

Urban Educational Problems: Whose Responsibility?

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The Detroit Education Task Force's work grew out of the concern of citizens for the rescue and improvement of the public schools in their urban community. Business and industry leaders cooperated with school people in this systemwide endeavor.

IMAGINE yourself a member of a Board of Education or the Superintendent in one of our nation's urban cities. As you independently review the school district's problems, you realize that one day their collective weight will suddenly crash upon you. The district is 74 million dollars in debt, a systemwide school shutdown is anticipated three months early, three successive millage proposals have failed, and your fourth and seventh graders are performing at the lowest percentile on the state assessment tests in reading and math. As you sort out ways to secure help, you decide to recommend the appointment of a citizens' Task Force. This body, however, will have to be different from similar groups that were previously appointed.

Detroit's School Superintendent, Charles J. Wolfe, recommended the appointment of such a Task Force, and the Central Board of Education responded to his request by appointing 57 concerned and dedicated citizens

representing a wide range of people from the community. Prominent among them were key leaders from business and industry. These leaders were asked to help the Central Board achieve the almost impossible task of resolving an embarrassing fiscal position, repairing a damaged public image, improving the quality and quantity of learning for pupils, and refining a state mandated decentralized system. It was a big order!

A "Different" Task Force

The Central Board insisted that this Task Force be different from other citizen efforts in that it would not only serve the traditional role of problem identification and possible resolution, but it would provide continued assistance in the implementation process. A decision was made early in the life of the Task Force to "work at" problems in a serial fashion. Objectives would be identified, various options would be explored, and recommendations would be advanced to the Central Board as they were completed.

This hard-working group of citizens was convinced that they could make a difference in the Detroit public schools. They would not stand by and watch the school move

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closer toward demise. Several local foundations joined the Ford Foundation in providing an adequate funding base to staff and house the Task Force citizens' operation. Luvern L. Cunningham became so committed to the prospect of this "third party" venture that he resigned a Dean's position at Ohio State University to become its Director.

The Detroit Central Board of Education exercised great wisdom in choosing for the group people with distinguished records of public service. Alfred M. Pelham, a "retired" City Comptroller, and Stanley J. Winkelman, President of a large chain of women's apparel stores were named Co-Chairmen. They were later joined by Ethelene Crockett, a prominent gynecologist. Under their leadership a Steering Committee was formed and the citizens chose to join one of three working groups: finance, organization and management, or education. Receiving its charge from Superintendent Charles J. Wolfe and Board Chairman James Hathaway, the Task

Force met for the first time on January 4, 1973.

This citizens' Task Force is proud of its achievement, but not complacent. The members realize that the real task of improving learning for children lies ahead. A concerted effort is presently being made to frame significant recommendations in reading and communication skills and counseling and guidance that will impact on teaching and learning. These recommendations will be advanced to the Central Board of Education as they are completed prior to the end of the life of the Task Force on June 30, 1975.

Solving the Fiscal Needs

Among the Task Force's achievements is the major role it played in initiating a series of emergency fiscal moves which prevented the early closing of schools. The Task Force, in conjunction with the Central Board of Education and staff, worked with the State

Legislature in the passage of two bills to fund a portion of the debt. In addition, lengthy efforts provided ways in which several million dollars could be borrowed from local banks. More than 48 million dollars worth of bonds were sold, and new fiscal controls and procedures were initiated by the Superintendent. The first balanced budget in years was adopted by the Board of Education. Sensing this desire for fiscal responsibility, the voters approved two millage renewal proposals saving the school district temporarily from financial disaster.

Task Force leaders from business and industry were central in this fiscal adventure. It is impossible to place a price tag on their work. They were an essential part of the team that met with bonding officials from New York. An improved bond rating was achieved by the city primarily because of the expression of faith in the city by a leading automobile executive, the largest employer within the city limits. The low interest rate on money borrowed from the banks represented by Task Force members was arranged, leading other banks to follow suit. Representatives from business and industry worked untiringly to help school officials chart a course toward responsible fiscal operation of the Detroit public schools. There is still not enough money to provide minimum services for children, but those dollars that are available are being spent with care.

