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ABSTRACT

Intended primarily for educational administrators, this review presents an analysis of the literature concerning student participation in educational decisionmaking. The educational and legal ramifications of student involvement in several decisionmaking spheres, such as school board and committee membership, student government, extracurricular activities, student publications, and curriculum issues, are discussed. Some suggestions are given to administrators for channeling student energies into a constructive improvement of the educational program. A 54-item bibliography of related literature is also included. (Author)

STUDENT INVOLVEMENT

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FOREWORD

"If you don't want them to tear it down, let them build it up" could well be the rallying motto of educators who have recognized the value of channeling student energies into constructive action for educational improvement. School administrators seeking ways to involve students should profit from reading the numerous practical suggestions reported here.

Among the many methods of student involvement discussed in the analysis section are advisory committees, membership on boards of education and curriculum committees, and participation in classroom instruction, curriculum planning, and development of dress and appearance regulations. Other topics discussed include conflict management, extracurricular activities, student government, student publications, and political expression.

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STUDENT INVOLVEMENT

Educators offer three basic reasons why students should participate in educational decision-making. The most frequently cited reason is the effect such participation will have on student unrest. Student involvement is a technique suggested to channel student interests and efforts into responsible activities and to prevent the disruption of the educational process.

Another reason is the potential utility of student decision-making as a teaching method. Wight (1970) sees that the mission of the schools is to train students not only to cope with problems of the future, but also to be contributing, participating members of a democratic society. He advocates experience as the most effective teaching technique, as do Brammer (1968), DeCecco and others (1970), and Flemmings (1970). These authors believe there is no better way to learn participatory democracy than through sharing in actual decision-making activities of the relatively sheltered school environment.

The third consideration supporting student participation in educational decision-making is that students, as a legitimate special interest group, ought to have their interests represented in the decisions affecting them (New Jersey State Federation District Boards of Education 1970). Recent court tests, reported by the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) (1968) and Gaddy (1971), confirm that students generally have the same rights and freedoms of expression and representation as have adults. Of course, as Griffiths (1968) points out, students may not disrupt the proper activities of the school in seeking such representation.

Opportunities for decision-making in the schools are numerous and include such areas as building sites, facilities planning, salaries, staffing arrangements, curriculum content, textbooks, instruction methods, student discipline, student government, and student activities. Decisions in each of these areas have effects on students as well as on administrators, teachers, board of education members, and staff. Although each group usually participates to some extent in the decision-making process, the proper role of each group, including students, varies from one area to another.

The extent to which students may become involved in school decision-making is, of course, finally determined by the administration—the school board, the superintendent, and the school principals. For this reason, much of the literature concerning student involvement is written for administrators, suggesting ways they can involve students in planning, evaluating, and strengthening school programs and policies. Many of these suggestions for administrator action are incorporated in this review.

CONFLICT MANAGEMENT

Although the bulk of the literature assumes that greater participation by students will result in fewer conflicts, several authors, among them Bailey (1970), Erickson (1969), and Gudridge (1969), believe that the culture in which we live contributes to student unrest and demands for greater participation. Administrators should realize, according to this view, that some conflicts in the schools are inevitable because they stem from the structure of society and not from the mental aberrations of a few individual misfits.

Bailey (1970) and Flemmings (1970) maintain that administrators, who are powerless to change these outside social causes, should develop conflict management skills and acquire methods for dealing with confrontations and conflicts. Some well-known measures involve arbitration, mediation between conflicting parties, compromise, and freedom from bias toward a particular policy or party. These procedures can be particularly useful when dealing with dissensions among student groups, such as those caused by racial, class, religious, or residential differences.

INCREASED COMMUNICATION

In the belief that administrators and boardsmen in some schools are seeking the opinions and help of students and that examples of student involvement in policy-making are more numerous than reported, the American Association of School Administrators and the National Education Association (1970) gathered information from a number of school districts about their practices regarding student participation. Without exception, administrators' comments emphasized that the greatest benefit has been the opening of channels for dialogue and communication.

Communication appears to be the most effective "preventive medicine" administrators can use. Many educators regard communication between students and administrators as the key to effective student participation (Ashbaugh 1969, Elseroad 1970, Erickson 1969, Gudridge 1969, and Keith 1968). Increased communication is perhaps most useful in eliminating problems of administrator misperception of student desires. Too often administrators institute the change they *think* the students want, only to discover too late that the students did not want that particular change. If administrators could successfully determine what educational changes are desired, they could consider implementing those changes and thereby reduce the probability of conflict.

