



# Building Community Acceptance for Innovation

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**B**UILDING community acceptance for innovation has become, in recent years, the number one responsibility of a school superintendent. Today, the educator must also be equipped to provide *instant* innovation, and examining the past for guidelines has offered little in the way of direction.

Alexander Pope's *Essay On Criticism* has provided us with some guidance in the past in saying, "Be not the first by whom the new are tried, nor yet the last to lay the old aside." However, this sage principle is no longer applicable, for administrators and teachers are being compelled by social changes to see that schools adjust and adapt to far-reaching changes almost in a period of days or weeks.

As a result of these changes, we sense a yearning in the community to subscribe again to Francis Bacon's theory that "men in their innovations . . . follow the example of time itself, which indeed innovateth greatly, but quietly and by degrees to be perceived." This yearning is a reflection of the manner in which changes have been brought about in the Spartanburg City Schools to this time; it is not to be interpreted as opposition to innovation.

On the contrary, one of the hallmarks of our school system is the mutual trust between the patrons, the board of trustees, and the professional staff. This means that

all elements of the district can work in a common cause and not at cross purposes. This fact is one of the keys to the success we have experienced in building community acceptance for innovation.

A second key to our success has been the consistent involvement of all elements of the school district in varying degrees of every innovation. The comparatively small size of the district, with 13,000 students and 700 professional personnel, probably is one factor which makes total involvement possible.

## The Year-Round School

A current example of an instructional innovation is the converting of the junior and senior high schools to the year-round programs. The possible advantages of a year-round program have been discussed for a number of years, and a growing interest has been manifested. Professional personnel, parents, and students have been sent to national conferences where year-round schools were on the agendas. Reports have been made at staff meetings and meetings of the board of trustees. Since representatives of the news media always attend meetings of

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To gain community acceptance for innovations, school personnel discuss educational changes with concerned citizens of the district.

the board, the news stories of the board meetings have reflected the progress toward a year-round school program, thus keeping the public informed.

In September 1971, a Title III grant was received for a feasibility study of the year-round school. This grant was publicized through the local news media. An advisory committee, with representatives from all segments of the school and community, including members of the board of trustees, teachers, administrators, consultants, and parents, was immediately formed.

Committee members were sent to school systems where year-round programs were being conducted to gain firsthand knowledge of such programs. Reports of these visitations were shared with the total advisory committee, and during the 1971-72 year these persons shared their experiences with other groups. Also, discussions of the year-

round school were held with the PTA Council, all school PTA's, the Chamber of Commerce Board of Directors, the Junior League, almost all of the civic clubs, student council groups, the Association of Classroom Teachers, school faculties, and a number of club groups.

During the study, a series of articles was published in the local newspaper explaining a year-round school program and pointing out some of the advantages of such a program for Spartanburg. This news coverage was solicited by the director of the study, and interviews for the reporters were arranged with members of the committee.

In the early spring of 1972, the advisory committee for the feasibility study of the year-round school recommended that the Spartanburg City Schools be formally converted to a year-round school system, with the program in the junior and senior high

schools being gradually restructured and completed by August 1973.

The board of trustees accepted the recommendations, and the local newspapers and radio and television stations carried the news story. Favorable editorials were published in both newspapers. Also, there was a local one-hour, prime-time television program during which the entire spectrum of the year-round school program was discussed by the superintendent and national authorities.

When the schools opened in August 1972, the English teachers were ready with 18 new eleventh and twelfth grade courses designed for a year-round program. A feature story was run in the local newspapers describing the new courses in a highly complimentary manner. Interviews quoting the reaction of students and parents to the courses were included in the story.

## Unitary School Plan

This is only a skeleton outline of the procedures followed in gaining community acceptance for innovative programs over the past 20 years. Implementing any innovation is always a monumental task, but the "instant innovations" called for when the schools were ordered by federal officials to meet unitary school standards, and one year later were ordered to abandon neighborhood elementary schools, will always seem our greatest challenge.

During the several months that the unitary school plan was being negotiated with federal officials, tension, apprehension, and hostility developed in the community. When it was apparent that extensive changes in the racial composition at each school would be required, meetings were scheduled with parents at every school, as well as with civic groups of both races, for the purpose of explaining the situation and urging them to accept the changes which were inevitable. Public education was at the crossroads, and local support for the schools was at stake.

