

Support or Confront?

Organizing public participation in P.E.I.

One thing far from settled in public education systems is the role parents and citizens may play in decisions taken in the local school. Professional educators notoriously obstruct their playing any such role. School boards clearly fail to fulfil the democratic functions they may seem to have on paper, their hand-in-glove relationship with even remoter authority placing them in frequent confrontation with local opinion.

The Home and School organization has traditionally coped by talking softly with deference; it carries no big stick, however. Smitheram analyses the meteoric but much-resisted rise in Prince Edward Island of the rival Concerned Citizens movement, and suggests that a solution may lie in giving the Home and School at least a small stick and a recognized role in decisions. But in a postscript he notes that that organization still doesn't seem interested in adopting an advocacy role.

In Canada and the United States three types of organization exist to meet the need for extended public participation: the volunteer cooperative groups known as Home and School or Parent-Teacher Associations, independent issue-oriented groups, and the school-building-based organizations called School Councils which are legally mandated by Provincial or State Legislatures.(1)

In Prince Edward Island only the first two types exist, in the form of Home and School Associations and Concerned Citizens groups. The latter have emerged very recently and account for an upsurge in public debate about P.E.I. schools. Why independent parents organizations have sprouted, when a well-developed provincial system of parent representation has existed for over 80 years, is illustrated in the recent Borden school controversy.

The Borden School issue

In February 1977, the Unit 2 Regional School Board of Prince Edward Island voted to remove grade 7 and 8 students from Borden Elementary into Summerside, and to close three small elementary schools in the Borden zone by June 30. A year earlier, in anticipation of this change, parents had appealed to the principal to accept the formation of a Home and School group for the Borden School, and had made overtures to the Provincial Executive at a semi-annual meeting, but no active response had resulted. As events developed, the citizens felt urgently the need to organize for opposition independently of the traditional parents body, and formed a Concerned Citizens group.

At issue were the parents' desires to maintain a close student-teacher-parent relationship, to minimize bus travel, to preserve rural identity and values, and to maintain the basic academic program in the community school framework. The Board argued that their motion had to prevail because of provincial policies of providing for consolidation of small units, separate housing for the intermediate level (grades 7-8-9), and equal program opportunities for all students. In summary, the situation had all the well-known characteristics of consolidation debates.

Within weeks the strength of parents' opposition became manifest in petitions, well-attended public meetings, and demands to rescind the motion. The Board reconsidered on two occasions, but remained adamant in its decision. Extensive publicity attracted sympathetic parents from other areas (who formed a provincial Concerned Citizens Association), and embroiled administrators, politicians and even the then Premier of the Province, Alex B. Campbell. Parents were caught in a vicious circle, between a board which steadfastly insisted it had to implement Department of Education consolidation policies and a government which resolutely maintained it could not interfere with the autonomy of boards (which had been set up in 1971 as part of the island's Comprehensive Development Plan). A high profile dispute raged for over a year. Parental pressure finally won a compromise, whereby two one-room schools were closed, but the zone retained grades 1 to 8 in two remaining eight-room and four-room buildings. This and many similar disputes were waged by independent groups of parents rather than by the entrenched Home and School Association.

The Home and School style

The basic orientation of the Home and School is one of cooperation and support for the school system. The sincere desire

"to do what is best for the children" is interpreted in such a way that cooperation with school authorities has high priority. The correlative seems to be that conflict is typically considered destructive of the system and ultimately obnoxious in its effects upon children. It is part of the "creed" of the Home and School "that it should be a cooperative effort to produce Canadian citizens who shall be capable of perpetuating the best of national life...and...that it shall not be used as a medium of criticism of or interference with school authorities and policies."(2)

Given this orientation, Home and School has overwhelmingly favoured methods of influencing education which are non-disruptive. Typically, it employs the tools of research, discussions, briefs, conferences, and the like. Moreover, these instruments are used in a controlled fashion. Public contexts such as open meetings and conferences are used to air issues, gather information, assess attitudes, and gauge support. Once an issue has been defined and a desire to pursue it has been democratically established, subsequent action is usually carried out in the contexts of private meetings with boards or principals or government officials. There, Home and School expects, and is usually granted, a hearing.

