

Operation "Citizen Involvement" Spells Help for School Challenges

NOLAN ESTES

People, even in large urban systems, such as the Dallas Independent School District, support the decisions they have helped to make. This model gives much promise.

PUBLIC schools throughout the nation and particularly big city school districts today are plagued by mind-boggling problems on every hand. There is certainly no shortage of critics to point out long and loud the shortcomings of our schools.

The challenges are gargantuan in size, but I personally like a challenge. And I believe the way to change many of our severest critics into our staunchest supporters is by giving them a piece of the action and by getting them actively involved in seeking solutions and meeting the challenges.

The day is past when we can open our doors to citizens only during American Education Week and close our minds to what

they are saying about how their money is being spent and what we are doing with their children. I feel that it is imperative for us to find ways to reconnect the schools and the community.

In the Dallas Independent School District we have found some ways which are working for us, and we are committed to searching for new and better ways. Much of our effort in this direction grew out of the Board of Education's decision to set communications and community relations as one of its major priorities during the decade of the seventies.

One of the most promising projects in this respect is the Dallas Independent School District's Operation Involvement program—a continuing needs assessment, goal development, and budget setting process which involves parents, students, teachers, principals, and central staff administrators. Operation Involvement began during the 1971-72 school year as an effort to make the budget relevant to the day-to-day instructional process and needs of the school. While last

Timeline: Goal Setting in Dallas

<i>September:</i>	Assess needs
<i>October:</i>	Formulate suggestions for goal development
<i>November:</i>	Consider these inputs
<i>December:</i>	Develop goals as budget guidelines
<i>January:</i>	Assess costs for each task
<i>February:</i>	Submit budgets for each school Analyze "work-ability" of goals Discuss and clearly define each goal
<i>March:</i>	Rank goals by priorities
<i>April:</i>	Assign resources to goals with highest ranking
<i>May:</i>	Review final budget proposal
<i>June:</i>	Refine budget proposal
<i>July:</i>	Adopt budget
<i>August:</i>	Cycle begins again

year's effort was expanded and refined, the purpose has remained the same—to involve the people most directly affected by decisions in their making.

Participants Set Goals and Price Tags

This is the way it works. Representatives from each DISD school, who, hopefully, reflect their faculty's concerns; parent representatives from Parent-Teachers Associations; a student from each high school; and principals and central staff administrators meet each month in small-group sessions of not more than 18 participants for in-depth discussions and the laborious process of budget development.

That development begins in September with an assessment of needs to be considered in planning for the following school year. In preparation for the October meeting, participants consider and formulate suggestions for goal development. Each group then elects a representative to attend a November Board of Education Retreat, which hashes and rehashes input from all the groups.

In December participants are charged with the responsibility of developing goals as budget guidelines, and January finds the groups tediously placing a price tag on the tasks for each goal.

Principals submit budgets for their respective schools in early February, followed closely by group meetings to analyze the "work-ability" of the goals which have been set. The latter part of February, representatives once more meet with school trustees and managers to discuss and clearly define each goal.

At the March meeting participants are given the difficult task of assigning a priority ranking to each goal. Ratings are tabulated, and, in April, representatives assign resources to goals with the highest ranks. A third Board Retreat in mid-May gives participants the opportunity to review the final budget proposal.

The budget is usually adopted in July after the final meeting of Operation Involvement in June to hone and polish the proposed spending plan. And then in August the whole process of sharing decisions—Dallas style—begins again.

Nearly 100 revisions or additions to proposed District goals were made for the 1972-73 school year, but probably of equal

Community Involvement: Who Participates?

From the Schools

Teacher representatives of each school
Parent representatives of PTA's
Student from each high school
Principals
Central staff administrators

From the Community

Civic groups
Chamber of Commerce
Business groups
Minority persons
Other concerned citizens



Photo courtesy of the author

Involvement of community representatives in decision making fosters support for public school programs.

importance is the fact that approximately 600 citizens, students, and educators sat down together to solve problems and meet the challenges of urban education. As one participant put it, "I have developed a greater awareness and knowledge of the total District—its thrusts, programs, and problems."

This year's effort will be expanded to include representatives of business and the community at large. In addition school trustees are actively seeking reactions of civic and community groups by meeting with Dallas area chambers of commerce and other organizations.

A Model for Shared Decisions

No one in Dallas would suggest that our model for shared decision making is perfect. It is not a finished product and never will be. It will continue to change, to evolve, and, of course, hopefully to improve.

Operation Involvement is one of many ways in which Dallas citizens are being asked to help.

The membership of the District's Special Curriculum Advisory Council is being expanded this year to include parents and students as well as educators. This group serves as an open forum to focus on concerns relating to curriculum and instruction.

The Textbook Committee, which selects textbooks from a state-approved list for use in DISD schools, also has citizen-student representation.

Another exciting use of the talents and expertise of Dallasites is the Career Education Advisory Board, made up of leading businessmen and industry leaders. This group has worked relentlessly in the development of career education courses which are relevant to the real world of business and industry. While no realistic price tag could be placed on the time, materials, and talents which these experts in their fields have donated, one thing is sure. There is no public school district which could possibly foot the bill; it would be prohibitively expensive.

The Greater Dallas Chamber of Commerce has worked closely with the District

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also. A Blue Ribbon Business Team analyzed the financial and business practices of the school district and made recommendations, based on their expertise in business matters, for improving our approaches to running the big business which any large school district necessarily is. There is no doubt in my mind that this group of dedicated, civic-minded business leaders deserves much of the credit for the AAA bond rating which the Dallas Independent School District recently was awarded.

In addition, we rely on a host of ad hoc and advisory committees composed of citizens from all walks of life. For example, a committee made up of Mexican-Americans assists us in keeping a pulse on the concerns and feelings of the Chicano community.

This year the District is proposing that the Chamber of Commerce again assist us—in a public relations campaign to help increase public support for public education in Dallas.

Our experience with all of these groups has been both fascinating and fantastic. It has proven to me that people want to be involved. They want to help us. They do want good schools and they are willing to work to make them better.

Yet I do not want to be accused of painting too rosy a picture. People do want to be involved, but it is not always easy to accommodate them. You have to be willing to work at it. Successful involvement strategies take many long hours, a lot of extra sweat and, most of all, a willingness to share the decisions. The latter is the toughest for most of us. But I am convinced that people support what they have had a hand in creating. And after all, as a professor once told me in one of those educational administration courses, the schools *do* belong to the people.

If we are going to make public school education work in the seventies and eighties, we have somehow got to find a way to reconnect the people and their schools.

—NOLAN ESTES, *General Superintendent, Dallas Independent School District, Texas.*

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