Interfacing citizen participation with planning and decision-making processes

Brian P. Miller

Roger Farrar

Interfacing citizen participation with planning and decision-making processes

by Brian P. Miller and Roger Farrar

Brian P. Miller has served some 12 years in education. He has been a teacher, principal and a university professor and administrator. He is presently assistant professor of Educational Administration and Supervision and Coordinator of the Southwest Regional Center for Community Education Development at Arizona State University.

Previous to coming to Arizona State University, Dr. Miller was a professor of Educational Administration and Supervision at Drake University in Des Moines, Iowa.

Roger Farrar's background in education includes classroom teaching at the secondary level, administrative work at the principalship and superintendency level and teaching at the university level. He is presently an associate professor of educational administration at Arizona State University with previous teaching experience in departments of educational administration at Trinity University in San Antonio, Texas and the Ohio State University in Columbus, Ohio. Farrar's major interests lie in the areas of planning and management, and he has served as a consultant to school districts in these areas.

Introduction

The evolution of traditional and contemporary planning and decision-making models has given educational leaders several variations on a theme. Among the better known planning models are PPBS (Planning, Programming, Budgeting Systems), CIPP (Context, Input, Process and Program) and OD (Organizational Development Theory). Although these models vary considerably in appearance, the scientific method of problem solving is inherent within each: (1) diagnosing the problem; (2) formulating goals and objectives; (3) identifying constraints and needed resources; (4) evaluating alternatives; (5) selecting solutions; (6) implementing the selected solution; and (7) feedback evaluation. Major differences between traditional and contemporary decision-making models include: (1) a greater opportunity within contemporary models for input from those persons affected by the decision; (2) a continuing concern for inputs and processes but a greater concern for the "outcomes" within contemporary planning models; and (3) an increased commitment within contemporary models for feedback evaluation. A major delimitation of both traditional and contemporary models of decision-making is the absence of consideration to the involvement of lay citizens. This is not to suggest that lay citizens have not been involved in decision-making in schools within recent years. In fact, there has been a noticeable movement within education to broadening the base of decision-making. The concern presented here is that traditional and contemporary models have not addressed themselves specifically to interfacing citizen participation with either traditional or contemporary decision-making processes recognizing the value of inherent process outcomes as well as the more traditional product outcomes.

Citizen Participation in Decision-Making Processes

For one reason or another, many boards of education and educational administrators have come to feel "obligated" to involving students, teachers and more recently, lay citizens, in the decision-making process. The authors attribute this movement toward lay involvement to several major occurrences:

(1) the acceptance of a democratic model of administration;

(2) a need for passage of tax overrides for operation of schools and/or school bond issues for capital construction purposes; and

(3) the development of formal community education programs throughout the country.

Although teachers and administrators have been slow to accept genuinely cooperative procedures, the use of these procedures has been widely extended in recent years. This effort to develop cooperative procedures among school boards, administrators and teachers has moved within very recent years to including lay citizens and there is every reason to believe that this thrust will continue. Many state and federally-funded programs mandate the development of citizen advisory committees to guarantee that "input" into the decision-making process. Such input is considered essential to the development of a "democratic" model of administration and decision-making.

1

In 1960, 60 per cent of the educational tax issues presented to the public passed but by 1970, only 10 per cent were approved.[1] The intent here is not to identify the reasons for this decline in public support in recent years. The intent is to recognize the fact that this decline has occurred and some boards of education and school administrators have begun to search desperately for ways to reverse this trend. Unfortunately, the effort to involve lay people in the decision-making process has many times been predicated not on the belief that the lay public does indeed have something significant to contribute but on the belief that "if they are involved, maybe they will support our position." This latter position appears to present a situation of "let's involve the public but not really involve them." Regardless of the motive, lay citizens in many communities are now being involved in decision-making processes relative to tax overrides and bond issue decisions.

