

Involving Parents

A case study in closing schools

Mobs are really frightening. But is development toward participatory democracy in general simply motivated by fear - representing merely a series of propitiatory acts by such as school boards? Charles and Evelyn Lusthaus show how a number of parents reacted to being involved in a well-planned process of decision, applied by one Montreal school board to proposals for closure of altogether 27 of its schools (of which ultimately 12 remained open). Their differences in opinion about the results, between those who "won" and those who "lost" these decisions, were understandably marked. But about the merits of the process itself their differences were not strong; and it is interesting that the degree of their involvement in school committees and so on became much greater, particularly among those who lost.

In these parents' evident acceptance of the channels thus made available to them, this study offers a point of contrast to others in this issue that deal with the organization of protest by parents. These parents seem to have acquired, for the short term at least, a confidence in their own participation in school management that would seem to justify certain hopes.

Parents have said that they want to be involved in decisions that affect their children's education, and the closing of a neighbourhood school is precisely the type of decision in which they expect to play a major role. Realizing this can be central to a methodology for school closure that attempts to overcome parental resistance to change. In such a methodology, the significant question is no longer whether parents should play a role in the change process, but rather, how to structure the situation to best use parents' efforts.

Parental participation is a mandated part of decision-making

process in many places in Canada. To some administrators this means that decisions are to be made and then sold to parents using public relations techniques; the structure created then has no substance. More and more this approach is being rejected by both parents and administrators, and school organizations are developing more sophisticated policies about parental participation. One large school board in Montreal has developed such a set of policies about school closings. It is the purpose of this paper to describe this board's policy and its effectiveness.

The Quebec context

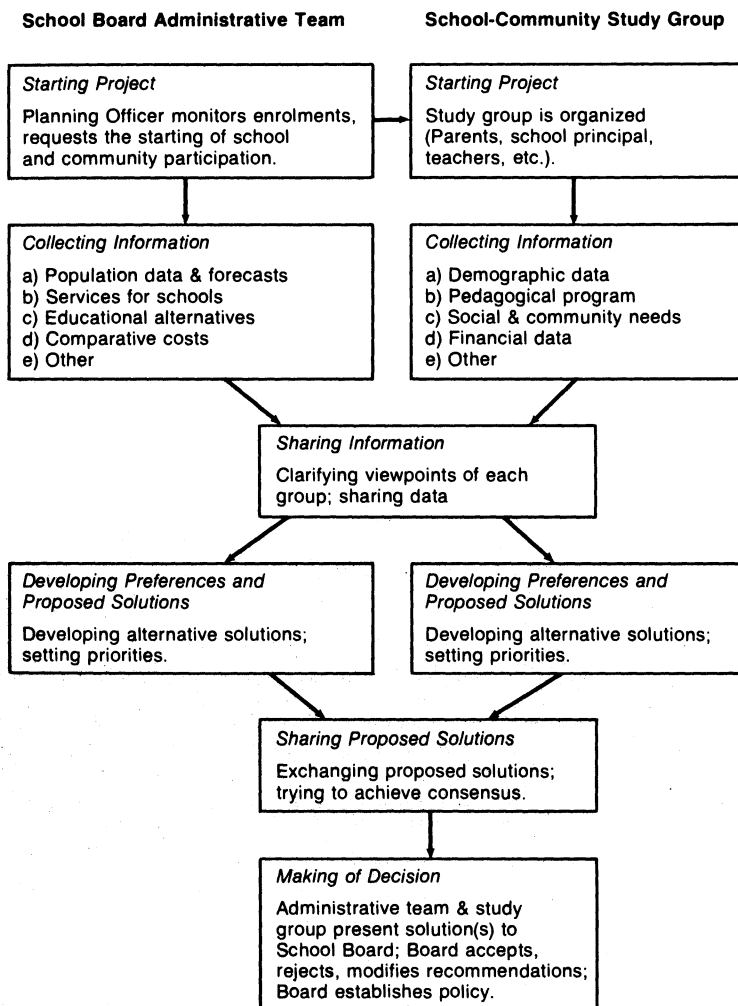
There has been a decline in school enrolments in Quebec since the late 1960's. It began in the French schools, and the methods for handling it were primarily technical; schools with enrolments below 250 students, for example, were closed. By the early 1970's a foreshadowing of major declines in enrolment also became apparent in the English sector: split classes increased, specialist services such as music and art decreased or disappeared, and so on. English school boards followed their French counterparts in adopting school closing procedures. They established a simple decisional rule to determine which school would close, most often deciding that a school with less than a certain number of students would have to be closed.

