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AUTHOR Steinberg, Lois S.
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ABSTRACT

This is the fourth report on participation in "Eastport," a heterogeneous suburb with a history of school-community conflict. Sociological concepts derived from reference group and role theory are utilized to analyze the effects of structural change designed to increase parent participation in decisionmaking at the local school level. Findings based on survey and field methods are related to parental socialization, mechanisms for participation, participatory roles, the impact of decentralization, and educational alternatives. Results suggest that administrative failure to ensure representative participation fosters school-community conflict, reinforces existing intergroup hostility, and isolates the school system from community factions. (Author)

PARTICIPATION and REPRESENTATION IN AN AGE OF DECENTRALIZATION and ALTERNATIVES

Lois S. Steinberg

Community Service Society*

New York City

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INTRODUCTION

This is the fourth report on a longitudinal study of participation in "Eastport", a pluralistic suburban school district with a history of school-community conflict. It will focus on parent influentials and their perception of the educational decision-making structure. Findings will be related to a central question of interest to policymakers involved in urban and suburban school governance and administration: can structural changes designed to increase parent influence in educational decisions improve the quality of educational services provided for their children?

While structural changes in urban school systems have been developed to increase parent influence at the community school board level, two structural changes in Eastport have been instituted to increase parent influence at both the school board and local school level. Parental response to these innovations and the traditional channels for participation was obtained from a survey of parent influentials and activists and in-depth interviews with parents and other school system participants.

Results reflect the impact of decentralization and the alternative education movement on participation and representation at the local school level. Decentralization legitimized parent involvement in the formulation of educational policy. The concept of alternatives not only reinforced parental expectations to influence programs offered to their children but formulated a new obligation for the local school: to provide options to meet variant client needs.

URBAN AND SUBURBAN PARTICIPATION

The implications of the urban decentralization movement on the governance of suburban school systems were recognized by many observers in the late 1960's (Campbell, Kirst). This was the major reason I pursued the research in Eastport, despite the obvious restraints imposed by a lack of funding and my status as a resident.

When I began this study in 1968, it struck me as curious that there were so few references in the literature on suburban participation which challenged the assumptions underlying the "community control" ideology: that a structural change providing for the election of a representative school board would ensure not only the representation of parent interests but that this representation would enable parents to change the quality of services provided for their children.

The findings of most of the studies on which this literature is based do not support the stereotype of "powerful middle class" parents intensely involved in public school affairs in school systems run by administrators responsive to their "demands". Rather, there was general agreement among researchers that the "no politics" ideology, the insulation of decision-making and the growth of professional control all operated to suppress parental involvement in educational issues and to channel participation into negative opposition to specific, usually economic, concerns.

A review of the literature available in 1968, however, also indicated the need for more systematic longitudinal studies not only to provide more information on how the decision-making structure functioned to produce these results but to assess the impact of change at the local school level. Of particular interest to me, as a researcher in the New York City school system and a parent in a suburban school system, was the relative neglect of the role of the school parent and the dearth of follow-up studies on school-board superintendent turnover. Nor does this research tell us much about the role of school principals. This, I believe, relates to the prevalence of the belief that all you have to do to change the schools is change the school board and the superintendent -- which is, of course, exactly, what decentralization advocates believed.

It occurred to me that the urban decentralization experience might eventually enable city education reformers to perceive the inadequacy of the channels for parent participation provided by the traditional decision-making structure on which decentralization is based. At the present time, few city reformers have achieved this insight and most are involved in efforts to broaden representation at the community school board level. Although this is a necessary factor, parent reactions to recent changes in Eastport indicate that it is not sufficient.

Analysis of these recent changes tend to support the conclusions of the earlier Eastport papers: that a major source of school-community conflict is the failure of the school system to institutionalize procedures to ensure broad-based parent representation in formal participatory roles in order to mediate conflicting parent interests. This failure persists in isolating the school board and administration from the majority of school parents.

The last Eastport paper showed how this failure affected participation in roles related to central decision-making. This paper will illustrate how parent participation is fostered or restricted at the local school by principal and parent leadership. A new source of conflict is revealed: the fundamental discrepancy between the emerging and traditional norms governing parent-school relationships. Exploration of the current controversies will illustrate the complexity of the public school enterprise and its interrelationship with factors within and beyond the local community.

Another aspect of the previous studies of parent participation must be mentioned. Few have dealt with parent-initiated efforts to effect educational issues or the quality of services. This reflects not only the biased view of the unstructured suburb with high consensus on educational goals but the school professional's definition of participation: support for the current school program, whatever that may be.

