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The Principal Faces Overcrowding

Problems arising through overcrowding today affect the entire staff and school population in so many communities. Only a total approach, coordinated by school leaders and using all available resources, can alleviate this prevalent and urgent condition.

OF THE MANY problems which confront the typical school principal, "overcrowding" is one of the most serious because it influences nearly every aspect of the school's work with children. Every school or classroom which houses more children than the optimum number encounters special difficulties in curriculum development, instruction, guidance, teacher welfare and morale, supervision, administration and finance, public relations and numerous other phases of school operation. Overcrowding, then, offers a tremendous challenge to the principal's leadership.

What Is Overcrowding?

Although the literature of education is surfeited with plausible opinions concerning optimum class size, it is distressing to realize that relatively little solid evidence is at hand to show that x, or x-plus-5, or any other number is a right or wrong one when we are trying to identify the point where overcrowding begins. When ASCD's new Commission on Crowding in Our Schools recently addressed a questionnaire to school people and state officials in all 48 states, the replies revealed dramatically that few persons see the problem in exactly the same way. One of the respondents stated, "I have come to the conclusion that the ideal class size is about five or ten less than whatever number a particular teacher has." The subtle truth of this remark was borne out in the wide range of opinions about class sizes of 30, 35, 40, and up. Nonetheless, there appear to be many who would agree with the statement of the Florida Council on Elementary Education, "that more than 35 children in a classroom represents overcrowding." (1)

Not only the numbers involved, but other factors are related to overcrowding. Thirty-six children in a huge, well-equipped classroom is a different problem from 36 children in a converted coalbin. Thirty-six children in the hands of an outstanding teacher may be better off than 18 children in the hands of a marginal performer. Eight classes averaging 40 each, in a building liberally equipped with auxiliary facilities (playroom, crafts shop, library,

etc.) may be better off than eight classes averaging 30, in a building with only eight classrooms. Smaller class sizes achieved at the expense of double-shift or staggered-schedule arrangements may or may not be better than larger classes on regular schedule. Conditions which would demoralize one group of teachers might well seem "heavenly" to another. And so on . . . overcrowding is a relative matter!

What It Does

Some of the problems alleged to accompany overcrowding are:

Less individual attention given each pupil

Less opportunity for counseling and guidance

Less opportunity for small-group work

Each child has less space for storage of his property

Health hazards associated with less air per pupil, more likely contact with disease, poorer lighting, etc.

More necessity for formal, regimented class lessons

Fewer work areas and interest centers within the classroom

More reliance on workbooks and drill materials (busywork)

Less use of face-to-face parent teacher conferences for reporting pupil progress

Reduction in time, space, and personnel available for library, arts and crafts, music, physical education, etc.

Greater demands upon the "only one of each" instructional materials

General deterioration in the morale of teachers (reflected in fatigue) and children (reflected in poorer discipline).

In cases where double sessions are in use, this incomplete list could be further expanded to include:

Shorter periods of time spent in classes

Disruption of normal family routines

Difficulty of cleaning and maintaining classrooms between shifts

Property conflicts as desks and materials are shared

Elimination of important services and curriculum areas.

Each principal must, of course, determine which of the foregoing problems exists in his own situation, and to what extent. Discussions within the staff, aimed at definition of the problem, would therefore seem to be prerequisite to the creation of solutions and remedies.

The Principal's Responsibility

The principal whose building is overcrowded should fight energetically and constantly for the correction and elimination of the conditions which have caused the overcrowding. As often as not, administrators are themselves to blame for lulling their communities into a state of apathetic contentment through overdoses of the "All is well!" theme in their public relations. Fear of criticism has frequently led the schoolman to paint too rosy a picture of the school's status and needs. Sometimes the public's ignorance or misguided actions can be traced in part to the school's failure to support PTA's and lay study groups, and to its slowness in developing a real "community school." A long, hard, constructive look at one's public relations is therefore necessary for the principal as he wrestles with his overcrowding problem.