One large English board in Montreal soon found this procedure to be dysfunctional for a number of reasons. First, the English community, being a minority community in Quebec, viewed the schools as primary centres of English life and culture. Second, when specific schools had been identified as schools which were to be closed, citizen interest groups emerged as pressure forces that tried to keep the schools open. This often resulted in conflict and trauma for all segments of the school community. Third, by the 1972-73 school year, School Committees had been established by legislation for all schools throughout the Province, to guarantee adequate parent input into school decisions. The arbitrary decisional rules being used by the Board were not consistent with the spirit of this legislation to involve parents in the critical decisions of school life.

By 1974 this School Board had begun to look for alternative approaches to use for school closings. Projections had been made that there would be major declines in enrolments, sometimes as high as 50%, over the next five years. The Board turned to their Planning Officer to recommend a procedure that would involve all major groups - school commissioners, central office staff, principals and parents. A policy was recommended to the Board by 1975. The policy, called the Major School Change Policy, was drawn heavily from a text written in 1974 called "Citizens

Figure 1

MAJOR SCHOOL CHANGE PROCESS*



*This diagram depicts process from initiation to decision-making. Further steps of communication, implementation, evaluation, etc. are not illustrated here, as they are not directly relevant to parental involvement.

Participate", by Desmond Conner. By May, 1976, the policy had been accepted by the Board and plans were made for its implementation.

A policy for major changes

In its essence, the Major School Change Policy states that "the involvement of local school communities shall be sought in examining the problem, in helping to find solutions, and in planning for the future. The process is designed to facilitate consultation with the local groups..."

When the school's student population falls below 60% of capacity, the process is begun. In general, the steps of the process are followed in a parallel way between two groups, the school board administrative team and the school and community study group. This is illustrated in Figure 1, "Major School Change Process."

At the outset, the administrative team informs members of the community of the impending process and invites them to participate. The project begins with a general meeting of parents at which they are given basic information related to their school situation. The Board's Planning Officer provides enrolment data plus projections, operating costs, comparative costs, anticipated residential development, and alternatives if the school were to close. The parents are asked to form a study committee which may be made up of interested volunteers, or the study may be undertaken by the already existing School Committee. The principal of the school and teachers are part of the group, and community service groups are asked for their input.

When the study group has been organized, its first task is to **review** information. It familiarizes itself with the data provided by the Board's Planning Office. The opportunity exists for parents to challenge any of the data or to request additional clarification.

The group then follows a step-by-step process to **acquire** information about various aspects of the school situation: demographic data, the pedagogical program, social and community needs, and financial data relative to the school. Demographic data is provided by the Planning Office, but is often verified by the study group using its own resources. The description of the educational program is the responsibility of the principal and staff. The social considerations are developed largely by the study group, and the financial information is provided by the school board administrative team. The study group may also gather additional relevant information, such as pupil distribution

in an area, community priorities relative to education, and the social consequences of various alternatives and solutions. Wherever a group of schools is being studied in a given area or community, representatives of the local study groups come together on a regular basis to share the information they have gathered. This group attempts to look at the community-wide picture in order to develop solutions for the total community.

Meanwhile, at the same time as the study groups are gathering information, the administrative team has also been engaging in a process of information collection and review. As the information collection stage nears an end, members of both the administrative team and the study group come together to share their information and ideas. Each group then develops its own set of preferences and proposed solutions. The groups come together once more to share ideas about their proposed solutions, exploring ways by which they may arrive at a consensus before presenting their solutions to the School Board.

