

# Goals Conference: Dialogue and Direction

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**A**N EXPLOSIVE growth pattern in a small suburban school district produces many opportunities and challenges in building a solid school system. For the past several years the Las Virgenes Unified School District has grown approximately 25 percent annually. Associated with this rate of growth, the system has experienced all of the related staffing, construction, curriculum development, and transportation problems of an 85 square mile area adjoining Los Angeles. The overwhelming success of school tax and bond elections during the past five years is an indicator of good communication with new residents and all citizens. Parents who are attracted to the oak-covered rolling hills of the area have a high regard for education and typically have sought involvement in the school district's development.

To provide meaningful involvement with the school district, local citizens have a number of channels open for dialogue. These include: sizable audiences at school board meetings, active Parent-Faculty clubs at each school, monthly Superintendent's Discussion Council with parents, a quarterly district newspaper, and weekly press coverage. In addition, the local teachers association is vitally involved in planning and giving direction to many aspects of school and community relations.

For the past two years, district-wide Goals Conferences have been held in the Las Virgenes Unified School District. The conferences grew out of an awareness of the staff and school board regarding the positive potentials of such efforts. The results have been rewarding in a number of specific ways.

Planning for the conferences began at a regular public school board meeting. The board suggested that a planning committee be formed which would: (a) outline the general purposes of the conference, and (b) suggest an organizational plan. Members of this committee were selected from the Parent-Faculty clubs, the local Chambers of Commerce, the Faculty Association, the Homeowners Federation, the School Board, and the School Administration.

## Meaningful Dialogue

Each year the planning committees met two months before the conference to develop a plan and formulate the main objectives of the conference. The primary purpose of the Goals Conference was "to involve school

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board members, teachers, administrators, and the community in a meaningful dialogue regarding all aspects of the school district."

Some changes in conference format took place between the first and the second conferences. Opening speeches and closing summaries were deleted the second year because written position papers were distributed prior to the conference and a printed summary was distributed after the conference. The second conference focused on fewer topics in an effort to provide more depth to the discussions. Chairmen were carefully selected from the community and were known for their ability to lead and not dominate a discussion. A staff resource person was assigned to each section to make a 20-minute factual presentation. In addition, each section recorder prepared written minutes.

Minutes of the planning committee meeting were sent to all school principals, Parent-Faculty club presidents, and interested persons in the district. Suggestions for the conference were requested, and as the plans developed, each group was posted on the developments.

Numerous logistical tasks had to be performed immediately after the planning session. Writers of the various position papers, which were to be a part of the conference data, were selected. Principals and staff specialists prepared the one-page papers on these topics for the first conference: High School Curriculum, Middle School Curriculum, Elementary School Curriculum, Fine Arts Curriculum (Art, Music, and Drama), Athletics, Exceptional Children, Leadership, Extracurricular Activities, School Facilities, District Financing, Special Services, Innovation and Change, Methodology, Communication with the Community, Reporting to Parents, District Testing Program, Staffing, Summer School, Homework Policy, and Discipline and Student Control.

Second-year papers and discussion topics were: Special Programs, Research and Accountability, Trends, Present Program, Extracurricular/Cocurricular, School/Parent Communications, District/Community Communications, Building Schools, Financing Schools, Grouping Pupils for Learning, Adult

Groups Working with Pupils, and Variable Schedules. The position papers were completed in time for printing and distribution prior to the conferences.

An attractive Goals Conference announcement brochure was printed, and each pupil in the district took a copy home. The brochures carried the following welcome message as well as a registration form to be returned to school.

Dear Parents and All Residents:

The Second Annual Goals Conference is being held on Saturday, May 9, at the Lindero Canyon—Yerba Buena School complex. This day is important to every person in the entire area because it is our invitation for you to communicate with us on important matters regarding your schools. It is a day we plan to listen to your suggestions and reactions to the present program. It will be a day in which we focus on the welfare of our children and the quality of their education.

May I urge you to reserve the day, or any part of the day, to be with us. Please fill out the registration form below to help in our luncheon plans. You will enjoy the noon concert.

Sincerely yours,  
KEN H. OSBORN, *Superintendent*

A student-teacher art project created a dramatic silk screen poster heralding the conference. A local merchant paid for the materials for the 100 posters which were placed throughout the district. The poster design became the conference symbol for all printed reports and brochures.



Symbol for Goals Conference



Each conference was held on a Saturday beginning at 9 a.m. Superintendent Ken H. Osborn and Board President Stephen Herthel opened the day with short welcoming speeches which restated the conference purposes and objectives. These speeches and announcements were limited to a total of 20 minutes, after which the conferees went to discussion groups. At the first-year conference, each person could attend four subgroup discussions on topics of his interest. The second year, several major sections were held on curriculum, communication, financing, facilities, and innovation. The rest of the day subgroups delved deeper into sub-topics related to these major areas.

Each discussion group was led by a community chairman with a staff resource person and a recorder present. The chairmen met in a pre-conference session to review their roles of staying on the assigned topic and keeping the discussion moving among all persons. Chairmen were encouraged to set a positive tone by attempting to keep the agenda open for even the most severe criticisms that might arise, yet try to state any recommendations to the school system in terms of goals to be achieved. Staff members were requested not to assume a defensive posture during the discussions. Every effort was made to create an atmosphere in which all parties would feel "safe" to communicate about any phase of school operation.

The results of the conferences can best be stated by some examples of goals that were proposed. Of the 150 goals stated during the two conferences, here are some examples:

- To establish and identify the curricular priorities for both the community and the students
- To expand the high school honors program wherever possible
- To plan strategies for including more fathers in all school activities

- To provide in-service training for parents regarding new mathematics and methods of helping their pupils at home

- To ensure that pupils are challenged fully in a continuing curriculum at the ninth grade level which builds on the eighth grade program

- To initiate the transitional first grade to assist pupils who are not ready for the regular first grade

- To make certain that pupils acquire study skills within the regular school curriculum in order that homework may be achieved with a degree of independence

- To provide remedial learning opportunities for pupils in need of skills in background development

- To improve communication with the community regarding the purposes and opportunities provided for pupils in the summer school program

- To continue building and designing schools that are in pace with the educational demands of 1970 and the years to come

- To develop the most responsible system of reporting to parents, whether it be report cards, teacher conferences, or some other plan

- To define clearly the problems and aspirations of parent volunteers in each of the schools.

As the community members look back on the accomplishments of the two conferences, they have reason to be pleased with the results. The district staff also believes that there is reason to be pleased with the results. Many of the goals have been achieved, others are being worked on, and some are not achievable at this time. A third annual Goals Conference is being planned for the spring of 1971. Suggestions are that the conference be held on a day other than Saturday and that an evening dinner be a part of the plan.

There is real evidence that these conferences have established broader understandings of the school programs. They have provided excellent channels for communication. The direct positive outgrowths of the conferences have proven worthy of all the efforts involved. □

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