

B.M.R. COMMENT



BUREAU OF
MUNICIPAL
RESEARCH

BETTER GOVERNMENT THROUGH RESEARCH

Suite 406, 4 Richmond St. E., Toronto 1, phone 363-9265

February, 1971 - #121

COMMUNITY SCHOOLS AND POLICY MAKING IN EDUCATION

In Ontario, the provincial government has the final responsibility for education. This responsibility is discharged through the Minister of Education and his department who finance approximately sixty percent of school expenditures, train teachers, and set curriculum guidelines. Municipal school boards (whose budgets must be approved by the Department of Education) have the overall responsibility for building and maintaining schools, hiring administrative and teaching staff, and tailoring educational programs to fit local needs.

Community participation in the educational system has paralleled the experience in local government. Other than the right to elect trustees, citizens have no formal role in policy formulation. The influence of a particular community, then, extends only as far as its ability to persuade the trustees on any given issue. Local decision making authority is vested in a board of education which is responsible for the local administration of education. The trustee, in his role as an elected representative, must continually balance his obligations to his constituents against his own understanding of the overall interests of the public. Community demands for a more effective say in determining policy are frequently resisted by the trustees who emphasize that they alone carry the full responsibility for educational policy. In this context, many controversies on particular issues (e.g., expropriation of homes for school facilities, or corporal punishment of students) are as much about how decisions should be made as about the actual decision itself.

In 1968, as a response to the continuing demands for better representation of interested parties in policy making, the Province provided the enabling legislation for School Board Advisory Committees. The appointment of such a committee is at the discretion of the school board, but if appointed, the membership must be as follows:

- three members of the board appointed by the board;
- the chief education officer of the board or his nominee;
- six teachers employed by the board, appointed by the teachers in the employ of the board;
- four persons appointed by the board who are neither teachers nor members of a board, but who are resident within the jurisdiction of the board; and

- two other persons appointed from Diocesan Council or Councils of the Federation of Catholic Parent-Teacher Associations of Ontario, and Home and School Councils (the allocation of representatives from these councils is specified in the Act)¹.

The committee may make reports and recommendations to the board on any educational matter but can not concern itself with salaries of board employees, personnel problems and policies pertaining to personnel.

Although this committee does expose the board to a broader cross-section of opinion, its limitations vis à vis citizen participation, are the same as the board itself. The committee, at the pinnacle of the policy making structure, is too distant from the problems and demands at the level of individual schools and too inflexible in size and composition.

The problems of opening up policy making at the community level, however, are difficult to resolve. On the one hand, there are those who advocate community controlled schools; this implies the governing of individual schools by "grass roots" organizations which handle staff recruitment curriculum, pupil policy and so on. On the other hand there are those who argue that the staff, in their role as trained professionals, are the best equipped to run the schools and should be answerable only to their superiors and the elected trustees. In the City of Toronto, it is the middle ground between these two extremes that is the subject of controversy and compromise.

One Step Toward Community Schools²

In the public school system in the City of Toronto the concept of community schools has made an auspicious beginning. An experimental project now referred to as the Kensington Community School has been one of the main factors in the apparently altered approach of the Toronto Board of Education to educational policy making.

In March 1970, the Board acquired vacant land on Bellevue Ave. as a proposed school site. In an effort to acquire more land for purposes of open space, the Board decided to purchase or expropriate, if necessary, thirteen of the adjacent properties and demolish the existing housing. Meeting strong citizen resistance to this decision (organized by the Kensington Area Residents Association, (KARA)), the Board moved to a compromise position. It decided to:

¹ Schools Administration Act, Part XII, sec. 110

² See Appendix for description of Kensington Area.