Before being presented to the Board, the alternative solutions developed by the study groups and the administrative team are presented to the parents at large, usually at a general meeting. The goals are to inform the parents of the proposed solutions and to try to get a consensus opinion from them. The parents will now have had the background information given them by the Planning Office at the original meeting, interim reports from the study group, and the final recommendations which the study group wishes to promulgate.

Finally, the recommendations of the administrative team and the study group are forwarded to the School Board, along with the data that have been collected. The School Board receives the report and listens to a verbal presentation made by administrators and by parents at a sub-committee hearing.

When there has been consensus among administrators and parents, the Board may simply accept the total set of recommendations. Where differences exist and opposite solutions are proposed by the two groups, the Board must accept one or the other, or a modified plan. In any case, the School Board, consisting of 15 elected school commissioners, must make its final decision at a public Board meeting.

The time involved between initiation and decision-making is approximately ten months. This period varies depending upon the complexity of a given situation and the necessity to avoid undue pressure to complete the study. If a study has begun in the

Table I
Information Provided To The Study Group
By The Planning Office

Area of Information	"Losing" Parents % Agree	"Winning" Parents % Agree
1. Educational program		
a. Information was complete	50	84
b. Information was understood	57	82
2. Costs of running school		
a. Information was complete	50	63
b. Information was understood	43	67
3. School enrolment projection		
a. Information was complete	58	74
b. Information was understood	73	52

spring, it can be completed by late winter of the following school year and thus be given ample time for the follow up, and for transition, during the remaining months until the school year ends.

Parents who participated

During the period between 1975-1978, parents in twenty-seven schools were involved in this decision-making process regarding the potential closing of their schools. Fifteen of the schools were closed and twelve remained open. We obtained from each school an official list of the study group; these lists included sometimes as few as three parents and sometimes as many as fifteen parents as members. In all, 174 parents were formally involved in the school-closing decision; all 174 parents were sent our assessment questionnaire. Of these, 101 were returned and usable: 49 of the usable questionnaires came from schools which closed, 52 came from schools which had remained open.

For purposes of analysis, this population of parents was later divided into two groups, "winning" parents and "losing" parents. "Winners" were defined as parents whose recommendations to the School Board about whether their schools should stay open or be closed had been accepted by the Board. "Losers" were defined as those whose recommendations had been rejected.

Some results obtained from the questionnaire are illustrated in tables I - V.

Table I indicates that 50% or more of all the parents felt that the information provided to them had been complete and understood. (This was true in all groups but one.) The table also clearly shows that more of those parents whose decision had been accepted by the Board believed that the information they received was complete and clearly understood than those whose decision had not been accepted by the Board.

In Table II, several aspects of the Major School Change decision-making process are listed. Since part of the intent of the Major School Change Process had been to involve parents constructively in decision-making, minimizing conflict, it is particularly interesting to note that approximately 60% of all parents - whether winners or losers - felt that conflicts were in fact "handled adequately." Most parents, regardless of whether they won or lost in the end, also felt that they were able to control their own meetings, rather than having them controlled by administrative personnel. Further, a great majority of all parents said they thought that the meetings were worthwhile. However, parents seemed to have wanted more time to explain their recommendations to the Board; this was

Table II

Adequacy of Decision-making Process

Parent Perception of Process	"Losing" Parents	"Winning" Parents
	% Agree	% Agree
1. Alternative suggestions explored	47	59
2. Conflicts handled adequately	61	60
3. Meetings controlled by parents (rather than by administrators)	73	58
4. Meetings worth attending	66	97
5. Enough time given to Parents to ask questions of Board personnel	65	85
6. Enough time given to parents to explain recommendations to Board	37	67

Table III

Effect of Study Group On Board Decision

Parent Perception of Effect	"Losing" Parents	"Winning" Parents
	% Agree	% Agree
1. I feel the decision made by the Board was correct	6	81
2. I feel that I can influence Board decisions	14	66
3. I feel that parents had enough participation in decision-making re school closings	24	71

