

Community Schools

[1981]

The Alberta Teachers' Association defines a community school as a school where first priority is given to the basic education function for children and youth; a community centre where citizens of all ages may take part in a multiplicity of activities; where appropriate, a centre for delivery and coordination of social services for the community; and where possible, a focus of community life and community improvement.

The assignment of first priority to the basic education function is supported in this province by the report of the Commission on Educational Planning (1972). In this report, the school is not portrayed as leading in the creation of a new social order in the community. However, wherever possible and feasible, community needs are met by joint community-school activities. The opposite emphasis, where community improvement and community service predominate, could divert the school from its prime function.

Although the basic education focus is more common in the Canadian experience, it is of concern that there is still tremendous divergence of opinion about the concept. This lack of consensus and wide variability makes it difficult to discuss community schools in general.

The meaning of *community* must be defined. It is not simply the citizens who live in a geographic area. Rather, a community is a group sharing interests, concerns and values. It is possible to have two or more communities in the same geographic area. A successful community school must have three basic components: a high level of credibility of the school and the school staff in the eyes of the community, a high degree of community homogeneity or agreement in terms of desired goals and means to reach those goals and a close fit between the local community and the provincial or national interests and needs.

The governance of a community school is a potential problem. Within a school, the lines of authority and responsibility are clear. Similarly, in a school system there are clear-cut administrative patterns. A community school introduces a school-community council. Its powers and responsibilities vis-à-vis the school must be clearly specified, in theory and in practice. The council should have the responsibility for identifying needs, assigning priorities among them, examining proposals for meeting them and acquiring resources for supporting them.

The basic education of children and youth must not be downgraded to a secondary position relative to other community agencies, such as culture, social service or recreation, by those who espouse community education. All instruction in community schools that is intended to culminate in student grades or standing in school subjects must be under the control of certificated persons under a contract of employment with the school board.

In a community school project, participation of all professional staff, including both classroom teachers and those in designated positions, must be entirely voluntary. Use of transfer provisions to move teachers against their wishes is intolerable. Persuasion is legitimate but neither veiled nor overt pressures are acceptable.

The staff of the school must not be pressured into activities relating to a community school that go beyond normal school duties. Community schools add to the workload of school staff, from the principal to caretakers and secretaries. In the enthusiasm generated by a community school movement, teachers may work night and day, literally. Teachers and other staff are generally willing to meet unforeseen emergencies even though these place additional demands on their time and energy. But no staff can be expected, on a long-term basis, to work under constant overload conditions. Community schools require additional staff.

Resources allocated to the basic education program must be adequate to meet the needs of that program, must be used for that program and must remain under the control of the school. Neither community agencies nor their programs should command or demand these resources.

The community school, with its expanded program and use, will cost significantly more to build and to operate than do traditional schools. An unrealistic approach to the greater cost implications inherent in the concept will lead to serious problems. Extra professional time is required and this means that extra money must be spent on more professional staff. More money will be needed, too, to finance expanded facilities, expanded program supplies, increased operating and maintenance costs, accelerated rates of depreciation of equipment and plant.

It is the Association's position that the roles and responsibilities of all participants in community schools must be clearly delineated in advance and in a way that is acceptable to all who may be involved. School staffs must not be left to battle this out with community forces. Such struggles will not contribute to betterment of either school or community. They could be a major source of disagreement and misunderstanding, thereby creating discord within the community and creating a rift where none previously existed.

The potential hassles and the uncertainties inherent in these proposals are reasons for deep and genuine apprehension on the part of teachers. Because they will be held ultimately responsible, teachers must retain commensurate authority and control for the basic education of the children and youth in the schools.

Although agreement on the precise nature of the concept is lacking and consensus on an acceptable definition is nonexistent to date, the concept of community schools is an attempt to address some important concerns besetting modern society. As a consequence, it merits serious consideration by educational and other social agencies to assess more adequately its potential for positive input to solutions of problems. Like numerous other innovations that have preceded it, the community school is no panacea for the shortcomings of our educational system. Similarly, it is unlikely that the notion of community schools will prove a cure-all for either community defects or the deficiencies of governments. Despite a lack of tangible evidence resulting from implementation on a broad basis over a significant period of time, and despite the numerous dissimilarities in the limited experiments with its inception, the concept of community schools should not be summarily dismissed as having no place in our society.

Thus, provided safeguards are in place to protect its concerns for the basic education function of schools, the learning conditions of pupils and the professional autonomy of its members, the Association supports the voluntary introduction of community schools, as it defines them, in those communities in Alberta where school personnel, educational authorities, the community and its various agencies are all genuinely in favour of their establishment.