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Citizen involvement in public education has been a tradition in our country.

The varied functions of local vocational advisory councils

by A. Bruce Hartung



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The past decade has seen a renewed interest in and resurgence of vocational education programs at all levels—middle-school, secondary and post-secondary. Accompanying this growth has been an increased emphasis on having local advisory committees or councils to assist these programs.

Advisory councils, in general, may provide immeasurable and invaluable assistance to teachers, principals and other administrators with respect to many programs—perhaps the most critical of these programs is in the area of vocational education. There are few limitations to this assistance except those inherent in the extent to which individual members are willing and able to become involved. Citizen involvement in public education has been a tradition in our country. Through citizen involvement with professionals in planning and evaluating educational programs, both the quality and the equality of opportunity of these programs are enhanced. Involvement of citizens also enhances public support for further and stronger educational programs.

The Congress also realized the wisdom and necessity for citizen involvement, as evidenced by Sec. 105(g) of the recently signed "Educational Amendments of 1976," which states:

(1) Each eligible recipient receiving assistance under this Act to operate vocational education programs shall establish a local advisory council to provide such agency with advice on current job needs and on the relevancy of courses being offered by such agency in meeting such needs. Such local advisory councils shall be composed of members of the general public, especially of representatives of business, industry, and labor; and such local advisory councils may be established for program areas,

schools, communities, or regions, whichever the recipient determines best to meet the needs of that recipient.

(2) Each State board shall notify eligible recipients within the state of the responsibilities of such recipients under the provisions of paragraph (1); and each state advisory council shall make available to such recipients and the local advisory councils of such recipients such technical assistance as such recipients may request to establish and operate such councils.²

As the federal law suggests, advisory councils may range in scope from program area councils, to school councils, to local administrative agency councils or to educational district councils. Generally, the program area advisory councils would be more likely to deal with "nitty-gritty" kinds of things whereas local educational agency or district councils would be more likely to concern themselves with more general issues. However, persons on any vocational advisory council may be asked to provide leadership, advice, or assistance in any number of areas or ways.

In general, however, the primary function of any advisory group at any level is to provide guidance or assistance to teachers and/or administrators.

Program area advisory councils should have as their membership both employers and employees who are engaged in work in the program area. It might also be advisable to include a recent graduate and a currently enrolled student. Program area councils should assist in determining needs for new programs and advise on course content. Their expertise should be involved in establishing realistic standards for the program and in periodic program evaluation.

School advisory councils are the liaison between the vocation education program of the school and the business and industrial community which it serves. Membership on these councils should vary to meet the needs of individual situations, but it should include at least one person knowledgeable of the needs of each of the school's program areas. School advisory councils should assist in determining the vocational education needs of the community. They may provide assistance in assessing the present and future local job market and hence advise on the initiation, termination or modification of programs. They may also assist in interpreting the total vocational program to the community and play a major role in program evaluation. If school advisory councils are to be maximally effective, communication must be a two-way proposition. That is, ideas must be brought to the school from business and industry and the philosophy and workings of the school's total program must be interpreted to the council for dissemination to the community.³

Local educational agency (L.E.A. administrative unit) advisory councils should be composed of representatives of the major vocational areas in the geographic area which that L.E.A. serves. If school advisory councils exist within that L.E.A., each of these councils should be represented. The functions of an L.E.A. advisory council are somewhat broader than those of a school advisory council. The council for an L.E.A. should advise the school board on the development of both long-range and annual plans for vocational education, and on matters of policy with regard to the implementation of these plans. These councils also should have the responsibility of determining community needs and transmitting these to the school board as well as interpreting board policy to the community. They

should also be spokesmen for the vocational education programs and assist school officials in evaluating the effectiveness of the total program.

Educational district advisory councils are normally composed of persons from each of the L.E.A. councils within the district, membership from manpower groups and representatives of the general public. Generally, these groups advise educators within their region, analyze vocational trends and send recommendations to those persons responsible for statewide planning.

The federal law does not dictate what system of advisory councils shall be operated, but leaves this decision to each recipient. Neither does the law simply say "go do this the best way you can," but requires that the State Advisory Council provide whatever technical assistance is requested.

If the only reason for establishing these local councils is to satisfy the federal requirements, any perfunctory attempt would suffice. However, if the intent is to comply with the spirit as well as the letter of the law, care must be taken in the appointment of the council members and operation of the councils in general. Citizen groups should be asked for suggestions for possible appointees. Some members appointed should have recent practical experience in the vocational areas, and all members should receive their appointments through the superintendent and school board.⁴

Unless citizen groups are involved at the local level, educators will continue making their decisions based upon past experience, general manpower data and their own generally good judgment. However, no opinions regarding the job market, needed additions and revisions to the curriculum, retraining needs, and other aspects of vocational education are as valid and valuable as those of recent graduates and workmen in the field. As clearly recognized by the Congress, it would be a complete waste if this expertise were not utilized to the fullest. As fundamental as this seems, it is difficult to understand why citizen involvement in planning for vocational educational programs has not been the rule rather than the exception. However, had this been universally the case, the federal requirement would not have been necessary.

In conclusion, it should be remembered that the one overall purpose of any advisory council is to provide advice and assistance to the teachers and administrators involved in vocational programs. Virtually any supplementary activity which contributes to or increases the overall effectiveness of vocational education programs and which the members of the advisory council are willing and able to undertake may be considered a perfectly valid function of that council.

References

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