

FLORIDA'S VENTURE WITH SCHOOL ADVISORY COUNCILS: PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS INFERRED FROM RESEARCH

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Introduction

In 1973 Florida's legislature ordered each school district to implement a school advisory council system (Fla. Stat. S230.22 [1973]). The legislation represents a venture on the part of the state to improve school-community relations through such councils and ultimately lead to more satisfactory schooling. We intend to enlighten the assumptions on which Florida's venture is built and the conditions which will affect its outcome. The venture is a serious one and deserves close scrutiny.

Our culture has a history of placing high hopes in relatively minor adjustments. Our technological notion of "fixing" things which usually involves tightening something here, putting a patch there, adjusting a mechanism, or making minor repairs may very well have carried over into our thinking about how to improve school-community relations. Here we attempt to go beyond a "piece-meal" approach and use basic and field research to point out several problem areas pertinent to school advisory councils and propose further research and action inferred from that research.

Five overlapping problem areas are examined which include: the prevailing, working concept of community; the need for an independent information source for councils; representativeness of councils; existing forms of communication between school and community; and constructive educational organization change. Our attack on these problems focuses on the role of councils in promoting a more responsible and democratic arrangement of school-community relationships.

"Community"

The term "school-community relationships" has long been an administrative phrase, to some extent a euphemism for public relations. In this formulation, "community" becomes simply the "public" or clientele served by a school, or more accurately, by a school system. The administration or teacher organization seeks information from its clientele or public in order to sell its product more effectively. From time to time this clientele is called the "community." The problems of defining the community are often overlooked.

School advisory councils are supposed to inform schools and school systems about the interests and attitudes of the community. They cannot do this effectively until they achieve a working definition of a concrete (that is, not abstract or rhetorical) community existing in a relationship to a concrete school. To become concrete in the sense of being as "real" or actual as the school, communities require geographical integrity, localized power, and an active and interested body of citizens involved in local school policy

formulation. These, then, are three goals which school advisory councils should pursue in building community around the school. Each will be discussed in turn.

A genuinely geographic community, as distinguished from an administratively declared attendance area, is a probable requirement for successful school advisory council activity. In "A Sociologist on School-Community Relationships," Gordon W. Blackwell (1955, p. 133) has written:

"To the extent that the real base for community organization . . . coincides with the real sociological boundaries of community, the chances for successful accomplishment of the objectives of the coordination process will be increased. Demonstration of the failure of various agency programs to operate over areas not coterminous with real communities has been made by Lee Coleman for a Georgia county."

Second, councils need to get localized power. Without power to translate "advice" into practice and policy, the potential energies of a council quickly dissipate in frustration or indifference. In regard to localized power, Fantini (1969, p. 97) has observed that "professionals, including researchers, are increasingly referring to the drive for self-determination as the 'fate-control' variable. The preliminary findings indicate that fate-control fundamentally affects human motivation essential to achievement in all areas." Such a sense of fate-control or self-determination exercised and experienced by councils not only makes a more effective council but can also have a significant effect on student achievement. That is, such councils can serve as a locus of influential parent participation in school matters. Studies by several researchers have demonstrated that when parents are involved in the decision-making processes in education, their children are likely to do better in school. Likewise, such parental participation and cooperation in school affairs leads to higher attendance, better study habits, fewer discipline problems and the like (Lopate, *et al.*, 1969).

Finally, a study by Paul E. Leman (1972) suggests that, if we want citizens to become informed about school matters, then they need to be "actively interested." To this we should add two observations by William Alexander (1972, p. 656): "First, community involvement is most widespread and effective when the issues are real and personal.

Second, community involvement is most real and personal at the individual school level." From these two observations, Alexander goes on to note that

"Review of various types of councils operating . . . during the past 25 years confirms the belief that district-wide organizations not based on individual school representation tend to lack the vitality and problem-solving focus of such representative councils."

School advisory councils should be school-based, pursue actual power in policy formulation, engage the active interest of the members by making the stakes real and personal, and, finally, seek to make the attendance area a genuine sociological community.