The reservoir of good will between the patrons, the board, and the administration was a factor which tipped the balance. The cooperation of the patrons in the implemen-

tation of the unitary school system was nothing short of remarkable, and the schools opened under the approved plan with a minimum of disruption. The news media contributed immeasurably during this period by avoiding a sensational approach in their reporting.

## Recent Innovations

The two preceding examples of the strategy used for gaining community acceptance for innovation represent the standard procedure which has proven to be successful in this community. A great many other innovations have been successfully launched, using the same general technique. A few examples are as follows:

1. The administration of the schools planned and prepared an exhibit of *Spartanburg Herald-Journal* clippings of school affairs, and first prize in the nation for outstanding news interpretation of education was awarded by the Educational Press Association. Included in the exhibit were examples of a weekly strip of pictures selected by school personnel which appeared on the front page of the *Spartanburg Journal* entitled: "Your Child in School." Each picture illustrated some innovative technique being carried out in the classroom or some innovative material being used in instruction. This weekly news strip contributed to the overall confidence of the general public in the schools.

2. In 1950, the task of developing elementary libraries was undertaken, and PTA groups began to supplement school library funds. As a result of these joint efforts, in 1963 our schools were among the finalists in the nation in the first annual Encyclopaedia Britannica Awards program, citing improvement of elementary libraries. The PTA organization is continuing to give us this same caliber of support.

3. In 1965, our schools were designated as South Carolina's "Pacemaker" in educational improvement in a nationwide school recognition project. This award was made for our leadership in improving the French language program.

4. Our program for senior high school students interested in conducting a science research project has been highly successful for students in terms of scholarships, first prizes, and breadth of scientific background, and, for



The superintendent explains to local businessmen the optional attendance plan possible with the year-round school program.

instructors, greater satisfaction in teaching and improved salary. This program has generated great pride in the community.

5. During the year that the community was in turmoil over the order to meet unitary school standards, a slide presentation of the work going on in the schools was prepared and shown to many groups. Also, during the next year, the *Handbook for Parents* was prepared which included all the school policies directly applicable to the handling of students. This included the Code of Discipline which students are required to read and sign. Both of these innovations strengthened the support needed to gain acceptance for the unitary school system.

6. Gradually, one of the lowest pupil-teacher ratios in the nation has been achieved while the assignment of only four teaching periods per day for academic junior and senior high school teachers has been maintained. The community has supported the increased costs incurred because of its confidence in the quality of the schools.

7. An outstanding vocational program has been developed in recent years in cooperation with a neighboring school district. An Appalachian grant made the new facility pos-

sible, but the community has been willing to finance the increased costs for this very expensive program. The Chamber of Commerce was very valuable in selling the need for this greatly expanded program.

8. This district was one of the first in the South to have all schools accredited, K-12. The meeting of Southern Association standards required considerably increased expenditures; but this community was eager to be one of the leaders in accreditation, and strong support was evidenced.

9. A great deal of state and national recognition has been received in the areas of art and music. The program in music has always been well staffed, but the honors won in art have enabled the administration to increase the number of art instructors.

10. All of the innovations mentioned along with many others have resulted in a very fine record of National Merit semifinalists and also Naval Reserve Officer Training Corps winners. The percentage of students winning scholarships to college and the number receiving advanced placement in college or advanced standing have also been very gratifying, and these facts contribute to the continued support in the community for innovation.

Every innovation we have introduced has not proven to be successful, and we have quickly abandoned the unsuccessful attempts to innovate and admitted the failure of the projects. This honesty has built confidence on the part of the professional staff as well as the patrons, and resistance to change has not grown into an obsession as it has in some school districts.

In conclusion, it would seem that the patrons are demanding more than ever before that their schools be responsive to the needs of every student, and this is one of the reasons they have not obstructed the instant innovations of recent years. However, at the present time the honeymoon is drawing to an end, and schools must take a stand against exploitation of children and youth. Such a stand will be a welcome innovation in many areas of the country. As has been said: "the roots of education are bitter, but the fruit is sweet," and many indices would lead us to believe that the time for the harvest is at hand. □

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