

Community Participation:

ONE of the major themes to emerge from the educational activities of the 1960's is "community participation" or "community involvement." The term "community" is often used but seldom defined, and with some justification. When we speak of community involvement, what do we mean by "community"? There are various ways to think about the concept of community. We tend to perceive of, say, a Harlem as a well-established Black community. Yet Harlem has many different neighborhoods, each of which can be thought of as a community. Further, we also use the term in a collective sense when we say, "the business community" or "the academic community," "the Italian community," etc.

Some city planners use the criterion "a sense of community" in ascertaining various district lines (for example, planning districts). What constitutes "a sense of community," however, is an elusive matter which survey techniques may not be able to detect sensitively.

Another handle may be to view those who use an institution in common as a community. For example, those who belong to a particular church or synagogue could be identified as "the community"; similarly, those who use a particular public school, or those who live in its immediate environs. However, this approach is also tricky. There are those who live in a neighborhood school

district, for instance, who do not use the school, say, as a parent would, but who do pay school taxes.

The anthropological notion that a community is a body of individuals held together by some common bond is, of course, useful. It helps explain the Catholic community, the Jewish community, the Mexican American community. It also helps give us a sense of the growing cohesion among groups that have a special alliance based on their common sense of powerlessness. Many Blacks refer to other Blacks as "brother," connoting a special closeness to other Blacks who share a certain sense of struggle against an alien white-dominated society. The terms "brother" and "sister" are also used in the so-called "youth movement"—again, to signal a closeness resulting from a common sense of detachment from their intolerant, but potent, elders. The list can go on and on—soldiers refer to each other as "buddy," sailors as "mate."

The idea of community is mercurial, but we all somehow get a basic flavor of understanding when we say, "community groups protested the construction of a high rise apartment" or "the community's welfare must come first," or "we have community support for the bond issue."

So will it be in this paper on community involvement, but with one important difference. Community refers to a *group* of some

Many Faces, Many Directions



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kind. Usually, it means those who speak for the larger community. It will be our point that community participation has many faces, but is moving increasingly away from a group notion toward the individual participant, that is, each and every parent and student as educational consumers. While we still use the term loosely to mean citizen participation, we will be giving the individual parent the leading role as the key figure in the school community. Since our frame of reference is education and the schools, it is both appropriate and necessary to emphasize the role of the individual parent in the community context. As we shall explain later, it is the parent who has an intrinsic tie with the student and his welfare. The parent has certain rights which need to be preserved. Since community involvement is also a political activity, emphasizing the individual parental role also serves as a safeguard against using the schools as a tool for more politically motivated ends or for a group making decisions *for* others.

Further, we also emphasize the individual student as a key school community figure. Not only is the student a community resident, but he is the central figure in the institution we call the school. Student involvement in school affairs, we suggest, will reach considerably beyond involvement in the usual student activities (for example, student government). We see the student as a legiti-

mate party in the government of his educational future with basic rights that need to be protected.

Together, parents and students form the major participants in our sense of the school community.

We also give full play to the *individual teacher* in the concept of community. The teacher is a central party in the school community. The teacher, including other educational personnel, will also be involved in renewing our schools. In order to develop a new concept of community schools, we suggest to the professional that he form a new partnership with parents and students.

These publics—parents, students, teachers, and administrators—for our purposes make up “the community,” that is, the school community. Yet, as we have suggested, there are many faces to community participation.

The new emphasis on community involvement increased, with the entry of the federal government into the realm of improving educational opportunity for the poor. Federal education programs emphasize community participation. The poverty programs were designed to permit “maximum feasible participation.” Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, which is aimed at the so-called disadvantaged school

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population, encourages community participation. Head Start, the popular early childhood program, is noted for its emphasis on community involvement.

Yet the use of the term "community participation" varies. When a superintendent of schools boasts of an active school volunteer program, he usually labels this a program of community participation. When a school district hires paraprofessionals, it also views this as community involvement in the schools. When a principal points proudly to a concentrated program in which parents help children with homework, he classifies this as broadened community participation. When a school staff attracts 500 people at a PTA meeting, the occasion is used as an indicator of active community participation. In the fall of 1966, when a group of Black Harlem parents boycotted the opening of the new segregated Intermediate School 201, it was viewed as an active expression of community participation. Similarly, when New York City and Detroit decentralized their schools, they did so to foster increased community involvement.

