COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT—MID-COAST MAINE

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This paper describes a community development action along a sixty-mile stretch about halfway down the Maine coast. The action was generated by the Education Development Center (EDC) of Newton, Massachusetts and the University of Maine Cooperative Extension Service. This account is intended to identify some characteristics, difficulties, and successes that have been encountered and seem likely to be met in other attempts to change social systems.

THE CHANGE AGENTS

Mutual interest in exploring ways to attack problems, a converging of objectives, and a chain of circumstances led the University of Maine Cooperative Extension Service to join efforts with the EDC in the area defined by EDC's Maine Pilot Community Program.

PROJECT DEVELOPMENT

The mid-coast Maine project sprawls over four counties, where occupations spring from such diverse sources as shipbuilding and shoe shops, lobstering and the tourist trade, clamming and broiler farming. It is nonurban; the largest town has about 10,000 people. Schools vary from tiny grade schools on islands in the sea to consolidated regional high schools to old ivy Bowdoin College.

Our project objectives within this regional community are that:

1. Community members come to share responsibility for decision making with the formally organized community leadership.

2. The community apply a systematic approach to relating the educational process to community concerns.

3. The community see education as a process directly related to community concerns.

These objectives arose out of long discussion of the question, "How do you influence change in the total educational system in a community?" We agreed that to influence change in such a major community element as the educational system requires change in the entire problem-solving process

in the community. To help us think from that stage to a statement of values, assumptions, objectives, and a plan for action, we arranged for consultation with a group from the New England Center for Continuing Education. The team included an educational media specialist, a community psychologist, an operations research analyst, a sociological statistician, and a community development specialist.

When we had hammered out the objectives, we faced the question of knowing when they are accomplished. What are community members doing when they participate in decision making? What is an appropriate level of participation for each citizen and who determines it? Such questions led us to analyze problem solving and community development processes. The result was a series of questions for the community development educator to answer relative to a community's performance on a specific problem. Answers to these questions can provide five categories of information for an evaluation of the quality of community development: problem definition, goal setting, solution finding, breadth of participation, and level of collaboration.

The initial plan of action that emerged was to select pilot communities within the region, then to:

1. Identify influential persons in each social subsystem.

2. Interview influentials to identify their major concerns.

3. Bring influentials into a group to:

    a. Examine concerns identified by individuals.

    b. Determine group concerns.

    c. Establish group goals.

    d. Determine plans of action to reach goals.

As individual communities established procedures for broad participation in educational management, we could expand the pattern to the regional community.

This plan has not been followed. It requires an organization, or at least an individual, within the community to initiate action. Efforts to find a ready-made sponsor have failed, and it has become necessary to develop an organization to take leadership. Since for various reasons it has not been feasible to initiate action at the local community level, an attempt has been made to establish an informal regional organization.

The approach we followed was to establish a consulting relationship with a few organizations to discover their problems, then to bring them together to stimulate joint action based on their common concerns. The

core organizations have been the Maine unit of the EDC, the community action agency serving most of the regional community, and two county extension services.

This approach seems to be working. The core is gradually expanding to include representatives of other social groups and is actively planning the initiation of subregional workshops on educational issues.

PROBLEMS ENCOUNTERED IN THE PROJECT

Perhaps this is enough description to define the general outlines of the project. Its specific nature is less significant than that it represents an attempt to effect change in a broad social system rather than to deal with individual problems that often arise because of the system. Following are some of the conditions that seem to go with such an attempt.

1. While the basic concepts are relatively simple, implementing them becomes complex. The concept of integrated planning and management for the community's total educational needs is readily accepted. Thinking through the requirements for implementing the concept tends to be overwhelming. A frequent response is, "The idea sounds great, but I wonder if it isn't too ambitious."

2. The magnitude of the task requires much time and effort. Just identifying and inventorying the groups in a regional community that need to have communication in the problem-solving process is a substantial task.

3. Analysis of functions to be performed, of resources required, and of alternative organizational structures is unorthodox procedure for most people. Implying that a system might be improved is in itself threatening and automatically creates resistance to change within the system. We are trying to change processes in a bureaucratic system when bureaucracy by definition aims to ensure stability and continuity of established routines.

4. A community tends to expend its energy in coping with immediate problems and is little inclined to undertake the long-time effort needed to remove the cause of those problems. A small peninsula-bound elementary school in the project area faced a self-appointed committee of irate parents this past winter. The parents charged that the teachers' introduction of ungraded groupings of students by study areas was destroying discipline. After a few months of heated conflict the crisis was mediated, but no real change has resulted in the system with its inadequate school-community communication links.

