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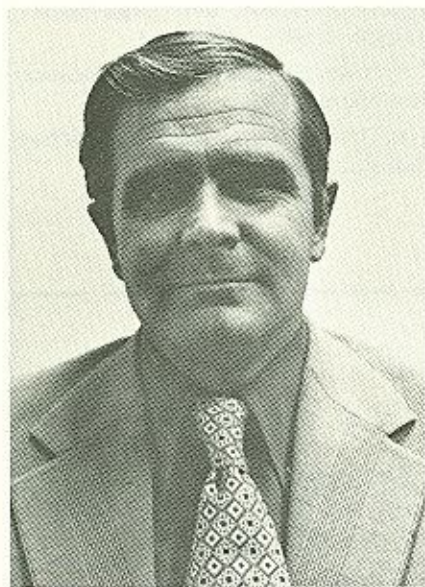
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An understanding of the scope of the concept can be gained from a list of the characteristics of successful community education programs.

indicators of community education

by Barry F. Semple



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Community education is the most exciting and relevant philosophy currently being discussed by the educational community. The focus on community involvement in educational planning and programming, as well as maximizing use of local talent, buildings and other resources makes sense in many ways. However, common understanding of the total concept is much like "common sense," not very common.

There are numerous reasons for continued misconceptions about the concept. One primary reason is erroneously confusing community education with such emotional issues as decentralization, regionalization and community control. A second reason is because some aspects of the concept are threatening to educators, such as community involvement in decision making and greater use of school facilities.

The purpose of this article is to identify some indicators of local community education developments. The development of such indicators has been an activity of the Office of Community Education, New Jersey Department of Education, during the past three years. Although they are not used to measure either legislation or state regulations, the indicators have been helpful in clarifying the concept for training purposes, and for providing a response to the statement, "we are already doing it." The community education indicators have also provided educators with a means of measuring strengths and weaknesses for more effective planning.

Community education is defined by Dr. Jack Minzey of Eastern Michigan as follows: "Community Education is a philosophical concept which serves the entire community by providing for all of the educational needs of all of its community members. It uses the local school to serve as the catalyst in bringing community resources to bear on community problems in an effort to develop a positive sense of community, improve community living and develop a community process toward the end of self-actualization."

Obviously measuring the extent to which such things as "sense of community" and "self-actualization" have been developed requires both subjectivity, and the identification of areas to measure. I would suggest one way scholars and practitioners can assess community education status is by identifying indicators of the concept. The following list is an attempt to state some of the areas of community education that lend themselves to measurement.

1. The existence of, and level of involvement of, citizen advisory committees.

2. The amount and quality of communication and cooperation among the educational organizations and agencies in the community.
3. The comprehensiveness of educational offerings for all ages.
4. The existence of a community education staff position.
5. Board policy that reflects the concept.
6. The extent and type of building utilization.
7. The amount and source of financial support.

Before discussing each indicator of community education development I must explain that the concept by definition, should not and does not take the same form or have the same substance in every community. Initiation and development are significantly influenced by both interpretation and the types of unmet needs existing in the school district when the concept is adopted as worthy of implementation. Because of these factors the concept could start as an educational planning effort (hopefully based on community input), as programs to meet specific needs of one or more age groups, as an effort to coordinate community resources, as a system for improving school-community relations, or in numerous other ways. Regardless of initial form the essence of the concept is in establishing an on-going process of "bringing community resources to bear on community problems," and requires continuous assessment. I propose that these "indicators" provide a basis for measuring the quality and quantity of both process and outcome goals of community education.

1. The first indicator pertains to the level of citizen involvement and can be assessed by asking such questions as:
How many and what types of lay advisory councils are functioning?
Are their ideas requested and utilized by the school board and staff?
Do they represent a cross-section of the community?
2. The second pertains to the very difficult, but vital task of improving communication and cooperation among organizations.
Are they kept informed of current program efforts and areas of need?
Is consideration given to their inclusion on advisory councils?
Are district-wide planning sessions held to identify areas of unmet needs, and possible areas of service duplication?
Is there an up-to-date listing of the educational services being provided by the various groups? And is it being disseminated?
3. The extent and range of program offerings is usually the easiest to measure. This is a necessity however, as usually major gaps do exist.
Are program opportunities provided closest to those most in need, such as senior citizens, day care for working mothers, etc.?
Are costs for tuition, fees, etc. prohibitive?
Is enrollment in a course perceived as an end in itself or as a

means of involving the community in the community education process?

Are opportunities for lifelong learning really available?

4. The fourth indicator is a simple one to measure, but a vital component of successfully implementing the concept.

Does a position in the school system have responsibility for establishing advisory councils, identifying local resources and administering programs for all ages?

Is adequate time, status and pay given the position(s)?

Has the individual(s) received training in community education?

Does the individual(s) have meaningful interaction with and impact upon the "K-12" operation?

5. The school system's policy manual or operations procedure is usually very indicative of the impact of the concept.

Are community education principles a major part of the philosophy statement?

How difficult and expensive is it for the community to utilize the schools for legitimate recreational, cultural and educational purposes?

Do the duties and functions of staff members reflect the principles of community education?

Does the educational decision making process provide for community input?

6. Since the concept assumes school utilization as community centers, this measurement is a basic one.

How many schools are being used by all ages before, after and during school hours?

Is adequate parking available?

Are entrances and exits adequately lighted?

Are appropriate security measures taken?

Are new facilities being planned with community use in mind?

7. Although I have never known financing to be the dominant reason for either the success or failure of community education, it is obviously a factor for consideration.

Are administrative or building use costs dependent upon a state or federal grant? If so, would loss of this aid cause the program to be curtailed?

Is there some level of local tax dollar commitment to the concept's growth and development?

Do the sources of revenue reflect broad community support for the concept?

Hopefully this list will serve as a starting point for the development of a community education assessment format that will help clarify the concept and serve as a basis for planning. Although more refinement and specificity is required in an assessment design, consideration must also be given to relating the design to local interpretation of district. However, regardless of such flexibility a sound method of assessment is required if we are to more effectively communicate the concept and document outcomes.