In these private contexts advice is given and received, but nothing requires the recipients to accept it or act upon it. The Home and School rarely if ever **demands** action. It may go one step further in the sense of a repeated appeal of some sort, and a return to the public context, which usually consists of a report at an open meeting about the reception it has been accorded. Usually, this is the limit of its tactics of influence - to venture into political means of public confrontation violates its code of cooperation. The belief is that conflict may yield short-term success but in the long run maintaining friendly relations with the authorities is more effective.

The Provincial Federation's list of Presidents since 1953 is representative of the kinds of persons who are most influential in the organization. Among the fifteen Presidents elected between 1953 and 1977, ten were primarily employed in education as teachers, principals, or administrators. Of the remaining five, four were professionals or spouses of professionals. Five of the Presidents were women, ten were men.

The Home and School record

A sample of the activities of the Provincial P.E.I. Home and School Association clearly shows that it has pursued many important educational issues. The P.E.I. group cannot be charged with being a mere "booster" society preoccupied with trivia and

sociability as several studies of American P.T.A.'s have maintained.(3) Since the Provincial's major activities are frequently responses to initiatives of local groups, it can be said that the latter also are not restricted to trivialities.

The Home and School has been effective in the role of high-lighting weaknesses of the school system. An obvious example is its 1955 call for the reform of teacher education, which was reiterated in 1962 and 1972. Its appeal preceded by fifteen years any concerted effort by Government and University to upgrade teacher programs and qualifications. Other examples include far-sighted recommendations about school literature, guidance, counselling, and vocational training.

Home and School has also actively fulfilled its support role when school authorities have set off in new directions, most notably in its participation in the massive reorganization of the school system between 1969-73. Furthermore, in less dramatic ways, the bulk of its activities are of a supportive nature. Through theme-oriented annual meetings, public conferences, discussion groups, and radio programs, it has played a significant role in information transmittal. For many citizens the Home and School is among the few significant sources of information about schooling. In addition, the organization provides one of the most readily available routes of access to school authorities at board and government levels. This feature is no doubt enhanced by its cooperative, non-militant orientation.

The list of activities of the Home and School is also significant in terms of what it **does** not include. In the 20 year span from 1953-1973 there is only one salient instance of sustained opposition to education authorities.(4) In 1972-73 the Home and School fought and won a vigorous public debate to reduce the size of a proposed new high school (Three Oaks) in Summerside.

In 1974 the Association called for a moratorium on school construction, a subject of numerous disputes since the inception of the education component of the Development Plan, which required complete consolidation of schools (365 in 1965 to 73 in 1974) and boards (from 365 in 1965 to 5 by 1972). This important issue was soon dropped, however, in the face of counterpressures.

Clearly, the Home and School is weakest in the role of defending parental interests when they differ from established policies, even in instances where parents are strongly united on an issue. Though 90% of the parents were united in the Borden controversy, which persisted in public view for over a year, the Provincial Home and School remained quiescent. While several members of the Provincial Executive accepted invitations by the

Concerned Citizens to attend strategy meetings, no significant aid was offered on an official basis. The failure to respond promptly, or at all, to "crisis" situations involving a struggle with a board or the government is perhaps the chief reason for the emergence of alternative parent groups.

A change in public attitudes

What are the reasons for this weakness in what is otherwise a commendable organization? In my view, part of the problem has to do with a turnabout in the kind of public involvement called for, where a school system is rapidly transformed without adequate consultation with the populace. Prior to 1969, most complaints about education were aimed at getting government or boards to remedy an out-dated system. Finally, when massive revisions did take place, from the mid-sixties on, some of the changes were gradually found objectionable. In particular, busing, school closures, and citizen participation in the larger educational structures became controversial issues. In this context, many citizens felt the need to change the direction or mode of implementation of entrenched policies. This context is new, in the sense that rather than supporting authorities in order to get them to act, there are now pressures to oppose authorities in what they are committed to doing.

