

Norman Robinson

# Grassroots Politicking

to save the neighbourhood school

In a society having different levels of income and of education, the idea of "grassroots" tends to be associated with the lowest level of all and therefore to have somewhat unsophisticated, earthy connotations. That this does not follow is demonstrated by the case studied in this article, where Robinson shows how a perceived threat to a neighbourhood school may stimulate a highly sober and sophisticated reaction by middle-class people, who command a wide variety of expertise. Does it seem reasonable to expect that this kind of group experience, once begun, is unlikely to end at that - with a return to an attitude of *laissez-faire* towards school-board decisions whether routine or strategic? Like the Coleman article, but also in contrast to it, this case exhibits the uniquely complicating factor in Canada of French immersion, as an issue fraught with its own kinds of public tension.

In the past, school boards and educators have sold parents on the concept of the neighbourhood school. Now parents seem unwilling to give it up. Many parents believe in the educational virtues of the neighbourhood elementary school. Many also believe that once a neighbourhood school is closed, the environmental forces of out-migration, population decline, and neighbourhood deterioration are irreversibly set in motion. In view of these beliefs, it is therefore not surprising that any suggested school closure or alternative use of a school can generate intense political conflict between neighbourhood parents and a school board.

One of the most significant political developments in the Western democracies in the last half of the 1970's has been the emergence of a wide variety of grassroots associations. These are

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groupings of people in a neighbourhood who have organized themselves to fight an issue that is vital to the everyday life of the neighbourhood. Such associations are most strongly developed in Europe. Spain has highly politicized neighbourhood associations. Italy's "self-reduction" movement is organized on a neighbourhood basis, and has been successful in getting citizens to pay only a "self-reduced" portion of utility, telephone and transportation rates. In France, there are well-developed neighbourhood groups in Paris fighting housing and transportation issues. (Perlman, p.4)

### **Grassroots associations of North America**

The development of such associations in the United States and Canada has been slower, but now appears to be catching up. Grassroots groups are emerging as a powerful and significant political force. New York has been the scene of innumerable rent strikes by neighbourhood associations (Perlman, p.6). In 1975 a network of neighbourhood associations from over one hundred cities in the U.S.A. successfully lobbied for federal legislation to force savings and loans companies to disclose the locations of the mortgages they held and the loans they made. This was an attempt to fight redlining, the practice among banks and loan companies of drawing a red line around neighbourhoods they considered to be high risks. Some neighbourhood groups have organized greenlining campaigns, getting people to draw their money out of institutions engaged in redlining practices and to put it into institutions willing to invest in the neighbourhood of the investors. (Perlman, pp.4, 18)

The grassroots associations of the late 1970's differ markedly from the social protest movements of the 1960's. Those focused primarily on national issues such as civil rights, Viet Nam, and women's rights. The focus of today's associations is on local organization and on local issues rooted in everyday lives. As one commentator puts it, "People are less concerned with making history than with making life." (Perlman, p.6)

The people involved in grassroots associations in U.S.A. and Canada today represent the total spectrum of society - rich, poor, young and old. This stands in sharp contrast to the 1960's when a much narrower segment of society was involved. The most remarkable development has been the increased involvement of the middle class. As Williams points out,

By the standards of the sixties, they are unrecognizable as protestors; their dress is neat, their tone is moderate, their battlegrounds indoors, not out.(p.12)

The middle class groups tend to be low on rhetoric and ideology

but high on the things the middle class does well, "organizing, propagandizing and working like hell." Members of these associations tend to have special skills that enable them to deal effectively with government bodies and the media, and to do the background research on the issues that are being fought.

Schools serve neighbourhoods, and the neighbourhood is the basic political territory for the grassroots group. There are numerous examples of neighbourhood groups in education which have employed successfully the several political strategies of direct action, seeking power, or forming alternative institutions. (Ianni, 1975) For example, dissatisfied parents of school children in quite a number of neighbourhoods have founded alternative schools.

There has been, however, little systematic study of grassroots associations in education as political phenomena. The one exception is a study by Summerfield, which examined the neighbourhood-based politics of education. Summerfield maintains that the neighbourhood functions essentially as an interest group. Neighbourhoods are, however, not all the same in terms of their interest group behaviour. Four basic political styles can be identified. Summerfield's study examined the relationships in each of four neighbourhoods between the community, the principal, and the school district authorities; but he did not analyse in depth the forces operating in each of the neighbourhoods studied.

Persons and places in this paper have been given fictitious names to preserve their anonymity.

The study reported here investigated the conflict between neighbourhood residents and the Mackenzie School Board over the Board's proposed plan for using surplus school space in the Inglewood neighbourhood elementary school. More specifically, the study focused on the grassroots political activity of the Inglewood residents.

