

A unified administrative effort is necessary at both the local and state levels.

Legislative Strategies Used by United School Administrators

by M.D. McKinney

The United School Administrators of Kansas (USA) was established in the early 1970s for the purpose of developing a strong coalition of school administrators who would have an influence on educational issues and government decision-making at all levels.

United School Administrators is an association of eight Kansas administrator groups. The impetus for its establishment came from school superintendents who realized that administration required a strong team approach through unified administrative effort at both the local and the state levels. By 1975 the association had expanded to eight member groups and included, in addition to Kansas Association of School Administrators (central office administrators), Kansas Association of Elementary School Principals, Kansas Association of Supervision and Curriculum Development, Kansas Association of Elementary School Principals, Kansas Association of Supervision and Curriculum Development, Kansas Association of School Business Officials, Kansas Association of Secondary Schools Principals, Kansas School Public Relations Association, Kansas Council of Vocational Administrators and Kansas Association of Special Education Administrators.

In addition to the purposes stated above, the association endeavors to establish better communication networks between the members and other education agencies and organizations and to provide high quality staff development opportunities as well as legal support and counsel to its members.

Of all these services, the top priority item, determined by periodic needs assessment, is the need for association participation in legislative activities. Therefore, one of the most important duties of the executive director and the associate is to serve the membership as registered lobbyists and coordinate efforts made by the association and its membership.

While there are many common elements in the roles played the eight administrative groups comprising USA, there is diversity among them in the details of their jobs and the scope of their responsibilities. Each of the eight affiliate

groups is totally autonomous but has joined with the others to work together in areas of common concern. Therefore, it is sometimes difficult to arrive at true consensus on all legislative issues.

In order to influence education-related legislation, USA has established a legislative committee which deals exclusively with surveying the membership, identifying the issues and positions USA will take, keeping the membership informed, and coordinating USA's lobbying efforts both at home and in the Statehouse. The process is further decentralized in order to encourage member participation and to seek out those with expertise in legislative matters. Special task forces deal with the more complex areas of legislation which require detailed, ongoing study, such as school finance, administrator due process, home schools and performance pay systems.

Approximately 1,250 of the 2,160 eligible Kansas administrators are a part of USA. From the outset, USA recognized that the number of its members, either actual or potential, does not provide the same "political clout" present with the two other major education organizations in the state—the Kansas National Education Association with its several thousand members, all of whom are eligible voters, and the Kansas Association of School Boards, backed by the thousands of voters who elected them. For this reason, USA plays a different role in the state legislative effort from that of those with greater political muscle.

School administrators, because of their professional preparation and experience, are obligated to share their knowledge with, and try to influence the decisions of, lay person board members. However, once a decision is made or a position taken, the administrator must then support and carry out the decision or promote the position. Because there are diverse elements influencing a board's philosophical, historical and practical views, it is impossible for administrators to reach total consensus on all legislative issues.

Since administration is an extension of teaching, the effective administrator must maintain a loyalty that runs both directions: to the board and electorate and to the districts' teachers. This is the basis for the generalization that school administrators are those in the middle, often between two major groups with differing opinions and goals.

The role of United School Administrators has evolved into one of merely providing to the lobbying process factual information central to legislative decisions. Seldom do the staff or members of the association use hard-sell tactics.

Because of the need for timely and accurate information in the legislative process, there is no one more sought after or influential in affecting education legislation than Dale Dennis, assistant commissioner of education. The information his office can supply is a compilation of data from all state school districts and is used at every level of legislative decision making. To a lesser degree, individual school administrators must be available to legislators to relate how certain issues will impact their districts.

USA staff members have been told repeatedly by legislators that in addition to the information supplied by Assistant Commissioner Dennis—often consisting of computer printouts showing the financial impact of the various alternatives being considered—they listen first and foremost to their "back-home" constituencies. District board members and school administrators are an important part of that group. Failure to hear from the administrators "back home" has often negated testimony given before legislative committees by those testifying on behalf of the association.

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This is particularly true of those issues where teachers, administrators and boards are on different sides.