Administrators can communicate with students effectively on an informal basis. Most superintendents who responded in the AASA-NEA study (1970) favored informal dialogue with students and found dinner or luncheon meetings especially helpful. Ashbaugh (1969) suggests schools have one or more student ombudsmen. Bailey (1970) thinks attending dances or other student social events contributes to an administrator's understanding of students. Gudridge (1969) recommends that principals and administrators eat lunch regularly in the school cafeteria with students and notes that open office hours, gripe sessions, sensitivity training groups, and suggestion boxes have all been successful communication media in one context or another. Student publications or newspapers often provide a reliable source of student opinion that would be otherwise difficult for administrators to obtain in face-to-face interactions with students. Even underground materials can provide warnings of latent hostility or deep-seated dissatisfactions before they become openly disruptive.

DeCecco (1970) and Elseroad (1970) add that increased communication, while desirable, is not the end result to be attained. The administration must act sincerely on some student recommendations, because communication is a means to effect education reform, not the substance of reform itself.

BOARD MEMBERSHIP

A few districts reported to AASA-NEA (1970) that the board of education has agreed to permit

students to serve as nonvoting members. The student representatives may be either elected by the student body or selected by the student council with final approval of the board, and they may participate, but not vote, in all deliberations except personnel items, most business items, and executive sessions. The representatives provide advice in the areas of direct pupil concern that require the board's deliberation, and they must study board materials, be prepared to discuss items of pupil interest and concern, and report back to their own and other student cabinets.

ADVISORY COMMITTEES

The most frequently reported method of involving students in the decision-making process is through an advisory committee on the local school level (AASA-NEA 1970). Many committees are composed of students and faculty or students and counselors; others include community members. Some advisory committee memberships are synonymous with the regular student government and a few are special bodies of elected or appointed students. In a number of cases a student-faculty-administration council serves as the governing body of the school, but most of the groups are advisory groups or discussion forums.

Some systems have student committees who serve the entire district and report to the school board or the district superintendent. Other schools hold regularly scheduled student discussions with the district superintendent (AASA-NEA 1970).

INSTRUCTION METHODS

Increased student participation in the educational process is usually reflected in increased involvement in decision-making in the classroom where students spend the greater part of their school time. Wight (1970) contends there is too much teacher-determined activity in the classroom, claiming that teacher-dominated settings stifle creativity and may impede learning. Goals, methods, and subject matter of a course are traditionally decided by the teacher. The most common traditional pedagogical method has been the lecture, an excellent means for imparting information but structured to preclude the participation of students.

One solution is what Wight (1970) calls "participative education." This method relies heavily on the use of small groups, preferably without the instructor's presence. Groups are structured to insure maximum involvement of all students and to guide each student in assuming responsibility for his own learning and development. Not only does the student assimilate the facts of the subject matter at hand, but he learns from group interaction, problem-solving, and analysis and evaluation of experiences. Students discover how to work together, to communicate, and to reinforce each other in their efforts to learn. Current educational theories note the effectiveness of learning by participation.

Another means of involvement in the classroom is student evaluation of teachers. Flemmings (1970) sees teacher evaluations, widely used in higher education, as a valuable technique for student participation on the secondary level.

CURRICULUM PLANNING

Trump and Hunt (1969) note that three-fourths of the secondary schools experiencing student protest reported criticisms of the curricular program. Lack of relevant courses seems to be a universal complaint of students. Educators are virtually of one mind in recommending greater relevance in curricula. Brammer (1968), DeCecco (1970), Elseroad (1970), Ferguson (1970), Flemmings (1970), Gudridge (1969), Kirschenbaum (1969), and the Wayne County Intermediate School District (1968) all cite the need for curriculum reform to increase the relevance of course offerings and content.

Brammer (1968) notes that schools often try to avoid controversy and controversial issues, areas in which students must someday participate as citizens. In this case the schools can be criticized for not preparing their students for reality. Flemmings (1970) and Gudridge (1969) urge that education not retreat from difficulty but deal realistically with vital issues.

Kirschenbaum (1969) feels that greater relevance can be achieved through a broadened offering of courses. He and Flemmings (1970) think that a greater choice of courses would bring instructional programs closer to student interests. Gudridge (1969) cites a program using minicourses that last only a few weeks so a student can elect three or four courses in the same length of time one traditionally organized course would last. Programs that encourage independent study or give credit for individual

study provide "automatic" relevance assuming the student can either completely or partly determine the subject matter he studies.

