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A Kansas school district involves the community in the planning of a facilities study. The district found that community involvement is a valuable asset.

involving people in school planning

By Max O. Heim and Virginia Elliott



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The 6-square-mile Hutchinson, Kansas public school district includes three old junior high buildings which demand attention, a definite lack of space in physical education facilities, undeveloped land owned by the district close to the border of a neighboring school district, no bus system, and 236 acres of grounds reserved for the Kansas State Fair. To compound an already complex situation, the district has experienced a steady decline in enrollment over the past several years, which is expected to continue during the immediate future.

This is the situation which prompted the USD 308 Board of Education to contract with an outside consulting team to conduct a facilities study. The rationale for this step taken in November of 1974 was simple: You can't face facts until you know them.

The Board of Education not only wanted the facts, they also wanted some expert opinions on what school facilities are needed in Hutchinson. Having a team of experts on school facilities conduct a comprehensive survey seemed the best way of gaining both objectives.

However, the study team, in itself, did not allow for all the expert opinion available to the Hutchinson Board of Education. The ideas and opinions of the various factions which comprise a community are as important to the final decision on the facility needs of a public school district as the ideas and opinions of people who work with school buildings—especially if that decision involves a referendum.

People in a community have ideas—often practical, valuable ideas. They ask questions school officials will have to eventually answer in initiating a building program. They state opinions which influence final decisions and certainly prepare school officials for opposition to a referendum. Also informed people in a community can become a school district's best salespeople if a bond issue should be necessary.

How do school officials utilize this resource? The Hutchinson Public Schools formed a Lay Advisory Committee of community representatives. School administrators thinking about the use of this approach should be aware of several stock criticisms before forming such a group.

First, the criticism of "tokenism" should be recognized; the committee was just formed as a "token gesture" toward interest in the community. The committee will not really influence the Board's decisions. Of course, we must assume this is not the case. An involved, active community offers too many advantages to ignore. A word of caution here: publicity following the Board of Education's decisions on facility needs

should emphasize the influence of the advisory committee's recommendations. If that influence is not obvious the committee will fall into the category of "token gesture" in the eyes of the community.

School administrators should also be wary of the criticism of "politics"—only members of the "power structure" were chosen for the committee, therefore the school district does not want a true representation of the community, just a sure thing in case of a bond issue. In selecting members for an advisory committee, school administrators should watch for this situation and avoid leaving the committee open to this criticism.

If a Lay-Advisory Committee is not formed to supplement a facilities study a district is left open to the most damaging criticism of all—no involvement—the district is not interested in what the community thinks, feels, or does.

The point, in short, is think ahead. Every school administrator knows community involvement is a necessary and valuable part of a referendum. So why not make it a necessary and valuable part of a facilities study which might lead to a referendum?

Even if the facilities study does not lead to a referendum, a school district has not wasted time and effort in creating a Lay Advisory Committee. The schools will still gain from a more informed, involved, supportive community.

It is necessary to clarify one point. Community involvement in school concerns should not be an "on again, off again" procedure to pass bond issues. Ideally, a Lay Advisory Committee for a facilities study is a supplement to the continuous, built-in community involvement effort in a school system. However, this article is directed toward the specific advantages of community involvement in a facilities study.

Once the decision has been made to form a Lay Advisory Committee, the difficult job begins of pulling people together, finding satisfactory meeting dates, and keeping discussion moving.

In forming the Hutchinson Lay Advisory Committee, after a briefing session on the requirements of a community advisory committee and possible groups to be represented on the committee, each of the Board of Education members was asked to recommend six candidates for the committee. These candidates received a letter of invitation to participate. The letter also included the reason for the facilities study and a brief outline of the responsibilities of the group.

In the Hutchinson school district experience described here a committee of 28 resulted from these initial steps.

Several points warrant careful consideration when selecting members of such a committee. Again, including only the "power structure" of a community should be avoided for reasons mentioned earlier in this article. Consideration should also be given to insuring the group is comprised of both "leaders" and "followers." All of either category will result in a group which cannot function as a group. Finally, if school administrators are aware of community people who

would probably oppose the schools' position, the administrators should consider trying to involve these people in the committee. Such opposition might be avoided if the potentially opposing opinions are aired before final decisions are made.

Members of a committee might include representatives of the following groups: staff, students, PTA, major community employers, news media, service clubs and lodges—beware of too many taxpayer associations, athletic booster clubs, art-music-cultural associations, band boosters, chamber of commerce, retired persons associations, and junior colleges.

A Lay Advisory Committee has now been formed. What is the next step? Information! Members of the committee must be in command of all available relevant data. Therefore, the committee should hear all preliminary reports and the final report of the facilities study team.

It might be wise to offer such a committee some guidance after they hear all the facts gathered by the study team and the recommendations of the team—particularly if the district's situation is complex as was the case in Hutchinson. Too much at one time could overwhelm an advisory committee and make members feel inadequately prepared for their task or feel the situation is impossible. Perhaps the administration, being more aware of the total picture, could place items to be discussed by the committee in order of priority, giving the committee task direction and scope. This should be done without "dictating" to the committee.

The committee might function more efficiently if organized into subcommittees. The following are some possible categories for subcommittees: (a) current facilities, needs and inadequacies—they can prepare tables and charts to substantiate; (b) taxation—could chart current and anticipated taxes; (c) enrollment and population studies; (d) program and curriculum problems and needs; (e) development of campaign materials; (f) coordinating committee.

Every committee, of course, must have a chairperson. Since this person will set the tone for the group, careful consideration should be given to this part of organizing the committee.

The Lay Advisory Committee is organized, it has at its disposal relevant facts and recommendations of the study team; what now? Recommendations to the Board of Education. This is where all of the "considerations" in forming and organizing the group bear fruit. Discussions, argument, brainstorming, frustration—the members of the committee will probably become familiar with all of these. Group interaction takes place. All the administrator can do at this point is supply requested information, wrestle with meeting dates, and let the committee do what it was formed to do.

If in forming the group, the administrator considered leadership, included followers as well as leaders, kept the group informed, and provided direction and scope, the committee will serve as a valuable asset to a facilities study.