

How Shall the Citizen Be Involved?

IT IS not the purpose of this article to debate the issue: "Should the citizen be involved actively with the school program?" Rather it is assumed that in a democratic society such as ours, the citizen can and must relate to the school program. If this position is tenable, then the major concern shifts to the favorite topic of the practitioner—how does one accomplish this? The eventual answer to this question must evolve from within the individual school system and be predicated upon local conditions. Several suggestions might be offered for consideration by the local school personnel as they meet this challenge on the "home front."

A vital phase of the school program lies in the general area of communications. Most educators agree on the importance of keeping the community informed. What is not always recognized, however, is that citizens who are positively engaged in some aspect of the program are also serving as important links in the communication network. It is a wise instructional staff which will bring in lay groups smoothly, as important components of the instructional team.

In what type activity is it possible for the lay group to participate? Many com-

munities have some across-the-board organization such as a community council. Such a group is often originated by those in City Hall, yet it does not necessarily need to be. The public school group might very profitably employ such an organization of representative community leaders to tender "counsel" as well as serve in a communicative capacity.

Useful Services

The instructional staff might find a profitable utilization of lay participation in the general area of providing services. During periods of stress such as bond elections, local citizens can form the backbone for the election campaign. In this manner parents find themselves in the position of improving the instructional program for their own children by obtaining the money to build adequate classroom space. Citizen participation of this nature helps alleviate the image of the professionals attempting to construct their monument to posterity.

In some communities, mothers perform a wide variety of volunteer services

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which assist the instructional staff. Many times these services are deemed necessary because of limited budgets which threaten the effectiveness of the instructional program. Partially because of a good relationship with the staff, qualified citizens volunteer their time to help accomplish some definite task. The parents may provide the manpower to operate a school library where no librarian is available. Volunteers may provide needed secretarial assistance. Some citizens with highly specialized skills may agree to work with individual students on specific projects. In such situations all persons involved gain through their experiences. A stronger tie between the school program and the citizen in the community results.

Providing services might also take the form of conducting public opinion polls for the schools. At times there is information useful and necessary for the school program. This is often difficult, or even impossible, for the instructional staff, in its status position, to obtain. A well-organized group of citizens might quickly procure the desired information.

Lay citizens often perform important services as members of advisory groups. Here a representative group of insurance agents helps to recommend the best coverage for the school plant and, incidentally, how this protection might best be written. There a group works with the instructional staff and the architect on developing the best possible plans for a new building. Others might be working with the staff to help solve such perennial problems as: How and what kind of discipline should be included in the written board policies? What are the basic educational objectives for our school system? These groups, made up of both citizens and staff personnel, can explore such issues and reach a consensus. They then

may submit their recommendations for consideration by the proper school officials—principal, superintendent, board of education.

Need for Perspective

Many supervisors and curriculum specialists oppose this type participation on the part of the lay public. Reasons for such opposition usually center around the fact that often the specialist does not trust the lay citizen to become too involved. He is wary of the uninformed attempting to tell the administrator or supervisor how to handle school business. This problem need not exist if proper orientation is provided the group and if the chairman is capable of seeing the group problem in its proper perspective. The lay group can help interpret the wishes of the community in a way which might be very difficult for the instructional staff to determine. The more candid the interplay between the professional and the lay group, particularly regarding basic issues, the stronger the ensuing program often becomes and the wider the support from the community.

An important item should be kept in mind when soliciting citizen help. The instructional staff should know generally what role the lay group might best play and should be able at the outset to clearly define this role for the citizens. A very serious pitfall in working with lay groups is the lack of understanding on the part of the citizens involved as to what is needed and how they should relate to the total educational picture. When a lay group is organized, the initial charge should be framed in such a manner that eventually the task will reach a clearly defined point of completion, beyond which lay participation will not be deemed necessary.

Nothing can frustrate a group of well-intentioned citizens more quickly than not being sure what is expected from them and not seeing a possible terminal point for their efforts. Occasionally such a group will take upon itself an unwarranted sense of responsibility for some phase of the educational program which is not its concern. Then instead of useful, productive citizen participation, only hard feelings and a deterioration of program effectiveness result.

