

# COMMUNITY STRATEGY FOR DISTRICTS

*Can one develop a program of change that is truly district-wide? The writer's experience indicates that this approach, though seemingly impossible, can be successful.*

**S**EVERAL educators have recently suggested that there is simply no good evidence that one can demonstrate change in any unit of school organization larger than a building.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, we might reasonably ask if there should be *any* administrative strategies that presume that one can, in fact, develop district-wide programs that actually are district-wide.

A further reflection about this topic which occurs to me is one which ASCD's never cease chewing on—the definition of curriculum or program. Personally, I am not much enamored of the notion that the curriculum is a program, a package, an outline, or even a single way to accomplish a particular goal. I think the only substantial element in curriculum that matters over time is changing to some degree the behavior of all of the “learners” in a school situation—

<sup>1</sup> John I. Goodlad. “Schools Can Make a Difference.” *Educational Leadership* 33 (2): 108-17; November 1975; also: conversation with Stuart Rankin, Assistant Superintendent, Detroit Public Schools.

parents, students, teachers, secretaries, custodians, and principals. If I am permitted to define curriculum in that manner (I don't think the reader can stop me from doing so except *post facto* by writing a letter to the editor), then I would rather focus this article upon a district-wide “strategy” which has promise of developing changed behavior in local buildings.

Part of the charge that was given to me as a contributing writer for this issue was to relate to “new” ways of gathering information, arriving at decisions, and improving communications. With nearly 20 years of rummaging around in public school work and with a passing acquaintance with the literature, I have come to the conclusion our problem may be that we have not really given some of the “old” ways an honest try. The principles that cause people to be open to communication and willing to move in new directions with some security really haven't changed much in my opinion. These principles are supported by efforts to achieve maximum face-to-face contact, policies aimed at high levels of involvement, practices which develop a climate of trust between people, and a persistent willingness to risk that good professional observation and judgment are at least as good as quantified data.

Come to think of it, I even have diffi-

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culty with the term "strategy" since it has for me strong elements of both warfare and manipulation. In light of the contemporary scene in education, especially as viewed from my vantage point here in Michigan (one of the "leaders" in the accountability movement, according to our department of education), my connotations may be entirely too appropriate. It certainly seems that at best many current change strategies growing out of the accountability idea suffer from "hard data tunnel vision." That is, such strategies appear to ignore the fact that the data are about, rendered by, or are impacting upon people. At worst they are quite evidently based on mistrust and coercion. I think a key factor in an overall district strategy aimed at promoting local building program change is in the people elements—trust and confidence.

## **The Community Education Concept Adds the "People" Element**

Based upon more than ten years of evolutionary experience with a now deeply ingrained community education process, I would like to offer this process as a district-wide consideration (rather than a strategy) in arriving at the necessary level of trust and confidence to permit a high degree of

local building program flexibility and autonomy. I am not sure that the reader will be able, or should in their own situation, attempt to replicate what was done. But, in the paragraphs which follow I will try briefly to describe what was done and what resulted.

We made the vehicle for community education the unit nearest to the people. The neighborhood elementary school serves a single population and it serves it more directly. Secondary schools can augment programs but they cannot respond effectively to multiple neighborhood inputs. A corollary is that the elementary principal assumed responsibility for community education leadership because that is truly the only kind of education going on in this district.

Getting to know who you are working with is a prime element both in getting started with the community education concept and as an outcome of it. Administratively it takes the form of the superintendent establishing regular and frequent times to meet with both central and building administrators, central administrators meeting regularly and frequently with building administrators, and making frequent visits to schools. It also requires of all administrators

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an honest and conscientious "open door" policy and a recognition that informal and social contacts are at least as valuable as formally convened councils and committees. At the building level principals expend considerable effort to know teachers both as professionals and as people. The underlying principle is for administrators to model the behavior they wish to elicit from teachers in their relationships with students and parents.