Ideas about the role of students in curriculum planning range from students offering suggestions for courses to students doing the teaching. The majority opinion falls between the two extremes. Brammer (1968) and Gudridge (1969) both suggest that students could successfully teach a course. Ashbaugh (1969) indicates there is general consensus that students should have some institutionalized means of regular participation. The usual means, according to Bailey (1970), Elseroad (1970), Gudridge (1969), and AASA-NEA (1970), is for students to hold memberships with faculty and staff on curriculum committees.

CURRICULUM AND AD HOC COMMITTEES

Some districts and individual schools, according to AASA-NEA (1970), have added student representation to committees in the curriculum and instruction areas. Such representation on systemwide curriculum councils usually includes pupils on an overall district curriculum committee, though a few systems have put students on committees in special areas, such as health education. The role of students on these committees varies from regular voting members to consultants who are asked to address the committee in particular areas. The voting power of students on curriculum committees is a matter of considerable debate; Brammer (1968) and DeCecco (1970) advocate full membership for students, including voting rights.

In a few cases, districts reported to AASA-NEA (1970) that they employ students, with pay, to assist the curriculum department in writing curricula, evaluating instructional materials, compiling research data, and reviewing and editing publications. In other instances, students participate with teachers in curriculum workshops or in writing and revising curriculum guides during the summer months. At the level of the local school, some curriculum committees are composed entirely of students who submit their recommendations to faculty committees on the departmental or school level.

Several school systems report success with student participation on district-wide ad hoc committees appointed by the board or superintendent to accomplish a particular task. Student representation may be especially advisable when ad hoc committees investigate such areas as the rights and roles of students or the secondary school curriculum.

DRESS AND APPEARANCE REGULATIONS

Dress codes and appearance regulations account for the greatest number of complaints in schools experiencing student protests, according to Trump and Hunt (1969). Usually established by administration or board of education policy with little or no participation from students, some of the more stringent regulations establish exact lengths for girls' skirts and boys' hair, prohibit certain hair and clothing styles, and bar the wearing of buttons, armbands, or other visible expressions of political identification. According to Gudridge (1969), such regulations often represent a previous generation's personal tastes in fashion.

Gaddy (1971), Flemmings (1970), and Gudridge (1969) cite instances of expulsion and suspension for seemingly petty violations of dress and appearance rules. When violations of school rules have such serious consequences, administrators must insure that the rules are fair and understandable to students. Participation of students in making the rules can help the administrator make fair judgments of the acceptability of everchanging fashion trends.

Numerous writers advocate that students, in a better position than adults to know personal tastes and fashion trends of other students, should participate in establishing dress and appearance regulations. Such measures should be open to constant revision in order to reflect changing fads in fashion and appearance. Believing that the imposition of a specific taste preference, student or adult, is to be avoided, both Flemmings (1970) and Gudridge (1969) propose sufficient variability in a dress code to allow for personal expression, various subcultural "uniforms," or ethnic identification.

There is some support from the ACLU (1968) for complete student responsibility in establishing codes for dress and appearance. Ideally, administrators, faculty, and school boards should adopt a hands-off attitude: "As long as a student's appearance does not, in fact, disrupt the educational process, or constitute a threat to safety, it should be no concern of the school" (ACLU 1968).

EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITIES

The North Carolina Task Force on Student Involvement (1971) contends that student activities are for the benefit of all students and that school extracurricular activities, including sports, clubs, and events, should offer every student the opportunity to participate in areas of his choice. According to the task force report, all student clubs should be open to students of all types of backgrounds, and students should be allowed to join at any time in the year.

Erickson (1969), Flemmings (1970), and Gudridge (1969) suggest the elimination of all barriers to participation in extracurricular activities. The North Carolina task force report recommends specifically that fees required for student participation be kept low to encourage the economically disadvantaged to become involved and that all grade requirements for membership and office-holding in clubs (except those of an honorary academic nature) be eliminated. The report also suggests that school districts provide transportation to and from events whenever possible and that activity buses be made available in the late afternoon so students without private transportation can remain for after-school activities. It may also be advisable, the report suggests, to include time during the school day when students may participate in extracurricular activities. Thus students who have jobs or other responsibilities after school may participate.

STUDENT GOVERNMENT

The literature deals with two issues: the participation of students in student government and the participation of student government as a representative body in the organizational decision-making of the school.