The orientation and methods of Home and School are much more suited to the pre-1969 context than to the present one. If people in a community have been told the school is to be closed in a year, quick action is needed to undo a board decision. When it turns out, as it almost invariably does, that the gentle persuasions of briefs and discussions fail, the urgency of time impels people to resort to forceful political action. But Home and School, having quite consistently eschewed such tactics, hesitates and is found wanting. Hence, an independent citizens group is formed itself and proceeds with its urgent task.

Another aspect of the problem relates to the Home and School leadership. The profile indicates that it is what the literature calls a "professionally-led influence structure", which is locked into a support role out of self-interest. The theory is a plausible one, resting on the assumption that most people hesitate to bite the hand that feeds them. A leadership dominated by school personnel is likely to be cautious, not necessarily because of lack of courage, but often because it is difficult to accept the legitimacy of opposition to the system in which one must work.

In the matter of finances, the Federation has received grants from the Government on a one-year basis. This dependency raises the possibility that the organization itself may be tempted to

compromise when public opposition emerges. While this is strongly denied by the leadership, the suspicion remains, especially since the Liberal government cut off funding for the Rural Development Council of P.E.I. when it became too critical as a result of the public participation it had been mandated to stimulate.(5)

The above factors, and the general orientation to cooperate with and rarely criticize authorities, leads the latter to think of parent organizations as listeners and reactors. Communications are typically from the school to the parents about what is about to be proposed. But it is not expected that parents will initiate or block policies.

Concerned Citizens groups

Concerned Citizens groups have developed on P.E.I. only within the past six years. They are independent, volunteer, issue-oriented groups of parents and citizens which arise in "crisis" situations. Formed by local citizens without the sanction of any larger body or the school system, they have no formal constitution or standard forms of organization. They coalesce on the basis of a concrete issue and are typically meant to last only as long as the problem remains unsolved. The main issues spawning such groups have been school closures, school building, vocational programs, French Immersion, and busing.

Usually these groups are formed after normal channels of appeal to Home and School, principals, and boards have proved ineffectual. Thus, they are born in frustration. By the time they are organized, the level of discontent is high enough to lead to a rapid escalation of tactics. The protocols of writing briefs, attending special meetings with boards, and collecting petitions are always observed, in the hope that renewed pleas under the banner of an organization will succeed where earlier individual action did not. If they are again rebuffed - as is usually the case when basic policies are being opposed (6) - they resort to methods of political activism and "go public".

In P.E.I., the methods typically include extensive use of the media through press releases and TV interviews, calls for special sessions with boards, and, almost inevitably, demands that the Minister of Education take the stand at an open meeting complete with briefs, debates, and press coverage. At this stage, issue-oriented groups clearly recognize that sustained and vociferous public pressure is their only weapon. The smooth pathways of private negotiation on the "inside" of the system are blocked. If the authorities propose renewed committee study under terms which seem to invite procrastination and delay,

reaction is swift and negative. Yet there has been a ready willingness to respond to genuine attempts by the authorities to find solutions. For example, the protracted dispute in Borden was finally resolved by the initiatives of a new Superintendent, who won the trust of the Borden Concerned Citizens after he had accepted some of their views under persistent public pressure.

In a move uncharacteristic of issue-oriented groups, a province-wide organization was formed in 1977 with the broad objective of increasing public participation in education. The Borden dispute attracted sympathizers from other communities who, after a desultory open meeting with the Minister of Education and the Unit 2 Board Chairman, decided to form the Concerned Citizens Association for Education (C.C.A.E.). Its Executive consisted of one representative each from as many communities as would join. They were in turn supported by a Research Unit made up of individuals with research experience from the University and from established community organizations. Their tasks were to prepare briefs suggesting amendments to the School Act to increase public participation and to develop a locally adapted form of School Councils based on successful models in Canada and the U.S. In addition, background material was provided upon request for local Concerned Citizens groups involved with specific problems, regardless of whether the latter were affiliated with the C.C.A.E. or not.