Initial Attitude

Another hazard for effective lay participation may be found in the initial group attitude. It would be less than prudent to ask a group of citizens, organized for the express purpose of pressuring for or against some aspect of the educational program, to serve as an advisory committee to the board on the merits of the case in question. It would be unreasonable to expect any group to present an unbiased report at that time and under these conditions.

A citizen who is basically favorable toward public education may be opposed to some aspect of the program. Certainly such an individual should not automatically be labeled "the enemy." Rather, the instructional staff should try to spend some time with this critic. Often the citizen who will come forward with a query will also come forward to defend the overall program if such assistance becomes necessary. Because of his expressed concern, improved education may result.

Unhealthy participation by citizens might include pressure groups attempting to usurp some function of the instructional staff. The current political scene furnishes many opportunities for this to occur. Here a group is involved

with the "racial issue" and how it should be considered in the schools; here a group is concerned with religion and "what the schools are going to do about it"; here communism is of more concern and some means of censorship is considered necessary. Such discussion might be a perfectly acceptable and healthy topic for debate in the realm of policy. It might also become amplified into fears, emotional upheavals, charges and countercharges which tend in the long run to do more harm than any benefit accrued as a result of "solving" the immediate problem.

The instructional program in some schools is being seriously impaired by lay groups attempting either to intimidate directly some of the staff or in many subtle ways applying pressures to include or exclude specific curriculum material. Special-interest groups and self-styled "experts" are also exerting influence upon the textbook publishers and those who select the texts for the classroom. Lay participation of this kind is not usually desired by the professional staff nor does it normally result in an improved instructional program.

Selecting Members

Methods of obtaining the cooperation of lay citizens will vary with the locale. The obvious persons to approach first for assistance are the PTA presidents. Too often the instructional staff make the error of relying only upon a limited number of citizens, either because they know only a few people or, more likely, because they know these persons can be depended upon satisfactorily to accomplish the desired task.

A better procedure for selecting the lay membership might be for the staff to be constantly aware of the need for

general citizen participation. Teachers, supervisors and administrators who are in daily contact with the general public become acquainted with a wide variety of people of all backgrounds. If the instructional staff were to make proper use of these continuing contacts, a perpetually expanding reservoir of potential talent would be available in addition to the resources regularly called upon. Some administrators make it a general practice when possible of inviting critics to serve on a committee concerning some other phase of the program. This method might very well result in a strengthened total program; it might also neutralize or even convert a critic into a supporter. A broad, general participation by all segments of the community is certainly desirable.

Examples of lay participation might be cited. One school system which has worked for several years on the basic premise that lay participation is vital to the evolution of a sound educational program is that of Jefferson County, Colorado. This suburban school system has grown at a phenomenal pace since 1950. The educational problems have multiplied, also. In Jefferson County lay group participation is, not the exception, but the rule. As a result many persons in the community not only know what the instructional program is, they also know how it came to be developed because they and their neighbors played some part in its formulation.

During the past ten years, citizens have been active, first in helping pass bond issues of over fifty million dollars, then in serving as advisory committees within the local areas to help plan construction of the new buildings. Recently a lay group was initiated by the School Board to develop future guidelines for the system. The Citizens Advisory Com-

mittee on Goals of Public Education, during the six months it functioned, devoted more than five thousand man hours to the task of considering the most acceptable aims and objectives of public education within the county. When the assigned task had been accomplished, the committee made its recommendations directly to the Board and was dissolved.¹

An example of another system which seeks lay participation is that of Tyler, Texas. For several years this school district has utilized the technique of activating a citizens group to work with some of the professional staff in the local selection of textbooks. These committees study the State adopted list and on the basis of their considered opinions recommend to the Board the book which seems best to meet the need of the citizens of Tyler. Each year new committees are formed and, after making their recommendations to the Board, each year the committees are dissolved. Membership is rotated throughout the community with many different citizens serving at various times. In this fashion the community is not only kept informed; but it has helped reach basic decisions and the entire program is stronger for the process.

Examples from other communities can be cited at great length. Needless to say, a mutual respect and understanding between the professional staff and the lay citizens will be evident in most communities. One will observe a willingness on the part of each group to listen to the other, to engage in a constructive give-and-take, to help reach a mutually acceptable goal in the continuing effort to improve the instructional program.

¹"Goals of Education," Board of Education, Jefferson County Public Schools, Lakewood, Colorado, 1962. Mimeographed. p. 2.

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