

Political Power

Mobilizing Political

TIMES change. Needs and interests change. So do goals and objectives. It is evident to many that the relationship of the education profession to the political world must change drastically and rapidly. Political power must be energized for educational ends.

Power here is considered to be the capability of one unit to influence another.¹ Political power is that residing in the various legislative halls. Power originates from coercion, reward, identification, a sense of legitimacy, and expertness.²

Power itself is finite and must be considered as limited, according to the "sum-zero" concept³; as one individual or group gains power, another must correspondingly lose.

The Struggle for Power

Within the educational power domain, students and teachers are becoming increasingly active. Each group is seeking to gain

¹ R. Murray Thomas, Lester B. Sands, and Dale L. Brubaker. *Strategies for Curriculum Change*. Scranton: International Textbook Company, 1968. p. 13. See also: Floyd Hunter. *Community Power Structure*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1953. p. 3.

² Robert L. Kahn and Elise Boulding. *Power and Conflict in Organizations*. New York: Basic Books, Inc., Publishers, 1964.

³ William A. Gamson. *Power and Discontent*. Homewood, Illinois: Dorsey Press, Inc., 1968. pp. 108, 109.

power from administrators and the board of education, the group that typically has retained power within a bureaucratic educational structure. In the past both teachers and students have accepted direction and have conformed or have departed. Today some of the power of administrators has been and continues to be eroded by the action of students and teachers.

Thus, we find the American Civil Liberties Union legal staff helping a student to break the dress code by endeavoring to protect students' individual rights regarding length of hair. We also find organized student groups on both high school and college campuses protesting and actively demonstrating for one cause or another. The amount of property damage and the loss of life (Kent State and Jackson State) point up dramatically the intensity behind these attempts to obtain power. We also find teachers presenting demands backed by demonstrations, walkouts, and strikes. Professional negotiations have moved like wildfire from a philosophical concept to a fact of life for an increasing number of districts in all parts of the country.⁴ The NEA and the teacher unions grow constantly closer, both philosophically and pragmatically.

The major fallacy of such action, no

⁴ Stanley M. Elam, Myron Lieberman, and Michael H. Moskow. *Collective Negotiations in Public Education*. Chicago: Rand McNally & Company, 1967.

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Power for Action

HAROLD E. TURNER *

matter how carefully or elaborately designed, is that it is confined almost entirely to the educational domain. When students and teachers gain power, administrators and boards of education find their influence eroded. With all such shifting and reshuffling, the profession as a whole has gained little. In fact, a backlash of anti-education opinion in some instances has reduced the amount of power previously belonging to the profession. Some school districts suddenly find they have lost much of the public support they formerly have taken for granted.

The tactical error thus perpetrated by well intentioned, sincere individuals has been to ignore the power potentially available to education residing within the political domain. When the various interest groups throughout the education profession, be they students, teachers, interested laymen, or whoever, can meet the criteria of an alienated solidary group,⁵ a new era can emerge. Solidary groups are collections of individuals holding similar attitudes of trust, with common perceptions of the political system's ability to work positively for the perceiver. An alienated solidary group, then, is composed of members who believe the authorities are either incompetent or biased in their actions toward members of the group. This group will logically rationalize that active confrontation is appropriate since there is little if anything for it to lose.

⁵ Gamson, *op. cit.*, pp. 53-56, 164-69, 180-82.

The Task at Hand

When enough educators can subscribe to a common goal, and thus join one solidary group, then it will be possible to overlook less crucial problems which have deterred cooperative action in the past. Such conclusions, once reached, should tend to make possible, if not probable, statewide action against the various state legislatures, the political units responsible under the Constitution for education.⁶ In a description of citizen power models, Ruoss⁷ explains how group effort can accomplish its objectives. For example, Mass-Based-Organization, particularly as advocated by Alinsky⁸ and patterned after the labor movement in this country, appears to be increasing in urban areas. The assumption is that citizen action is necessary in a democracy and that change only comes about by use of citizen power.

Hence, in such a situation, friends of education would band together to actively

⁶ Nicholas Masters, Robert Salisbury, and Thomas Eliot. *State Politics and the Public Schools*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1964. p. 275.

⁷ Meryl Ruoss. *Citizen Power and Social Change*. New York: The Seabury Press, 1968. pp. 57-89.

⁸ Saul D. Alinsky. *Reveille for Radicals*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1946.

* Harold E. Turner, Associate Professor, School of Education, University of Missouri, St. Louis



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confront state legislatures in the attempt to acquire some advantage for education. Most likely a direct attack at the ballot box would be a major tactic employed. Individual and group pressures, economic and otherwise, would certainly be utilized. Note a recent comment by George Fischer, then NEA president, indicating an intent to defeat at the polls politicians considered unfriendly to education.⁹ Statewide "sanctions" and the use of the strike may be refined and employed with more effectiveness. Such direct action calls the attention of the public and its elected representatives to something which needs immediate attention by those holding power.

