



“IT’S

WHAT do citizens really mean when they talk about citizen participation and citizen control of the schools? My growing conviction, based on both research and experience, is that citizens do not want to run the schools; they only want to be consulted and respected. Citizens want to be accepted as people with ideas and resources to be contributed. They want to be a valued part of the educational system, not a tool to be used for docile “support” of the educator’s objectives, at his beck and call.

There is both anger and understanding in this statement. Over the years I have known of many hurts inflicted unknowingly by educators. It started in the early grades when teachers in their best “soothe the savage beast” style would say to me and my friends, “Now don’t try to teach your child to read. You just read to him, take him on trips, and get him ready. And we’ll do the teaching.”

This made me feel pretty inadequate. Was I not to be trusted with my own “whole child”? I knew that everything that happened at home was part of his learning environment. I wanted to be a partner in shared objectives. I resented the implication that the teacher’s professional know-how transcended my own values as a parent and functioning member of the community. I felt patronized.

Even as a PTA officer and civic organization leader, I felt that my role should go no further than to support the schools and make

suggestions. There was, even with the most popular and enlightened principals and teachers, no request that we help with problem solving, that we help explore alternative paths of action from a community point of view, that we help educators formulate goals for the education of our children.

I am, I suppose, a very model of the kind of community person the schools think of as a responsible citizen, influential and active and concerned. I have a teaching credential, have taught adult classes for many years, have played a leading role in working for financial support for the schools. And yet, I felt “put down” as a parent.

As part of my present graduate work in education, I have been surveying attitudes and opinions of citizens representing a cross section of leaders in the broadly diverse community in which I live. I found considerable difference in attitude about citizen involvement in school decision making and planning, ranging from the two-time PTA President with a teaching credential who said, “I don’t know what I’d have to contribute,” to the neighborhood aide in the poorest area who said, “I may be ignorant, but I’m not stupid. I know what my kids need.”

However, there was a thread which ran through all of my depth interviews. Each in his own way was saying, “I want to be listened to with respect. I want to know why. I want to be consulted and I want interaction with the educational staff. I don’t want to be received and filed.”

THE ATTITUDE THAT COUNTS"

PAULA MENKIN *

Citizen Advisory Councils

I did not find any desire to get in and run the schools. I found much respect for the professional knowledge of educators, and clear understanding of the importance of education—good education. The controversy within my sample lay largely in differing definitions of what is good. This seems to me clearly to point to the need for community participation in defining educational objectives relevant to the environment in which our young live and will live. One of the major problems in community participation is defining the term "community." This term has been increasingly clouded in recent years by its use to denote the ethnic communities, or the community of the poor.

My research shows a growing concern on the part of the rest of the people that they are being taken for granted. Unfortunately, much of their sense of community is expressing itself in protectiveness of the status quo, because of fear of the influence of "pressure groups." Many administrators share this feeling. These fears are leading to increasing polarization and distance between the various groups in the community concerned with education.

It is in this atmosphere that we enter the new era of citizen advisory councils. The administrator truly does not know what community groups to deal with. He finds, in this atmosphere of polarization, that no matter what he does, he is attacked. He spends in-

creasing amounts of time dealing with conflict situations and finds it difficult to follow the textbook admonition to differentiate between responsible dissent and destructive demands. He often, in sheer desperation, finds himself choosing between two alternatives, neither of which really works.

He either uses the classic ploy of divide and conquer, which yields at best a Pyrrhic victory, or he falls back on the advice and services of the traditional "community leaders" who will, in today's climate, support what he wants to do because they are afraid of losing that which they think is good if they open the door to "those other people" and to change.

Let's listen to a discussion meeting where school people are being talked about by a representative group of educated, civically active, responsible middle class women who are currently serving, or trying to serve, on education advisory councils:

"Our principal really didn't want a council. He fulfilled the requirements by consulting on the phone with the president of the local Chamber of Commerce, a minister, and the president of the community coordinating council. We had to organize a group of interested parents to request a real representative council, and then he called us 'radicals' at a PTA meeting."

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"Our principal seems to think that if we don't agree with him, we aren't supporting the schools, and he thinks that the teachers on the council are disloyal if they agree with things the citizens say."

"Our principal encourages us to criticize and suggest and say what we think, but he never asks us to help with his problems, or do anything constructive. I don't think it's good use of my time just to go to gripe sessions. If he responds at all, he says he can't do it because of school regulations or system-wide policies. He's always passing the buck upstairs."

"Our principal didn't want us to succeed. You should have seen his face when he came into a meeting we had called for parents to help on college advisement after training by the counselor. He was stunned to find 12 parents there for training, and now he goes around bragging about the 400 seniors we interviewed and helped apply for college."

"I can see the necessity for proving we really mean it by doing things, but I think our major role is to get close enough to the schools so we can help them see some new things that need to be done. For instance, we heard of the serious absentee rate at our school and our committee decided to offer our services at night to call parents of kids who were out. Most of them work and are never reached by the school attendance office daytime calls. The parents really appreciated the concern of other parents for them and their kids."

"Our committee members were all college graduates. We have to stop being afraid of the democratic process. The sustained interest is by people who *care*."

"Attendance at our council meetings has certainly made me understand the pressures on the schools a lot better. I get angry at the principal for the way he handles the meetings, but I sure can understand why he behaves that way. It must be murder to have these conflicting demands day after day and feel that if he

pleased us, he would get static from his superiors."

"How do you keep the schools responsive to the community when there are so many conflicting demands?"

The literature on conflict management points the way, which is to find and build on the areas of agreement, the values and goals that *can* be agreed on, so that diversity becomes a desirable source of new ideas and approaches for reaching agreed-on objectives. I would like to propose the use of the citizen council as a vehicle for (a) mutual exploration and decision making on goals and priorities; and (b) channeling the participation of lay and professional personnel into collaborative and mutually reinforcing activity.

The literature on successful citizen participation in the schools all seems to reinforce these criteria. Implicit in them is the acceptance of a collaborative peer relationship between layman and professionals in working toward common goals. Since the collaborative process is one of the most highly held values of educators, the very process of working in this way is fulfilling an educational goal, the goal of educating for responsible citizenship. It makes the school-community interrelationship a model for our young to see that the values we teach, we use.

It is time to stop selling the schools to the citizens who already own them, and take the new approach of building educational systems which include all components—the administrator, the teacher, the parent, the student, and interested adults who are part of the community environment in which we live—as partners, each with attitudes, skills, and resources necessary to define what relevant education is, and work together to achieve it. □



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