These research deficits become apparent when one compares studies of suburban and urban participation. The former, which characteristically focus on the negative consequences of increased participation (defeat of school budgets and bond issues or a specific professional policy) have created a stereotype which equates increased participation with opposition. Most recent studies of urban parent participation are evaluations of compensatory programs. Here too, parental involvement is typically conceived in biased terms. That is, as a mechanism to "train" parents. (McLaughlin)

A close look at compensatory programs which include a parent component reveals that the objective is usually to change the parent's attitudes so that his goals and behaviors conform to those acceptable to school professionals. Rarely do we find an analysis of the parents who did not like the program or would have preferred another program.

This limited conceptualization of parent involvement in urban school districts is consistent with the philosophy underlying compensatory education which attributes the child's academic failure to inadequacies in the home. Some have questioned the basis of programs developed for minority children and the compliance expected of the "disadvantaged" parent. (Baratz and Baratz, 1970)

But there is little recognition that suburban parents are frequently expected to play a similarly compliant role. Where this is recognized, it is typically supported by the belief articulated by Iannaccone and Lutz (1973), that "educational policy can be developed through 'objective' expert advice."

This expectation for parental compliance to the school system is not only inconsistent with the concept of educational alternatives but the reality of the local school district described by the above authors as a "political arena with varying forces competing for advantage and public interest, as each sees it."

Before the emergence of the alternative movement, decision-making in Eastport often reflected response to the pressure of organized interest groups. Most changes were add-ons -- ancillary services or programs to meet "special" educational needs (retarded children and children with learning disabilities)-- rather than a basic change in the "regular" program or reallocation of resources.

Three factors enabled Eastport administrators to evade the pressures generated by competing interests in relation to the school program itself: acceptance of professional control of this area, the inability of activists to mobilize consensus for a specific change, and the absence of intellectual support to legitimize their interest. (No label had been invented.)

Until recently, parents who criticized the Eastport school program or demanded changes were perceived negatively by school officials and the community at large, reflecting the biased view of participation mentioned earlier. They were usually considered "troublemakers" or "neurotics." Although these parents continue to be perceived negatively by most parents, there are several indications that state education department acceptance of alternatives and parent involvement will have a profound impact on the role of parent activists as well as local school board policy.

All of which indicates the need to elaborate the concept of parent participation but this task is beyond the scope of this paper.

CHANNELS FOR PARENT PARTICIPATION

The Eastport school district includes one pluralistic and two factional suburbs. The factional suburbs are Republican-dominated, have restricted country clubs, and friendship cliques are frequently formed on a religious basis. Because of the similarities the two factional suburbs will be referred to as one community: Old Haven.

Of the districts four elementary schools, the two located in Old Haven have had the most active PTA's during the course of this study and women from these schools tend to dominate PTA leadership at the secondary schools. There is considerable interlocking of leadership in the PTA and other civic groups in this area, particularly the Junior League and League of Women Voters. A relatively closed nominating process ensures the perpetuation of this group. Parent dissent also tends to be concentrated in the Old Haven area.

Traditionally, the Eastport PTA has been the major channel for parent participation at both the local school and school board level. Prior to the 1969 budget defeat most parents were not active in the PTA which was perceived as an arm of the school administration. PTA leadership justified the exclusion from leadership roles of what they referred to as "conservative" parents on the basis that the district was dominated by "anti-school" conservatives resistant to innovation as well as increased services. Parents who wanted a more "progressive" or "creative" curriculum were excluded on the basis that they did not represent the community. The function of the PTA, defined by these leaders, was to support the administration and provide services to the schools. Resistance to parent efforts to influence curriculum was reinforced by the state PTA policy of non-intervention in administrative policy. (This policy was revoked in 1972.)

Two innovations have been introduced to broaden parent participation in educational decision-making. In 1969 the school board sponsored an Educational Goals Committee which lasted until 1972. (See Steinberg, 1973 for an analysis of participation generated by this effort.) In 1971 a Redesign project was initiated by the State Education Department. During the first year, a consultant whose salary was paid by the state, worked with school administrators and faculty to develop a process to promote grass roots change at the local school level. The following year parents were included in Redesign committees at each local school and the school board transferred four goals formulated by the Goals Committee to Redesign for implementation.

In contrast to the centralized Educational Goals Committees which involved a small group of parents on an on-going basis with district-wide participation confined to one or two annual meetings, the decentralized Redesign Committees (consisting of local school administrators, teachers, custodians, secretaries, parents and students) met regularly throughout the year. Parent participants in the Goals Committees were selected by central administrators; for Redesign they were recruited by building principals. This is one reason why Redesign, in its first year of parent participation, was perceived by many activists as similar to the Goals effort: a device to control parents. To broaden participation local schools were asked to establish subcommittees to which any parent was eligible. Nevertheless, many activists maintain the same negative attitude toward Redesign that they have toward the PTA.

Between 1970 and 1972 several dissidents from Old Haven who were active in the 1969 budget controversy assumed PTA leadership roles to see if this channel could be used to influence policy. During this same period there was a shift in the school board from a business-oriented majority concerned with cutting

school costs to a majority concerned with educational quality. In 1973, "conservative" activists attributed the change in school board leadership to the domination of the "liberal" faction. Few conservatives were still active in Old Haven PTA's, they tended to boycott Redesign meetings and hardly any showed up for the annual Selection Committee Meeting in 1972 or 1973.