- 1) Halt all action to acquire property in the Kensington area for the site of the West Central Public School, (now referred to as the Kensington Community School);
- 2) That a committee, consisting of members of the Board, officials and a representative of KARA be appointed to meet with residents in the area and with any other interested persons to discuss alternatives and existing plans.³

Following the Board's decision to delay and to consult the residents, two employees of the Board entered the Kensington area as community workers. In their own words:

Moving very cautiously, Mr. Marino and Mr. Brown entered the community. A residence was set up at 110 Oxford Street in the middle of July, 1970. A meeting of KARA (Kensington Area Ratepayers Association) executive authorized their work in the community. KARA sent out a newsletter to each resident as a means of introduction.....

.....
Moving throughout the community, the team met with residents, on street corners, in places of business. Contact was made, the school discussed. At night, informal meetings were held in 110 Oxford Street. Over coffee or orange drinks, interested residents would hear about the background of the school and were invited to join in the planning of the school.⁴

On August 31, a citizens committee was formed at a public meeting to work with the school board in choosing a site for the school. The committee's primary goal was the preservation of the existing housing stock and the alleviation of traffic and parking problems. As a result of their meetings with the trustees, on October 8, an earlier motion that the Board build a school on the original site (supplemented by only two additional properties instead of the original thirteen) was reaffirmed and subsequently accepted by the Board. Since that time the committee has turned its attention to parking and traffic problems, the design of mixed use facility, and consideration of the programs to be offered when the school opens (e.g. day care, hot lunch programs, and English classes).

³ Lorne K. Brown, "Market Place for a School, The Story of the Kensington Community School" (unpublished report) p.11.

⁴ Ibid., p.12.

The program has not been free of problems. Organizers encountered apathy, suspicion, distrust and a lack of information about the School Board and its intentions.⁵ Despite these problems, however, the Kensington Community School has managed to bring together interested residents, school officials, and trustees in a working relationship that is far more satisfying to the participants than the rancour and hostility associated with the original conflict of June, 1970. The interested residents have a forum from which to speak to the Board. On the other side, the Board has recognized that its own goals can be achieved within this framework.

The future of the amicable association between the citizens committee, school staff, and school board is an unknown. To date, the decisions made by the citizens committee on the school site have been close to the Board's original intention. Consensus on other decisions about the design of the building, the curriculum, the staffing, and the pupil policies may not be so easy to achieve. To that extent, the future of this experimental decision making structure is surrounded by uncertainty about what will be accomplished and what conflict will be created. But these risks must be matched against the potential disaffection and alienation of support for education if nothing is done and, secondly, against the potential benefits of a more responsive educational system tailored to community needs.

⁵ Ibid., p.13.

APPENDIX

The Kensington area is bounded on the north by College Street, on the east by Spadina Avenue, on the south by Dundas Street West, and on the west by Bathurst Street. Census data indicates that this area ranks among the highest of Metropolitan Toronto in the percentage of residents who are immigrants and among the lowest in terms of the socio-economic ranking of the residents (in this case, socio-economic rank is a summary measurement of income, occupation and education).

The census data below compares the population characteristics of Kensington with those of the City of Toronto and Metropolitan Toronto.

	Metro	Toronto	Kensington
Population	2,158,496	664,584	5,260
Increase (since 1961)	18.3%	-1.2%	-4.3%
Age 0-4	28.1%	24.0%	28.8%
Age 65 plus	11.8%	11.0%	7.9%
Total Households	516,736	178,525	1,257
Owner Occupied	59.5%	50.8%	35.4%
Tenant Occupied	40.5%	49.2%	64.6%
Householders with Lodgers	10.9%	21.1%	15.5%
Apartments and flats	36.1%	44.0%	65.6%
Total no. of Families	468,307	58,918	1,082
Childless Families	32.6%	38.5%	26.7%
Unmarried Population	17.9%	23.3%	22.8%
Born in Canada (1961)	66.7%	58.1%	33.5%
Immigrated (1946-1971)	-	-	54.4%

Source: Metropolitan Profile (1966), Social Planning Council,
55 York Street, Toronto, Ontario.