### **Inglewood against Mackenzie**

Mackenzie School District is a large Anglophone urban school district somewhere in Canada. The Inglewood neighbourhood in this district is exclusively residential and upper middle class. The events in the case took place in the early months of 1978. Documentary data from the Mackenzie District files and the Inglewood group's files were collected and analyzed. Since the Mackenzie-Inglewood conflict had received wide media coverage, the newspapers, radio open-line shows, and public television forums were important.

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Structured interviews of two to three hours each were held with the principal leaders of the Inglewood group. These people were identified by a reputational technique: all members of the Inglewood group who had been active in the Mackenzie-Inglewood conflict were asked to name the group's leaders. These nominations were pooled.

No interviews were conducted with school board members or educators at the school district or school level. This was a deliberate decision, as the principal purpose of the study was to examine the Inglewood grassroots association from the "inside", from the perspective of participants.

### **The beginning**

In early January, 1978, the principal of Inglewood Elementary sent a notice home to parents asking them to come to the school on the following day to hear Dr. Len Marshall, Assistant Superintendent in Mackenzie School District, speak on the district's plans for the use of surplus space in Inglewood school. About 30 parents attended this meeting and heard Dr. Marshall explain a plan to locate two French immersion classes of twenty-five students each in Inglewood school beginning in September, 1978. These students would be drawn from all across the city. As space became available as a result of Inglewood's projected continuing decline in enrolment, each following year an additional class would be added. At its peak, Inglewood had enrolled over 400 students. By January, 1978, its enrolment was down to 317; projected enrolment for September 1978 was 263, and by 1982 the school's enrolment was expected to be 137.

This first meeting was followed by a formal meeting of the Parents Advisory Committee a week later. At this time a number of parents expressed concern about the introduction of the French immersion classes into Inglewood, and the Committee decided to ask the members of the school board to attend a special meeting of the Parents' Committee to discuss the French immersion plan.

At this point, Mrs. Bronston, one of the concerned parents, phoned over 100 Inglewood residents asking them to come to a meeting at her home. About 60 came. At this meeting the feeling was voiced that the Parents Advisory Committee was ineffective for this situation. It was too large and slow-moving. What was needed was an "inner group" - a smaller and more active parents' group which could take the lead in opposing the school board plan. Leaders were chosen to present the parents' case at the upcoming special meeting. A petition was prepared, and workers for collecting signatures were assigned. A phone

committee was formed to get parents out to the special meeting with the school board.

Over 200 parents attended the special meeting with the school board. The parents' leaders stated that their main concern was that the regular school program at Inglewood would suffer. As time passed, more and more French immersion classes would be added to the school, and the regular English program would be reduced to a skeleton. Good teachers would leave, and parents might move to another neighbourhood.

Above all, the leaders said that the parents resented being presented with what looked like a **fait accompli**. The school board should have presented the neighbourhood with a number of alternatives to deal with the declining enrolment situation. As one speaker put it to the school board members, "You provide us with only one option, and you're trying to push it down our throats." A small minority of parents spoke in favour of the French immersion plan and accused the main group of bigotry. The meeting ended with a standing vote of over ninety per cent expressing opposition to the school board's plan.

### **Reactions to "reaction"**

The accusation of bigotry then precipitated an intense media reaction. One editorial said that the "bigots at Inglewood are not only depriving their own children of a tremendous opportunity to learn a second language, but by their shortsightedness and stupidity, they are preventing more enlightened parents from giving their children the best our educational system has to offer." Another editorial described the Inglewood parents' reaction as "irrational, reactionary, and not in the best interests of either their country or their children." The leaders of the Inglewood parents' group responded to the charges of bigotry by repeating what they felt to be their legitimate objections to the plan. Dr. Sanderson, one of the principal leaders of the parents' group, said in a press interview that he "would like to see the school board start from scratch: explaining the situation, giving us all the alternatives, including French immersion. And then letting us see for ourselves what is the best way to go."

At the next regular meeting of the school board the issue of Inglewood school received exhaustive discussion. The board indicated that it did not think it could "start from scratch", and that it would seek another location for the French immersion classes. The President of the Inglewood Parents' Advisory Committee was in the audience and was asked to comment. She said that the parents themselves at Inglewood were going to do a comprehensive study of the declining enrolment situation at

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Inglewood and prepare a set of recommendations for the school's future.