Independent Sources of Information

The dynamics of getting information have been a constant concern of citizen advisory groups; first, in order to adequately prepare such groups for responsible participation (McCune, 1956, p. 64); and secondly, to maintain the confidence of school boards (Bretsch, 1959, p. 77). However, these are largely information concerns that can be solved by a program of administratively initiated communication about the school's needs and successes. A more critical information need is expressed by James D. Koerner in *Who Controls American Education?* from which a major conclusion is drawn (Davis, 1973, p. 36) that, "citizens have neither the information nor political leverage necessary to counterbalance the monopolistic power of national professional organizations or state and federal programs and funds."

Herbert Hamlin (1957, p. 26), long a champion of vigorous citizen group conduct of education, has written, "A good deal of the trouble citizen's committees have traces to their lack of information for use in thinking about the local school and community situation. They need information from outside sources." Along these same lines Frank M. Marlow (1969, p. 19) has suggested that providing such advisory committees with outside consultants is one way in which a school board can demonstrate its support.

Before discussing a major source of potentially independent information, the university or college, one further comment on information seems useful. In *Information Decision Systems in Education*, Gary M. Andrew and Ronald E. Main (1970) made the following observations:

1. In a biological sense, organisms which have neither the capability to adapt nor the requisite information system to notify them of the requirement to adapt soon become extinct. (p. 3)
2. Unless they are implemented through logical techniques, . . . information systems can exist, evolve, and promulgate themselves in the absence of clearly defined goals. It is essential, therefore, that the organization for which the information system serves be cognizant of its purposes. (p. 4)
3. Power is the means to influence people and events. Information influences people and events; hence, information is power. (p. vii)

One might add to statement three that while information is power, power is also access to independent sources of information. One such source could be the college or university. This source suggests itself, first, because unbiased information is its wealth and its professional, lawful business. Second, this source is more cosmopolitan in its personnel, resources, and viewpoint. Thus, the possibilities for information and perspectives which can present alternatives to a locality are possible. Finally, the resource presents itself to attention as higher education increasingly involves itself in "community service," continuing education, and "out-reach" activity.

While a university is certainly a potential source of independent information, two cautions should be entered. First, it can be expected that to the degree in which consultative arrangements are made through school administrators or boards, the university expertise will be less independent of its "employer." Hence councils should have the capability to purchase expertise independently of other elements in the school system. Second, in view of the stand taken here on the council's role in school-community relations and information acquisition, the university or college may not be yet ready to commit its resources. In "Which Citizens Participate in What?", Irving Lazar (1971, p. 106) has written, "It is hard to think of any social institution less involved in the problems of . . . community than the university."

Representativeness of Councils

A school advisory council will neither inform its school or school system of the interests and attitudes of the group members of its community nor know what information it needs unless the council is in fact what its enabling law [Fla. Stat. 2230.22 (1) (b)] stipulates: "broadly representative of the community served by the school." This means that the membership of a school advisory council must be representative at least of the various socio-economic groupings which inhabit the attendance area. Unfortunately there is a tendency to overlook some of the major difficulties which have historically made representativeness a serious problem.

The problems of the recruitment and participation of lower socio-economic group members within advisory councils are varied and complex. Piven (1967, p. 117) studied the problem of the incompatibility of the world view of lower socio-economic group members with the perspective conventionally necessary to function on advisory councils. He said that the poor "have no belief in their ability to affect the world in which they live, and so they are not easily induced to try to affect it." This hopeless and passive perspective was also noted by Zurcker (1970). Wilson (1963, p. 482) agreed but emphasized the problem the poor have in abstracting from concrete experiences. He found that the poor are likely to see general plans in "terms of specific threat and short-term costs" as opposed to upper- and upper-middle-class people who are likely to think in terms of long-range benefits.

The lower classes are (Banfield and Wilson, 1963) "private regarding" as opposed to the more "public regarding" middle class: voluntary and enduring membership in advisory councils is virtually confined to higher socio-economic status (Wright and Human, 1955; Harris, 1971; Hoffman, 1970). Warren (1971) found lower-status people in rising fear of co-optation and disenchantment with established agencies of the community. To them their advice is only accepted if it goes along with the status quo.

Certainly, there is the question, "who speaks for the poor?" and how to avoid "maximum feasible misunderstanding" in efforts to establish such a voice on a council (Alinsky, 1965; Marris and Rein, 1967; Moynihan, 1969; Litwak and Meyer, 1974).