Student governments are often hailed as a training mechanism for democratic participation. To be truly effective as a training device, student governments should guarantee the representation or participation of all students. Flemmings (1970) observes that certain administration- or faculty-imposed restrictions or qualifications for student council membership—such as a minimum grade point average or good behavior—deprive a considerable number of students of representation. Bailey (1970) contends elimination of academic requirements would provide a more representative student council.

Just as the literature indicates some students are underrepresented in student government, it suggests that the student council, or other student governing body, is underrepresented in the policy- and decision-making activities of the school. Brammer (1968) maintains that the student council often serves as a mechanism to siphon off student energies into a meaningless exercise.

The student council, if genuinely representative of student needs and opinions, can serve as an ideal instrument of institutionalized communication, conveying the interests of the students to the board of education and the school administration.

STUDENT PUBLICATIONS

Student publications provide an excellent means for the expression of student opinion and thus are a good channel for communication with faculty and administrators.

The ACLU (1968) considers student publications a learning device. As an educational tool, a school newspaper or publication should not be considered an official image of the school, even though circulation carries the material beyond the school. Therefore, the ACLU recommends that faculty advisors and principals try to refrain from censorship of student material.

If a single publication is incapable of incorporating opinion fully representative of all students, school officials would be expected to encourage multiple and competing periodicals. Groups representing differing viewpoints have equal rights to school resources (ACLU 1968).

Drawing on relevant court decisions, Gaddy (1971) concludes that the only restrictions administrators can place on the issuance and distribution of student publications are those in effect in the adult community, because students are guaranteed the constitutional rights of freedom of speech and expression. The ACLU (1968), also citing court decisions, states that administrators can prohibit publication and/or distribution of material, whether school sponsored or independent, only "when such publication or distribution would clearly endanger the health or safety of the students, or clearly and imminently threaten to disrupt the educational process, or might be of a libelous nature." Gaddy (1971) notes that the mere presence of obscene language or material in poor taste does not necessarily justify prohibiting publication or distribution.

POLITICAL EXPRESSION

According to the ACLU (1968), student expression of opinions about national, local, or other nonschool political policies is, in a technical sense, not the concern of the school. Gaddy (1971) cites several cases showing that the general trend in the courts supports the wearing of buttons, armbands, or other visible symbols of political opinion as a constitutionally protected right. Griffiths (1968) says the general principle to be followed is consideration of the question of disruption. School authorities, he comments, are not permitted to impinge on the freedom of students unless student behavior substantially and materially interferes with the discipline and good order of the school.

It remains to be seen what effect the Twenty-Sixth Amendment, giving the vote to eighteen-year-olds, will have on the rights of students to participate in public school decision-making. It seems that the clear trend to legitimize and guarantee the participation of young Americans in local and national decision-making not only forecasts greater student participation in public school decision-making but also implies that schools can place fewer restrictions on student political activity.

OTHER METHODS

The AASA-NEA report (1970) reveals that a variety of other methods are being used by school districts to involve students in decision-making or to facilitate communication with them. A very effective area for student participation is a student-run tutoring program, particularly for disadvantaged children. The tutors and tutees, as well as the school, benefit from such a program. Among the more unusual, yet successful, methods of student involvement are participation in the selection of textbooks and of administrative, teaching, and paraprofessional personnel, and representation on human relations councils, school self-evaluation subcommittees for school accreditation, and student disciplinary councils.

Several systems report conducting surveys of the student body. The results of questionnaires and interviews with students, carried out on either a total population or random sample basis, can be useful to administrators in the areas of curriculum, school rules, student activities, and program planning.

Districtwide conferences on student concerns provide the opportunity for student groups, parents, teachers, administrators, and others to spend a large block of time together exploring student concerns, gaining information, sharing ideas, and making recommendations.

CONCLUSION

The literature on student participation in public school decision-making emphasizes the need to develop positive student involvement within school systems. Without doubt, increasing student participation is an established educational trend. Educators seem hopeful that increased involvement of students in constructive educational decision-making will be reflected in decreased student disruption of the educational process. As a teaching method, the usefulness of student participation is widely accepted and, now that eighteen-year-olds have been enfranchised, the participation of at least the older students may have some legal sanctions.

Students always have had and will continue to have a profound impact on the educational process. With the increased involvement of students in educational decision-making, educators have an excellent opportunity to translate student energy into positive action for the improvement of the educational program.

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