

# Three Concepts of Democratic District Leadership

THE recent history of Southern California is one of mass immigration, bringing with it the multitudinous problems associated with rapid expansion. To meet the challenge of this physical growth has been a continuing task of school administrators. Accompanying the task of expanding building and staff, in many cases requiring Herculean efforts, has been the equally challenging problem of preserving the values of our democratic heritage.

Under the pressures of an unpredictable population explosion, the temptation is strong to exercise a purely authoritarian leadership, as a surer method of achieving efficiency under conditions of great stress. The challenge of preserving some form of functional democratic leadership, and of maintaining the equilibrium of school organization with the democratic ideal, has been met by California school districts in a variety of ways.

The La Mesa-Spring Valley School District was subject to all these pressures. From a one-school district in 1941, it has grown to a 19-school unit in 1963, with a certificated staff numbering over 500. La Mesa-Spring Valley is now one of the ten largest elementary districts in the

State of California. A mechanistic view of leadership, interpreted as the control and management of group behavior by a superior authority, has always been denied by the administration of this district. A democratic philosophy of sharing leadership, a sophisticated concept of group dynamics that encourages staff contributions to the common purposes of administrative leadership, with the accompanying personal satisfactions that make willing team members, has been the guideline. This sometimes difficult philosophy has been made functional in the La Mesa-Spring Valley School District in several ways.

## Representative Staff Concept

First, there is the Representative Staff Concept, known as the "Modified Staff." In practice, this democratic instrument permits all professional employees of the district to share in a realistic way in the initiation and processing of district policy and projects. This method also provides for rapid and sympathetic communication of ideas among the members of the

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staff. Recognizing the building principals as the administrative ambassadors, the district has the concept of using the principals as district instructional leaders.

To assist in implementing this concept, principals are given extended contracts to allow time for instructional and committee activities. Each principal assumes the chairmanship of several of some 37 instructional committees now in existence within the district. In addition, the district has the concept of continuous leadership development. The district lives not only for the selfish present, but tries to keep an eye on the future. If the democratic philosophy that is the reference point of district leadership is to prevail, a training program for leaders must be carried out. This is encouraged through workshops, in-service education and the like. It is not the feeling in the La Mesa-Spring Valley schools that administrative philosophy must be sharply defined as a democratic versus authoritarian leadership. Common sense dictates that both patterns must sometimes be used. It is the concept of our district that the best administration, the successful administration, is the one that functions largely through democratic practices which facilitate the professional growth of the entire school staff.

There is a temptation to say that the first concept, that of the "Modified Staff," is the most fruitful approach. This group has about 55 members. Such a group may seem large and unwieldy, but in practice it is not, due perhaps to its representative nature and the careful selection of objectives that permit large scale participation. The "Modified Staff" comprises three distinct groups of professional employees. The first group is made up of representatives of each building, elected by the building faculty. The

second group is composed of principals, and the third group is drawn from special service personnel. Recognizing the need of identifying problems facing the district and establishing priorities, this group begins the school year with a three-day meeting in a mountain retreat before the opening of school. The cost of this meeting is borne by the membership. It is here that guidelines are established, objectives adopted, and the year's working program organized.

At the beginning of the 1962-63 school year, the "Modified Staff" decided to give top priority to the task of maintaining and improving good community relations. The attack on this problem is used to illustrate the operation of the "Modified Staff." Various pressure groups, some with selfish ends to pursue, and some not inclined toward the best interests of the schools, were beginning to make their presence felt. It was recognized that, in democratic fashion, the welfare of the schools was the business of the whole staff as well as the community. To implement this need, a steering committee of nine members of the group was set up, enlisting the services of three principals, three teachers, and three parents.

Under the guidance of this planning committee, the School-Community Relations Committee was organized and put to work on a permanent program. As a result of the work of the "Modified Staff" and its steering committee, the many significant objectives were met. Accepting the general guideline that the public would like to know more about the curricular aspects of the schools, the following actions were taken to make this functional.

First, improved publications were initiated and distributed to the public. A

pamphlet, *Your Elementary Schools*, with emphasis on staff, instruction, services, etc., was published monthly and 12,600 copies were sent to the parents of school children. Second, in every building, a teacher was selected to represent the school for the radio, TV, and the press, by seeing that these media were informed of interesting projects and events. The superintendent held a monthly PTA presidents' meeting. The PTA representatives had an opportunity to present their questions and requests to the superintendent. Third, all teachers were aware that they constituted individual information contacts with the public, and had a responsibility to present the story of the schools. Both the teachers and principals, and the central administrators, found themselves invited to teas and coffees by interested neighborhood groups as school representatives. In general, the climate of the district, as it related to the schools, was definitely improved. This was a democratically conceived program, carried out by the participation of the entire staff with extremely beneficial results.

It is part of the pattern in which the "Modified Staff" functions to hold general monthly meetings to exercise a guiding hand on the work in progress. At the end of the year the "Modified Staff" meets at an Evaluation Day to assess results, to evaluate committee reports, and to point to next year's projects. The values of the "Modified Staff" are many. Among these values are: a representative feedback from a large staff to the administration; a speeding of communications, as staff members carry their story back to the buildings they represent, and the existence of a two-way communication process between teachers and administration that really functions. Fi-

nally, out of the bulky Representative Staff there is born a variation of the "Modified Staff." This group is the Superintendent's Advisory Council, representing a sampling of the larger group. This committee meets directly with the superintendent, particularly after Board of Education meetings, to go over the actions of the board and to assess their impact on the school staff and policy.

