



Community Involvement in Change

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THE name of today's educational game is community involvement. But few people know the rules. What is more, no one has written an appropriate rule book. And our problems are made more difficult by the hand wringers inside and outside of the establishment.

Most of us who read this journal are establishment types. We are for the most part persons who have devoted our professional lives and interests to the development of today's educational structures. There are rebels within this audience, but for the most part they are only garden variety rebels: the kind that slink back to the suburbs at 5:00. They, like me, worship at the shrine of community participation. But most of this worship is ritualistic and the shrine is our own design and construction.

Frankly, most of us are not up to coping with new citizen interests. But somehow we must.

A Profession Up-tight

We need not detail the magnitude of citizen feelings about education in the nation. Suffice it to say, school boards play to packed houses, some PTA meetings are circuses, and superintendents' offices resemble police stations with bulletins coming in from around the district on how things are going today. Buildings have been burned; administrators

have been killed; school board members have been threatened; superintendents have bodyguards. And the prospects of widespread violence in schools across the nation continue to escalate.

The irrationality, the hostility, the aggressiveness, and the violence which accompany some acts of "participation" are usually born out of despair. The participant who wants to see change finds his efforts thwarted continuously. He seldom has a victory. The education enterprise is fantastically self-protective. It has so many built-in and difficult-to-recognize protective mechanisms that those who seek to penetrate or even to dent its calloused exterior find it necessary to employ harsh and violent means.

The "outsiders" who wish to make changes are a mixed lot. There are among the "protagonist people" a very small number who have as their goal the complete destruction of the institution. There is no doubt about that. So the principal, or the teacher, or the superintendent, or the board member always has in the back of his mind the gnawing prospect that *this protagonist* may indeed be the dangerous one. The professional finds it difficult to sort the legitimate from the

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illegitimate, the wholesome from the un-wholesome, the responsible from the irresponsible. Not knowing how to make those judgments, he plays it safe and is hostile or non-responsive toward them all.

The fear of conspiracy is genuine. Educators of all types are concerned about infiltration of anarchists, neo-Nazis, antagonists, SDS'ers, and what have you. School people lack the information or the necessary G-2 to make discriminating judgments. They cannot sort all those folks out. Schools are not budgeted for an investigatory arm. Nor are school people excited about requesting police and/or FBI partnerships. There is something incompatible with education in the utilization of police resources to sustain an educational enterprise. That is, in the educators' judgment, a last resort, and most are very reluctant to take such action.

Participation: Why?

A limited attempt to learn more about emerging new forms of citizen participation was made recently at The Ohio State University. We produced a brief report for the national office of the Urban Coalition. This report was an analysis of forms or mechanisms in which community participation is evolving currently.¹ Our resources were sufficient to take us to 13 cities. We visited the cities quietly, without fanfare or flourish. We asked a lot of questions of a lot of people.

Citizens are producing ingenious new ways to affect the schools. Some ways are through an individual such as the ombudsman; others are through groups such as assessment councils and advisory committees. Some are neighborhood in scope; others are metropolis-wide.

We tried to apprehend the several purposes that citizens are seeking to serve through participation. There appeared to be four: (a) to develop community understanding and support for education objectives; (b) to supplement efforts of school staff members in pursuit of educational objectives;

(c) to articulate citizen expectations for schools; and (d) to insist upon accountability for educational objectives.² In most cases there was remarkable, almost desperate, concern for good schools, good teaching, equality of opportunity, and the like. We found little evidence of self-seeking or rabble-rousing for its own sake.

We found considerable interest in the concept of accountability. It is the "in-thing."³ The accountability impulse is widespread within society and therefore significant. It may become the most important thrust leading to educational change.

When citizens become so aroused that they can no longer tolerate a set of events in a classroom or a building or in a school system, they find within themselves the resources to take action. What is occurring in many places are attempts to repair, or streamline, or invent new mechanisms for the mobilization of energy to act upon or against the schools. It is these sorts of strengths within the society (latent as well as manifest) that are causing change. We professionals by and large fail to understand them.

We fail to understand especially the problems of participation as viewed by those who wish to participate. Participation is rough. Participation requires large amounts of time. Participation is often lonely business and it pushes people into groups. Laymen wallowing in their frustrations have a difficult time sorting out issues of significance. Their purposes are often unclear. Their information base is limited. But their anxieties spill out. They cannot in good conscience sit idly by and let the pressure mount. James Coleman a decade ago wrote that "everybody knows that there are no controversies where there is nothing to quarrel about."⁴ The constituencies of the schools believe that there is plenty to quarrel about today.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 15-20.

³ Leon M. Lessinger. "Accountability for Results." *American Education* 5 (6): 2-4; June-July 1969.

⁴ James S. Coleman. *Community Conflict*. New York: The Free Press of Glencoe, A Division of the Macmillan Company, 1957. p. 3.

¹ Luvern L. Cunningham and Raphael O. Nystrand. *Citizen Participation in School Affairs*. Washington, D.C.: The Urban Coalition, June 1969.

School Boards as Agents for Community Feeling

Probably the most telling, critical citizen involvement in educational change is achieved through school board leadership. Those laymen today exercise (or fail to exercise) responsibility over the destinies of an exceedingly "pluralistic" public enterprise. People on boards of education are themselves the targets (or beneficiaries) of the efforts of citizen participation. They are "destiny makers" and as such are not overlooked when aggressive citizens seek agents for achieving their private as well as group goals vis-à-vis the school system.

