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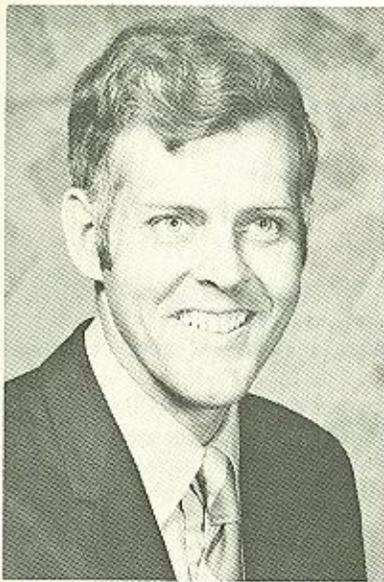
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The quest for quality leaders in great quantities could be the nemesis of the community education program. The injection of large doses of federal funds demands serious planning for the training of future community educators.

federal funds for community education: a mixed blessing

by Clyde LeTarte



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At long last—federal funds for community education. While I often stated publicly that this would someday happen, I must confess that there were many days when those tiny flickers of doubt would force themselves into my consciousness. The many problems and obstacles faced by community education gave cause to wonder whether the entire movement would survive, let alone obtaining financial support at a national level. Well, that's in the past now. We have our funds and the resulting recognition and "legitimacy" that result from it.

As I think about what has happened, I know that I should be elated, exhilarated, and even ecstatic. I find, however, that I am not. Some of those same flickers of doubt that initially appeared regarding whether or not community education would find its potential still linger. The reasons for the doubt have changed, but the concern remains.

As we move into an era of expanding federal support and increasing national visibility, the growth potential for community education takes quantum leaps. Within the next four to five years literally thousands of school districts will establish themselves as community school or community education districts. Many of them will do so because they believe in the concept. Others will do so because they want to bring additional funds into their districts or simply get on the bandwagon. For whatever reason, a thing called "community education" will be established around the country and people will form perceptions of it based upon whatever is done in its name.

What community education will be is going to be highly dependent upon what community education leaders in various communities perceive it to be. This recognition is the source of my single greatest concern. Who will be establishing these community education programs throughout the country? What individuals will be selected to initiate, develop, and lead community education in the many communities that will soon establish it? Where will these people come from? Certainly, current training programs are not adequate. While I recognize that we are training more community educators each year, I find no reason to believe that we can meet the future needs for trained personnel at any satisfactory level. We appear to be in a position similar to that of the wage earner in our inflationary economy. While he may obtain a five, six, or seven percent salary increase, he continues to slip further and further behind in an economy with an inflation rate of eight to twelve per cent.

While we may produce more trained personnel than ever before, we will fall further and further behind because the demand will increase so rapidly. The question that this raises is obvious. What will districts do when they can't obtain trained personnel? I think the answer is also obvious. They will employ untrained people and hope for the best. The employment of untrained community educators on a mass scale could virtually destroy community education. As people are employed who have little or no understanding of their role, have few of the necessary skills to carry out the task, and have little or no commitment to meeting the potential of community education, programs will fail. If hundreds and hundreds of community education programs are established and find either failure or limited success, support for community education will fade rapidly. Like OEO and HUD, community education might well become one of those federal support areas that is dropped as quickly as it was initiated. Should that happen, community education as a viable concept would be virtually eliminated in this country.

The history of education is replete with educational movement and innovation that was started with a strong, viable philosophic base and was ruined with misapplication of principles. Most of John Dewey's ideas in education are not rejected because of the things he believed, but rather because of the misapplication of his ideas. If untrained community educators attempt to apply the principles of community education without understanding them, we face a similar demise.

In discussing my concerns regarding the new federal support for community education, I am concerned that I am striking an altogether too pessimistic note. While the concerns are real, the potential for growth and improvement that these funds bring is also real. Let me now turn to what I believe to be a positive direction and positive utilization of the funds. The federal legislation that presently exists focuses upon the need for training. It recognizes that we do need trained leaders in community education if the program is to succeed. Financial support is available, then, to universities to greatly expand and increase their training programs. Assuming a continuation of this basic premise in the legislation for the next several years, we should be able to meet a large percentage of the demand that will develop. The major determinate to success or failure obviously lies in the federal government's willingness to continue its emphasis on training long enough to assure a cadre of qualified people.

Certainly, the problem of developing an adequate quantity of trained people is crucial to the success or failure of community education. Achieving adequate numbers, however, is only one side of the training problem. The quality of those trained must also be considered. This problem

cannot be resolved as easily as the first; by continuing a funding direction that has been established.

Leaders in community education have had great difficulty agreeing about what community education is, resulting in training programs that produce "community educators" with vastly divergent views on what their role should be in a community. Much greater agreement must be reached regarding what community education is before some consistency in the quality of training programs can be reached.

While this problem will not be resolved easily, some progress has been made toward resolution. Dr. Jack Minzey and Dr. Don Weaver have provided a major contribution in establishing the role of community education and the training components that should be incorporated into any training program. From their work we are beginning to recognize certain key aspects of community education as universal, and draw from them some of the specific skills required of any community education leader. Weaver, for example, feels that understanding of and competence in some of the following areas is essential for the future community educator:

- organizational analysis and management
- leadership theory and application of principles
- communications theory and practice
- public relations
- group process participation and analysis
- group leadership and analysis
- social problem analysis
- community organization analysis
- program development
- survey research techniques

While these components may not receive agreement from all community educators, they do provide a first step in establishing some consistency in what a good training program should include.

How a specific training program is structured will vary with the individuals and institutions responsible for providing it. Diversity is appropriate and necessary. Within that diversity, however, there must remain some consistency regarding what community education is and what constitutes a trained professional in the field.

In summary, it appears that as this budding community education movement is about to flower on the national scene, two critical problems emerge—that of quantity and that of quality. It is essential that we both train enough people to provide community education leadership in local communities, and that these trained people share a similar understanding regarding what their responsibilities are, with training appropriate to those responsibilities.