### Principal as Instructional Leader Concept

The Representative Staff Concept is a valuable principle used in the La Mesa-Spring Valley School District, yet it is supported and strengthened by other provisions for democratic leadership. A second concept employed is one of utilizing the principal as a district instructional leader. To implement this practice, the district offers its principals an extended contract period. This gives the principals time for committee participation, workshop membership, conference attendance, individual research, and especially, the opportunity to act as chairman of special instructional projects or committees.

Principals are encouraged to identify specific projects which, in their opinion, could be supported by district and NDEA funds. To this end, principals have contributed to many pilot programs, such as closed circuit TV, use of Cuise-naire rods, foreign language study, University of Illinois Science Study, and new reading programs. It is recognized that principals have unique interests and that these interests may contribute to district programs. Knowledge of special subjects in depth is therefore encouraged. If a principal becomes a specialist while maintaining sufficient general knowledge

efficiently to carry out his other duties, he will probably be able to advise and guide the district as well as other principals. He may become head of the district's committee on science, math, social studies, etc.

An example of the district's encouragement of a principal's growth in special fields is the present district-wide interest in multigraded-team teaching. This technique, as yet not commonly practiced in California schools, has as one of its aims, the use of an individual teacher's unique knowledge and gifts for the benefit of a larger group of students. Interest in this technique in the La Mesa-Spring Valley School District began with the desire of one principal to acquire professional knowledge and skill in this field. To this end, and using the time allowed by his extended contract, as well as his own leisure moments, the principal began a program of research and observation.

After extended study, the principal's plan was ultimately presented to the School Board. Impressed by his sincerity, extensive knowledge, and grasp of technique, he was given the green light for a pilot project in his school. First, the idea was explored with representative committees of parents to enlist their cooperation. Teachers in the school were informed and were encouraged to research the technique, and interested teachers were assigned responsibilities in the experiment. The project was given a year's trial on a limited basis. This pilot run proved eminently successful, winning praise from parents, teachers and students. The other principals in the district were kept fully informed and were encouraged to observe. As a result of this experiment, the pilot school was given permission to adopt the multigraded-team teaching organization for

all grades. The principal was chosen as chairman of the district's Multigraded-Team Teaching Committee. Two other principals, using the knowledge gained in the original experiment and receiving help from the committee, are introducing pilot programs in their schools for the new school year. The continuing study with regular reports to the principals of the district in the field of multigraded-team teaching forms a valuable fund of knowledge for the entire district. This is an example of the functioning of the concept of the principal as the district instructional leader. This instance points to a whole area of valuable professional knowledge that allows the entire district a safe and sure way to grow with the times. This approach is the product of the farsighted policy of the district in democratic sharing of responsibility, of opportunity for contributing, of the wonderful feeling of belonging to a working professional team.

### Continuous Leadership Training Concept

We have noted, briefly, two administrative concepts that influence the practice of democratic leadership in the La Mesa-Spring Valley School District. There is, in addition, a third concept held by the district, that of continuous leadership training. The premise is firmly held that leadership is a group process, and that as such it can be a learned skill, whether thought of as an art or a science. Acceptance of this role of leadership gives a closer approach to the values of democracy we must constantly strive to achieve and to preserve. It must also be said that, in the practice of this idea, all staff members are encouraged to partici-

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Examinations exist not to aid education, but to make the system more efficient.

The step from the fantastic consequence of having asked the wrong question in the first place, equating rigid selection with excellence in education, is short. Nearly everyone takes this step. You can't miss, of course. If your students are already good, then your teaching will surely be good, for they will succeed in tests. As Casey Stengel said once, "With Mickey Mantle in the outfield, I'm a hell of a manager."

No, the answer will not be better than the question. And the main educational questions all proceed from a consideration of what it means to be a human being. No lesser question will cope with the problem.

—ARTHUR W. FOSHAY, *Teachers College, Columbia University, New York, New York.*

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pate to the extent their duties permit.

Several methods are used to give reality to the continuous leadership development concept. Each Tuesday, throughout the school year, all the principals gather in a planned in-service meeting. For example, a program may be presented on a new instructional technique in music. There is ample opportunity for exploration of all facets of this technique through discussion and questions. Interest may be stimulated to the extent that further research may be planned. Constructive criticism is invited.

There is also an extended type of workshop where the principals meet for a period of several days. A recent workshop of this nature was an "in depth"

presentation of new concepts in the mathematics curriculum. A third type of in-service meeting for principals is the field testing of a workshop presentation. Here, supervisors come in and try out new ideas on the principals rather than on the teachers. Principals, as a result, are better able to evaluate a new technique or tool to determine whether it satisfies a particular need of their staff. The principals also have a better understanding of the program or plan prior to its introduction to staff.

Another method of leadership training is through the district's summer school program. Teachers are appointed to serve as summer assistants under a director, giving aspiring faculty members an opportunity to learn administrative techniques. These assistants work closely with the director of the summer school, who makes recommendations to guide them in their administrative development. Along these same lines is the practice of providing an assistant to the principal in each district elementary school. This teacher is in charge when the principal is out of the building, and is also guided by the principal in learning to accept the responsibilities and other duties that face administration. Through these and other techniques the district has a continuing program for stimulating leadership training.

In this paper we have suggested three basic concepts that implement the philosophy of democratic leadership accepted by the administration of the La Mesa-Spring Valley School District. We do not feel that these concepts are necessarily new or unique. However, in this district, these concepts govern the administration's effort to practice, in the public schools, the democratic way of life.

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