In every instance the Chairmen of local and provincial bodies have been drawn from among farmers, clerics, housewives, and businessmen. Though educators and professionals have participated as members, none were elected to head any of the groups. Whereas the research group was dominated by educators, their role was primarily to provide information at the request of the citizens. The policy was that researchers should serve but not control. Most groups were led by a small core of activists. All meetings were open, and constant care was taken to ascertain popular support through petitions and attendance at public meetings.

Strengths and weaknesses

The main strengths of Concerned Citizens groups are clarity of purpose, action-orientation, independence, and grass-roots support. Their sense of purpose is fueled by definite, concrete objectives (such as keeping a school open) which are of direct concern to parents and students as a community. Such clear purposes form easily recognizable rallying points. Personal commitment is reinforced by the conviction that what the group is doing is linked to basic parental responsibilities and community needs. Finally, opposition offered by school authorities is all that

is needed to stimulate solidarity.

Concerned Citizens demonstrate an organizational vigour far greater than do permanent groups with broader goals. They discuss with a view to definite action. They aim to win their case, not just to be heard. They want action, not words. Though willing to exercise self-restraint as long as some progress is being made, they are prepared to move toward strong public debate in the face of inflexibility. In cases where open conflict has ensued, it occurred only after a long series of graduated approaches had been exhausted.

The determination of the groups is enhanced by their independence. Since they are led by non-school personnel, hesitation by leaders fearful of their employers does not hamper their activities. They are also difficult to co-opt because of independent leadership, the absence of financial support by any outside agency, and local autonomy. (The provincial C.C.A.E. is there as a resource only. It exercises no administrative control over the Locals.)

Concerned Citizens groups represent the emergence of grass-roots democracy. They arise from within the community without stimulation from outside agencies or the school system itself, and are controlled by non-school personnel.

Though issue-oriented organizations have only been active for the past few years, they have succeeded in influencing a number of specific board decisions about such matters as school closures, French Immersion programs, and access to board documents and meetings. They have also had considerable impact in raising awareness of the need for strengthened citizen participation in school governance. When one considers the difficulties in altering established policies or reversing decisions made by established authorities, who have all the resources of constituted power, finances and staff, the impact of Concerned Citizens must at least be judged significant.

However, in the brief history of Concerned Citizens in P.E.I., there has been little opportunity to test their capability in the support role. In the first place they have been embroiled in attempts to change existing policies, and this seems like a negative activity. Unfortunately the positive aspects of these efforts - the preservation of community schools and the promotion of a philosophy which envisions a close relationship between pupils, teachers, and parents - have been underplayed. Secondly, they have received no help from individual teachers, who in a period of shrinking enrolments and job placements have kept a safe distance from controversy. Thus once a crisis is done with, there is no one within the school to suggest specific new roles

Support or Confront?

for the citizens. The paucity of teacher involvement militates against forming contacts for cooperative long-term efforts.

The provincial C.C.A.E. faces special difficulties in its attempts to be supportive. Its public stances have made school administrators defensive, and many have chosen to view its proposals as dangerous attempts to dismantle the present consolidated board system and to return to individual school-based administration. This serious confusion arises from its suggestion that School Councils, while basically meant to be advisory groups, should have some decision-making powers in strictly local school affairs. The C.C.A.E. brief explicitly recognizes the boards as the only bodies with the power to delegate or withdraw decision-making powers; however, a more carefully conceived brief would have stressed this important point to avoid misunderstanding.

Where constant, long-term involvement in school affairs is desired, issue-oriented groups are ill-suited, since they tend to wax and wane with the rise and resolution of each issue. Another difficulty is that in the absence of a formally constituted structure, the membership may fail to be representative of all segments of the community. It should be noted that Home and School has no safeguards against this problem either. Finally, while the citizens groups do perform a role in information transmittal, the scope is limited to selected issues and there are no funds available for an adequate communications effort.