An Executive Vice-President from the largest downtown department store spearheaded his committee's review of the administrative structure of the Detroit public schools. His Organization and Management Committee submitted to the Central Board of Education a detailed plan for reorganizing the central administrative structure. This plan was the result of delicate negotiations

with school officials over an eight-month period. As of this date, nearly all of this plan has become a reality.

Use of Citizens' Expertise

A Task Force member who is Chairman of the Board of a large bank and trust company offered the expertise of his staff to study

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and suggest a more effective utilization of space in the Center Building, a fourteen-story building housing the Central Administration. Several months of service have been given resulting in valuable data for the Superintendent.

A Co-Chairman of the Task Force who heads a chain of women's apparel stores has devoted many hours of his time, energy, and management expertise. He has helped to chart a no-nonsense, task-oriented course of action for this citizens' group. He understands both the dynamics and constraints of a large urban school district, but refuses to accept excuses for less than the delivery of a quality education to all pupils.

Business and industry joining hands with education to work toward a common goal is not new. There are many examples

Future ASCD Annual Conferences

1976	March 13-17	Miami Beach	<i>Convention Center</i>
1977	March 19-23	Houston	<i>Civic Center</i>
1978	March 4-8	San Francisco	<i>Civic Center</i>

across the United States. The U.S. Office of Education¹ has formed the Office of Federal Coordinator for Industry, Education, and Labor. Among its purposes are the provisions for leadership in coordinating and stimulating collaborative relationships between education and business and serving as a clearinghouse of information relative to the use of industrial resources as they are applied to meet educational needs. However, it is the opinion of many that our Task Force model of cooperation does not exist anywhere else. For example, ours is a sustained "third party" effort with the school district. There is excellent liaison with the school district provided by a designated staff person. The Board of Education, school officials, and Task Force members meet frequently to resolve problems.

"Power from Differences"

The Task Force is becoming a learning laboratory for educators as well as leaders from business and industry. Cunningham² reported in a recent paper that it is "possible to construct a real learning community through participation of dedicated citizens." He further stated that it is "possible to achieve remarkable power from differences. It is possible to locate the chemistry which releases human talent for constructive public purposes." Leaders from business and industry have been a vital ingredient in that chemistry to help achieve the Task Force mission.

We at the Task Force have nurtured growth and understanding in our business and industry leaders. They know now, if they did not know before, that the teaching and learning process is exceedingly complex. It differs significantly from the problems and solutions related to business finance, industrial management, or the accountability for production of an object. We believe they

better understand the concerns of "grass roots" people. They know that the continuous struggle and fight by those representing the community is just and real. Our business leaders have gained a new and deeper appreciation for the outstanding work and achievements of the professional educator, who often works under less than ideal conditions.

Our staff has a much better understanding of the dynamics of the utilization of talent from business and industry. We know that these leaders differ in their need for and level of participation, as we do. It is crucial to review continually, on a personal basis, how business leaders can be helpful. One "automotive giant" stressed that although he would not attend all meetings, we could contact him personally if there was something specific he could do, and he delivered. Another shared confidentially that he felt out of place. Educators spoke a closed language. We know that business leaders are impatient with the slow progress in the resolution of educational problems. They do not fully understand why all children can't read at grade level within a short period of time when efforts are intensive.

We have learned that business and industry leaders often prefer to work in educational areas where they feel comfortable, areas that are similar to their day-to-day activities. They are willing to help with finance and school management, but would prefer to leave teaching and methodology to the professionals. Business and industry leaders have fewer problems communicating with school personnel than "grass roots" people.

Finally, we have confirmed that leaders in business and industry are deeply interested in education. They acknowledge that their business often depends upon the quality of the people they get from the educational institutions. They understand that better education is related directly to increased buying power. Leaders from business and industry have always cooperated with those of us in education. It is our responsibility to effectively utilize this valued resource. The Detroit Education Task Force is a step in that direction. □

¹ Office of Deputy Commissioner for Occupational and Adult Education, Office of Education, Washington, D.C.

² Luvern L. Cunningham. "Third Parties as Problem Solvers: A Case Report." Presented to the David W. Minar Memorial Conference, Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois.

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