Interviews in 1973 with some of the PTA leaders who had previously supported the superintendent and school board, indicated that they had come to share the attitudes of the dissidents. Representatives of both groups challenged the views of school trustees and administrators which attributed most school problems to conflicting parent values and/or teacher resistance to change. Rather, they had come to believe that most problems resulted from the weak position of the school board in relation to the administration and the teachers' union.

The suggestion for the parent survey came from activists who wanted to document these views of the decision-making structure.

THE PARENT SURVEY

In June 1973 a 36-item questionnaire was sent to 90 parents who had been PTA executive board members between 1970 and 1973 and 24 parents who had been independently active in school affairs during this same period. To qualify for the latter category a parent had to have been visibly and consistently involved in public school meetings or recognized by other parents as being influential. (This eliminated the majority of parents who thought they could change things by attending one meeting and never learned the rules of the "school game".)

The questionnaire consisted primarily of items to measure parents' educational preference, perception of the decision-making structure and attitude toward the parents' role in decision-making.

Sixty-five parents, or 57% of the original sample, returned the questionnaire. Of this group, 49 were PTA executive board members and 16 were independents. Eleven were men and 54 were women.

Respondents represent households headed primarily by business executives and professionals; almost 80% are in these categories. This is also a highly educated group. Thirty-seven men and 24 women completed some form of postgraduate training.

SURVEY RESULTS

Based on responses to an open-ended question asking for a description of the kind of education wanted for their children, there appears to be at least three types of parent leaders in Eastport: educational progressives, traditionalists and moderates.

Parents whose response indicated an interest in "child-centered" approaches are categorized as progressive and comprise 29% of the sample. Responses mentioning alternative programs, teaching methods that promote "joy" and "open classrooms" were frequent.

Moderates, 37% of the sample, are parents who prefer teaching methods that combine individualized instruction or methods that "challenge" the student with instruction in basic skills.

Traditionalists prefer an emphasis on teaching the basic skills. Responses in this category, 25% of the sample, often mentioned a desire for more discipline or "structure".

Based on ratings of 12 characteristics of the school system, leaders are most satisfied with factors related to services provided to pupils and most dissatisfied with their relationship with the administration, the school board and factors related to administration and curriculum (building basic skills, discipline, developing problem solving skills).

Although interviews with PTA leaders before the survey had revealed antagonism toward the school board, the criticism of the administration revealed in the survey came as a surprise. There are two explanations for this: my initial perception of the PTA as a monolithic group comparable to their counterpart in other suburban studies and the tendency of PTA leaders to give public support for administrators confining criticism to private conversations.

Several questionnaires returned by PTA leaders discussed the political behavior of administrators. For example, one parent wrote that "certain administrative staff concern themselves exclusively with keeping parent peace ... and will tell you only what they think will stir up the least amount of flak.. One top administrator is on the surface a political liaison to the monied influential groups in town with no understanding of those voters ... least likely to pass the school budget...From the top down, I find general lack of consistency for enforcement or follow-through... It must be recognized that many parents are turned off by the futility of voicing their concerns on system-wide level, hence the apparent lack of interest by most parents."

Another PTA board member said "the administration lacks the necessary insight, imagination and know-how to get our school system moving quickly enough into an individualized K-12 system where every single student counts."

Almost all, 95%, of the respondents think parents should have a "great deal" or "some" influence in budget decisions and 85% think parents should have the same amount of influence in curriculum. There is a widespread belief that parents want to be involved in personnel ~~section~~ selection, but fewer than half of the respondents think parents should have "a great deal" or "some" influence in this category.

Of the respondents who think parents should have a great deal or some influence in these decision categories, a minority think the PTA is able to represent parent interests in these areas. The school board is perceived as having the most influence in budget, the administration as having most influence in curriculum and personnel and the teachers' association as having most influence in negotiations.

Respondents were almost equally divided in perception of the PTA as a group through which they could pursue their educational interests or the interests of the parents they represent. Of the 33 parents who gave a negative answer on this item, 60% were or had been PTA executive board members. It should be noted, however, that the sample included parents who had become active in the PTA in 1970 and 1971 with the specific goal of influencing policy.

Although more respondents (N=30) perceive Redesign as a group through which their point of view will be represented, a sizeable group (N=21) said they "didn't know." Similar results were obtained on the question about the School Board where 19 indicated they "didn't know" if their point of view was represented on the board.

Those with a negative view of Redesign tend to see it as a political device. According to one respondent: "Redesign is bunk -- generally political in result and largely so in intent." This parent said that at her school the Redesign committee is an "approval group to establish positive budget passage. It was too administratively directed .. programs were defended and not openly analyzed."

