

When Citizens Participate

in curriculum planning

*... they should do so
as befits amateurs,
humbly and with a proper
awareness of limitation.*

THOUGH humility and an awareness of limitation are also reasonable injunctions for professionals in curriculum planning, there are differences between the amateur's role and the professional's. Despite its inexactness as a science, educational administration is a more informed function than common sense alone can be trusted to perform. When citizens participate in educational planning, both they and the professionals ought to be wary lest they perceive each other as equal members of the same team. They are not.

It is not merely the difference in knowledge, vast and vital as it is. Role differences are equally great. The viability of curriculum decisions depends upon mutual acceptance of both these differences. Procedurally, the acceptance is often reinforced by maintaining a certain social distance between citizens and the administrators they may be asked to advise.

There are those who doubt that there

is a technology of education sufficiently advanced to disqualify the dilettante from its practice. Even within the profession, some specialists persist in an out-of-joint view of administration and administrators. They act as though to deny the organizational imperatives of control. Those who undervalue the discipline of responsibility misjudge the rigors of decision making. Thus is organizational balance threatened; for if some canon of democratic process, or even knowledge itself, is overvalued and allowed to supersede the decision making responsibility, the integrity of the organization is by that much dissipated.

The reason why American schools are continuously planning their curriculum in so many local places is that we are prudently stubborn about the distribution of power in our democracy. Most Americans insist that *local* curriculum decisions are good, even when some of these may be demonstrably inadequate, because some schools do go far beyond any conceivable standard curriculum. The freedom to be different is also the freedom to be better, and being better is the kind of efficiency and economy that cash does not have anything to do with. Such freedom is priceless.

The drive to be better requires strict attention to the problems of progress, that is, to the conflict of ideas. Theories, beliefs, priorities, objectives and values

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about the interrelated problems of money, curriculum, personnel and buildings are in violent competition in our nation. In a free society, moreover, ideas in conflict become embodied in voluntary associations devoted to their support and dissemination.

The resolution of conflict, in this sense of somehow making decisions about ideas in opposition, is the responsibility of administration. There is no other way, for all the alternatives are anarchical. Conflict among the bearers of ideas must also be resolved, of course. Administration deals with both ideas and people.

At its most equable, administration is a strenuous life, laced by tension. A normal, even instinctive, response to its pressures is to maintain a power structure within the organization that minimizes outside influences. Conflict of ideas is a latent threat to the organization and, not so incidentally, to the administrator. The why-look-for-trouble view of life is not altogether hedonistic; it is more like mental hygiene.

It seems too stern to counsel superintendents against those tactics by which conflict may be suppressed or at least muted. But such the counsel must be. Success in administration must be characterized by progress, by a reaching out for achievements beyond those already gained. If people wish schools to improve at a rate speedier than inevitability, change must be deliberate.

Deliberate change comes from the application of ideas, and ideas must be sought wherever they may be found. For the decision maker, one of the more likely sources for ideas is other persons. But this creates a dilemma. If the superintendent seeks ideas from people, he runs the risk of stirring conflict which then he must resolve lest the conflict become destructive.

But safety is not the prize. It is doubtless safer, for example, not to fool with nuclear energy at all, yet a "controlled reaction" is possible and, when accomplished, may yield commercial quantities of power. Risk-taking is intrinsic in the managerial role.

Conflict of Ideas

Perhaps setting the forces of conflict in motion may seem not so much foolhardy as unnecessary. Does not the conflict of ideas always exist? It does, but it does not always concern those problems whose resolutions make for progress. Strong feelings about superficialities are common enough and even if they are beautifully resolved the enterprise is not better off, only quieter. To be useful, the opposing ideas ought to be substantial. Getting people really concerned and creative about the things that matter is surely more dangerous than being indulgent of debates about bus routes, but the potential value makes the danger worth courting, because if usable ideas are produced the educational power of the enterprise can be increased. It is *worth* a lot of trouble to get useful ideas about things that matter.

The citizens curriculum committee is a case in point. Every citizens committee that gets so close to heartland may imperil the enterprise. Many administrators risk the gambit because they perceive the problems of school administration realistically. They need ideas of all kinds, and citizen ideas about curriculum are often worth having. Therefore, administrators build a mechanism for consultation with citizens, a citizens curriculum committee. The administrative skill required is that the committee should operate to create ideas appropriate to its competency.

Happily, both objectives can be clearly defined. The competency of a citizens curriculum committee is to advise the school enterprise about educational goals consistent with the community's best aspirations. Anything else is beyond its ability. Its sole function is to advise, never to go further in the decision making process than deciding upon its own recommendations.

Properly used, the citizens curriculum committee is an extension of the board's competence to make educational policies; that is, to state the desired objectives of the educational program. This kind of board policy is a social judgment about education. It expresses the educational expectations of the community. Citizen committees can be expert consultants to both board and superintendent in defining the community's educational aspirations. Such consultation is the committee's primary validity.

The method of the citizens curriculum committee is to debate competing ideas about educational goals. Disciplined by a clear understanding of its purpose and role and manned by persons of good sense, the citizens committee is like a furnace for idea-conflict in which it is possible to maintain a "controlled reaction" for the generation of ideas. Its usefulness as a consultation mechanism is precisely that its control is possible in a way that unknowing argument never is. The committee not only motivates a disciplined debate of educational ideas, but its definition of role as consultant (one whose power is to affect a decision before it is made, but not to make it) and its understanding of its purpose make the committee a mechanism for the resolution of idea-conflict as well. Its usefulness as a conflict-reducing mechanism is the citizens curriculum committee's secondary validity.

