Community process: community education's promise

by William M. Hetrick

William M. Hetrick is director of the University of West Florida's Center for Community Education serving 14 counties in the Florida panhandle. In addition, he serves as assistant professor in the Department of Professional Education.

He is a former teacher, coach, athletic director and high school principal. In 1966 he was the recipient of a Mott Fellowship through Eastern Michigan University. In 1973 he received his Ed.D. from Western Michigan University.

The year Nineteen Seventy-six promises to be the most exciting year in our nation's history, as cities and hamlets of varying sizes across the United States prepare to celebrate the 200th birthday of the greatest democracy in the world. Our forefathers' belief that citizens should have the right to decide issues that would subsequently affect their lives led to the development of our representative government. Basic to its success is an educated, informed, and involved constituency. Public education became the keystone to our nation's success.

Community Education, more than any other educational philosophy, succinctly reflects the ideals of democratic government. Because of this, Community Education has the potential to move our nation toward a degree of refinement of participatory democracy that we have not yet realized. It is this facet of Community Education that most excites Community Educators as we enter our bicentennial year.

Yet, even as our governmental "liberty bell" prepares to toll forth its birthday proclamation, a noticeable crack has developed in its make-up. The first faint sign became noticeable in the early 60's. Initially it was characterized by a gradual reduction in the number of citizens who exercised their right to franchise. This flaw in our national make-up gradually became more pronounced, but still few people expressed concern. Citizen disinterest and apathy continued to grow. Recently it reached an unprecedented high and is now a cause of great national anxiety. A recent Harris Poll found 64% of those interviewed felt that what they think didn't make any difference as to the decisions their governmental representatives would ultimately make. This had increased from 37% in 1966. Perhaps of equal concern was the growing disenchantment with the institutions and organizations that serve people, an attitude which had risen from 29% of those interviewed in 1966 to an alarming 61% in 1976.

The present trends represent an ominous foreboding as to what may ultimately cause the downfall of our form of government and give credibility to those who say the greatest threat to democracy is public apathy. To continue to survive as a democratic nation, we must rekindle that basic belief of citizen involvement in government.

Why Citizen Apathy and Disenchantment?

Perhaps if we can identify some of the causes for the rapidly escalating number of persons who have lost confidence in the democratic process and the organizations and institutions that serve communities, we then might be able to reverse the present trend.

There is little question that part of the problem evolves around our nation's increased population. The first census conducted in 1790 showed 3,929,214 persons living in the United States. The 1970 census showed 203,235,298 nationally. Representative government is based on the assumption that the people have access to their elected officials and vice versa. Sheer numbers have created blockages in the two-way communication network so that only the assertive and demanding are heard. Thus, government legislation now primarily reflects the needs and wants of big business and special interest groups. The increased concentration of power at the federal level at the expense of state and local government has only tended to compound the problem and increase the isolation and frustration of local citizenry. There remains a critical need for some mechanism whereby neighborhood

needs and concerns can be identified and channeled to the appropriate governmental group for resolution.

The increasing number of organizations, agencies, bureaus, and departments designed to meet educational, social health, welfare, and recreational needs has contributed to citizen apathy. All too many have soon developed institutional isolation. Those who most need the service soon become lost in the bureaucratic maze of service sources and are frustrated by the fact that they must go to where the services are rather than having the services delivered to them. Organizations initially created to serve the public have become "self-serving." The "edifice complex," which has resulted in centralized service centers with schedules developed to accommodate the worker rather than the client, has decreased the service agencies' effectiveness in reaching their clientele. In like manner, public schools, created by our forefathers as the educational institution charged with perpetuating the ideals of representative government, have also grown apart from the very communities they serve. Participatory democracy has become something that is taught but not practiced.

Federal government has attempted to overcome this lack of involvement at the local level through requiring "advisory councils" as part of the qualifying guidelines for various federal programs available to schools and city government. All too often, however, these councils exist in name only or have degenerated into "rubberstamp" operations called together to approve what has already been decided by the program administrators. Rather than solving our dilemma, this approach has only amplified the distrust the general public has for government and its various institutions.

Can Community Education Help?

During the past decade the literature of Community Education has dwelt on clarifying the concept. Although differences exist among various authors, there are commonalities that run like threads through all the writings. Familiar to most is the "program" aspect that assures maximum use of school facilities, expanded K-12 programming, and provides recreational, educational, and social programs for adults. These are the overt activities most communities associate with "community school" and typify most persons' perception as to the extent of Community Education. Perhaps more subtle in its approach and definitely less understood is the "process" ingredient of Community Education.

Two components compose the "process" aspect of Community Education. The first has to do with identifying community resources and coordinating the delivery of their services. The premise of this component is based on the assumption that it is possible to establish effective two-way communication between service agencies that will maximize effectiveness in the delivery of their services. Every community has a variety of organizations and institutions that provide educational, health, social, and recreational services to its citizenry. Yet, most operate autonomously and this results in duplication of effort and wasted dollars. With the community education coordinator serving as community needs assessor and facilitator, two-way communication is established between the various service organizations that ultimately eliminates duplication and assures maximum efficiency through using the local schools to deliver their services at the neighborhood level.