Table IV

Effect of School Board Decision on the Child

Effect of Decision	"Losing" Parents	"Winning" Parents
	% Agree	% Agree
1. Detrimental to my child's educational program	53	20
2. Detrimental to my child's friendship group	88	25
3. Detrimental to my child's attitude to school	63	31

Table V

Effect of Winning or Losing
On Parent Involvement

Membership and Level of Involvement	"Losing" Parents %	Winning" Parents %
1. Past Membership		
a. Home & School Committee	50	57
b. School Committee	44	46
2. Past Level of Involvement		
a. High	65	53
b. Moderate	30	28
c. Low	5	19
3. Present Membership		
a. Home & School Committee	50	64
b. School Committee	51	67
4. Present Level of Involvement		
a. High	82	67
b. Moderate	12	25
c. Low	6	8

particularly true of parents whose recommendations had not been accepted by the Board.

It is clear that perceptions of the effectiveness of the study group were significantly different between the parents whose recommendations had been accepted and those whose had been rejected by the Board. Seventy-one percent of winning parents said that parents had enough opportunity to participate in the decisional process; this is in contrast to only twenty-four percent of losing parents who said the same. Similarly, sixty-six percent of winning parents agreed that they can influence Board decisions; only fourteen percent of losing parents agreed to this statement.

Parents indicated that a decision to close the school had been most detrimental to their child's friendship group, over and above its negative effect on their child's educational program or their child's attitude toward school. More than 50% of these parents indicated that the decision to close the school had been detrimental in all three areas. Even among parents whose schools remained open, there was an indication that they felt the entire process had had a detrimental effect on their children. At least 20% of these parents reported that their children had been negatively affected, particularly in their attitude toward school.

In Table V, the membership and levels of involvement of the parents before and after their participation in the Major School Change Process is recorded. All parents - both winners and losers - reported that their membership in committees and their levels of involvement had risen since their participation in the school-closing issue. It is particularly interesting to note the comparison between the winners' and losers' present levels of involvement. Eighty-two percent of the people who are identified as losers in the school closing issue said that they presently have a high level of involvement in their schools; this compares with sixty-seven percent of the defined winners. In short, despite the fact that they did not succeed in convincing the Board to accept their recommendations about school closings, eighty-two percent of these parents continue to be actively involved in their schools.

This high level of involvement is particularly interesting when compared with the parents' response on the question of whether they feel they can influence Board decisions. Only 14% of losing parents answered yes to this question; yet 94% of these same parents rated themselves as highly or moderately involved in their schools at the present time. Although in the school-closing decision they felt defeated - unable to influence Board policy - the data clearly show that the group is continuing to be active. Thus the Major School Change Policy did not discourage involvement. This is exceedingly important if, as in the case in Quebec, one of the major goals for parent involvement is to develop structures that support participatory

democracy.

The data also suggest that whether parents were among the winners or losers in the process, they felt that their participation had been constructive rather than co-optive. This was particularly apparent in their responses to questions about information and control. Even among the losing parents, 73% reported that they felt that the parents - rather than the administrators or school personnel - had controlled the meetings. Further, most parents said they felt they had had adequate information from the School Board and enough time to ask for further information. These responses support the notion that the process was not set up in a way to co-opt parents, but rather to involve them, in a decision which could significantly affect their children's education.

This point is further borne out by the fact that in not one of the school communities slated for school closings did any other neighbourhood interest or pressure group emerge to fight in this issue. Thus the study groups that were part of the Major School Change Process seemed to have been viewed in the community itself as legitimate mechanisms for change and involvement. This is in marked contrast to the community experiences studied by Lusthaus et al (1976) and Robinson (1979), where it was found that adversary groups sprang up outside the organizational context of schools. In the light of these findings, then, this policy may be viewed as a beginning step for a school commission in involving parents constructively in difficult, school-related decisions.

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