Community University: Public Schools' Ombudsman?

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The cloistered college appears to be no longer relevant. Certainly it has been rudely shaken and closely examined in recent years. On the scene today are universities that seek to serve rather than be served, relate to the community rather than expect the community to relate to them, and insert their influence into the commuting communities where higher education can be regarded in dollars and cents terms rather than in theories and philosophies.

In the past several years, Ohio has constructed state institutions which have been given the job of existing for the benefit of those citizens in the area in which they are located. Typical of this "new breed" of universities is Wright State University in Dayton, Ohio.

Throughout the past four years a "rurban" local school district and a new state university in west-central Ohio have developed a most unique relationship. The nature of this relationship has evolved and continues to "grow" in many ways, all of which focus on education renewal for both!

A school system that feels it exists to serve its public has a philosophy similar to that of the relevant university. A university and a public school system with such compatible points of view could not avoid working together in harmony in the development of an educational renewal effort and the subsequent development of the ombudistic relationship described in this article.

If an ombudsman serves a role as one who is jointly selected by two groups to serve as a mediator, facilitator, and sounding board for both parties, then Wright State University (WSU) became one unintentionally. At no time was this role the objective as we first talked with Northeastern (NE) representatives. It is not the goal now, but we do seem to fit the role.

New Approaches, New Roles

The administration of the Northeastern Consolidated School District in Clark County, Ohio, felt that one way to secure a more effective relationship with the teachers in the system was to involve them in their own educational renewal program.

Having been approached by the NE staff and administration who were seeking outside

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help for their district, WSU responded by refusing any package proposal of courses, speakers, etc. With the usual eliminated, the scene was literally pregnant with possibilities for a new, constructive, and flexible relationship to emerge.

Brainstorming, oft lauded in the literature but seldom practiced, became a commonplace activity with both WSU and NE personnel involved. Teachers, deans, professors, and administrators talked endlessly about educational renewal and the two institutions. Out of these sessions emerged a proposal that involved new approaches and roles for all parties.

The traditional in-service activities of NE (special days, early dismissals, etc.) were largely discontinued. Renewal by requirement was out; it had never really been in if "in" and "success" are synonymous.

The university provided flexible policies which would allow participants in the upcoming project admission to graduate standing, undergraduate status for nondegree persons, and a continuing education status for the few non-high school graduates involved. All were able to receive college credits (three quarter hours per quarter) for their work on a pass/unsatisfactory basis.

The participants who gathered together in the fall of 1968 included citizens, parents, faculty, and administrators of NE and a number from neighboring districts as well. These 70 people wrote their own curriculum, which was an examination of modern trends in education. WSU then arranged the "course" specifics, such as materials, resources, and speakers. The sessions were held in the NE high school building, rather than on the campus some 30 miles away.

Using multimedia extensively; using numerous speakers from many places, including several by teleteach from Nebraska, Pennsylvania, and Massachusetts; using a variety of reading materials; and using an informal, coffee-available format, the participants skimmed through the fall quarter and were ready to brave the winter roads of Ohio for the next quarter.

The project and the enthusiasm it engendered seemed to achieve results. Perhaps it served as a catalytic agent of renewal as teachers and administrators went back to their buildings and began to try new ideas and procedures.

The third quarter was the climax, with action the key word. It was composed of individualized lesson preparations, or "contracts," which set forth an agreement between the signer (or signers) of the contract and Wright State University, to the effect that if the signer(s) would meet in a designated place on a regular basis and work toward the completion of a program that could be put into use the following year, WSU would award three hours credit. The contract called for an identification of the group by name, a list of member(s), a statement of purpose, some general objectives and then some specific ones, and finally some hoped-for outcomes. No mention was made of attendance, finals, or grades.

The third quarter was action, but it was much more. With WSU being the agent, perhaps ombudsman, individuals, programs, and procedures were renewed. The university was developing a partnership, a district with which we would work and which we could use for our own research and programs. Additional "courses" created to meet the expressed needs/desires of the NE participants were held during 1969-70.

Such needs as media instruction and production, reading in all levels and subjects, and administrative teaming received attention.

**Renewal Programs**

NE administrators Charles Stephens and Carl Frazier summarized their reactions as follows:

"What were some of our perceptions of this different kind of renewal program as we saw it unfold? What is our evaluation of it now that we can look back over several years to see it in its entirety? We feel it has been not only developing but continuous as well; relevant to our needs as administrators and to the teachers. In addition, the programs appear to have been enjoyable, pleasant, and individualistic."
"The students provide the continuity as well as the enthusiasm needed to keep the program alive and vital. Instead of a set syllabus of events to provide continuity, the expansion of the horizons of the students and the development of their programs made each class a step toward further possible development. It might be comparable to the motivation to climb a higher hill—always with the possibility of viewing a more magnificent scene, rather than merely getting to the other side.

"Our deepest satisfaction came from another aspect of the program—that of the relevancy to our needs and desires. Primarily, a district worth its salt is concerned with a constant renewal of its materials, staff, and philosophical orientation. The renewal program, in addition to filling a need for the district, was also relevant to the teachers in it, since by nature it was a program based on the perceived needs of the teachers themselves and growing as the teachers themselves developed within it. This point indicates that it was a highly individualistic program as well."

Probably the individual nature of the course accounted for the staff's deepest satisfaction with the program. Due to the contractual nature of the first year's third quarter, groups of individuals interested in particular directions and goals organized themselves toward these ends and, as the year developed, concentrated in program development that would enable them to utilize those programs as teams or individuals for the next year. Many of these groups or persons continued the following year, developing their programs and trying them out in actual classrooms.

The brainstorming continues, and new ways to extend the mutually beneficial relationship are constantly being sought. Where will it lead or end? If the answer were known at this time, the role would no longer be viable and worth continuing. It is the mutual respect and willingness to listen, to dream, and to change that keep both educational institutions involved.

Some of our insights gained from this ombudistic association are:

1. The logical progression from survey of field to preparation of relevant program makes sense—and the implementation of the program is a logical sequence. What else is educational renewal? During the past year this concept was found to be equally as applicable to administration as to staff.

2. Staff members apparently are as interested in educational renewal as are administrators. If the program can be initiated from a mutual concern and if equal decision-making responsibilities are shared, the traditional threat and administrative "organizing" do not provide a base upon which teachers reluctantly subscribe to the superior's idea of needs. The responsibility for a program emanates to a considerable extent from the participation in the planning of it. Those interested in educational renewal must be both power and peer—and for the same reasons.

3. Nonthreat renewal motivates better than required in-service courses. This is merely what both perceptive administrators and most teachers have known for a long time.

4. The renewal of education in a community is the responsibility of the community university as well as the public schools. It may be as difficult for the professor to be a neutral party as it is for the teacher or the superintendent.

Educational renewal should be a personal goal on the part of all concerned. If the ombudistic air is to exist, no participating agency should exert undue influence on the other in an authoritarian manner. It should not be too much of a heresy to indicate that a university professor could learn by becoming involved in a public school classroom.

5. The ombudsman is not necessarily a person; it can be a situation. The condition of ombudsmanship can be created by mutual agreement between participating parties much as he is elected by participating electorates. Although the person or office of the ombudsman has been identified in related literature, this experience tends to indicate that it can become a mutual agreement between participating agencies, which is the rationale for the role initially.

6. The condition of ombudsmanship has a relationship to educational renewal. It can be the arena of action. It is appropriate for the community university and the community school. Both must become appropriate for it.