Community involvement has a longer history than the 1960's. We all remember the post-Sputnik furor over "the low quality of education" in the schools, which many citizens felt was responsible for the Russian lead in space exploration. This furor over the quality of the schools was seen as increased community involvement in education.

Moreover, we can go back to the classical Pasadena story of the late 1940's and early 1950's to learn how a community becomes active when the schools implement programs that are not supported by the majority in the community. Certainly this California case demonstrated increased community participation.

Today, taxpayers, overburdened by the rising educational costs and their dependency on local property taxes, are participating in defeats of school budgets. This is another example of community participation. We are also in a consumer environment today. That is to say, increased consumer awareness is spreading to the school, as well. Many parents and students, as educational consumers, are expressing their dissatisfaction with standard school programs. In our urban centers, the expression of concern for the poor quality of education has forced the educational consumer to rebel and to call for an increased voice in the running of schools.

In other areas, educational consumers are "turned off" by the dehumanizing effect of their formal education. These consumers are seeking alternatives to the public schools. These are also indications of community participation.

Further, the current call for *accountability*, having been triggered by rising costs and dissatisfaction, is serving as another stimulant to community participation.

There are, indeed, many faces to community participation. While there appears to be a general shift in community participation from a school-dominated activity to one controlled by the educational consumer, we nevertheless have a range of efforts under the rubric "community participation." It may be useful to categorize these efforts so that we may have a clearer notion of the kind of community participation being advanced at any given time, in any given situation.

Participation for Public Relations

Under this framework, schools view parents and other community people as "clients." They view participation in school

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affairs as a privilege, not a right. Consequently, the schools, to keep a favorable image *vis-à-vis* their clients, mount a program of controlled information. The school may have a PTA which is asked to plan social activities. The role of the parent is kept "light." They may plan a "teachers' day" or have the school directly invite parents to scheduled "education week." There may be talent shows or meet-the-staff night, etc.

The superintendent and other administrators are called upon to participate in various civic meetings to "inform" the community on the state of education in their schools and to *interpret* the school to the community. Often there is a school paper which reaches the community and describes, mainly in positive terms, the programs of the school.

Parents are invited to school usually for regularly scheduled events, or if for any reason the child may be having difficulty.

The natural intent of PR is to control the communication in such a way that the best is emphasized. It is also a natural part of PR to encourage participation of the client, but in ways that are acceptable to the school.

Under a successful school PR program, the parent is made to feel that the school has things under control, that the parent can feel confident that the child is in good hands. If parents and other community residents feel confident, there is usually little reason for any other kind of participation. "After all, we pay the professionals to do their job, and if they do well, fine."

PR programs help pass school budgets, bond issues, etc. When school budgets and bond issues are defeated, then the PR approach is either restructured or other forms of participation may be considered.

Participation for Instructional Support

Another form of community participation involves parents, other community residents, and agencies in the direct affairs of the school through such efforts as school volunteers, paraprofessionals, and business, industrial, cultural, or civic programs.

These participation efforts seek to increase the base of talent within the school

by tapping community resources. Women's groups have volunteered their services on a regular basis for such roles as hall monitors, reading tutors, clerical aides, library assistants, lunchroom assistants, and dramatics club assistants.

These programs help cement the school to certain key elements in the community. Many school volunteers are wives of prominent community leaders, and this is seen as having important PR value.

In certain urban centers, so-called paraprofessional programs have been launched. Under these "new career"¹ efforts, community residents, usually economically disadvantaged, are "trained" to assume roles in school as paid teacher aides or teacher assistants. Paraprofessionals assume such duties as supervision of lunchtime and recess activities, operating audio-visual equipment, assisting children with homework, tutoring in specified skill areas, assuming the teacher's clerical functions, preparing materials used in teaching and demonstrations, correcting homework, assisting students at home in subjects requiring special competency, for example, mathematics, history, biology, and working with small groups in special technical areas, for example, plastics, electronics, and design.

Paraprofessional programs help residents earn a living and learn something about their schools, as well. They become important links to the community and are able to reach parents and students who otherwise may not be contacted.

Today, community resources are expanding for the school. For some years, individuals from business and industry, for instance, have come to school as occasional "visiting teachers." In some schools of late much of the education takes place outside the four walls of the classroom and in the community itself. Schools without walls (for example, Philadelphia, Chicago, Berkeley, Hartford) have students use the resources of the community—hospitals, museums, cultural centers, scientific institutions, publish-

¹ Suggested by: Arthur Pearl and Frank Riessman. *New Careers for the Poor*. New York: The Free Press, 1965.

ing firms, insurance firms—as “classrooms” and extend community involvement even further.