An example of the above and another key in developing a genuine community education outlook is the implementation of a teacher home visitation program. The super-

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intendent, both by encouragement and example, had already gotten nearly every administrator in the district involved with some community-based club or organization. When the idea of home visits began, the superintendent and central administrators did it first. Principals followed that lead by setting aside a half day a week for a year. Then teachers were helped to gain confidence and commitment through combined workshop and visitation days. Now home visitation by teachers is a frequent, organized, and institutionalized practice in all elementary and junior high schools. The basic principle is that if you want residents to reach out to schools, then reach out to the residents.

As teachers and parents became real people to each other through home visits, it became easier and easier to get parent volunteer help for a great many instructional tasks in the schools. The word spread and involvement began to generate involvement. The circle of people in the community who understood through direct experience what our schools were trying to do continued to grow. (For the past few years we have had over 900 volunteers each year working in eight

schools.) Since distrust is rooted in ignorance, the more people came to know each other, the more they trusted each other.

Availability of volunteers made possible the extending of preschool opportunities through weekly "story hours." This provided early and positive contact with parents at a time when they were most sensitive to children's needs and most likely to be amenable to "hearing" what the schools had to "say." Preschool parents' clubs, conducted while the children were in story hour, quickly became a self-perpetuating social-educational *liaison group* in the neighborhood.

Because many residents now know people from their neighborhood who are working in the schools, and the residents who are in school now feel free to talk to teachers and principals they see regularly about both the positive and negative aspects of our operation, a people-oriented continuous feedback cycle has been generated. In addition, principals can readily discern who the "opinion leaders" are in their neighborhoods when they wish to test a new idea or different approach. The need for "show-case" advisory committees is dramatically reduced because of this functional and continuing interaction.

This type of involvement is a highly personal kind of "accountability" in which "needs," "goals," "delivery system," and "feedback" are a seamless whole based on joint efforts of lay people and educators. In this context such "hard data" as are used about community, parents, students, and staff are conditioned and screened through much more realistic appreciation of the people element in the educative process. I believe if more schools had functioned in this community-oriented manner in the past, the general public would not have been so easily sold on simplistic state assessment test modes of accountability. Based on our experience, I believe it is not too late for teachers and administrators to develop such a relationship.

Some verifiable examples of outcomes in our district which I am convinced are attributable to this version of "accountability" are:

1. Local building autonomy has developed to the point that except in broad cur-



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One of the mothers leads a preschool story hour.

riculum area goals the only way we can now describe our school program is in terms of a particular building.

2. Even though there are practically no total-district adoptions of materials in basic subjects, it has been years since the central office has gotten any calls from parents concerned because they transferred to another school within the district and did not find the same books being used. The on-going

parent involvement has shown them that children can and do learn from a great variety of materials.

3. In the past few years, a number of curricular innovations have been "painlessly" installed because of our continuing ability to have access to residents' viewpoints in a climate of trust. Among them are improved elementary report cards, multigrade open classrooms, junior high cross-age tutoring programs, school learning centers staffed chiefly by aides, and several varieties of delivery of special education services. This latter area includes the "invention" by Hazel Park of the Bucket Brigade tutoring concept for children with pre-reading learning problems which has now become a national movement.

4. Secondary schools benefit in a variety of ways. Parent involvement at the elementary level has kindled an interest in adult education enrollment, generated community support for a very comprehensive vocational program, and provided a communications link to convey information and concern about secondary curriculum.

Except for report cards all the innovations noted here were gradual, building by building developments.

Some things do *not* happen—and this, too, can be important and valuable. Parents do *not* think less of teachers because of close association. Their understanding of the complex nature of teaching and learning increases as does their regard for teachers. They do *not* tell educators how to teach and they do *not* believe that the only important results of schooling are tests and grades.

In summary, consciously designing means by which residents, parents, students, secretaries, custodians, teachers, and administrators can get to know, appreciate, and help each other in the mutual task of improving learning for all is best encompassed under the community education concept.

I believe the results of the "community education strategy" are in some measure attainable by any district that will give enough time and commitment for it to bear its harvest of trust and confidence. □

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