Perhaps the alternatives available to Florida for responding to the problems have been most starkly stated by Edelston and Kolodner (1967, p. 240):

"It seems to us that there are only two choices: either time, money and method must be available to facilitate a process which is more than perfunctory, or the pretense should be dropped altogether and program planning left to the technicians. Any course between is meaningless ritual."

The first alternative is a much better bet, and here are four of its steps.

The State Department of Education should insist that councils become representative of the occupational, ethnic, racial, sex and age composition of the population served by the school or school systems. The present evaluation form used by the department focuses only on sexual and racial categories and ambiguously asks, "Is the committee broadly representative of the community?" The department should do a thorough statewide analysis of the present social composition of the councils. On the 1974 evaluation, 100 percent of the district-wide councils and 91 percent of the school-wide councils answered this ambiguous question of representativeness in the affirmative. Such a reply needs verification. The analysis should also determine whether different recruitment practices produce different memberships. Finally, this study should seek the views of lower socio-economic people about their participation in councils. Such information could provide help in insuring representativeness.

The possibility of giving these councils decision-making power needs serious examination. This could be perceived as the practical extension of the department's effort to make the local school the unit for accountability. The city school system of Louisville, Kentucky has established school councils which have decision-making responsibilities. This Louisville case should be examined.

Finally, the department should study the present and potential types of training available for council members. Without substantial training in such democratic decision-making processes as the Method of Practical Judgment (Raup, *et al.*), broadly representative councils could easily turn into shouting matches or lessons in futility.

Existing Communication System

We should approach school advisory councils with exceeding modesty of expectation or abandon that establishment and concentrate our efforts on improving the existing communication system between school and community so that it may become the basis for a more wholesome form of school-community relationships. A basic issue that has to be faced in regard to school advisory councils is their place in a naturally operating communication system that channels information between school and community. When such a system is investigated, the relative unimportance of a school advisory council in that system is disclosed. Most of the communication between a school and members of its service area flows through a teacher-student-parent communication network. Considering this, the conventionally established school advisory council may be no more than an appendage to an already bulging school bureaucracy.

Within any school attendance area, or community, there exists a communication network which can be diagrammed by noting who talks to whom on a regular basis over time. It is also possible to describe a school-oriented communication network within a school's attendance area by asking

people, "To whom do you talk about schooling and on whom do you rely when making decisions about the quality of schooling?" This procedure can provide a rough idea of how school-oriented communication flows through a community. By selecting a school and determining the general form of its school-oriented communication, the effectiveness of a council within that network can be checked.

A relatively small, heterogeneous (race and socio-economic), elementary school in Alachua County was chosen as a case. A random sample of parents (34 out of 214) was interviewed using a structured interview to determine the general characteristics of the school-oriented communication network associated with this school.

In general, the four major findings were (1) parents do not usually talk to their neighbors about schooling [3 out of 34 talked to their neighbors], (2) parents do not usually talk to work cohorts about school [2 out of 34 talked to work cohorts], (3) parents do not usually talk to council members about schooling [2 out of 34 talked to SAC members; one was a council member and the other was an officer in the parent-teacher organization], and (4) all parents reported that they talked about schooling with their children and made their decisions regarding schooling based on information gained through their children. Other school-related communication took place as parents congregated around the school just before children were released for the afternoon and when parents talked with teachers, normally about individual student problems.

In this sample, few parents talk to council members. We have to question the general effectiveness of the council arrangement for getting information from the community into the schools, and *vice versa*. Upon hearing this report, one council member remarked that we should realize that councils are new and have not yet established themselves. Even considering this, how will their further establishment greatly affect the day-to-day communication behavior within a community?

The teacher-pupil-parent communication link is primarily responsible for how information gets into the community. It might also be used in getting information from the community into the school. It is an already existing and broadly-based communication system which potentially could facilitate the development of a more wholesome school-community relationship and more intelligent decisions at the school building and school district level.

Of course, the teacher-pupil-parent communication link, if it is to work both ways, will have to be fostered and will require the expenditure of time, energy, and money. For it to be effective, a change in teacher behavior and school routine will be necessary. But this may be no more expensive in terms of time and resources than a system of school advisory councils.

There is a possible role for councils even recognizing the existence of natural communication networks. Once such natural networks are cultivated, the school might very well be overloaded with input from its constituents. However, this information would represent the interest of an aggregation of individuals within the attendance area and most likely would have to be integrated in some way before the school could manage its response. If the school advisory council could accept such an integrative function, it could provide a necessary service. But for the council to under-

take this task, questions of the nature of community, independent sources of information, and representativeness will have to be faced again with a new dimension.

