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Four important areas of the community/school relationship should be analyzed to determine the potential acceptance of community education programs by the local community.

strengthening the school-community relationship

by James W. Satterfield and G. Kent Stewart



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Forward-looking boards of education, school executives, and teachers have accepted the reality of community involvement in educational decision-making. Similarly, the concepts of community education and the community school are maturing rapidly in most urban and suburban school systems and are enjoying a high level of assimilation into rural school districts.

Secrecy, as the traditional *modus operandi* shrouding schools for decades, has given way in many school districts to a new spirit of cooperation between educational and community leaders. In these districts school and community are integrating into a functioning social and political entity. Effort in educational and community endeavor is aimed at strengthening and refining what appears now to be a solid new relationship.

In grappling with the challenges resulting from this union—the press of time and the frustration of “administrivia” being two of the more prominent—there is need to assess quickly community characteristics and interests in relation to educational priorities. Reduced to its most common terms, the challenge is one of determining what the school administrator needs to know about the community in order to effect the highest level of commitment to community education.

Reflectors of the Community

Basically, there are four areas of community study required to provide data to make good decisions about school-community education.

1. Community Power Structure. What is the established organizational (power) structure of the community? To administrators in some school systems, this can be a misleading or perhaps lightly received question. For instance, some believe that a new community or a new subdivision within a larger community is not very well organized. This is seldom the case. In fact, in some situations, the newer the community the stronger and more vigorous is its organizational structure. The authors have worked in newly established communities which were organized and tuned to a high level of political finesse. These types of communities are located usually within suburban school districts. In older more established communities the organizational power structure is present, but may be more difficult to define clearly since ultimate decision-making power is often obscured from general public view. This need not be of too

great a concern however, because the more visible agents of community power provide cues and directions for decision-making and are relatively easily observable.

The identification of power is an area of real concern and can be accomplished by observing closely those in leadership roles among the various publics of a community and school system. Examples of various active publics include: the music public (band boosters), the cultural arts public (art, history and orchestra activities), the vocationally oriented public (vocational school advisory groups), the agricultural public (farm bureau, grange, vocational agriculture and agribusiness advisory groups), the basic education public (the 3 R's), the athletic public (athletic boosters club), union leaders, business (chamber of commerce), and the various service club leaders to name a few.

If each of these areas of power interest is charted, a series of pyramids is formed. Each pyramid represents a school or community interest. At the peak of each pyramid is the person or persons who holds greatest authority within the organization. The researcher is well-advised to be cognizant of the fact that the individual at the peak of the pyramid is not necessarily an officeholder in the organization. Often the power holder remains in the background, but nonetheless directs the major decisions of the organization.

If those at the peaks of the power pyramids are identified, they are often the principal participants in decision-making relative to community-wide and educational priorities. These are the individuals with whom the school executive needs to establish a positive relationship. Often this relationship is established vicariously, yet effectively, through more visible school and community workers.

By studying the organizational structure of the overall school community, the educational executive is provided with the names of recognized community leaders and decision-makers. These individuals almost always have an input into community-wide decisions affecting program and finance priorities.

2. Trade and Professional Employment Profile. What are the various trade and professional groups represented in the school community? To answer this question it is necessary to collect hard evidence concerning the community employment profile. Once the data is obtained, predictions can be made relative to probable levels and areas of support and interests in school-community affairs.

For example, a professionally-oriented community made up of high-salaried executives and upper-income professional people may take for granted involvement in educational decision-making and be more than ready to organize and support an outstanding program of community education and even a community school at the highest level of its definition. In fact, the leadership in this kind of community might think it strange indeed to learn that other communities are ahead in any area of educational leadership or innovation.

At the opposite end of the employment profile continuum, a community which is made up of low-paid operatives and unskilled workers may find it difficult or of little importance to spend much time in educational goal setting in relation to community needs and interests. In this case, leadership for community involvement in educational program develop-

ment must begin with strong executive effort at the school level. Parent-teacher association and service club involvement is an effective place to begin. After a program plan for involvement is initiated, leaders and interested individuals in other community organizations such as those mentioned earlier can be included. Eventually, through consistent and positive effort an organization is formed and a commitment to school/community program activity emerges.

To develop a community employment level profile the school executive needs to obtain from every employer the types of jobs and relative salary levels of each of the job-type categories. This is not entirely private data and can be obtained rather easily. From the chamber of commerce or similar organization, data relative to professional and private employment can be obtained. From this data the employment and income profile can be charted.

3. Age Groups Within the Community. What are the various age groups represented in the school community? This is a critically important question because the interests of individuals comprising a school community vary according to age of the population and, to a degree, even the geographical location of the community.