5. Individual interests make it difficult to maintain a broad perspective. We repeatedly catch ourselves discussing some generalization about the

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"educational system" when our meaning is obviously the "public school system."

6. We just do not have adequate knowledge of reliable change strategies and techniques for democratic action.

7. In the early stages the problems, goals, and plans were explained in great detail to potential agency participants. I believe this was a mistake, that each participant has to struggle through concept development and goal setting to arrive at his own role.

8. The basic objectives seem too abstract to generate deep commitment, while more specific and immediate goals tend to becloud and detract from them. My own impatience must constantly be held in check; it is agonizing to wait for six or eight members of a steering committee to arrive at a consensus about the approach to use in an opening conference.

OUR SUCCESSES

We have successfully avoided predetermining solutions to problems. The opportunity for wide participation in decision making has been carefully guarded. This is basic for the entire approach. Our role is to help the community do what it wants to do, not to provide solutions to cure what we think are its ailments.

We have not permitted time and other pressures to divert us from deliberate concept development and planning.

I sense a gathering momentum toward greater collaboration of the core organizations and an expansion of the core. Slowly, the initiative for developing a regional community system for education problem solving is shifting to community members. At last we seem to be moving toward wider participation by the regional community. Subregional conferences have been scheduled to provide large numbers of citizens an opportunity to express their views and concerns about learning needs and problems of education. If this problem census is successful, we can then build the organizational structure and processes to weave the common threads into a fabric of action.

Perhaps in a decade we will know whether our objectives are realistic.

GENERAL OBSERVATIONS

A substantial concern in our society is centered on education—on learning skills, knowledge, or attitudes that are needed for a full life amid fast-changing conditions. Because the demand for learning is heavy, the number of organizations engaging in educational functions in any community may be staggering. In addition to schools at elementary, secondary,

higher, and specialized levels are churches, industries, families, youth groups, service clubs, health and welfare agencies, community action agencies, Cooperative Extension Service, and others.

Two questions nag most of these organizations and the community members whom they serve:

1. How can the educator make programs and methods more responsive to learners' needs?

2. How can more community members participate effectively in decision making about education?

No matter what organization performs it, the application of the educational process to content is the same function and requires the same resources:

1. Physical facilities.

2. Sources of knowledge, skills, and attitudes.

3. Educators who can design, organize, and implement effective learning situations.

Planning and management of education is isolated or fragmented. Program or curriculum development in the public schools, in the churches, in the Cooperative Extension Service, in industry training is achieved within each institution and within its narrow perception of its role, interest, and capability. Although some coordination, or even collaboration, may occur among institutions, it is either accidental or results from personal administrative styles, not from the existence of any community procedure. For instance, have you ever heard of a community deliberately identifying the learning needs of retired and about-to-retire citizens, considering the facilities, educators, and finances required, then determining the most effective organization to provide them?

It is very difficult to restructure an existing agency to meet the newly identified needs. It is usually easier to create new organizations than to change a bureaucracy.

Alternatives for improving the educational system are often limited by decisions being made at the wrong community level. A town has an outgrown, obsolete high school building. It is too small to support an adequate facility or faculty. Neighboring towns refuse to admit nonresident students; consolidated districts are also closed. The town has no acceptable alternatives. But it has to do something! It often ends up with a new building it cannot afford and a generation or more of inadequately prepared youth.

A decision by vote taken within the boundaries of a municipality may affect as many people outside as within and vice versa. Several major economic enterprises are causing problems of this kind in Maine: a possible oil refinery and free port in Machiasport, a possible aluminum smelting plant in Searsport, an atomic power plant under construction in Wiscasset. Each situation involves a sudden injection of millions of dollars of capital and operating finances, increased population, and the accompanying demand for community services. The decision to permit site location is made by voters of the town where the real estate lies, yet many of the demands on community services—including education—fall on surrounding towns.

Attempts to redefine communities, as in the establishment of consolidated school districts, only partially reduce the problem.

Too often, most community members have only veto power as a realistic means of participation. For example, the individual citizen can only express displeasure about an educational program by voting against the annual request for a budget increase. He has, or feels that he has, no effective means of making a positive contribution in developing a better program. Effective public affairs education programs and gradual development of increased participation can help remedy this situation.