The second component in community process has to do with developing a mechanism that will involve community members in decisions that ultimately affect their welfare. The premise here is that community members not only desire but are willing to spend the time and effort necessary to establish a democratic process whereby local problems are identified and solved. This component uses the elementary school attendance area as the recommended organizational unit since it is small enough to assure effective "grass roots" representation, yet serves a neighborhood with common interests and concerns. Using any one of a variety of selection techniques, a community council of 25-30 members representative of the various persons and groups residing in that area, is established to identify community problems and concerns, prioritize them, and decide upon appropriate solutions. Here again, the degree of success is determined by the extent two-way communication is established between the council, the community members they represent, and the service organizations that have the necessary resources for solving community problems.

Are We Realizing Community Education's Potential?

Many Community Educators have theorized that Community Education is a concept that, as it is implemented, focuses initially on the overt activities, or "program" aspect and ultimately evolves into "process." We have used this rationale for quite a number of years to justify our lack of community process development. Yet it is the two "process" components that are most needed by society today. As one visits the various Community Education programs in operation across our nation, it soon becomes obvious that the development of community process has not evolved to the degree one might expect, and that some obvious deterrents are present. Closer scrutiny reveals some of the following as underlying causes:

... "community process" has not been considered a priority by Boards of Education and administrators.

... Evaluation of Community Education has focused on "programs," i.e., number of participants, extent of facility use, etc.

... many Community Education programs must be financially self-supporting.

... University programs for training Community School Coordinators and Directors have focused on the nuts and bolts of programming with little or no attention devoted to developing community process.

... most educators and agency heads are uncomfortable working with community groups and tend to avoid the slowness of decision-making associated with involving community members.

... in many instances coordination of community services is fragmented and lacks continuity because of personality differences and interagency jealousy.

Other factors have undoubtedly also limited the degree to which we have achieved "process," but the above have been the primary impediments. In examining each, we come to a better understanding as to what must be done to make the necessary change.

One does not have to look too closely to understand why "programs" have received the major emphasis, with "process" forced to take a back seat. In many community education districts, Boards of Education and school ad-

ministrators have limited understanding of Community Education. As a result they are primarily interested in seeing school buildings opened for community use and activities offered for all ages. They believe that "process," involving community members in resolving local concerns and working with other community agencies, brings into the school elements that are inappropriate to the educational scene. It is only as we are able to broaden their understanding of the true parameters of Community Education and society's educational needs as they exist today that they will give "community process" priority emphasis in their districts. An on-going Community Education awareness campaign is critical to ultimately developing community process.

Community process, by its very nature, is difficult to evaluate. As a result, in assessing the effectiveness of Community Education, we have dwelt on comparing the numbers of participants, the amount of money generated through adult education, the extent of facility use, and other comparative "program-based" analyses. Community School Coordinators and Directors have, naturally enough, put forth their efforts in developing the areas on which they are being evaluated. Only as we build in ways to effectively evaluate "process" development will emphasis be put on that aspect.

A third factor limiting the development of community process results from the fact that many Community Education programs are initiated with the idea that they will result in little or no extra cost to the school district. This forces the Community School Coordinator/Director to look upon his role as primarily one of the "fund raiser" so that his program will be self-supporting. By the very nature of such prerequisites and our present federal and state funding practices for such things as basic adult education and high school completion, he is soon forced into focusing primarily on whatever programs that will generate dollars. In such a situation, the Community School Coordinator/Director is automatically predestined to be primarily a programmer with little or no time left to work on process.

Much of the blame for not developing community process to the degree possible can be attributed to the Universities and their overemphasis on programming skills in their Community Education training programs. Many Community School Coordinators and Directors avoid the process aspect because they feel they lack sufficient training to work effectively in this area.

When University training programs provide community educators with the necessary background experiences and skills to work with process, then the practicing Community School Coordinator/Director will gain confidence in his ability to work with agencies and community groups and will exert his leadership in the process development.

Assuming that educators and agency heads who are specialists in their area will readily accept in-put from community groups as to the action their agency or institution should take is a misconception. Although they will be the first to acknowledge that they direly need a more effective way to ascertain local needs, their time and effort is spent in delivering services. It is here that the role of Community School Cordinator/Director becomes so critical to the success of community process. Only as he develops a comprehensive needs assessment strategy that utilizes a composite of sources, drawing upon the Community Council, surveys, personal interviews, and contacts with community groups, will he be able to act as the successful facilitator or catalyst. The Community School Coordinator's ability to function as the intermediary will be dependent upon his ability to identify community needs and the resources he has to work with and maintain two-way communication with both groups.

Perhaps the problem that is the biggest road block to maximizing community services is the lack of cooperation and communication resulting from interagency jealousy and personality differences. There are those Community Educators who believe that, if the Community School Coordinator/Director adequately identifies needs in his community and makes these known, he has fulfilled his responsibility. These persons will argue that service agencies and institutions will respond to community needs when identified, since their very livelihood depends upon it.

Other Community Educators propose a stronger course of action, arguing that only as structure is changed will inter-agency cooperation be assured. Thus the last few years have seen the evolution of the Community Education consortium uniting local government with Boards of Education in a combined Community Education effort. The proponents of this approach point out that these groups represent the institions that create and support the organizations providing services to people. Such an organizational structure provides the Community School Coordinator/Director with direct access to the broad range of health, recreational, social, and welfare agencies supported by city or county government as well as the schools with their programs and facilities.

Community Education today stands at a critical cross-roads. If developed to its full potential, Community Education offers a developmental mechanism for reinstituting participatory democracy. To achieve this goal will require the leadership and commitment of Community Educators nationally to the development of "community process." If, instead, we are content with what we have presently achieved, we will be taking the second choice . . . one that has been taken by leaders of some of the great concepts of the past that failed to realize their potential because of lack of vision. The choice is ours!