Another parent reported that it took parents at her school "8 months to find out they were used as tools for the administration."

The middle school's Redesign Committe, however, was perceived positively by many respondents from all four elementary school areas. As one parent put it: "Committee members were qualified to make mature evaluations about the school."

A few of the parents who "didn't know" if they were represented on the school board attributed this to the fact that board members do not debate issues publicly.

These results deserve attention. They suggest that a large percentage of the parents comprising what we can assume to be the most informed segment of Eastport perceive Redesign and the school board as negative or ambiguous reference points.

When responses to all three questions on perceived representation were compared, it was found that 26% of the total sample did not perceive their point of view as being represented by any of the three groups, the PTA, Redesign or the board.

Only two parents think the school board develops policy. The largest response to the item dealing with this issue (N=28) was that the superintendent develops policy recommendations and presents the board with various alternatives. Seventeen respondents think policy is developed cooperatively. (At a meeting to present survey results, the board president and superintendent revealed that performance varied with issues but that in general the third response was most accurate.)

Respondents were also asked if they agreed or disagreed with a suggestion that the superintendent should present the school board with alternatives based on research and program development. A clear majority (N=49) agreed and more than half of this group believe the system provides sufficient resources for research and development. But interviews with the superintendent and trustees indicate that the local system lacks the resources to fulfill this expectation which they share.

High attendance at elementary school "Back to School" nights, decreased attendance at each of the secondary schools, low attendance at PTA and district-wide meetings is attributed to the following beliefs: that parents are most involved

when their children are young, are most interested in meetings related to their own children and tend to view general meetings as boring or a "waste of time".

Channels of communication are in need of improvement, according to most respondents. They feel there should be more communication between the PTA and the board, that the board should receive more information on school programs; there should be more opportunity for parents to influence educational policy and that the school reporting in the local press is inadequate. Educational issues are a "frequent" topic of conversation at social functions attended by half of the leaders. The rest pursue this topic occasionally. At one point in the community discussion of survey results, the board president admitted that the school board knows little about the day to day operation of the local schools.

Most respondents think nominating procedures for the PTA officers are adequate (N=51) but far fewer (N=32) are satisfied with procedures for nominating selectors for the school board. The most frequently mentioned recommendations for change were: develop a more open nominating process and broaden the cross section of the community represented.

Over two-thirds said they had tried to improve characteristics rated less than "good". A majority of this group felt the effort had resulted in "some" improvement. Those who saw little or no improvement attributed this to unresponsive administrators and insufficient parent or public awareness of the issue. Interview data suggest that the improvements affected by the above efforts were usually responses to an individual concern.

Combining survey results with interview data and incidents at the local school level, provides some clues to explain these different perceptions of the decision-making structure.

LOCAL SCHOOL PARTICIPATION

To simplify this analysis, the discussion will be limited to events related to principal and PTA leadership, Redesign and ad hoc groups at the two Old Haven elementary schools: Maplewood and Cornwall. Data were derived from interviews with parents, staff and trustees and observations of school meetings.

For this discussion, the term "activist" refers to a parent who became visibly involved in school affairs with the intent of influencing the curriculum at the local school level. The focus is on the three types of activists identified by the survey: traditionalists, progressives and moderates.

Eleven of the 24 activists included in the parent survey sample reside in the Maplewood school area. An additional six activists from this school assumed PTA leadership roles during the course of this study. All three types of activists were involved.

There were six activists at the Cornwall School during this same period but only one, a moderate, became a PTA executive board member. Other PTA leaders at this school were traditionalists and moderates.

In contrast with the Cornwall PTA, which suppressed parent controversy and with the one exception, excluded activists from leadership positions, Maplewood PTA leadership has included all types of activists and the school has had a high level of parent conflict over this three year period. This is in keeping with Maplewood's reputation of having the most "aggressive" parents in the district. At both schools dissident complaints about the school program were similar: ineffective or inappropriate teaching methods (typically described as "rigid"), lack of administrative commitment to new programs and rejection of parent involvement.

A new principal was selected for the Maplewood School in 1969, shortly after the arrival of the new superintendent. Structural changes almost immediately implemented in this school: team teaching and differentiated staffing, were scored by both progressive and traditional activists who wanted changes in teaching methods rather than classroom structure. It was rumored that the principal's inability to control parents and staff accounted for his dismissal in 1971. His successor was at first perceived positively by the traditionalists and negatively by the progressives. The former believed he would bring order to the school. Progressives reported that he was "hostile" to parent involvement and formed two ad hoc groups to press for "open classrooms".

Several members of the open classroom groups were former teachers who had read Silberman, Kozoland Holt. After defeat of the school budget and a bond issue in 1969 some had participated in a 1970 League of Women Voters study of the district's elementary school facilities. But these mothers were interested in more than facilities: they wanted to see what the program was like in the Maplewood School.