Legislators consistently make an additional point. Frequently, an issue has divided educators and laymen. In those cases, the three major education associations have been told that their position will have credence if it is a joint position of K-NEA, KASB and USA. Such joint positions often prevail even in opposition to other expressions from "back home."

Following the release of the major reports on education in 1983, Kansas and many other states seem to have done more adjusting and tinkering with standards than making an in-depth study to determine if and what kind of reform should take place education. If the systems engineering approach were to be applied, a thorough needs assessment would be able to determine what the whole should consist of. We could then set about designing the individual parts rather than tinkering with those now in place, many of which may be obsolete.

One who follows the legislative process closely can have little doubt that education is a political football in all states. Since educators and school board members have asked state government for the funding needed to equalize educational opportunities in Kansas, local option given historically to boards of education has declined. The same has been true as state and local governments have accepted equalization funding from the federal government. The federal guidelines to be followed have diluted the autonomy of state and local boards of education.

The state of Kansas provides, through state income and sales tax rebates, approximately 45 percent of the costs of public elementary and secondary education, and few areas of the state budget approach the amount allocated to education. Such amounts of money are not appropriated without a great deal of public debate. The amount money to be spent on public education is related to the taxes legislators are willing to impose on Kansans, and this will always be a political issue.

In the recent legislative sessions, this observer has consistently seen most educational issues, especially those involving money, decided along party lines. The votes on all the major issues have been controlled by the leadership of the parties.

For the past two years, Governor Carlin has met with his advisory council on education on a monthly basis during the legislative session. The membership has included the chief executive officer and the president of each of the three associations already named plus the commissioner of education and his associate commissioner for school finance, and representatives from the Board of Regents. In meetings of that panel during the 1985 legislative session, the discussions often centered upon the prevailing legislative goal of not permitting any increase in taxes to support the governor's program.

Toward the end of the session the Board of Directors of the United School Administrators authorized their acting executive director to propose to the governor a plan which would attempt to remove education from the political arena. In an effort to find a new and independent voice to speak in behalf of the educational needs of Kansas, it was sug-

gested that the governor consider the appointment of a "blue ribbon panel" similar to ones which had produced excellent results in the states of Georgia, Kentucky, New Hampshire and South Carolina, to assess the needs of Kansas education as related to its economic and social well-being. By establishing a non-partisan group of highly respected citizens from business, industry and government, as well as educators and board members, the expectation would be that political overtones could be removed, and Kansas citizens can look upon schools and the necessary funding as an investment in their future, rather than a cost to be borne.

USA members have little hope for any significant change in the amount of money made available by the Legislature for the equalization formula without a dramatic improvement in the Kansas economy. Neither legislator nor gubernatorial candidates are likely to run for election with a platform of tax increases. There are those who believe many incumbents will use the large ending balances left in the state treasury along with their resistance to any tax increases as very important issues in their re-election campaigns. However, as a result of that action, or inaction, Kansans will resist efforts to increase local property taxes, even though surveys indicated they were willing to pay an added one-half of 1 percent increase in the sales to tax to support education. This will surely result in Kansas falling further below the average of teachers salaries, the major factor in attracting and retaining good teachers. As a result, dramatic improvement in Kansas education is not likely. It appears there can be no successful attempt to increase the level of education funding for at least two legislative sessions.

All this is happening at a time when the federal government is passing the responsibility for equalizing educational opportunity back to the states. In those states recovering from the economic slump, the money for school improvement seems to be available, and several states have enacted large school reform packages. Because of our dependence on the declining farm economy, increased expenditures for education do not seem likely for the future without a significant shift in perceived need and changed priorities.

USA's efforts to affect legislative decisions have only been minimally successful in the past using paid lobbyists to present the needs of education to committees of legislators and individual legislators. Using the legislators' suggestions stated above, educators will need to commit themselves to individual lobbying of all legislators in order to have a significant effect on the process. In addition, administrators will need to lead the effort to establish the same kinds of coalitions at the local level as have been established at the state level. When there has been consensus on education issues, K-NEA, KASB, USA and, on occasions, the Kansas State Board of Education have all spoken as one voice to influence legislative decisions.

These groups will also need to add to their coalition any and all who can assist in endeavors to make Kansas a better place to live because of its superior educational opportunities.