The following evening, at the Inglewood Parents' Advisory Committee meeting, five committees were established. These committees were the census committee; the closure and facilities use committee; the committee on the alternative use of space, excluding French immersion; the committee on compatibility of the French immersion program with regular English programs; and the enrichment committee. Each of these committees had a chairman and five to ten working members. Extensive use was made of outside consultants, and the committees either visited, interviewed, or corresponded with a large number of public and private institutions and individuals. To chair the committee on compatibility of the French immersion program with the English program, the parents chose Dr. Lionel Stanfield, a university professor. He was a resident of the Inglewood neighbourhood, but had no children in school and had taken no part in the events to date. Both pro-French immersion and anti-French immersion parents were named to this committee.

### **The report**

The committees' reports were brought in on schedule two months later and presented to the school board. The census committee had conducted a door-to-door survey of the Inglewood neighbourhood, and came to the conclusion that the school board enrolment projections were wrong. Although Inglewood school's population would be going down in the future, the drop would not be as rapid as predicted by the school board staff. Accordingly, classroom space to any large extent would not exist for the French immersion program. Subsequent events proved the parents' committee to be right. In September 1978 Inglewood school had an enrolment of 316 students, compared to the school board staff's projected enrolment of 263.

The committees generated a large number of suggestions for using school space as it became available, for programs other than French immersion. These included pre-school programs, community education programs, enrichment programs, and so on. On the controversial question of compatibility of the French immersion program with the English program, the committee report said,

We are not able to determine clearly the impact of an immersion program on a school as small as Inglewood. We feel that French immersion is a desirable side-by-side program, but not easily suited to a small school where the continuing viability of the existing

English program would be in question.

Summing up, the Inglewood parents made one final point.

We do want to express our strong disapproval of the conduct of the school board both in its handling of the French immersion issue and the attitude towards planning for the future. As parents and taxpayers, it is not enough to be told by school board officials that the future beyond two or three years is too uncertain to plan for. Effective methods are available for modelling the many variables such as school populations, programs, and physical facilities to forecast the range of possible future events. The school board's failure to do effective planning has caused the entire Inglewood community to be cast as bigots at this time of search for national consensus. For that, the school board will not soon be forgiven.

In the light of these reports, the school board dropped its plan to introduce the French immersion classes into Inglewood.

### **An analysis**

The purpose of this study was to analyse the Inglewood parents group as a grassroots association in education. The group was analysed in terms of its social origins, its size and constituency, its leadership, its issues, and its political strategies.

**Social origins.** The residents of Inglewood neighbourhood had a long tradition of supporting their school. They had been satisfied with the job it was doing and, in addition, they had been satisfied with the job the school board was doing.

For the most part citizens are content to assign to school board members the trustee role in education. This means that board members are free to make judgments and provide leadership without continual public consultation. This norm of trusteeship does not apply, however, when an issue of great cruciality to a particular group surfaces. Meaningful consultation must then take place. In contemporary North American society, city councils and school boards alike have not been particularly good at knowing when to give up the trustee role and when to solicit the views of local interest groups. As Zisk points out in her study of city councilmen:

They (the councilmen) apparently believe that the council, with the advice of the city manager and city staff, is generally capable of acting in the interests of

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the community without actively soliciting the views of the electorate. (They seem) to drive ahead, glancing neither to the side nor into their rear-view mirrors at the non-council traffic accompanying them. Their destination is the relatively insulated ... councilroom, where the search for "right answer" prevails, regardless of the ... clamour outside.(p.143)

In this case, there is ample evidence to indicate that the school board failed to perceive that they should consult widely with the Inglewood neighbourhood before attempting to introduce the French immersion plan. This conclusion is reflected in the remarks of one of the parents:

Reception of the proposal to introduce the French immersion program might have been different had the school board and officials apprised parents and residents beforehand of the extent of their concern about declining enrolments; had they advertised and described the French immersion program and taken steps to assure parents that qualified programs in English and French can co-exist in the same building.

When it appeared that the school board was attempting to present the Inglewood neighbourhood with a **fait accompli** on the French immersion plan, the roots of middle class resentment were tapped and the grassroots politicking began.

**Size of the group, and constituency.** The Parents' Advisory Committee at Inglewood school was a school-board mandated committee. As its name suggests, it had advisory powers only, and its membership was restricted to parents. For a grassroots association to be successful, it has to develop a constituency which will provide a broad base of support. The "inner group" which was formed at the meeting in the Bronston home undertook to develop that constituency. Through the telephone campaign and the circulation of the petition, additional supporters were enlisted. The interview data revealed very clearly that the "inner group" did not attempt to involve only anti-French immersion supporters. Pro-French immersion supporters were encouraged to become involved as well. A large number of Inglewood residents who had no children in school became involved also. The leaders of the "inner group" wanted to bring together as many differing points of view as existed in the neighbourhood. Conflicting points of view could be reconciled, and when this had been accomplished, the residents of Inglewood, and not the school board, would determine the future of the Inglewood school.