In 1974, the American Association of School Administrators Commission on Community Education Facilities identified eight components that new forms of community education should include if they are to better serve a rapidly changing world.[2] One of the eight components is "community participation in planning and decision-making." As the community education movement has developed in many communities throughout this country, it has carried with it this perceived need to involve the community in the decision-making processes. In spite of this movement toward community participation, it is a conviction of the writers that many boards of education and school administrators still do not understand and accept the major values inherent in that "citizen" involvement. Such involvement must be predicated on the inherent value of the involvement to the system, *not* because it seems to be a popular thing to do, *not* because we need citizen involvement to gain their acceptance of our proposals or *not* because the movement toward community education programs demands it. There does exist today a need to develop a model for interfacing citizen participation in planning and decision-making processes. Such a model must not only reflect the outcomes of more traditional models of planning and decision-making—(1) determination of need; (2) a quality product; and (3) community acceptance of that product—but must include at least two highly important process outcomes not generally identified with existing models—(1) citizen ownership of the decisions and products and (2) shared responsibility of accountability for those decisions and products between lay citizens and those specifically charged with the responsibility of legislating and managing the education enterprise.

The Model

Figure 1 presents a model for interfacing citizen participation with the traditional, scientific planning processes discussed earlier. It is a major thesis that the product outcomes of the traditional planning processes will continue to result from the interfacing of citizen participation with traditional planning processes. Not only will the product outcomes continue to result from such interfacing but at an improved level. In other words, not only will there be a determination of need but that determination will be a more accurate determination given access to more definitive and comprehensive information relative to community needs. Participation of many

qualified and knowledgeable lay persons should help to provide a better and more appropriate product. Citizen participation should help to increase the level of community acceptance of decisions in as much as the decision is, in part, a community decision and not a school board decision or administrative team decision. Many of the challenges often met without community participation may never be resolved. The major process outcomes discussed earlier can only result if citizen participation is encouraged. Teachers, staff and community members are many times reluctant to accept a particular model unless they have had some involvement in the invention of that model. Community ownership is a very direct, desirable outcome. Some sharing of responsibility between professional educators, boards of education and the general public will provide a relatively new, but very positive, force in the education of young people and the development of a community *esprit de corps*.
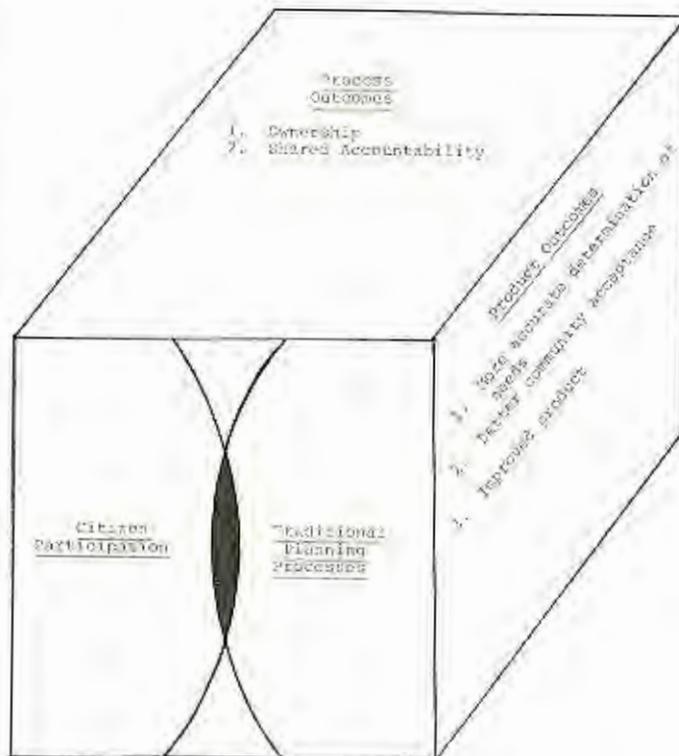

Figure 1. A Model for Interfacing Citizen Participation with Decision-Making

Process Facilitation and Citizen Involvement

There are numerous methods for structuring citizen involvement in the decision-making processes. J.B. Rosener has identified 39 such forms of citizen involvement.[3] Prior to initiating a particular planning activity involving citizens, it is most important to ascertain what inputs and outcomes are sought from the citizen group. Once the desired contribution to be gained from the citizen group is identified, the type of activity needed will be more readily apparent.