Participation for Community Service

Another pattern for increasing community involvement in the school is to develop “community schools.” In the simplest form, community schools offer the community a range of services after school, in the evenings, and on weekends.

The movement toward so-called community schools is only now beginning. Many urban school programs that began by focusing on the “disadvantaged child” have gradually expanded the normal daytime programs into the afternoon and evening; after-school programs for children now extend into evening programs for parents. Drama clubs; child care training; literacy classes; courses in basic skills and vocational skills, in parliamentary procedure; and similar projects soon take form and shape. Before long, the school may be open seven days a week from early morning to late evening, offering a variety of programs for all ages.

In Flint, Michigan, for example, each of the 54 schools in the district is a Community School and is so named. A Community School Director is assigned to each community school and is responsible for coordinating its afternoon and evening programs. A varied program of education, recreation, and cultural enrichment is scheduled. The community itself has requested such clubs as a senior citizens', bridge, women's, men's, and athletic. In addition, the Mott Foundation Program of the Flint Board of Education offers day and evening programs for parents and children from “sunrise singers” each morning and roller skating in the afternoon, to ceramics in the evening.

Community Schools serve more than a social, recreational, or strictly academic function, however. Parents can use the school to discuss and plan civic programs. Community Schools can serve as forums for solving a variety of community problems such as school integration, urban renewal, family relocation, and organization of indigent

neighborhood leadership. Daytime students could be involved in any of these evening seminars as a phase of the citizen career orientation which emphasized participatory behaviors.

In New Haven, Community Schools are defined as:

1. An educational center—as the place where children and adults have opportunities for study and learning
2. A center for community services—as the place where individuals may obtain health services, counseling services, legal aid, employment services, and the like
3. An important center of neighborhood and community life—as an institutional agency that will assist citizens in the study and solution of significant neighborhood problems.

A more detailed articulation of a community school was made by Leonard Covello, who pioneered the concept of a community-centered school in New York City with a predominantly Italian community.

Participation for Crisis Resolution

Another form of community participation occurs when the school or school system faces a major problem. We are all familiar with problems—such as “double sessions,” “racial conflicts,” “school bussing plans,” program cutbacks in interscholastic athletics, or strikes—which trigger substantial community concern. Usually, school auditoria are filled to capacity. In these cases, the participants have strong feelings about the issues. Such participation is aimed at immediate resolution of a crisis. At times, the large showing of community participants continues, often in a hectic manner, until something is done about the discontent.

Participation for Accountability and School Governance

Public education in the United States was never meant to be a professional monopoly. The concept of local, lay control of education is at the heart of the American public school system. Laymen determine the

goals of education and the policies calculated to achieve them. Laymen delegate to professionals the responsibilities for implementing these policies. Professionals participate in the development of goals and priorities, but the public's right to evaluate and to hold publicly employed professionals accountable is fundamental.

Thus, the public has a right, for example, to ask, "why can't Johnny read?" or the community has a right to participate in the process of establishing new goals for education. For example, in New Jersey a process of goal setting is being developed through a broad community participation effort called "Our Schools." In New York State communities, several school districts are participating in the "redesign" of their schools. When the educational enterprise is operating smoothly, the public (community) does not often exercise its right to an accounting. It is when the public finds itself inadequately served that the issue comes to the fore. Often the right of the consumer to an account for professional performance, while acceptable in theory, is in effect nullified by challenges to what are considered basically professional affairs. Public education is a public as well as professional business. The current educational climate is one of reform. It is a natural consequence that the public would seek its rightful role in such an important process.

Therefore, when community participation is used today, it is more likely to refer to school governance, that is, involving the community in the making of educational policies and decisions. This movement toward an increased voice for the educational consumer in the affairs of schools is an outgrowth of several current forces. As the public schools attempt to meet the challenge of universal education for a pluralistic society, it is inevitable that consumer discontent will increase. The current public schools system was never designed to educate everyone, to respond to diversity. Forged during the 19th century—an agrarian period when education was a privilege, not a right—for a few, not the many, the same public schools must now respond to space-age problems. These same public schools have tried to ac-

culturate an ethnically plural nation, compelling the consumer to adjust to the school or fail.