**Leadership.** Mrs. Bronston, who provided the initial leadership thrust, no longer had children in the Inglewood school. She was



an older woman and had developed a healthy skepticism about educational innovations as a result of her children's earlier experiences with such matters as the New Mathematics. Putting a French immersion program with an existing English program seemed to her an educational innovation of dubious value.

The "inner group" that formed at the Bronston home provided the leadership nucleus: there were approximately sixty people at the Bronston meeting and about five individuals emerged as leaders, each having a responsibility for a different area.

The men present at the meeting were all experienced and articulate professional and managerial people. The women were full-time housewives who had ample free time to devote to the task at hand. As needed, the "inner group" called on experienced and knowledgeable people with the requisite skills to carry out specific tasks. Everything was done expertly. A good example is the census committee's work on projected school enrolments.

**Issues.** What were the issues in the Mackenzie District-Inglewood dispute depends upon which sources are tapped. An analysis of the school board records shows that the board members and officials felt that they were acting in the interests of the school district as a whole by introducing a needed educational program into a school which had available space. The district would get a program it needed, and Inglewood's declining enrolment situation would be ameliorated.

Letters to the press, calls to open line radio shows, and participation in public television forums reveal that a large segment of the public saw the Inglewood parents as a group of upper middle-class anti-French bigots who were opposed to an educational program designed to promote national unity.

Documentary and interview data obtained from Inglewood sources reveal a different perspective. There is little evidence to suggest an anti-French feeling among the Inglewood residents. Indeed, the Parents' Advisory Committee had made several representations to the school board requesting an expansion of existing French programs in the school. The main issue in the minds of the Inglewood residents was that the school board had failed to involve citizens in the making of decisions that affected the everyday lives of people living in the Inglewood neighbourhood. The board had failed to discuss with residents the problem of declining enrolment, to formulate a range of alternatives to deal with it, to discuss the proposed introduction of the French immersion program, and finally to produce evidence that French and English programs could co-exist in a school like Inglewood.

There was a general feeling that the school board had relied

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solely on the advice of its officials as to whether the French immersion program should be introduced into Inglewood. There are routine and strategic decisions in the life of a polity. Boards can safely leave routine decisions to their officials; but strategic decisions affecting everyday lives must be made by boards in conjunction with the people affected by these strategic decisions (Boyd, 1976). The school board treated the introduction of the French immersion program into Inglewood as a routine decision. In reality, it was a strategic decision, and the residents felt they should have been involved in the decisional process.

**Political strategies.** In their struggle with the Mackenzie School Board the Inglewood grassroots group used a direct action, pressure group strategy. The "inner group" provided the leadership nucleus for the broad base of neighbourhood support that came from parents and non-parents. All the grassroots politicking that took place occurred under the umbrella of the Parents' Advisory Committee. This committee, supposed to be for parents only and simply advisory to the school staff, proved to be useful as an existing organization under which community forces could be mobilized.

The political behaviour in this dispute is very similar to that of one of the four neighbourhoods described by Summerfield.

In Larsen, the principal does not serve as an active petitioner for the neighbourhood school, and the parents do not petition the principal. Generally, the intensity of Larsen political activity is low. The educational service and educated product satisfy Larsen consumers. Parents support the school, and its principal is able to operate non-conflictually with the neighbourhood and central office.

### **Concluding statement**

At the present time the ordinary citizen has little say in the educational decision-making process except at election time. For some time there has been a call for the development of a "third force" in education to counteract the dominant influence wielded by teachers' organizations and educational bureaucrats with their rubber-stamp school boards. Wider citizen involvement in education has taken place with the growth of citizen advisory committees in education, but the committees have provided for little more than symbolic participation. No effective means have been developed to make educational institutions more responsive and sensitive to public needs and demands, particularly at the neighbourhood level.

It is this that has given rise to the development of

neighbourhood grassroots associations in Europe, the United States, and Canada. It was the Mackenzie School Board's insensitivity to the feelings and needs of the Inglewood residents that gave rise to the development of a grassroots group in that neighbourhood. At a time when neighbourhood schools are threatened because of declining enrolments, it seems reasonable to expect that a lot of grassroots associations are going to come into being to protect these schools. If this occurs, the process of public involvement in education may never be the same again.

Grassroots politicking is invaluable. People see how power and politics operate. They see both the potential and the limitations of collective action. They feel a new sense of self-esteem. And a few individuals cross the threshold between making life and making history.

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