The citizens curriculum committee is a current vogue. Many school systems have been using the committee for some years with demonstrable success, and now many more districts are being encouraged to risk it. Its success has not been automatic; many districts have learned from experience that the fire of idea-conflict can rage out of control. Many of those who have been singled have been guilty of looking the other way, careless or betrayed by a disability endemic to administration, the disability that might be called the "public relations tic." Those so afflicted can be recognized by their habit of defending each school inadequacy with a more strenuous public relations campaign.

Support of the Public

It has not been lost on those who have a salesman's view of human interaction that a citizens group involved in school affairs may have a public relations use. Indeed, a by-product of any interaction between citizens and their schools may be a gain in the conviction that yields support. (It may, of course, also be a loss.)

No one will deny the need for and effectiveness of public understanding of public education. No one will gainsay the administrative efficiency of working for and meriting the support of the public. That is, most people affirm the value of good relations built on understanding between the school and community. The citizens curriculum committee has its legitimate PR value. Yet the step down in integrity between recognizing the PR possibilities of the citizens curriculum committee to its exploitation as a PR device is, for some, too easy a rationalization.

If PR exploitation is the administra-

tive aim, the citizens curriculum committee is compromised. Instead of being consultative, instead of generating and recommending new ideas, the committee becomes a kind of flying buttress for administrative decisions already made or intended. This is not merely the error of substituting the form for the substance; worse, it perverts the honored democratic principle of managing the enterprise in the expressed interests of its constituents into another means for manipulating public opinion. "The citizens committee," these salesmen-administrators seem to be saying, "is useful not for its ideas, but for ours."

There is another reason for the citizens committee vogue. The citizens committee may be perceived not so much as a PR buttress but rather as a shield for anonymity, a way to hide from responsibility.

Freedom To Differ

To minimize risk, even though it means reducing potential profit, is a temptation beyond the resistance of the more timid or bedeviled superintendent or board. How fine an armor is a committee whose recommendations can be treated as holy obligation! "We asked a sampling of our finest citizens," the school's officials say, "and they told us: now, being democratic, we must do as they say." If arrows of censure are later shot, they may bounce off the committee, never reaching the vital zones.

It's too easy a stratagem to be right, for how can the school administration continue to defend the integrity of its decision making power once it accepts consultation as decision? The ultimate potential conflict between recommendation and the judgment of those legally

responsible for deciding cannot be so painlessly avoided. The currency of responsibility is, inevitably, risk.

Still, none of man's devisings is proof against debasement. Just because its form can be used to give the appearance of consultation should not dissuade those who have the insight and courage to use consultation for all its worth. No one who has any responsibility for operating American schools can allow to lapse his stake in the principle that the freedom of local school districts to be different is the same freedom that permits one to be better than another. The American faith in administration is in its leadership capacity, not its caretaker arrangements. No people have believed more strongly in the concept of progress or in their own ability to progress than Americans. That is why conformity, risklessness, deserves to be viewed with alarm.

The raw material of progress is an idea, a notion about what is valuable and good, what is, in fact, better than what is already possessed or achieved. Aspirations are ideas about purpose, and in an educated and able society aspirations are constantly on the rise. Consultation with citizens is an excellent means for defining and agreeing on ideas about aspirations, and the responsible leaders of a social enterprise seek these ideas so as to increase the probability of progress. When a school system is urged on toward advanced goals by its constituents, these goals become realistic, however far in advance of present practice they may be. American school system organization makes possible the translation of the aspirations of quite small groups of citizens into reality. Where the possibility exists, the consultation offered by citizen committees provides a swift vehicle for progress. It has its

(Continued on page 38)

tion on industry, labor unions and other groups. Teacher workshops in economics, science and class use of community resources are widely offered and attended. Seminars and conferences on a wide range of subjects useful to teachers have proven popular. Business-Industry-Education Days have gained favor all over the country. Scholarships, fellowships, research grants and endowments of professorial chairs have been established to encourage improved teaching and serious intellectual effort. A number of associations, companies and organizations also offer awards for outstanding teaching achievement.

Special interest groups also render continuing service through maintaining liaison with authors, editors and publishers of textbooks and other instructional materials and with educational societies and associations. In this way up-to-date information and illustrations are at the finger tips of those persons who take leadership roles in shaping programs of instruction.

Opportunity, and Challenge

It should indeed be encouraging to educators that more and more industrial and business groups, voluntary organizations and other special-interest groups are demonstrating real concern for helping to prepare young people for a happy, productive place in society.

The key to the effectiveness of the relationship lies in the educator's proper performance of the responsibility to choose teaching materials and methods within the policy set by the community. The schools will not be overloaded with outside materials and programs so long as they base acceptance of each upon the answer to the question, "What body of knowledge, skills and understanding

does this organization, individual, material or program offer which is significant and important for students and teachers?"

Immeasurable progress can be made when school forces are joined by those from outside to work toward common objectives. The ultimate result can be a higher calibre of citizenship, a pretty good test of any educational program.

Citizens Participate

(Continued from page 34)

dangers, as most power-laden mechanisms have, but it certainly has its uses.

Yet consultation is still only consultation and, like any advice, is no better than its source nor more definitive than its use. Committees must be chosen for their quality; advice from persons whose judgments are not backed by valid credentials of prior performance are unlikely to engender the respect of decision makers. Representativeness is not an especially valuable criterion of a committee's worth, except for polling. But the committee is a poor polling device. What is wanted from a committee is reasoned judgment such as may emerge from sustained intellectual vigor.

Good advice is, of course, likely to be persuasive to decision makers. If the relations between committee and administration are characterized by mutual understanding of function and role, if the administration is ready to use advice to inform its decisions, while still insisting on its prerogatives, if no promises requiring abdication of responsibility have been made, then the advice of the citizens curriculum committee is likely to be deeply effective. At its best, its use will add practicality to curriculum planning for achievements that go beyond the current.

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