate school financing. The expeditious growth of the school district demands tremendous increases in the amounts of instructional materials and supplies. The need for additional classrooms becomes a problem of major concern.

Adequate Financing

The demand for additional plant facilities outstrips the school budget. Because of this, makeshift expedients are being employed. Some resort to providing temporary structures, converting homes, community halls, and even tents into classrooms. In some suburban districts overcrowded classrooms and double sessions become the rule rather than the exception.

One not closely involved in the problem of the growing suburban community might suggest that advance planning would have eliminated the classroom shortage. It cannot be denied that in some cases planning would have helped considerably. However, there are factors which may prohibit the fulfillment of advance planning, such as constitutional and legal debt limits, community fear of overbuilding, and the strain on the capital expenditure budget.

Once the children start arriving, the district finds itself faced with extensive construction costs. At this point the school board employs its full taxing power and finds the demands can only partially be met. There is a false assumption made by many that the influx of large numbers of students from homes of above-average income produces sufficient revenue through local taxes to support the growth. There is a significant difference between the wealth of families as a factor in supporting education and real property as a tax base. The assessed valuation of homes is relatively much less

than that of business and industrial property. Consequently, revenue from property tax in a district containing few businesses, little or no industry, and many family dwellings reduces the per pupil revenue. This is the situation in nearly all bedroom communities. Adequate school financing demands a balance between homes, business and industry if schools are to continue to obtain most of their income from local taxes.

A possible solution to this problem lies in establishing a broader tax base as a source for school revenue. One way of accomplishing this is by placing a greater portion of the financial burden on the state or perhaps federal government.

Another possible alternative to lessen the financial burden on suburban schools is through district reorganization. By this means the boundary of a district could be extended to include areas supported by business and industry so that the balance between homes, business and industry is brought about. Unfortunately, the usual problems involved in district reorganization tend to arise in exaggerated forms in bedroom communities.

Leadership

Neither of these two solutions, more federal and state support or district reorganization, lies entirely within the jurisdiction of any individual district. Consequently, immediate escape is not possible. Yet the lack of adequate financing makes it impossible for most bedroom community districts to house pupils properly, provide sufficient materials, acquire adequate staff, or to pay salaries that will attract experienced professional leadership.

To cope successfully with the problems thus far identified, bold and strong

leadership on the part of the chief administrator is particularly needed. The superintendent of the once small school district may lack the adaptability, imagination, experience and energy to give constructive and insightful leadership when his district is hit with the influx of students and problems. When this situation exists, the pressures will eliminate an unprepared superintendent.

This is unfortunate for both the man and the school district, for he is usually not relieved of his responsibilities until a multitude of problems have developed. Consequently the new superintendent finds himself faced not only with the mounting problems of the future, but the problems of the past which are closely tied to the emotions of his staff and community. The new administrator must recognize that he is subject to being the victim in this situation. He will be well advised to learn the causes of tension, recognize that prejudices exist, and identify the reasons for the differences in the community. His job becomes one steeped in human relations and directed toward assisting diverse groups to find ways of working together. He must be a social engineer attuned to the human climate. At the same time he must not sacrifice sound educational practices to gain personal favor in the community. Only strong professional leadership can withstand such a test.

This article has identified a few of the problems inherent in rapidly growing suburban school districts. The suggested solutions to these problems are based on a premise that the school in a bedroom community can be an effective force for acculturation and that the school cannot be considered apart from the cultural fabric of the community. The school has an important role in weaving the thread of this fabric into a harmonious whole.

Copyright © 1960 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.