By obtaining data relative to this question, the school executive can discover facts which go far in understanding types and levels of community-wide support for community education programs.

For example, the school executive might learn that the average age within the community is quite young and that interest in education is high because the young supporters have school age or pre-school age children. This age group may represent a vocal power structure often at odds with the older, wealthier power structure. Sometimes the latter group is conservative, especially in the realm of community education or community school organization. Here lies the potential for effective school-community leadership by the local school administrator; because **it is possible** to blend an older conservative leadership with a younger and perhaps more liberal leadership to obtain a positive force for educational change and improvement.

Generally, the older and more conservative element of the community will support an educational endeavor such as community education or the organization of a community school program if it can be demonstrated that the program will have long-term benefit for the community.

Community education is an economic consideration for profit-oriented and forward-looking community leaders. They are aware of the fact that better schools make better communities; and better communities mean better jobs which in turn mean more money in circulation for even better schools and so on around the economic circle of the profit motive. This is the real world within which the modern educational executive must relate if community education programs are to become a reality.

Data relative to age can be a bit more difficult to obtain than that for employment. Two principal sources are the chamber of commerce records and the United States Bureau of Census records. The latter contains accurate information which can be plotted on school district maps which have superimposed census grids. By assembling such a map, the

problem of determining the location of various age groups within the community is solved, thereby easing the task of determining population distribution in relation to educational facilities for housing community education programs.

4. Attitudes About the School System. What are the attitudes of community members toward the school system? This has been a popular topic of formal opinion research; yet, a number of school executives give only token attention to this important facet of community study. The authors have asked practicing school administrators how their respective communities feel about education and the school system. Also, they have posed the same question to community leaders in the various communities. The differences in responses were amazing. Too often the superintendent of schools will reply, "all is well," while community leaders in the same school district will reply emphatically that, "the administration just isn't very responsive to community interests." This is indeed unfortunate and can lead to conflict within a school community and certainly has the potential for weakening the channels of communication and cooperation necessary to embrace and nurture the concept of community education.

To avoid these kinds of problems the school administrator should conduct attitude surveys within the school community. It is here that a basic level of community involvement in educational decision-making can be initiated effectively. By involving community leaders in development and application of attitude surveys, the potentiality of token involvement is avoided. Once initial involvement activity becomes a meaningful project, then the future effectiveness of the school-community marriage is virtually assured.

Action research at the local school district level generally follows the pattern of a questionnaire mailout where citizens are asked to react to questions and express observations concerning major facts of the school system—organization, finance, staff, curriculum, public relations, and co-curricular activities.

As a follow-up study, based on findings from the community attitude survey, some school executives publish a budget study handbook which lists and describes various ongoing and proposed programs for the regular educational and the expanded community education programs. Each

program contains a statement of dollar cost required to continue, upgrade, or initiate each described program; and citizens are invited to react to each program prior to budgetary decisions. This is a very effective means of soliciting and utilizing community input into educational programming and priority assessment.

Implications for the Board of Education

The board of education is the decision-making body which controls the programs and the direction of the school system. The data obtained from the four areas of inquiry described above should be shared with the board. Obviously, some of the data are confidential as shown in the following tabulation:

| Inquiry | Level of Confidentiality |
|--|--------------------------|
| 1. Community Power Structure | Very Confidential |
| 2. Trade and Professional Employment Profile | Semi-confidential* |
| 3. Age Groups within the Community | Public Information |
| 4. Attitudes About the School System | Public Information |

* Dependent upon the design of the profile in relation to community size and potential for invasion of privacy.

Armed with this battery of information, school district personnel and community personnel are able to join effectively into a team organized to bring school and community into a relationship which will mutually benefit one another.

Administrative leadership, community leadership, individual and group effort, and school board and municipal government support are all required if the objectives of community education are to be achieved. Through this type of dedication, a new level of school and community achievement can be effected. It has worked, it is working, and it will continue to work throughout America's 17,000-plus school districts. These are the prerequisites for continued strengthening and developing of the already successful marriage of school and community.

"There is a cybernetic law that states that the more probable a message is, the less information it provides. The information contained in a message, for example, decreases with its repetition. This creates a curious dilemma for any group: the longer its members are together, the less they have to say to each other—at least about the group's own relational structure. Since the circuitry of the group is known to everyone, the information value of what is being communicated is going downhill all the time. The more effectively a group communicates about itself and its constituents, the more quickly it will stagnate in the absence of inputs from outside."

Philip Slater, *Earthwalk*
Anchor Press-Doubleday, Garden City,
New York, 1974, p. 69.