Since overcrowding is a relative con-

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cept, the principal's next step might well be defining in concrete terms the actual seriousness of his problem. A room-by-room physical analysis would provide data on the floor space per pupil, the amount and suitability of furniture and equipment, the atmospheric conditions influencing health and comfort, the amount and suitability of instructional materials, the availability of auxiliary rooms and spaces, and similar factors. A re-examination of the present uses, and use schedules, of all non-classroom areas in the building might reveal unsuspected space resources. A fresh look at the daily and weekly schedule of class hours, including the noon hour and whatever after-school program may exist, may help by revealing time devoted to activities of lesser value. These and related studies will help the principal to reappraise some of the physical and mechancial aspects of the problem.

Of even greater importance is an analysis of the professional and non-professional staff in terms of (a) the actual workload of each person and (b) the probable capacity of each person in relation to that work-load. Here one might utilize the techniques of "time and motion study," with a view to analyzing the specific range and nature of activities which consume each person's work time, and the degree to which wasted, duplicative, or unnecessary motions and procedures may be involved. Although such studies obviously would be easier to do for clerical and maintenance personnel, successful time studies have also been made of classroom teachers[2] and we need no longer "guess" at the amounts of time teachers spend in instruction, guidance, clerical duties, meetings, and the many other activities which go into the work year.

Office Streamlining

Many times the principal devotes an undue proportion of his time to secretarial and clerical tasks which, following analysis, might well be omitted or delegated to the school secretary and others. Candid self-analysis, perhaps with the aid of a stop watch or a time-use chart, might reveal a number of ways in which the principal's time is being squandered on picayunish, low-priority functions.

Probably every principal in the United States could use more secretarial help than he has. Job analyses and time studies are ways in which the effectiveness of the available help can be increased, especially if one follows through by eliminating some of the low-priority functions and the wasteful motions. To save time in delivery of messages, for example, one could install and make good use of intercommunication or buzzer systems. To save the secretary's time while the principal is dictating, and to make both their schedules more flexible, a dictating machine may be used. Simplify paper work by standardizing report forms. Reduce money-counting by selling weekly or monthly tickets (or in dollar amounts), or by insisting that the banks and bus companies provide their own envelopes and do their own counting. Such efficiency devices will free the secretary for more important work and the principal, in turn, can be freed of many minor worries.

Where the budget for secretarial

services is not adequate, it becomes all the more important to eliminate all but the high-priority secretarial services of a school. Sometimes it is possible to supplement an inadequate secretarial staff by the use of parents who volunteer, each giving a half-day or more of time each week as office receptionist, machine operator, typist, etc. Although there are hazards and inconveniences in the use of unpaid volunteers, principals should not underestimate the interest and the willingness of parents when they recognize the need for help.

Supplementing the Staff

One of the truly significant current experiments in the search for solutions is the one sponsored in Michigan by Central Michigan College of Education and the Bay City Schools. Known as "a Cooperative Study for the Better Utilization of Teacher Competencies," it has included job analyses and time studies of elementary teachers and a "Teacher Aide" plan whereby nonprofessional assistants at unskilled wage levels work under the teacher's direction in classrooms with large enrollments. Some of the teacher aide's functions include housekeeping tasks such as preparing the chalkboard, arranging seats, taking care of books and supplies, collecting papers, and room ventilation; clerical duties such as typing and duplicating lessons and tests; correcting tests and workbooks; handling school banking, taking roll, and keeping pupil records; helping individual pupils with their wraps, first-aid problems, desk-to-desk work, and answering questions; supervising children in corridors, during washroom recesses, and on the playground; helping the teacher with opening exercises, taking charge of art materials, operating audio-visual equipment, changing bulletin boards and displays; and dozens of similar tasks.

The report[2] of this experiment offers exciting clues to the principal who is seeking ways to unburden his overworked teachers of some of the routine responsibilities which take up their time. Although one teacher aide per classroom would be desirable, it is easy to see how even a few aides per building could make a real difference to a harassed and overburdened staff. And again, with the precaution that problems may arise, it is conceivable that even unpaid parent volunteers might be fitted into the teacher-aide pattern and that regular teachers could be relieved of a great many minor tasks.