Practical Dimensions—Old Boundaries and New Expectations

The Florida statute requiring the formation of school advisory councils is only one element of broader legislative commitment to decentralize educational decision making in order to provide for increased involvement of parents, citizens, teachers, and students in educational planning. Other examples include the Annual Report of School Progress, school district and school center comprehensive planning, and Full-Time Equivalent (FTE) program budgeting; each calls for major changes in patterns of educational leadership in Florida school systems. These statutes reflect a fundamental assumption made by Florida legislators that established patterns of interaction in complex educational systems can be modified readily by legislative mandate. Further, legislators have also assumed that such changes can be brought about with minimal time allowed for transition, little or no training or other support arrangements to assist in bringing about the proposed changes and only a token monitoring of the processes by which the new statutes are implemented. Whether the assumptions are warranted is a question that has to be faced.

The discussion to this point has focused upon four general problem areas related to the formation, functioning, and social context of school advisory councils. It is the purpose here, first, to indicate briefly, some practical dimensions of the relationships between a school organization and its community which are involved in establishing an effective school-based citizens advisory committee, and, second, to suggest that the process for bringing about basic changes in this relationship may be facilitated by an awareness of these practical limitations. The discussion which follows is based upon a diagnostic matrix for organizational analysis developed by Fox, *et al.* (1973, 129-149).

One of the first barriers to meaningful participation of parents and citizens in educational planning for school improvement concerns the legitimacy of their involvement in educational decision making. It boils down to a problem of traditional territories. Principals and teachers view themselves as professionals who have been trained to make curricular and instructional decisions for students entrusted to their care. In general, parents and citizens have acknowledged the professional expertise of school personnel and have accepted the existence of a boundary between professional and nonprofessional responsibility in education. The requirement for a school advisory council directly challenges the legitimacy of this boundary and calls for a new partnership between professionals and nonprofessionals.

A second practical concern is the establishment of an effective school advisory council related to the roles and functions which parents and citizens on a council will undertake. The typical model of citizen and parent involvement has been the informal parent-teacher association which has served as a vehicle both for informing parents about selected aspects of school programs and for mobilizing parent fund-raising support for school projects. The school advisory council legislation calls for the design of a more active role for parents and citizens in educational planning, budgeting, and evalua-

tion. Common expectations about the appropriateness of the parental and citizen roles in school programs must be augmented by expectations for direct and active participant roles in school decision making. This shift in the role of parents and citizens on councils anticipates a corresponding shift in the roles of educational personnel serving on these councils toward increased listening and support during discussion of matters affecting the school. Modification of roles will take time, but it may be facilitated by deliberate cooperative planning among principals, parents, teachers, citizens, and students on councils to assure that the contribution of each member is encouraged. Active participation as an explicit value supports individual contributions, not only in order to provide representation for the group with which that individual identified, but also to provide an opportunity for the council to recognize and utilize the individual ideas, talents, and skills of council members in making decisions.

A third issue closely related to the questions of professional/nonprofessional boundaries and roles of participants in school advisory councils concerns the directions, focus, and strength of influence exerted by council members, both individually and collectively. The most common patterns of influence between school and parents have focused upon individual students. For example, in reporting a student's academic performance and social behavior to his/her parents, the teacher or principal solicits parental support of enforcement of school values of achievement and behavioral self-control. In other words, school personnel attempt to influence parents as a method for changing student behavior. In instances where the influence effort is directed from parents to the principal or teacher, usually the parents are seeking a change which they believe will specifically benefit their child. By contrast, school advisory councils are intended to provide a mechanism for parents and advisory councils are intended to provide a mechanism for parents and citizens to exert influence in educational decision making with respect to the total educational program of a school as it affects all students who attend that school. Hence, the establishment of a council calls for radical changes in the direction and focus of influence. The fact that parents are to constitute a majority membership of a council also emphasizes the weight which their voices are to carry in the workings of a council. The very practical problem of traditionally felt limitations of influence and new expectations has to be faced. Facing the issue of influence requires as a first step clarifying and validating the kinds of concerns which a council will consider as its charge. For example, a council might define its purpose as the development of values and goals for the school and the evaluation of the appropriateness of programs and of the effectiveness of current programs in light of those values and goals. This statement of purpose recognizes that trained educational personnel must continue to exercise their expertise in specifying objectives, assessing needs, identifying methods and procedures, and selecting resources for instructional activities. The potential influence patterns of councils form a continuum from "rubber stamp" to confrontive power struggles, and it is vital to their effective operation that members develop common perceptions and values about the kinds of issues which constitute legitimate concerns of the council. Although council recommendations may not be binding, for members to experience a sense of productivity it is neces-

sary that their work be regarded as important and have a visible impact upon school programs.

