

An Institutionalized "Sense of Community"

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FOR ten or more years prior to the spring of 1968, Staples High School was generally viewed by members of its community as a highly successful educational institution. A high percentage of students went on to college, college board scores averaged well above the national mean, the pupil-teacher ratio was quite acceptable, and the breadth of courses offered suggested a comprehensive program. In addition, students and staff were allotted a voice in at least some decisions concerning their life in the school. The school could comfortably pass the "check list" test of Conant's *The American High School*.

In the spring of 1968, however, a philosophical fissure was becoming more and more apparent. The traditional administrative structure, student government, rules on student dress, and the general areas in which students and teachers were invited to participate by the chief school administrator became points of growing concern. This was also the peak period of restlessness on college campuses and urban "long hot summers."

Student Rights

Students were claiming that how they dressed was their own business, actually their right. Students were also complaining that teachers should let them know in detail the means by which they were to be graded. In

addition, they were increasingly dissatisfied with the lack of voice and the allotted budget of power that they had in the operation of the school. The Staples Student Organization (SSO), our equivalent of a student council, was more and more identified by students and some staff members as sandbox government with no real relevance or power. Relevancy became a rallying call on this campus as it did in many others across this country.

Simply saying to a student that he was not properly dressed, his hair was too long, he should not talk to teachers that way, he failed because the teacher said so, or he was suspended because the administrator dictated, was no longer sufficient. The ever-present question of "why" was put forward. If the answer did not suffice, an appeal was assured. "I have a right to . . ." or "you do not have the right to . . ." became standard jargon for students. As court interpretations were rendered on cases carried that far, the violation of student rights became more and more a prime consideration in teacher-student and administrator-student relationships.

The problem that our school administration sensed was that of continually being on the defensive or re-acting rather than providing a constructive leadership in dealing

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with such things as student rights, relevancy, real student involvement. In order to attempt to solve the problem, several joint meetings of student and faculty leaders (the dissidents as well as the "in" crowd) and the administrators were held to assess what was happening at Staples that was educationally undesirable and to explore what might be done to remedy the problems.

The students made it clear from the outset that they felt they were treated as something less than emerging adults. Teachers could wear beards but the students could not. "Free" periods were not really free but were actually school-day detentions. Student government was restricted to holding dances and concerts, and jurisdiction over not walking on the grass. In nearly all claims, staff members tended to agree with the student complaints. As a matter of fact, staff members voiced some similar complaints about their own position in the school community. (In 1960, a group of staff members formed a Teachers' Interest Committee—T.I.C.—because they felt that the teacher's best interest was not always considered when administrative decisions were made.) Perhaps the greatest single benefit of these initial exploratory sessions, some of them full school days at a time, was that various elements of the school community began to talk and listen to one another.

A New Administrative Structure

From that spring until January 1970, a hard core of devoted people sought direction that would provide for better guarantees of student rights, representation, relevancy. Staff members in the group explored with equal fervor guarantees for staff rights, representation, and relevancy in connection with school decisions and policies. (Whereas faculty members expressed concern about violations of teacher rights in 1960, through T.I.C., they sought to promote greater involvement of both staff and student in 1970.) The group, student and staff, was definitely out of the sandbox. The topics of *decision making* and *power* became more and more the focal points. One sure way to have power,

to be involved in relevant decision making, was to be a part of the administrative structure.

The "Future Directions Committee," as the study group was labeled, recommended to the school administration that the existing structure of student government, faculty (really the principal's) meetings, and advisory council of department chairmen be eliminated. In their place, a tripartite representative body made up of students, teachers, and administrators was recommended. This was *not* to be an advisory board; it was to be a *governing* board. According to its constitution, "All powers regarding Staples High School not assumed by the above groups (Administrative Council, Board of Education, state and federal laws) shall be vested in the Staples Governing Board, as well as such powers as may be delegated to it." The group was indeed to have power. For example, the SGB structure and procedures stipulate involvement in such things as: *what* is taught, *how* it is taught, *grades*, *examinations*, *scheduling*, *athletics*, *fund raising*, and *general grievances*.

The makeup of the Staples Governing Board (SGB) was as follows: 10 students—4 seniors, 3 juniors, and 3 sophomores; and 10 staff members—7 teachers and 3 administrators. Each group was elected by its respective constituency (in a manner decided upon by *that* constituency).

To add to the stature of the SGB, the principal dissolved his administrative advisory council. In addition, the Teachers' Interest Committee assumed authority for calling faculty (not the principal's) meetings. Finally, the three constituencies, students, faculty, and administrators, held referenda and formally adopted the SGB.