While paid or unpaid teacher aides can be of great help, the availability of professional colleagues in increased numbers would in most situations be much more welcome to the classroom teacher. Some schools with overcrowded classrooms have increased the number and variety of consultant and specialist personnel in order to strengthen the teacher's hand and provide a solution to guidance problems, remedial cases, intricate instructional problems, and the like. In one overcrowded school, for example, a certified teacher was added to the staff as a permanent "floating substitute," available to give assistance to teachers (with extra reading groups, for example) and to take over certain lessons each day during the regular teachers' rest periods. Another school system employed a full-time teacher-librarian to

work in each school on double sessions, on the theory that such a person could give much needed help to teachers in planning home lessons, resource units, etc. A full-time music or crafts teacher in each building could presumably have a similar effect on overcrowding.

Home Assignments

It is quite possible that home lessons, adequately planned in terms of the resources and skills available in the home, may be one of the most promising means of filling the program gaps which are caused by shorter school days and more crowded conditions. By no means to be confused with the old "homework" pattern of bygone days, a modern concept of home assignments could well be developed so that readings, projects and activities not expressly dependent upon the teacher's methodological know-how could be supervised by the parents—thus strengthening parent interest as well as conserving precious time in the school for the group experiences and culminating activities which give meaning to the total enterprise.

Not the least benefit of such arrangements would be the protection of time for the creative, enriching aspects of the school's program: art, music, rhythms, crafts, physical education, etc. Here are the experiences through which children re-charge their emotional batteries, maintain and develop the ability to enjoy and appreciate the good things of life. Probably the school will need to increase its program of off-hours recreation, club work, and the like if overcrowding is stifling the normal day-to-day offerings in these fields.

The principal might well find himself seeking out the neighborhood's church leaders, recreation directors, youth group leaders and others in order to encourage them to make use of off-session time for their programs. In one community, the principal's request of a ministers' group led to the establishment in several of the churches of a "morning program." This arrangement was for children who (on double-session) did not report to school until afternoon.

Double Sessions

Many of the aforementioned devices should be considered where the principal and his staff are coping with double sessions. Certainly great effort should be made to protect and to emphasize the areas which so often suffer: kindergarten, music, library, arts and crafts, and other enrichment offerings. Teachers should be literally flooded with help, material as well as personal. Appropriate home lessons and community activities should be increased. Perhaps homogeneous grouping should be considered as one means of reducing the range of teacher preparations. Special meetings and conferences should be arranged with parents, so that disturbance to family schedules and patterns of living can be minimized or made more bearable. These are but examples of the steps which can be taken to protect the welfare of children victimized by overcrowding.

Just as every principal's overcrowding problem is in some way unique, so must be the solutions he attempts. Here, however, are some bits of advice which may be useful to the principal

whose school is overflowing with children:

1. Start with the staff. Find out how they define the problem, and what they see as possible solutions.

2. Tie this "staff's-eye" picture to your own estimates of the public's attitude, the physical and mechanical aspects of the problem, your assessment of the staff's capacity for dealing with the problem, and the ways in which overcrowding is affecting your supervisory program.

3. Analyze the current work schedule of all team members by means of time and motion studies; eliminate low-priority activities in the office and in the classrooms.

4. Supplement the professional and clerical staff; take advantage of volunteer parent services wherever possible; maintain an adequate flow of instructional supplies to classrooms.

5. Attempt to conserve on precious school time by maximizing opportunities for children to work and learn at home and in their neighborhood.

References

(1) Florida Council on Elementary Education. *What Happens to Your Child in Overcrowded Classrooms?* Tallahassee: the Council (Jack Stevens, Treasurer), Centennial Building, 1955, p. 3.

(2) *A Cooperative Study for the Better Utilization of Teacher Competencies.* Second Printed Report, 1955: A Description of Teacher Aide Experimentation. Mount Pleasant, Michigan: Central Michigan College, 1955, p. 32.

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