Subsequent to the determination of the type of collective activity in which citizens will be asked to participate are several important considerations. If citizen participation is to have a significant impact on the desired decision-making process, the following four criteria should be present in planning for citizen involvement.

(1) *Be cognizant of the need to provide strong organization to the initial stages of citizen involvement.* Lack of such organization, as evidenced by the absence of a prepared agenda, the absence of a formal process for inviting citizens to the initial meeting, absence of a clear understanding of the tasks citizens are being asked to perform along with several other organizational considerations can cause early experiences to be less than meaningful to citizen participants. The credibility of the entire project can be diminished, if not destroyed, by a failure to pay close attention to initial details.

(2) *Work to develop a clear understanding of the role to be played by the citizen's group.* It is imperative that the administration, on behalf of the board of education, identifies specifically the how, why, who, where and when of citizen involvement in the planning process. If, for example, citizens do not understand that their role is strictly an advisory role, hard feelings might result when the recommendations of the advisory group are not implemented in their entirety. In the early stages of planning, school administrators and citizen groups need to agree upon the exact role of the citizen group and its relationship with the school board, the administrative team and the community at large.

(3) *Determine if the problem you are asking citizens to help solve is worth their time and talent.* Nothing will short-circuit a citizens' planning group faster than the absence of a viable and meaningful problem. If busy and productive citizens are involved in a task of little consequence, they will quickly lose interest and it will be difficult to enlist their support at a later time.

(4) *Be sincere in your interest to have citizens involved.* A lack of such sincerity is probably the most damaging practice in which a school administrator can engage relative to citizen involvement in decision-making. Never involve a group of energetic and dedicated citizens in planning unless you fully intend to give serious considerations to the recommendations they generate. Expectations for a dynamic committee of volunteers to rubber stamp and/or give token advice will usually result in hard feelings between the volunteers and the school administrators who invite them to participate.

Techniques For Citizen Participation In Planning

Of the many alternatives available to administrators, brainstorming, charettes and the Phi Delta Kappa Delphi Technique are three forms of citizen participation worthy of notice. It is a relatively simple matter to invite a group of citizens on a one-time basis to generate, through brainstorming, ideas related to a certain problem. If more in-depth planning is desired, the charette offers many advantages. In charettes, participants are compensated for their time and generally stay with a task until it is finished. Participation may range from two to three days up to a month. The charette offers many advantages such as closure on a task by a specified date and the undivided attention of the planning participants. The Delphi Technique is also a noteworthy approach to planning in the initial stages. This technique can be applied to the process of prioritizing within the needs assessment process and in one to three sessions, provides school administrators with a fair understanding of citizen opinion on different issues.

A citizen advisory group which is highly structured and organized can provide input on a variety of issues and questions as they arise in a school situation.

Summary

School administrators are experiencing increasing pressure to involve the community in all aspects of school administration. Traditional planning methods do not provide well for the interface of citizen participation and the planning process. The need exists therefore to develop methods and delivery systems for the constructive involvement of citizens in planning and development.

Presently the outcomes of planning are generally of a "product" nature. Systematic citizen participation in planning can lend an additional outcome, that of process.

Inherent in this process is an increase in feelings of ownership for the final specifications of the plan and shared accountability for the quality of the product.

Footnotes

1. Hostrop, Richard W., *Managing Education For Results*, (ETC Publications: Homewood, Illinois), 1975, p. 13.
2. AASA, *New Forms Of Community Education*, (AASA: Arlington, Virginia), 1974, p. 15.
3. Rosener, Judy B., "Strategies For Community Participation," *Public Management*, December 1975, pp. 16-19.