The SGB was formally approved by the Board of Education in January 1970. Its approval had been recommended by the building principal and supported by the Administrative Council made up of other town principals, townwide subject directors, and members of the superintendent's staff.

Most people in this country, and specifically those of us associated with formal education, will not soon forget the spring of

1970. Kent State, Jackson State, and many other campuses were extremely active during that time. Nevertheless, something educationally positive happened at Staples High School during that period. The SGB provided one small visible example of the value of open communication among the various elements of the Staples community. Though not established simply to provide a forum for airing grievances, the SGB nevertheless set a tone of reasonableness that helped us through a trying spring on campus.

A Broadening Base of Power

Students talked to teachers, teachers to administrators, administrators to students. More important than the talking, however, was the listening. People in diverse elements of the school community heard one another more than they ever had in the past. The "hair bill" and the "pass—no record bill" came to serve as focal points for a genuine test of the power possessed and the procedures followed by the SGB.

The "hair bill" was an attempt to modify hair length restrictions that were being imposed on athletes by an athletic code, though there were no restrictions for the school at large. After considerable emotion, a bill prohibiting such restrictions on any student was passed. The principal chose to veto the bill for a number of complex reasons, but the veto was upheld by the SGB.

Something happened during airing of the "hair bill," however, that was far more significant than the text of the bill. Student rights were discussed in depth. The value of extracurricular sports was challenged. The power of coaches, teachers, and administrators was reviewed. While these areas of potential conflict were before the school, pro and con elements arose among each of the three constituencies. People were assuming positions on the basis of the issue at hand, however, not just because they were students or teachers or coaches or administrators. Trust in the intent and integrity of the "other" guy seemed to grow. Differences became more issue oriented as opposed to group or class centered.

As the SGB moved into the area of student evaluation and curriculum, the "pass—no record bill" brought about similar experiences. "Pass—no record" simply called for either a mark of P (pass) for successful completion of a maximum of one course per year, or no record at all of involvement with the subject. Passage of this bill, in turn, led to an in-depth study of the entire student evaluation system. The study is still under way. (Quick to follow was a bill calling for teacher evaluation by students.)

Though the SGB is no longer a baby, it is still not fully matured. That is perhaps one of the most exciting aspects of its development. Like adolescents, it is groping, growing, given to occasional emotion, but refreshing and anxious to challenge what is simply because it has *always* been.

Trust Develops

Some of the negative attitudes that existed in the tone of the school prior to the inception of the SGB were beginning to pervade the actual educational process. The school was becoming a "they and us" dichotomy. Rights of students were in fact being denied. Some students were being failed because they had long hair, kept out of school because they aggressively challenged rules. Worst of all, though, they were being denied the right of thinking and feeling positively or at least neutrally about school related issues. If the SGB were to disappear tomorrow, the genuine feelings of trust that have developed within the school community, as a direct result of new relationships that came about through the SGB concept of shared power and protection of rights, would surely remain for some time to come.

Issues must be meaningful. The total constituency must be enfranchised either directly or by peer representation. Perhaps most significant of all, the possessor of power must truly believe that sharing, trust, and change are desirable. Power sharing makes for a difficult way to run a school. Communication can break down. Things happen that can be interpreted as being either vindictive or just plain incompetent. If trust in

the good intentions of the respective elements of the school community exists, however, those human failings can be weathered.

The SGB was not originated as a strategy. It was created in response to the felt needs of various elements of the Staples community. There is a feeling within the school that the SGB has institutionalized a sense of community. This happened, however, as much through evolution as through a clear-cut, focused plan. A strategy that might be suggested is perhaps overly simplistic. Listen! Sense! Seriously entertain consideration for change even though such change may break old patterns.

Involve the Entire Community

One caution might be suggested from our experience. In considering community, little or no attempt was made to involve the parent-taxpayer element. As a result, the feelings of trust and good faith that came about within the school did not extend into that element of the larger community. As a matter of fact, overt opposition and hostility were aimed at the total SGB concept as being permissive, promoting a lack of discipline and an insufficiency of administrative leadership.

We are not sure that we have overcome those negative feelings yet. However, the SGB open meetings, willingness to share, and proven record of careful deliberation of issues have at least begun to reduce the concerns of the opposition.

If schools can facilitate the learning of trust by shared power and shared decision making that involve—directly or through real representation—the entire school community, they may, in fact, be a much needed prototype for the community at large. At Staples High School, we feel that the SGB has given us the sense of community that is needed to achieve such a goal.

Note: In keeping with the concept and tone of the SGB, this article was completed through the shared efforts of students, staff, and administrators of the Staples community. □

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