Community education and the urban crisis

by Stephen L. Stark and Philip T. West

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American society in the mid 70s is an exceedingly complex system. Fraught with inconsistencies, it promises the best and worst of times. Advancing at an unprecedented rate, science and technology have given impetus to large-scale economic growth and to the rising aspirations of an increasing number of Americans. Today, more people than ever before have access to material conveniences, schooling and job opportunities. Still, progress has brought with it the dilemma of change. Impacting the life styles of most Americans, change has resulted in major population shifts, transcience, disintegration of the familial unit, impersonality and even alienation. Particularly feeling the impact of change are the large urban centers, where cultural dislocation has been the most severe.

Rising tax rates, imminent or actual municipal budgetary collapses, growing crime rates, pollution, blight and major attempts to achieve racial integration through bussing have prompted many to flee to the suburbs. For those who choose or are compelled to remain in the city, problem-solving strategies become a social imperative. Viewed often as a panacea for dealing with social ills and the malaise wrought by rampant change, the school frequently bears the brunt of developing a large share of these coping strategies. Serving as a moral stronghold, a cultural assimilator, and a fount of wisdom, the school is increasingly called upon to lay present and future foundations for a splintering society. But its architectural response, while well-meaning, is often too eclectic to produce a structure of contemporary significance.

To restore a sense of community to a society impacted by change and to make change both beneficial and meaningful to all who are touched by it, the school must reestablish a communal relationship with the clients it serves. To accomplish this kind of relationship, it need only embrace an old concept in a new form—the community education philosophy or democracy in its finest form.

The Promise of Community Education

The community education philosophy, while not the only answer to resolving the emergent urban crisis, is, in essence, democracy at work. It engenders grass-root participation and joint decision-making. It fosters, as well, the Gemeinschaft of a yesteryear and puts the notion of neighborliness back into uprooted urban areas. It extols synergestic activity and ennobles the contributions of the marketplace.

As its basic promise, community education scales community activity to the needs, interests and abilities of its school-community constituents. Tipping the balance in favor of those individuals ready and willing to shape their destinies is the neighborhood elementary attendance area, the corner stone of personalized participation and the smallest unit of community activity. Operated, as it were, under the auspices of the larger school system and guided to its ultimate fruition by a trained community education director, the neighborhood school becomes a natural setting for individuals to achieve a sense of unity within a complex urban environment.

Bombarded by a deluge of mass media and often shocked into insensibility by information overload, urbanites are frequently baffled by the intricate social machinery of the greater metropolis. Occasionally, they even misinterpret the goals of the larger school system. Through the neighborhood school, however, every individual is afforded an insight into the direction both metropolis and school system are traveling. By unifying their efforts, these same individuals may have a strong voice in goal redirection. In an age of bureaucratic perplexity and one-way communiques, the neighborhood school becomes an ideal vehicle for achieving two-way communication. People choosing to become and in the process of becoming are an integral part of the neighborhood school. For as they grow, so grows the school, the community and the nation.

The Urban Dilemma

Unfortunately, there has been to date only limited success in achieving community education in large urban areas, and this success, like it or not, has had to depend upon financial support from outside sources. These sources have included private foundations, Model Cities funds, federal aid under Titles I, III and IV of E.S.E.A., and limited revenue sharing funds. In large cities, such as St. Louis, Indianapolis, Dayton and Houston, when the "soft" money disappeared, so did community education programs. Though attempts were made to reestablish these programs by alternative means, no comprehensive urban model has ever been generated from the financial revenues of the city itself.

The past failures of community education in central cities appeared to be the result of many causes. Sometimes there was merely a waning of project interest in the school leadership hierarchy. More often then not, "soft" money spelled both the rise and fall of community education projects. For as long as proposals were being funded, community education prospered.

Funds were usually easy to obtain because community education seemed to be a feasible method for mitigating and, perhaps, resolving a growing rash of urban problems. As a result, community education proposals were written, approved, and funded under the sponsorship of the urban school district. And a pattern of "find the bucks and we'll give it a try" became the established routine of urban school systems desiring to climb aboard the community education bandwagon.

Generally, the leadership of the urban community education project was selected from within existing administrative ranks and had little conceptual or practical understanding of community education. Worse yet, because "soft" money projects were typically funded in the middle of July and up for renewal for second year funding by early January, communities were forced to accelerate program development without proper planning. Omissions of inservice for the regular school staff were notable, if not pronounced; and duplication of services arising from a lack of coordination with other agencies and institutions became paramount. Finally, the urban community was left largely unaware of the advantages of community education because few attempts had been made to promote an understanding of the community education concept and even fewer had been made to involve neighborhood leadership.

From Promise to Plan

Though there is no sure way of guaranteeing the success of community education in urban environments, there are certain steps which may be taken to reduce the possibility of failure.

First of all, a careful study of the community education concept should be undertaken by school board officials and city councilmen. This study should carefully consider not only the potential contribution of community education for the urban community, but also methods for financing a pilot project. In making this assessment, leaders should evaluate total community resources and investigate joint methods of funding by school district and city.

Secondly, pilot programs should be developed in several school-community neighborhoods and be strategically located so that they cut across the strata of the total urban community. A minimum of two years should be allowed to demonstrate project capability in the resolution of urban problems.

Thirdly, trained professional community educators should be secured to initiate and administrate pilot projects. Too often, the failure of community education in urban areas may be traced to a lack of leadership training in community education.

Fourthly, from its earliest inception, community education must include within its planning process community agencies, organizations, and individuals. To be successful, community education must be the people's program.

In conclusion, program expansion should be attempted only when school district and city are ready to pool additional resources together. Such expansion will most surely occur when the community asks for it, and not before. Yet given an adequate amount of time and patience, some extraordinary effort, and a reasonable amount of community involvement, the voice of the urban community will soon be heard.