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Utilization of community advisory councils

by Wayne Robbins



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Legislation and policies initiated in very recent years often require that a component of "community involvement" be incorporated into educational programs. This is often accomplished or sometimes mandated through the formulation of a citizens advisory council.

Unfortunately, in my opinion, advisory councils have not become an effective force in relation to their potential for assisting in the improvement of American education, and community life in general. We must ask why.

First ask, are we serious? Do educators and governmental officials really want community involvement and at what level? Legislation often requires community involvement in the planning process of developing programs and activities and requires the signature of a community person showing approval of the plan or proposal. The level of involvement is generally strictly advisory with no decision making power given to community people. This often leads to frustration and a non-effective council.

Many educators believe that decision making is the sole right and responsibility of the professional and are unwilling to involve the agencies and the community in meaningful decision making. This attitude, it seems, encourages further distance between the school and the community and isolates the school from the community.

Numerous agencies serve the community in many different ways. Agency representatives must be a part of the total planning process so that they are able to continue their services in an effective manner, and, more importantly, provide input into how the community can be better served. Although the trend is improving, traditionally, schools have given little consideration to agency needs.

Second, if we are serious about involving community and agency people through effective advisory councils, what can be implemented to accomplish this?

If we view the community from a holistic standpoint, we see the school as a sub-part of the total community it serves. If we view environment as the major factor in determining the lives of individuals and especially youngsters, then we must view the school as only one factor in this determination. Accepting this point of view leads one to think in terms of the total educational system and not isolate thoughts to the limited schooling process. How then can we implement a process by which the total environment can be addressed in a coordinated fashion to improve the total educational system?

Educators can take the leadership. They possess the only facility that is located within every sub-community within the United States—the school. They represent an administrative structure which is politically safe to most people, and the school/community advisory council has the potential of becoming the force to bring the segments of the school-community together.

The frustrations, which many council members feel, may be reduced if certain processes are followed to assist council members in becoming more effective. These processes include:

1. Assuring that council representation is reflective of the community. This means to examine the community from major political and sociological factors and include agency and community members from at least the major segments.
2. Developing a working relationship—it is important to take time to establish a strong working relationship among council members. Knowing and recognizing each individual's strengths, limitations, and personality assists in developing ties that result in a more effective council. There are many simulations and/or games which can assist in this process.
3. Establishing Roles—From some traditional processes such as conducting a needs assessment, establishing bylaws and developing goals and objectives, additional steps must be taken to assure that each council member knows his or her roles in relation to the operation of the council. Beginning with a basic understanding of the education code, district board policies and administrative rules and regulations, and then discussing and determining specific roles and parameters. What are the council's responsibilities? What is the prerogative of the principal and/or staff? What specific area will the council be involved in? Will the council be the decision making body for some agenda items or will it always be totally advisory? What are the normal reporting procedures to other parties, such as community school staff, administration, agency needs and school board? No two councils will necessarily operate under the same guidelines, but by establishing how "this" council will function reduces frustration.

4. Developing specific process skill areas—Some of these are:
 - a. Consensus—Reaching agreements without voting.
 - b. Conflict Resolution—Conflict is a normal human function especially if a council is effective. The point is to have a process by which to resolve conflicts when they arise.
 - c. Time Management—Making the most effective use of time and efforts as related to the council.
 - d. Change Processes—Knowing what logical steps need to be taken in order to create change.
 - e. Identifying Resources—Methods by which human, physical and financial resources within the community can be identified.
 - f. Task Force Organization—A method by which a greater number of people can be involved in decision-making processes and leadership can be dispersed throughout the community. There are, of course, other skills which will be identified as needs for a particular council. These should be addressed as they arise. There are several effective simulation exercises which assist in developing these skill areas.
5. Maintaining Interest—Many councils begin to fall apart after the initial interest and functions have been accomplished. It is important to continually identify new areas of concerns or endeavors. Sometimes these may be a problem or they may be areas by which the council can introduce new and innovative ideas. The point is that a council without a task will soon become non-effective.

These five points are offered as suggestions for implementing and maintaining an effective council. If councils are implemented by going directly to issues without developing process skills and establishing roles, the chances of success seem to lessen. Taking the time to follow at least the five factors mentioned above may not insure a successful council, but experience has shown that the chances are much greater.

Community "Advisory" councils can be an effective means to bring the school and community closer together and to improve upon the total climate of the community.

Ideology and education

"If the majority of Americans come to be preoccupied with questions of human dignity, worth, and justice for all, then the schools might have an invaluable civilizing influence on such a society. If, as is more likely, such questions are regarded with disdain, then our minorities and women will have to look elsewhere for enlightenment and help."

Ideology and Education. Richard Pratte.
New York: David McKay. 1977. p. 280.