The reactions of government

What these groups are up against is well illustrated by obstacles faced at the provincial level by the Concerned Citizens Association for Education. In a bid to increase public participation it generated three proposals: to amend the School Act to allow for plebiscites where controversy develops over school closure; to have permissive legislation for School Councils, thus requiring boards to recognize them as legitimate advisory groups; and to form a Citizens Educational Information Service.(7)

The Minister of Education has not been convinced of the need for such measures. His reluctance was probably reinforced at the House Committee hearings of the P.E.I. Legislature in July, 1978. There the C.C.A.E.'s proposals were stonewalled by the Teachers' Federation, the School Trustees, and to a lesser extent the Home and School Association. The fears generated are summed up in the conclusion of the P.E.I.T.F.'s Executive counterbrief:

In conclusion, we wish to reemphasize the fact that, as an Executive, we seriously considered the proposals

Verner Smitheram

of the C.C.A.E. We are not prepared to support most of them because we do not believe that their implementation would lead to improved educational opportunities for the children of the Province. Many of the proposals appear to be aimed at breaking down the present administrative structure of education in the Province and we are not prepared to support this objective. We do not believe that the present structure has been in operation for a sufficiently long time period to achieve its potential. The proposals seem to be saying "return the decision-making power to the masses" and if one looks at the parts of the world where this is supposedly occurring it can be seen that it is done at the expense of personal freedom.(8)

The School Trustees fear a return to individual school-based boards. The Home and School's position is ambiguous; while it recognizes the need for fuller citizen participation, it has no wish to actively support what could become an alternative parent organization.

Criteria for good public participation

It is difficult to escape the conclusion that public participation in education in P.E.I. is in several important respects unsatisfactory: about 50% of the schools have no parents organization whatsoever. Among existing organizations, Home and School is often ineffectual when parents' wishes run contrary to the system's policies, while Concerned Citizens are trapped in a conflict model of interaction. The coexistence of two types of parents groups gives the impression of disunity and allows authorities to play one group off against the other.

As the legally constituted bodies administering the school system, boards must accept the responsibility for involving the public in critical decision-making activities at the local level. While no foolproof system has yet been designed for the purpose, extensive experience in Canada and the U.S. strongly suggests that the best forms of participation have emerged under the following conditions:

- when people have some sort of self-interest at stake;
- when they have a clear and compelling diagnosis of the needs of the situation;
- when they have a meaningful prescription or remedy for the situation;

Support or Confront?

and when they have a sense of power to act.(9)

The first condition is best met through a school-based organization, because most parents are directly interested in the school their children attend. Relatively few have system-wide concerns. The remaining conditions have as their sine qua non the delegation of specific board responsibilities to local groups. This is the "sticky wicket" which leads most boards and governments to hedge. The directives for the Quebec system of mandated School Committees, for example, state that:

school committees...must be defined within the school structure as organizations cooperating with school administrators and school boards. They are to be complementary structures without encroaching upon the duties and authority of school commissions and administrators.(10)

As a 1977 study headed by Professor Lucas of McGill shows, these committees failed to provide a useful forum for parents because they were structured so "that only benefits should be experienced by the authorities." Parents cannot be a source of meaningful contributions if their only option is to be in full agreement with the system. "If the choice is for more advocacy on the part of parents, occasional non-cooperation would seem to be one of the costs entailed."(11)

Just as boards insist on their right to criticize Department of Education policies, parents can be expected to want something more than a system which restricts them exclusively to cooperation. Besides being undemocratic, the stifling of non-cooperation is impractical, for citizens can take matters into their own hands, as we have seen. Boards must cease viewing parent groups as mere "wisdom-dispensing" agencies and accept a role for them in policy-formation. To do this boards will need to resist the view promoted by many professional educators that professionals are the only people fit to make judgments about education. The dominance of entrenched professional administrators in P.E.I. is increasingly recognized by parents and politicians alike as a potent factor in the diminished sensitivity of boards to parents' wishes.

The outcome for P.E.I.