Hunter¹⁰ analyzed the structure of power in a community. He identified key individuals holding power and described how they functioned, separately and together, to maintain and enhance their power. A concerted effort of this type, on a local, regional, and statewide basis, could be mounted by educators. The procedure would follow a consistent pattern in which first the domain (the geographical area as well as the particular issue under consideration) would be determined. Second, by means of a systematic interview process, an attempt would be made to ferret out the key individuals holding power. Third, strategies would be prepared to work with and, when possible, through the established power group thus identified in

an effort to influence the particular issue in a manner favorable to education.

The objective is to influence the power structure in a manner which will cause it to provide support through its connection with, and relationship to, the political leadership. Those who advocate such procedure hasten to point out that considerable finesse is needed to accomplish the desired objective. The power figure must be contacted at an appropriate time, in an acceptable manner, and by an individual agreeable to him.¹¹ Educators ignorant of the rules of this game, or unaware of the power individuals, will surely be bypassed when decisions are made within the political domain.

Implementation

Translating general suggestions into productive, specific action is seldom easy, although highly important. It does require much cooperation among the groups. Resources, talent, manpower, knowledge must be pooled in the interest of the prime objective. Identification of the holders of political power should be accomplished as early as possible so that acceptable ways of approach can be devised. Often an intermediary—relative, business associate, or friend—can be identified to approach the power figure. Also, careful consideration must be given

¹¹ Ronald C. Powers. "Identifying the Community Power Structure." North Central Regional Extension Publication No. 19. NCRS-5 Leadership Series No. 2. Ames: Iowa State University Cooperative Extension Service, November 1965.

⁹ "We Deliver the Votes." *Phi Delta Kappan* 51 (10): 549; June 1970.

¹⁰ Hunter, *op. cit.*

issues receiving top priority. Attempting to influence everything quickly will become self-defeating.

While this behind-the-scenes action is proceeding quietly, a serious effort should be made to develop the largest solidary group possible which could create a "Mass-Based Organization" throughout the entire geographic territory in question. Working closely together, administrators and teachers will find it possible to enlist others sympathetic to the cause. Better use of professional organization power should be a high priority. Minority pressure groups with compatible goals that have likewise evidenced interest in the political domain would be a fertile source of aid. Representatives of industry, always interested in maintaining at least a semblance of quality education, could be strong allies. Organized groups might be easier to enlist; individual participation, however, should be actively solicited.

Such mass action is expensive, and in some manner large sums of money must be diverted to this endeavor. Serious efforts should constantly be given to "tell the story" at the local level in such a fashion that the impact will be felt throughout the political domain. Cleared communication lines between educators and the public will help. The strengthening of communications between both educators and the public and the leaders of the political domain is a necessity. Certainly a close working relationship should be developed and maintained with locally elected state legislators. The establishment of an active lobby near the state capital has been an effective vehicle used by others and could prove so for educators. The tactical use of force as an eventual alternative (strike, sanction, or whatever) will continue, but only as a "last resort."

The supervisor is the logical person, capable of marshaling the various educational forces for such mass action. Operating in a democratic fashion, and employing the concept of participative management,¹² he will have established a special rapport with teachers which never can be achieved by the line administrator. He, therefore, will have gained the confidence of the teacher groups and will have reached the level of high trust advocated by Gibb.¹³ Inasmuch as he also must work with the administrators, he has developed certain relationships that teachers cannot achieve. Hence, the supervisor can become the catalyst as well as the cement needed to make possible a concerted mass action.

Unfortunately, few educators are qualified to function in the political domain. Therefore, it is likely that special consultants or new positions will be needed to provide the technical expertise necessary for such activity.

The two basic approaches should prove to be mutually reinforcing and, taken together, could greatly assist the professional educators in attempting to enlarge their power domain. Those who choose to ignore the potential of political power will continue to decry the fact that the local tax election again has failed to carry and will continue to speculate over the deteriorating perception of education throughout the community. □

¹² Joel M. Rosenfeld and Matthew J. Smith. "Participative Management: An Overview." *Personnel Journal* 46 (2): 101-104; February 1967. Also see: Jack R. Gibb. "Fear and Facade, Defensive Management." In: Richard Farson. *Science and Human Affairs*. Palo Alto: Science and Behavior Books, Inc., 1965. pp. 197-214.

¹³ Jack R. Gibb. "Dynamics of Leadership, Defensive and Emergent." *Vital Speeches of the Day* 33 (12): 375-80; April 1, 1967.



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