The board of education is now the community educational lightning rod. This has not always been the case in American education. For decades (and even now in hundreds of school districts) the superintendent was the principal agent for community interaction and interrelationship. Board of education members by and large played a passive role in community exchange. Now in a large number of school districts the board of education member finds it impossible to be passive. He must either be responsive and active in that sense or get out of the saddle.

Some board members are finding it exciting to serve as active proponents for change. The life of the school superintendent is markedly different where there are board members who serve as change advocates. In such situations school administrators often sit rather passively by, speak when spoken to, respond when called upon, but allow board members to carry the burden of deliberation.

Curriculum Types and Community Involvement

Many school districts, especially large city systems, have developed fantastic bureaucratic mumbo-jumbos at the central office level. They are populated by a mixed bag of "about to be's" and "has beens." They do all sorts of funny things. They take in each other's laundry. They write reports which no

one reads. They file things. They produce memoranda for principals. They attend conferences. They are very busy.

As educators our problems are severe in this arena. Not only are such professionals nonplussed by the motivation behind much of the new citizen interest; they find it difficult to reconcile these impulses with time-honored professional control over what happens in schools. They say: We are the professionals. We are expert. We know the answers. This attitude has blended nicely with the traditional view of many parents that the teacher is "in charge." The teacher knows best. Respect your teacher.

Now we must reach out and try to reconcile the past with the present. What was true in the past may continue to be true in the future but to a much more limited extent. Most parents would like to respect their children's teachers and their schools. Most parents still have a measure of confidence in these public institutions. But obviously not all parents have confidence in teachers or in institutions. Certainly the articulate members of the disaffected populations can spread their discontent and do. In fact, they are obligated to do so if they feel deeply about issues and want to see some change.

In the past several years I have become sensitive to what I would describe as the "layer problem." The layer is that group of downtowners who may become enchanted with their own purposes, fail to understand the problems and issues as they are experienced by people in the schools, and at times garble communication from the superintendent about what needs to be done.

Central office curriculum and supervisory people visit schools. They come with bright smiles. They are seated at the head table. They talk big talk; they think big thoughts; and then they excuse themselves so they can rush off to yet another meeting in another of the provinces.

The men and women on the firing line (out in the schools) have little idea what "those people" scurrying around downtown really do. They have some vague notion that it must be important or the district would not be spending all that money on their salaries.

They keep looking furtively for some evidence that what the downtowners produce is good.

After extended experiences with downtown types, the people in the schools get increasingly disenchanted. In fact they get outright angry and hostile. They read the memoranda grudgingly. They file the lengthy gobbledegook reports. And then they go back to contending with parents and students on an hour by hour basis, hoping somehow to survive.

They wonder too why the superintendent is not interested in *them*. At the same time, the superintendent wonders what happened to his good ideas.

A few months ago several of my colleagues and I (from The Ohio State University) exchanged positions with principals in ghetto schools in a large city. For one week we had the responsibility of running those enterprises. We learned. We found many things that disturbed us—more than can be reported in these few lines. But again an indelible imprint was registered: curriculum people and supervisors “upstairs” in the organization were neither understood nor appreciated. The “grass rooters” felt neither respect nor disrespect for them. They were not particularly interested in them.

Over the past several years in my associations with large city systems, I find few curriculum specialists who are *really at work* on basic curriculum problems. Most of them are repairing old fences, cranking out curriculum materials that are much like those of historical precedent. They work feverishly with committees drawn from here and there on this and that. But I do not find them where the action is. You seldom see them at community action organization meetings or dealing with people at the neighborhood level or visiting on street corners. Somehow they fail to countenance the importance of such places of interaction. This is simply not within the traditional image of what such specialists do. Such specialists are uncomfortable outside the net of traditional interaction and communication. Despite discomfort with today's tempestuous events, they apparently do not see dealing directly with these events as their

responsibility. They seem to get their kicks from perpetuating their own irrelevancies. What is even more tragic is that many college and university curriculum specialists, too, sit idly by and wring their collective hands.

We must find improved ways to bring all responsible segments of the educational fraternity face-to-face with community feeling. We cannot afford to have little islands of isolation, especially when their inhabitants are expected to deal with the substance of education. Principals and teachers are exposed and vulnerable; so, obviously, are superintendents. Curriculum people, too, should be brought into this half of the century. They should seek out feelings, note fresh attitudes, have sessions with militants, recognize where the action is.

As a society we are well into our toughest period. We joke about survival. But our problems are exceedingly severe and deep seated. We are painfully aware of the issues in reconciling the competing interests inherent in a pluralistic culture. The divisiveness in the culture itself could occupy our full attention, but that luxury escapes us. Our burden includes the clarification of how an institution (education, itself pluralistic) can integrate its purposes, functions, and products with the society.

Communities (and the individuals who compose them) will not content themselves with idle observations. Nor can professionals alone call the shots. The rights, privileges, and responsibilities of professionals are in need of fresh review. Yet so are the rights, privileges, and responsibilities of laymen vis-à-vis their institutions. It is imperative that professionals understand the new surge by citizens. It is equally important that citizens season their aggressiveness with responsibility.

Antagonisms have grown in many communities and relationships have so deteriorated that we need to declare a truce or a moratorium on wrath. An initial goal is understanding. A more significant goal is a joining of forces in a mutual attack on the basic educational problems that caused the breach of confidence in the first place. □

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