

Citizen Participation in School Affairs

Active involvement of citizens in study, discussion and planning offers a very potent approach to solution of many school problems.

CITIZEN participation in community affairs has grown steadily in the United States. This participation has increased materially since World War II. The increase is due probably to several forces such as increases in wealth, educational quotient of individuals, rate of social change, mobility of population and volume of communication carried by the mass media.

In the field of community education citizen participation usually means participation in government—in other words, actual self-government that goes far beyond formal balloting.

Planning Procedures

At no time in the history of education in the United States has there been greater citizen interest in the schools than there is today. School administrators, school boards and citizens everywhere struggle with the problem of how to mobilize this interest and make it a powerful force in the improvement of

their community school systems. Various avenues of approach to the public are being tried and tested in different communities.

It is felt by some that whenever the board of education has a major problem to deal with, a citizens committee should be activated and handed the problem to work on with definite directions to follow in preparing its recommendations. When the committee recommendations are made to the board the committee is dismissed. This procedure presupposes that the professional staff and the board can predict the educational needs for the community and keep the planning process under control. It means that the only problems which get considered are those which the board feels are important enough to command their attention. Subsequent approval by the board of the committee's recommendations makes a base of public support for acceptance of the program. This system has been employed with varying degrees of success by boards of education when faced with building programs and millage campaigns to support bond issues. The lay committee appointed by the board surveys the needs, makes the recommendations, assists in the promo-

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tional campaign for the election and then is discharged. Again the committee members become relatively inactive as far as schools are concerned and await a time when the board feels the next crisis has arisen and their services are needed and wanted. One might hasten to add that this type of citizen participation is effective and certainly better than none at all. But is this practice in accord with the best in democratic practice?

Community School Approach

Another approach to lay participation is through the community school concept. Here the citizen attaches himself to the school and becomes a part of the continuous effort to improve it. He makes his contribution as a cooperating participant; he is active in the PTA or other parent organizations in the school; he knows that the school is partly his; he believes the school exists for the child, youth and adult; he sees that the school is a strong unifying force in his community; he studies the curriculum; he knows that the curriculum to be effective must grow out of the interests and needs of the people; he recognizes that what the school is he helps it to be; he supports his school because he believes in it; he communicates well with the professional staff in the school; he works on joint committees of lay and professional people studying problems of mutual concern; he brings to his board of education in joint action with his fellow citizens positive recommendations to be acted upon; and he recognizes that school improvement is a continuous process.

Let's see how this process works in the Plymouth community. Here the people in cooperation with their board of education recognize the need for wide lay and professional participation in the im-

provement of the community school system. For the past six years there has been an active School Community Planning Group. This group, which includes a team of people from each of the schools, has been meeting together regularly each month except during July and August. The school team representing a neighborhood school consists of the principal, one teacher and two parents. The parents are elected by the PTA with staggered terms of two years each so that one new member is chosen each year. The faculty of the school elects the teacher to serve for one year and the principal of the school serves continuously.

These teams when assembled form the nucleus of the School Community Planning Group and open the lines of two-way inter-school communication as well as communication with the board of education. Since school board members and the superintendent of schools are ex-officio members of the group they are in constant touch with community thinking in regard to the schools. In addition to the teams an open invitation to attend the monthly meetings is extended to all interested citizens. The Chamber of Commerce, American Association of University Women and some of the service clubs have on occasion sent representatives to the planning group meetings.

The planning group in making recommendations to the board of education has been a positive force in helping to activate citizen interest in the schools and bring about significant improvements. Committees working on pressing problems report each month to the larger group the progress of their studies. After a satisfactory solution to a problem is reached in the planning group, recommendations are passed

along to the board of education for approval, rejection or modification. Most members of the planning group are working on one or more of the study committees. Moreover, the school teams report back regularly to their constituent schools and neighborhoods on the progress made on the problems under consideration. In this process new ideas and suggestions are constantly under examination. Problems dealing with safety, teachers' salaries, school sites, naming of new schools, planning of school buildings, bond issues, millage campaigns, curricular offerings, and extending school services during the summer months have been handled by this planning group.

Need for Theory and Strategy

The time has come to give more attention to theory and to long-range objectives. When citizen participation is looked on as a way to get out of a community conflict or to put over a bond issue, the very process is degraded. Emphasis should be placed on the essential nature of democracy—on the basic rights of the interested citizen. Education, being a matter of great public concern, should be planned by all members of the community. Without participation in educational planning, only the most common and traditional of needs may be perceived and met.

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community agencies bearing upon children's welfare and for participation in community activities.

In crowded classes there are usually few opportunities for children to use initiative and develop resourcefulness. These lost opportunities have an important, even if deferred, impact upon our

In recent years citizen participation has centered to a great extent on producing enough classrooms to meet the needs (quantitative) of the next year. This kind of participative action is good but not enough. The problems that are related to the *quality* of education must be given more attention.

The citizens and the professionals who are ready to deal with strategy should try to direct attention to planning in such fields as these:

1. Program or curriculum planning
2. Personnel policies that will develop highly professionalized teachers
3. An advanced concept of method and instructional organization such as the operation of the career teacher in a self-contained classroom
4. Developing a consensus on the roles of educational institutions
5. Developing a consensus on the goals and nature of education in a free society
6. Continuously evaluating and re-planning the total community program of education.

The waste motion in education today and the need for considerable change in the educational program call for public study and discussion of issues as grand as those posed by Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson and Horace Mann in earlier times.

communities. In a democratic society improvement in the quality of living is the responsibility of all citizens; hence creativity and initiative are the very qualities that the classroom needs to encourage in youth, not only for their present values but also for the future of our society. Yes, crowding makes a difference, for the future and the present.

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