Given the present status of parents' organizations in P.E.I., the Home and School Association would seem to be the most suited to function as the voice of all parents. However, this proposal only makes sense under certain conditions:

Verner Smitheram

(1) that some type of formal mandate be given by boards to indicate officially their desire to include parents as meaningful advisors to the schools and to the boards;

(2) that boards delegate some specific local responsibilities to recognized parents groups;

(3) that Home and School change its leadership profile to purge itself of the suspicion that it is a "professionally-led influence structure." It can do so by amending its constitution to ensure that its executive is dominated by non-professionals; and

(4) that the Home and School adopt advocacy as one of its major objectives. That is to say, in addition to the roles it now plays, Home and School should, where warranted, pursue parental concerns even in the face of official opposition, with legal and political means if necessary.

These proposals are intended to strengthen the position of Home and School within the educational structure, so that Locals may play a much more substantial role in the day-to-day life of the school, and to make it a credible force as the voice of **all** parents in both support and advocacy roles.

Postscript

In the years since this paper was written, nothing has happened to indicate that Home and School can, or wishes to, assume a strong advocacy role. Where it fails to respond, independent groups continue to arise to meet the needs of the moment. (12)

In 1978, when school controversies were frequent, the possibility of rivalry between parents groups, especially at the provincial level, seemed likely. However, a period of relative peace followed the election of a Conservative government, which is officially more sympathetic to parents rights and small community interests. In the ensuing lull, the C.C.A.E. has become dormant and Home and School remains unchanged. In a word, both groups behaved true to form. It seems that in Prince Edward Island, support and advocacy roles are destined not to be played out within the compass of a single parents association. If so, political realism suggests that the two types of organization be viewed as distinct and complementary forces.

NOTES

1. Quebec has had a province-wide system of School Committees since 1972. Institute for Responsive Education studies claim there were at least 10,000 Councils in the U.S.A. by 1977. Davies, D. "Citizen Participation: Quality and Impact," in *The Common*, April/May, 1977. p.3.

School Councils vary greatly in composition, role and effectiveness.
2. The Canadian Home and School and Parent Teacher Federation, *History 1895-1963*. Appendix E, p.88.
3. Fantini, M., Gittel, M., & Magot, R., *Community Control and the Urban School*, N.Y.: Praeger, (1970), p.74.
4. The Prince Edward Island Federation of Home and School Associations, *History 1953-1973*, Hesta MacDonald, editor; 1973, p.5.
5. The Rural Development Council was established as a semi-autonomous group specifically charged with stimulating public discussion of social, economic and educational changes called for in the P.E.I. Development Plan.
6. An attempt to account for the increase in confrontations between citizens and boards and for the inflexibility of boards on basic policies is made in my unpublished paper - Smitheram, V. "Resurgence and Reaction: Small Schools, Community Values, and Public Participation in P.E.I." Paper presented to Atlantic Education Association Conference, Charlottetown: October, 1977.
7. Concerned Citizens Association for Education Brief on Public Participation, April, 1978.
8. Provincial Executive of the P.E.I. Teachers' Federation, *A Reaction to Recommendations of the Concerned Citizens for Education*, March 1978.
9. Palmer, P., and Jacobson, E. *Action Research: A New Style of Politics in Education*. Boston: Institute for Responsive Education, 1974.
10. Government of Quebec, Department of Education. *Mission 27, School Committees and Parent Committees*. Document Number VIB. Quebec: 1972.

11. Lucas, B., Lusthaus, C.S., and Gibbs, H. "Parent Advisory Committees in Quebec: An Experiment in Mandated Parental Participation." Presented to the Annual Conference of the Canadian Association for the Study of Educational Administration, 1978.
12. Background for numerous disputes about schooling in P.E.I. since 1969 is available in "Development and the School Consolidation Debate" in Smitheram, V., Milne, D., and Dasgupta, S. *The Garden Transplanted: Prince Edward Island 1945-80*. Ragweed Press, Charlottetown, P.E.I., (1982).