The monolithic uniformity of public schools was thought to guarantee equal (the same) education to everyone. However, over the years, just the opposite has resulted for many students and their families. Trying to get a pluralistic society to adjust to a uniform educational process has taken its toll: alienation, loss of cultural identity, human classification (slow, underachiever, deprived, disadvantaged, with self-fulfilling prophecies), absenteeism, rebellion.

Today the educational consumer needs quality education to survive economically and politically in an advanced technological society. As increased numbers of school users called for more quality in their education, the call became known as accountability.

The demands were first manifest in our urban centers where the school casualties are most pronounced. Realizing that the two major reform efforts of the past decade—desegregation and compensatory education—had failed, frustrated educational consumers resorted to personal involvement in changing the schools. Schools, they felt, were run by professionals. The demand for increased participation in the governance of schools became known as "community control" in some quarters. In certain big city school systems, decentralization was proposed as a pattern for increasing community involvement in their schools. New York and Detroit now have decentralized schools, that is, have reorganized a centralized school system into a federation of semi-autonomous community districts, each governed in part by a local board, representing the local community.

Different modes of connecting the community in school and educational decision making have emerged:

1. *Consultative.* With this approach, school officials make a point of conferring with various community organizations, groups, and individuals before making a decision, which remains with the professional.

2. *Advisory.* Many schools have formed community advisory councils with whom they interact on a regular basis. School officials re-

tain final decision-making functions. Certain forms of decentralization utilize this pattern.

3. *Shared.* Under this pattern, professionals and consumers have an equal voice in shaping policy. This usually includes equal representation of laymen and professionals on some governing structure. Decisions are arrived at by the consensus.

4. *Community control.* This pattern shifts the bulk of decision-making authority to the layman, for example, local governing boards, individual school trusteeships, etc.

5. *Individual or family control.* This pattern views an individual and/or the family as the ultimate selector of that type of education which suits them. This form of participation makes the family the consumer with the right to choice of schools, for example, educational vouchers.

In the last analysis, the individual citizen has the right to participate in his own way. Some may prefer to join advisory councils, others may want to work with teachers as volunteers or aides. Still others may wish to delegate most school responsibility to schoolmen. In each case, *the individual makes his own decision*, which is the key to school governance. This new form of community participation will gain momentum as educational alternatives develop, both within and outside the framework of public schools. In the coming decades, our pluralistic society will seek to demand different educational means to common educational ends. During this process, the right of the individual student, parent, teacher, and administrator to choose from among legitimate educational options (probably inside public schools) will lead to a new individual expression in democratic community participation.

Participation in a representative form limits the citizen's role to voting for someone to make wise decisions for him. Once the citizen votes, his participatory role is largely over. In a pluralistic society, it is often difficult for a representative governmental system to be equitable. Further, it is also difficult for a small elected, representative group to provide for the individual needs of each and every citizen. Even in community-controlled

school situations in which local residents elect a governing board, this inability to serve each and every citizen remains.

The most advanced stage of participation in education, therefore, is one in which every citizen participates directly in making decisions concerning his education. This applies especially when public schools reach a stage in which large portions of the citizenry (parents, students) call for reform.

During such periods (we are in one at the present time), it seems necessary to provide the citizen with various forms of participation, including decentralization, community control, and individual decision making. The last—individual or family decision making—is preferable, for it provides each person with a direct role in the educational decisions most central to him.

Thus far, we have begun to provide for citizen participation in public schools (especially those most urban) through such efforts as advisory councils, decentralization, and community control. We need to continue these efforts and to expand participation to public schools of choice in which each and every citizen decides the type of education most suitable for him. This means setting up a plan in which each student, parent, teacher, or administrator makes a decision from among a wide range of options; that is to say, having alternative forms of education available *within* the framework of public schools and providing each teacher, student, and parent with the right to choose from among them.² Alternative forms of education can exist within a single school, for example, schools within schools (open, standard, Montessori), or as separate schools reflecting a distinctive mode of education, for example, prep, school without walls, or multi-culture, so long as exclusivity is not practiced.

Indeed, community participation has many faces, and the current concern for school reform will emphasize all of them. □

² A full length book by Mario D. Fantini titled *Public Schools of Choice* will be published by Simon and Schuster in late 1972 or early 1973. Also see: Mario D. Fantini. "Public Schools of Choice and the Plurality of Publics." *Educational Leadership* 28 (6): 585-91; March 1971.

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