



**Allen Fisher**

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*Members of advisory committees in Florida say they are not involved in budgeting or staff evaluation, and that they seldom succeed in getting other changes made.*

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As public dissatisfaction with the cost and quality of education threatens support for school programs throughout the country, a growing number of systems are seeking new, more cooperative relationships with the people they serve. Bringing more people into the decision-making processes—bridging the gap between educators and members of the public that pay the bills—has become a major objective. One case in point, that of the state of Florida, offers valuable and sobering insights into the demands and limits of bridging that gap, no matter how well-intentioned the effort.

In 1973 the Florida legislature ordered that state's 67 county school districts to establish advisory committees broadly representative of their communities. Guidelines issued by the State Department of Education required each district to have at least one committee, to define its functions,

and to evaluate its effectiveness at least once a year. But to advise is not necessarily to influence, as Florida's experience shows. And in delegating to local authorities almost total discretion over duties and authority of these committees, the state may well have undermined much of what it hoped to achieve.

My conclusions are drawn primarily from a survey conducted last year among 140 advisory committee members serving various levels of administration in the seven largest county districts. More than two-thirds who responded to a lengthy questionnaire were women; most respondents were between 30 and 39 years old; and the overall sample exhibited a high degree of advanced education. Of the 65 percent who had 15 years and more formal education, more than half held bachelor's degrees, 40 percent held master's, and nine percent had doctorates. Whether this repre-

sents a fair cross-section of the thousands of citizens serving on such committees in Florida and in other parts of the country, I cannot say.

The amount of formal education possessed by these advisory committee members suggests they are interested in schooling and are well prepared to offer advice. Nevertheless, their responses indicate that their effective influence with school authorities was severely limited—and in many instances nil.

### Budgeting and Staff Evaluation

The study revealed no evidence whatever that advisory groups were participating in budget-making decisions at any educational level. Earlier research<sup>1</sup> has shown that when parents are involved in significant decision-making at the district level, they will be more active and persuasive, influencing others in the community to support necessary school levies and bond issues.

To overlook this potential is a serious waste of concerned citizenry, and Florida has apparently wasted much of it. According to survey responses, the involvement of advisory committees in helping generate financial support was disappointingly low.

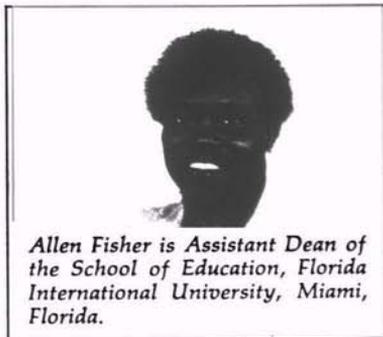
Another major area completely barred to advisory groups, according to the study, was that of evaluating teachers and administrators. Certainly this is a highly sensitive issue, complicated not only by problems of confidentiality, but also by the terms of existing contract agreements. On the other hand, what is a more natural concern for citizens than the competence and performance of those educating their children?

Particularly in this area there should be no misperceptions or false hopes raised. If public advisory committees are to play a role in evaluating administrative and/

or teaching staff, a clearly defined plan for involvement should be the first priority. Given adequate briefing and with a firmly established set of rules and objectives, committee members could valuably assist in measuring performance by the standard both educators and parents hold above all others: student achievement.

### Little Success

An unfortunate number of survey responses indicate that from the standpoint of committee members, too many school authorities treated advisory bodies with virtual indifference. Of many attempts to initiate change, ranging from major (helping choose a school site, improving a physical education program) to minor (improving school security, setting disciplinary guidelines) to trivial (changing a school lunch menu), most were unsuccessful.



*Allen Fisher is Assistant Dean of the School of Education, Florida International University, Miami, Florida.*

This, I hasten to add, was not all due to official deafness. On the contrary, many members said school authorities were open to suggestion, but that they themselves lacked the necessary knowledge and experience to participate effectively. Simply opening the door, apparently, is not enough. Educators must take the extra step of providing advisory bodies with training appropriate to their areas of expected involvement.

Lest this report sound too pessimistic, there were examples of successful advisory group action. But these were generally of the

limited-issue type, such as improving the safety of school grounds or sponsoring a sex education class.

It is apparent that advisory committees have not been used as the state of Florida intended, and they have not performed as well as many hoped. The failure was, in a sense, built into the system that created them.

They were created to solicit public input in the decision-making processes of education. In this role they should be helping to dissolve long-standing prejudices and misperceptions between professional educators and the lay public, yet seem to have fallen victim to those very prejudices and misperceptions. Given the broad option by the state to form and limit the purview of school advisory groups, too many authorities followed the dictum: leave education to the professionals.

This is an attitude that simply won't do any longer. The educational community must encourage and welcome all expressions of public interest—and use to full advantage the opportunities offered by the creation of advisory committees.

But in doing so, educational authorities should take great care not to raise false expectations which, if unfulfilled, could further alienate the public. If this report achieves no other objective, I hope to convince educators considering the establishment of such bodies to enunciate honestly and openly the exact scope and extent of their powers. If necessary we must go the extra mile, extend the first invitation, make the first gesture. In a time of tightening resources, declining enrollments, and growing resentment over all public services, we can hardly afford to do less. *ET*

<sup>1</sup>Jack D. McCall and James E. Walter. "Citizens Committees Can Make a Difference." *School and Community* 62: 10; May 1976.

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