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Responses to a Decentralization Crisis. "Pulse of the Parent" #1: First in a Series of Reports of Parent

Opinion Prepared by the Mass Media Committee.

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Discussed are some decision-making influences on the attitudes of New York City parents toward school decentralization. The Mass Media Committee of the Center for Urban Education maintains a representative panel of parents from whom information about communication experiences and responses to educational issues can be gathered. Telephone interviews elicited the panel's responses to a number of facets of the Ocean Hill-Brownsville school crisis and to the decentralization question. Both white parents favoring decentralization and Negro parents in communities where the leaders support decentralization showed little agreement on how "parent influence" can achieve better education for the children. Supporters of decentralization are not demanding parental control. These "suggestive" poll findings imply that decentralization must be debated as an educational issue with specific application to the children. (NH)

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**RESPONSES
TO A
DECENTRALIZATION
CRISIS**

**by Gladys Engel Lang
with Leonard Fontana,
Roy Mallett and Keith Melville**

July 1968

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The Center for Urban Education



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RESPONSES TO A DECENTRALIZATION CRISIS

"PULSE OF THE PARENT" #1

Mass Media Committee

Prepared by Gladys Engel Lang, with
the collaboration of Leonard Fontana,
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RESPONSES TO A DECENTRALIZATION CRISIS

Pulse of the Parent #1

The success of any overall attempt to decentralize the mammoth New York City school system into a number of semi-autonomous locally controlled districts will depend, in large part, on how ready are the communities, and especially parents of school-age children, to give any plan a fair trial. It seems essential that attitudes not become so polarized and hardened around emotion-laden symbols that rational discussion of the complicated educational problems involved is no longer possible. The lesson of the almost-defunct desegregation effort is painfully relevant: desegregation proceeded smoothly where public opinion was not mobilized before concrete steps to desegregate were taken. Where opposing forces mobilized during debate, plans seldom went into effect or, if they did, seldom were successful.¹

Evidence from research conducted by the Center suggests that before the 1967-68 school year attitudes towards "local control of schools" -- both in black and white communities -- were largely unformed and fluid but that by the spring of 1968 public opinion had begun to polarize around the issue. To cite evidence from opinion studies carried out in Rochester (early 1967)² and in Bedford-Stuyvesant, the largely black community in Brooklyn (Summer 1967),³ parents were ready to rely on the judgment of professional educators -- teachers and principals -- as to which textbooks should be used, which subjects should be taught, which teachers should be hired; they were more anxious to have some say in which teachers and principals should be dismissed. When a sample of 421 Negro and white parents with

children in the Rochester public schools were asked to summarize their attitudes towards parental involvement ("Should parents have a lot to say in how the schools should be run?"), 87 per cent of both groups of parents said "No," that this was a job for the teachers. Yet first returns from a Center survey of some 300 parents in the New York City public schools indicate that by Spring 1968 -- after a school year that began with a teachers' strike and ended with direct parent-teacher confrontations in ghetto communities -- lines around the issues of parent-school relations have begun to sharpen. Close to half of the Negro parents want a say in choosing textbooks; more than half in deciding what subjects should be taught. Less than one-fifth of the white parents want parents to decide on textbooks and less than three-tenths think they should have a hand in choosing courses. Still, over 80 per cent of the Negro parents and 90 per cent of the whites continue to think running the schools is a job for professionals.⁴

Parental attitudes towards decentralization have been and are constantly being shaped and modified in response to directly experienced events but are also influenced by events reported by the media of mass communication. Debate over the various plans offered -- the Bundy Plan, the Regents' proposal -- certainly has had some influence on the development of public opinion. But we expect that attitudes have been and, for some time to come, will be most crucially affected by developments in three so-called demonstration districts -- in Harlem, in the lower East Side, and in the Ocean Hill-Brownsville section of Brooklyn -- where the Ford Foundation has been helping to finance pilot experiments in local autonomy. Crises in these community-controlled districts are

likely to activate latent fears and hopes and mobilize support and opposition to the general concepts underlying decentralization. On this assumption, the Center's Mass Media Committee feels it relevant to report some provocative findings on the initial responses of parents elsewhere in the city to a controversy that erupted at the beginning of May 1968 in the Ocean Hill-Brownsville area and remained unresolved when school ended in June. The crisis, which drew the United Federation of Teachers and the lay governing board of the demonstration district into open conflict, stirred a city-wide debate that raised most of the fundamental issues involved in decentralization.

The Events in Ocean Hill-Brownsville

On May 9, by registered letter that gave no reasons for dismissal, the governing board "fired" 13 teachers, five assistant principals, and one principal in the district; they were told to report to the Central Board for reassignment. It must be noted that, from its inception, the governing board had asked for the right to hire and fire its teachers and administrators, while the Board of Education had maintained that these rights could not be granted under state law. After the dismissals, both the Board and the union leadership called the action "illegal" and said that the dismissed educators, who had been working at six schools, had been denied due process of law. Albert Shanker, president of the U.F.T., asked the teachers to report to work as usual and, threatening a strike in the district, called upon the Board and Mayor Lindsay to protect the returning teachers. Rhody McCoy, administrator of the district, said (according to news reports) that the 19 were dismissed because "the community lost confidence in them" and because they were trying to sabotage the decentralization project.