They did not find much "joy" in Maplewood classrooms. Neither did another resident (an educational consultant) who had studied with Lillian Weber and had helped set up open classrooms in other school districts. She advised the parents to form groups to press for reforms -- that if they made individual efforts to influence school administrators (the method used by most district parents) they would be labeled "neurotic" or "kooky" because the administrators didn't understand open classrooms. She also warned them that no change would be effective unless it included teacher training. One group was organized to get open classrooms K-3, the other for a 4-6 alternative.

When the two groups first met with the 1971 school board which was dominated by businessmen, requests for open classrooms were rejected on the basis that the parents didn't represent the "community". The mothers reported a similar response from the education-minded board in 1972, but actual facts contradict this.

That year, 1972, the district hired a consultant to work with Maplewood teachers who were interested in developing open classroom techniques. At the same time the new principal entered a leadership training program operated at a well-known institution located in the nearby urban center. There were several indications that this program was designed to foster open classroom methods and parent involvement. In the fall of 1973 the school opened with a K-5 open classroom component and parents report that the principal's attitude toward open classroom mothers has changed completely.

At least six factors appear related to the progressive's success: 1) formation of two highly organized and informed parent groups with a specific goal; 2) changes in Eastport school board leadership (the 1973 board president is known to support alternative programs including open classrooms), 3) assumption of the PTA presidency by a mother active in the open classroom groups, 4) acceptance by the State Education Department of the concept of alternative programs, 5) principal retraining and 6) teacher training.

Maplewood Redesign. Parents participating in the 1972 Maplewood Redesign Committee were inclined to perceive the parents as representing the school's parent body and the teachers as resistant to both change and parent involvement. By the spring of 1973, parents involved in the open classroom movement who originally had doubts about Redesign, had come to see it positively since a member of their group had been appointed to the Redesign Committee.

At the beginning of the current year the number of parents in Maplewood's Redesign Committee had tripled and all three types of activists are represented. The progressives tend to perceive all three channels for participation, the PTA, Redesign and the school board as effective. Traditionalists and moderates have a "wait and see" attitude toward Redesign and view the PTA as ineffective.

THE CORNWALL SCHOOL

The Cornwall School, until the end of the 1973 year, was administered by a principal who had been in that position for over 20 years. Not only did he reject parent involvement in curriculum and teaching methods, but he tended to resist the programs devised by the superintendent most of which reflected responsiveness to community-wide demands for increased accountability. In all fairness to this principal it must be pointed out that his support of teaching staff made him very popular with teachers. This quality enabled him to maintain many highly gifted teachers, which in turn made his school more satisfactory to parents than the Maplewood School, which has had four principals in the last 10 years. Controversy at Cornwall was usually episodic and mostly known only to parents who were included in the PTA leaders' network.

Even though there were parents at Cornwall who shared the same educational interests as progressives at Maplewood, there was little support for open classrooms, in part the result of PTA leaders' attitudes toward parent participation, the principal's attitude and religious differences.

The attitudes of Cornwall PTA leaders were formed by the literature based on the notion that education was a "science" -- educational programs were said to be based on proven theories. Mothers, they were told, should turn to school professionals for advice on child-rearing practices in order to avoid learning

problems. Cornwall leaders also believed that good teachers would leave the district if parents had a say in school affairs.

Jewish mothers who have occupied leadership roles at the Cornwall School tend to perceive their area as dominated by Catholic parents and rejected progressive and moderate requests for change on the basis that it would antagonize the principal and activate the Catholic majority. Jewish mothers heard that the principal's appointment had been opposed by a group of Jewish mothers and that the episode had made him hostile to parent involvement. Newcomers were socialized to play a submissive role and to accept the school program because it was what the "majority wanted". To maintain stability, Jewish leaders advocated a low profile for Jewish women and supported the principal's strategies to maintain professional authority. Most potential activists were quickly discouraged.

These strategies conformed to the pattern identified by Becker (1953) to control parents in an inner city school: administrative defenses to support the authority of the school even where the parent complaint might be justified. At Cornwall, this control was achieved through the "neurotic mother syndrome". Acceptance of this strategy by most PTA leaders (until it operated against them -- at which point it was usually too late to do anything) was a major reason neither the progressives or moderates were able to mobilize a cohesive effort to influence affairs at this school.

The neurotic mother syndrome was designed to diffuse parent dissent by attributing criticism of the school program to individual deviance. Two types of "neurotic mothers" were found at Cornwall: Jewish mothers whose activism was considered a sympton of "anxiety" and "overinvolvement" and Catholic mothers whose activism was interpreted as either an attempt to make the schools conform to parochial schools or "overprotectiveness".

Despite the different basis for this presumed "overconcern", both types of mothers were reported to be "hostile": they didn't trust the schools and tried to blame the schools for educational failure. (In fact, few of the activists seemed to have failing children.)