The school principal and his/her attitudes toward participation of parents and citizens in educational decision making are crucial to the formation and functioning of an effective school-based council. The principal, although an ex officio member of the council, is likely to select initial participants, determine the time and frequency of meetings, suggest a purpose and possible tasks, and define limits of council activities. The principal also generally controls access to official information about the school. His/her attitudes toward shared decision making in educational planning and willingness to give time, energy, and effort to a council are also critical considerations. Finally, the extent to which he/she is willing to support a council financially by covering costs of mailing a newsletter or by purchasing services or materials to strengthen skills of council members has a direct bearing on the council's effectiveness.

School advisory councils constitute one mechanism for giving parents and citizens a direct role in seeking ways to improve educational opportunities for students. But effective councils cannot be simply mandated into existence; they must learn to become effective by recognizing and dealing directly with the issues of planning and implementing changes in the human systems of the school and its community.

Constructive Educational Organization Change

Improvement in school-community relations in an industrially, commercially associated population, whether that improvement arises from school advisory councils or better parent-child-teacher arrangements, in any event will require at least five changes in the conduct of schooling. Accepting the fact of necessity of the changes and acting in terms of the acceptance are probably necessary for school improvement. These are the changes. Carefully "sweeping" organizational reform of the school and school system (Averch, *et al.*, 1972, p. 158) is one. No change short of this has practical warranty. Any change short of this is aborted or has unintended consequences because the members of the system all together are and make the change—the law of *interpenetrativeness* or *transactionality*.

Second, a shift of school attention from conventional pedagogical matters and ideas to the socio-economic arrangements of the families of pupils of the school is probably

necessary. The variable of family background is the only variable consistently evidenced as related to school achievement (Dyer, 1968, p. 42, 52; Averch, *et al.*, 1972, pp. 1958-60). The attention could start with distributing books to pupils who possess none. It could start with or aim methodically at thoroughgoing racial and economic integration. The attention could start with establishing community organizers like Saul Alinsky, Martin Luther King, or Walter Reuther.

Third, a reduction of bureaucracy and size of schools and school systems (Averch, *et al.*, 1972, pp. 94-96) is necessary. This could be promoted by democratizing the criteria and means used for selecting principals and teachers (Averch, *et al.*, 1972, pp. 97-98; Grobman, 1958; Miles, 1965; Schmuck, 1968). It could be promoted by providing in-service training of principals, teachers and administrative staff in human relations and small group dynamics and in a method of democratic judgment in practice (Miles, 1965; Schmuck, 1968). The reduction requires radical decentralization of accountability and reporting and, maybe, an active realization that legal responsibility may delegate executive power.

Fourth, a change is necessary from an hierarchical-competitive power allocation system to a system of either equal and countervailing power or of equal and equally controlled power (Kelley, 1951; Miller and Hamblin, 1963; Bridges, Doyle and Mahan, 1968). Steps to either change are equal reward, collective bargaining, government in public, social anthropological work by teachers and principals in attendance areas, and training in human relations and group dynamics and in democratic judgment in practice.

Finally and concurrently, there must be carefully sustained cultivation of external shocks to the educational system and a sustained, inclusive public search for a unifying American dream (Averch, *et al.*, 1972, pp. 156, 166). As the recent "War on Poverty" can remind us and the physicist has long known, systems maintain themselves and change fundamentally only in response to external force. On the matter of a unifying American ideal, Averch, *et al.*, quoted Thomas James before the National Academy of Education:

"We desperately need, for the long range, not to preoccupy ourselves with the trivial, but to shape our goals to fit our broadest perception of the needs of human life, and to challenge our model-builders to reach toward them, and to be critical of failures to reach them."

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