Progressives and moderates were involved in a few encounters with the superintendent and school trustees. Typically these officials would tell the mothers that they would "look into" the matter but usually nothing was done. Some persistent mothers were even told that their involvement in school politics would be detrimental to their children's achievement. Several incidents have occurred during the course of this research to suggest why there was no response.

Most of the complaints dealt with the Cornwall principal's refusal to do anything about ineffective teachers or what the mother's believed were destructive teaching methods and classroom management techniques. (One teacher, for example, punished a child by putting him in the coat closet.) The principal would tell a mother -- even when she knew other mothers had spoken to him about the same issue -- that she was the "only one" who had complained; therefore there was nothing he could do. It was up to the mother to help the school change the child and, sometimes, herself. Few Cornwall mothers pursued encounters with this principal because his tactics were well-known throughout the area. The persistent mothers tended to be professional women who refused to accept the submissive behavior required by the principal, as well as his definition of the situation. (Note: These incidents occurred before the women's lib movement. Today the active mothers are labeled "militants" and amongst themselves talk about the school administration's "sexist" role definitions.)

Labeling the mothers "neurotic" eliminated any basis for school board or superintendent intervention. This strategy was reinforced by bureaucratic procedures for dealing with parent complaints which concentrates power on the side of the professionals. The rules require the board member to refer the complaint to the superintendent who in turn goes to the building principal. The Cornwall principal would tell the superintendent that the mother was the only one who had complained and he had evidence on the record that she was "neurotic", "conservative" or the child was "disturbed". Since the division of functions between the board and the superintendent clearly prevents the board member from "interfering" with administration of the schools, and the board does not have an independent staff to investigate parent complaints, it must rely on the reports of the school administrators. Thus the board has no basis to act unless parents form a group and deal directly with the superintendent and the board.

Progressives and moderate activists were unable to enlist support of other Cornwall parents because the PTA leadership accepted the principal's definition of the situation. Whenever the insurgents would attempt to mobilize an ad hoc group, the PTA leaders would spread the word that this was another one of those "kooky" or "conservative" mothers.

Two episodes illustrate how the syndrome operated. In 1971 the dissidents arranged a meeting of the so-called "neurotic" mothers to which a sympathetic trustee had been invited. The purpose of the meeting was to document the principal's strategies to control parents, and protect teachers, following the board member's advice that there was nothing the board could do unless parents documented the problem. Someone led the superintendent to think that the meeting was called to discuss a "radical" social studies program in another school. A Cornwall PTA leader told the school board president not to pay any attention to the mothers because they were the same "negative" parents who were always complaining.

In 1972, a moderate parent wrote an article for the Cornwall PTA newsletter criticizing the school board and administration. The author had recognized the strategy of the neurotic mother syndrome because of the similarity with strategies used by principals in New York City schools where she had taught. A board member told this researcher that the mother's views were a reflection of her "anger" which was related to her child's alleged "learning disability".

Several reports of this type of labeling suggest that it was considered acceptable for principals to reveal to school officials and parents information divulged in what parents assumed to be a privileged communication. (In some instances the information was correct, in others it was not. But knowledge of the practice served to immobilize any parent whosechild's record included any suggestion, validated or not, of academic problems related to psychological, neurological or sociological impairment.)

This acceptance indicates either ignorance of professional ethics in regard to privileged communication or tacit acceptance of the violation of this code.

In spite of the school board's recent support of parent involvement and alternatives, Cornwall dissidents have been unable to have an impact on the school's program because their efforts lacked three of the ingredients found at the Maplewood School. They did not have support from the PTA, the principal or a group of parents with consensus on a specific issue.

The selection of supportive PTA leaders or naive parents for the 1972 Redesign Committee at Cornwall increased the alienation of moderates and PTA leaders whose efforts to influence the Cornwall principal had been rejected. When it became obvious to one of these leaders that she was a victim of the neurotic mother syndrome there was a sudden change in attitude toward the other dissidents.

There were six parents involved in the beginning of Cornwall's Redesign. The number has grown to 27. Twelve are members of the PTA leadership group. At the end of the 1973 school year, a coalition consisting of activists from all three categories began to emerge from Redesign meetings. In the current school year, this still loosely knit group tends to resist proposals from the central administration and supports Cornwall faculty members who have sought help in resisting such pressures.

SUMMARY OF PARTICIPATION IN REDESIGN

A comparison of parent participation in Redesign committees in all six schools indicates that participation has increased only at the Maplewood and Cornwall schools. Of the six principals, only Maplewood's recruited a diverse group of parents in the first year. Members of the PTA leadership group dominated Redesign committees in the other five schools. This situation continues, in the current year, with the exception of the middle school. In both years only 4 parents have participated at this school, but where there were four PTA leaders the first year, now only 2 are in this category. (Interview data indicated that the favorable references to this school's Redesign report were based on the knowledge that it was the only school where Redesign members analyzed the curriculum.)

At Maplewood and Cornwall the number of parent participants has tripled but at Cornwall, Redesign includes 12 members of the PTA leadership group; at Maplewood only two PTA leaders are included. Finally, Maplewood is the only school to enlist participation of independent activists.

Interviews with several parents active in committees at the six schools suggests that Redesign is viewed most favorably at the 3 schools where suggestions for innovation or plant improvement were implemented: the middle school, Maplewood

and one other elementary school. These recommendations were formulated by the school staff and approved by parents.

Lack of consensus among staff and parents at the other three schools is attributed by observers and participants to two factors: 1) ineffective leadership and 2) faculty resistance to parent involvement. Parents from these schools report that their suggestions or those received from other parents at an open school meeting were not taken seriously. They felt that staff members preferred to focus on facilities or marginal issues that would not affect the curriculum.

The formation of ad hoc groups at two of the schools where Redesign is perceived negatively suggests the correlation between secondary participation and parent leadership discussed in the last Eastport paper which analyzed participation in the Educational Goals Committee. When formal roles which provide access to decision making are occupied by parent influentials representative of various community factions, there is an increase in participation in the channels provided by the school system when a problem arises. This serves to integrate the school board and administration with these factions. If parents occupying formal roles are not perceived as representative (or as co-opted by the administration) dissent is channeled into community-controlled channels. Ad hoc groups, since they are controlled by parents and leadership is isolated from the school board and administration, are in the latter category.

Although the Maplewood open classroom groups began on an ad hoc basis, they were eventually included in Redesign. But there is a crucial difference between the changes brought about by the open classroom groups and the changes introduced through Redesign: The open classroom parents are the only ones in the district who have been able to effect a major program change.

All the evidence reported here suggests that the structural change, Redesign, to provide parent participation at the local school level has not enabled parents to influence the kind of educational programs offered to their children. This does not mean that results are not important or do not affect the children. Given the "trustee" orientation of most Eastport principals it is probably unrealistic to expect more than what has occurred to date. (See Mann, 1971, for a discussion of administrative representation.)

At the time Redesign was introduced to the district, four of the six principals were men appointed by the former superintendent which could lead us to anticipate resistance to any innovation imposed from above. They were socialized to the view that educational decisions should be based on professional expertise and see parent involvement in terms of compliance to professional authority. The practices engendered by these views are reinforced by administrative policy which gives principals autonomy to implement programs in terms of local school needs.

To achieve the goals of Redesign, principals would have to open participation to both teachers and parents with diverse values and would thereby subject themselves to cross-pressures. Restricted participation is a device to avoid this source of conflict, but it seems to work only at schools where parents are relatively satisfied or not interested in participation. Where this is not the case, it can <u>create</u> conflict -- particularly amongst parents who do not see other channels for participation as effective. As the survey indicates, the discrepancy between the school board's acceptance of parent participation and the administrator's attitudes toward parents has already antagonized many PTA leaders as well as activists.

DISCUSSION

Recent events in Eastport illustrate the flexibility of the decision-making structure to adapt to both community and extra-community change. Decentralization has legitimized parent participation in decision-making and both the local school board and the State Education Department have created channels for such activities. A parent-initiated open classroom movement succeeded, through efforts pursued outside school-controlled channels, in getting its goals accepted by the administration. A district traditionally governed by trustees who left the regular curriculum intact on the basis that it met the needs of the "majority" has approved other teacher-initiated alternatives. However, new problems have been created where these changes subject principals to conflicting parent and teacher interests.

The district has become the "increasingly structured electorate," described by Campbell (1968) "with conflicting demands to which educators and politicians will have to respond." So far, the school board has not evidenced the capacity to cope with principal resistance to these conflicting demands and, in fact, may not even perceive the basic problems. Interview data suggest that some resentment has generated among PTA leaders and activists because the board has responded to the interests of only one segment of the community consisting primarily of younger parents.

It is doubtful that veteran PTA leaders will utilize the political tactics of the open classroom group to achieve their goals. For one thing, their interests are focused on more diffuse, system-wide issues. More importantly, their training has not equipped them to pursue a political course.

The Eastport PTA is ineffective not because of the type of parents selected for leadership roles but because the socialization of parents is controlled by

school administrators. In addition, the anticipatory socialization of older parents was inappropriate because it was based on the no-politics ideology that dominated the literature read by these parents. They have read nothing about the professionalism and bureaucracy characteristic of the modern school system.

For these older mothers improving the schools meant getting the community to spend more money on education. But increases in the school budget, primarily the result of teacher salary raises and inflation, have ruled out this type of activity. Fund raising, volunteer activities, and opposition to program cuts, are the only tasks left for these mothers.

Contrary to the views of many activists, PTA leaders have little influence with the school board. A few episodes indicate that the PTA has had an impact on the board, but the issues were considered minor. According to one former trustee, the board rejected PTA leaders for the same reason it rejected activists: they did not represent the community. Since PTA leaders do tend to come from the more educated and affluent segments of the district there was some truth to this.

Veteran PTA leaders appear to share the same concerns as the activists who do not opt for alternatives as the means to achieve school reforms. Concentration on alternatives provides options for only a minority of students and, because they neglect system problems, leave the regular program intact. (A frequent objection to open classrooms indicates awareness that the movement has focused on the elementary level. Activists ask what will happen when the children reach the middle school which has a highly traditional program and a tracking system. Limitations of the open classroom and "free school" movements are discussed in Cremin, 1973.)

Parents also perceive that the authority of the school board appears to have declined in comparison to the power of the teachers' union and the school administration. Originally inclined to think that a more representative school board

would lead to increased accountability, by 1973 some parents felt that it didn't make much difference who they elected to the board. Costs kept going up despite program cuts. They think most board members are ineffective because they know little about how the school system functions before going on the board and once there information is screened by the school staff. When evaluations of new programs are conducted they are typically positive and it is rare for a board member to challenge these reports. School visits are infrequent and parents think board members see only the "best" classes or programs.

What happens to board members appears to conform to the socialization process documented by Kerr (1968). On assuming the trustee role, their primary reference group shifts from the community and parents to the school system. Like PTA leaders, they are socialized to publicly express the view that the board cannot respond to interest groups or extremists and educational decisions must meet the needs of the majority. At the meeting to discuss the survey results, a trustee stated that before going on the board a lot of parents had discussed school affairs with her. Once on the board, parents stopped calling. The board president said he had the same experience. Thus the board is virtually cut off from direct communication with its constituents and interaction is predominantly with school officials.

Parent leadership is strongest in the three schools run by principals who are not defensive and share information with parents. This generalization applies to both PTA and Redesign. The socialization of PTA and parents to submissive roles at the other schools combined with the neglect of the PTA leaders by the school board and administration has created a district with weak parent leadership. Although these practices may have enabled the board to avoid the cross-pressures of conflicting interests in the past, the indication of the impact of decentralization on Eastport suggest that they are now dysfunctional.

A major function of the board is to pass the school budget. This is no easy task in a district where only a small majority (52%) of the households utilize the schools and where the budget has risen at the rate of almost one million dollars a year. Turnout for school elections since 1968 has been consistently high and passage is obviously dependent on parental support.

Defeat of the 1969 school budget, partially attributed to the school system's isolation from various community groups, has inclined successive boards to spend a great deal of time promoting the budget throughout the community. It was automatically assumed that the PTA would get out the parent vote. In 1970 the PTA reversed its policy requiring PTA presidents to support the budget. The board's neglect of the PTA and parents plus the fact that they see budget increases as a teacher interest, has inclined several leaders to reject this task.

Regardless of whether or not the PTA is representative of the community, the fact remains that it is the only group whose leadership is elected by parents and it has included representation of diverse educational values (the major group not represented is parents who would opt for vocational or career oriented programs). Leaders tend to be active in civic and religious organizations so they have strong ties with local communication networks. Neither the board or the administration can afford to neglect this group. Nor can they afford to permit the continuation of administrative strategies which restrict participation at schools controlled by defensive principals.

CONCLUSION

So far the structural change to foster parent participation has not enabled Eastport parents to influence the educational programs provided for their own children. At schools run by defensive principals the consequences of Redesign are similar to the PTA: principals have recruited submissive PTA leaders and the process does not provide for the mediation of conflicting interests.

In addition, because it focuses on the local school level, Redesign does not permit parent influence in the central decisions that concern many PTA leaders and activists. Thus the district still lacks a channel to provide representative participation at the school board level.

The impact of decentralization on Eastport, has legitimized parent participation but parent-initiated efforts for reform continue to be mobilized outside of the school controlled channels for participation at schools run by defensive principals. On the basis of the open classroom experience, factors related to goal achievement include: a legitimate issue, the ability to mobilize parent support and administrative responsiveness. Few alternatives are currently available for the mass of students, however, and most parents lack the requisite skills or the inclination to pursue the tactics of the open classroom group.

The findings of this paper tend to confirm those of the previous Eastport papers. The major source of school-community conflict is the failure of the school system to institutionalize procedures to ensure broad-based parent representation in formal participatory roles in order to mediate conflicting parent interests. This applies to Redesign as well as the other channels for participation. This failure not only isolates the school board and administration from the majority of its constituents but weakens the schools linkage to multiple community factions and reinforces intergroup hostilities.

The need for procedures to expand representation is heightened in the present context of educational decision-making characterized by efforts to broaden parent influence and expand educational alternatives to meet variant client needs. The history of events in Eastport suggests that these efforts will be thwarted where school administrators have little support beyond the organized and vocal parent groups.

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