On Friday, May 10, the 19 teachers and administrators did report for work but did not teach. By Monday the 13th, their efforts to take up their work again brought open conflict. Negro militants and pupils at one junior high blocked the entrance of five teachers; at another school, a group of Negro mothers yielded to police appeals and allowed teachers to enter. Both schools were closed in mid-day to avert an overt clash. By the 14th, the situations had grown tense around J.H.S. #271, with demonstrators barring entrance to the school and many teachers -- at the urging of the union -- staying out of the school in a show of support for their dismissed colleagues. Policemen, uniformed and in plainclothes, stood ready, if so ordered, to clear the area and make way for the re-entry of the teachers. By the 15th, the Central Board called on the police to remove the demonstrators and assist the dismissed teachers in re-entering the junior high. It was at this point in the course of events that our researchers took a look at some parental responses to news of the crisis in an effort to assess its initial impact on attitudes and the polarization of opinion.

Prologue to Study

The results of a telephone poll reported here are a fortuitous but incidental offshoot of a continuing program concerned with mass media coverage of educational news and research, especially its impact on parental images of and responses to school matters and educational issues. What picture do parents get of school routine and basic educational developments? What are their sources of information? What are they learning and thinking about the wide range of educational information to which they are exposed, especially by the news media?

This research is policy-connected -- the idea is to anticipate the development of public definitions of educational issues, not to wait until attitudes have hardened -- when knowledge can no longer be brought to bear on decision-making or help avert unnecessary mistakes. Towards this end, we have formed a panel of parents, representative of a wide range of neighborhoods and perspectives, from whom periodically we can gather information on communication experiences and responses. Roughly one-sixth of this panel consists of parents who are themselves interviewed and who then interview the other parents on the panel. A first survey, making use of this panel, was in process at the time of the Ocean Hill-Brownsville controversy. Since the parent-interviewers on the panel had already recorded their communication habits, needs, hopes and despairs for us, this provided an opportunity to find out which of these parents were hearing what news through various sources and how it was affecting their attitudes and expectations with regard to the matter of decentralization. The respondents were contacted by telephone. While some public opinion experts suspect the validity of responses to telephone inquiries, we have reason to believe that these parents, being familiar with us and our work, gave frank accounts of their feelings.⁴

Of the 57 parents reached, mainly on May 16 and 17, 25 are white, 21 Negro, nine Puerto Rican, and two others of Asian extraction.⁵ Each has at least one child in one of 13 schools -- including elementary, intermediate, and high school; they live in all five boroughs, three of the Manhattanites residing in the upper-middle class upper-East Side and the other three on the more working-class Lower East Side. Of 53 on whom background information was readily available, 39 have a relatively long-range interest in the public schools since they have at least one child who has not yet reached

the fourth grade, and another six have at least one child who has not yet entered high school. Three persons in our sample (including the two of Asian extraction) had children attending school in one of the demonstration districts.

Given the small size of the sample, interviewees' responses cannot be generalized to the total population, i.e., if 9 per cent were unfamiliar with the news about Ocean Hill-Brownsville (as they were), this does not necessarily mean that 9 per cent of all public school parents in the city were unfamiliar with it. We do know that more than 90 per cent of these parents, representing a pretty good cross-section of parents whose children are now in New York City public schools, had been exposed to news of the controversy. By studying what they said, we get a fairly good idea of how various types of parents responded to that news and why.

The five parents who knew nothing of the dispute included two of nine Puerto Rican parents (that is, 22 per cent of the Puerto Rican parents) who could be reached by phone, two of 21 Negro parents (9 per cent of the Negro parents), and one of the 25 white parents (4 per cent of the white parents). Four of the five had not finished high school, as compared to 20 out of the 52 (less than two out of five) who were familiar with the situation. Thus the parents unfamiliar with the news were persons who had little formal schooling and, in some instances, were unfamiliar with English. Lack of formal schooling, however, did not preclude attentiveness to the news; after all, 20 of the 24 parents who had not finished high school (over 80 per cent) were conversant with the situation.

We did find here, in line with other audience studies, that the better educated parents were more likely than others to have read something about

the school situation in newspapers since, among the more well-educated, there is relatively higher reliance on print. Still, that more than 90 per cent of these parents -- white, black, and Puerto Rican -- should have immediately identified the controversy reveals a special attentiveness to news of the schools. (The lead-off question was, "Have you heard anything about what has been happening in the schools in the Ocean Hill-Brownsville section of Brooklyn?" If yes: "Can you tell me in a few words just what has been happening?" The five indicating no exposure to news of the school crisis were not asked further questions).

General Attitudes Towards Decentralization

Asked, "In general, would you say that decentralization will be a good thing or a bad thing for the education of New York City school children?" Nine of the 52 (17 per cent) insisted, despite proddings to venture an opinion, that they "could not say" while another two could see "bad" that balanced the "good," or vice versa. Of the 41 who had formed a judgment, half (21) thought decentralization would be a "good thing" and half that it would be a "bad thing."

While most parents were thus ready to make a firm judgment on the issue, of those who were not, Puerto Ricans and, even more so, Negroes were less ready than whites: 12 of 19 Negroes (63 per cent) gave a firm opinion, compared to five of seven Puerto Ricans (71 per cent) and 22 of 24 whites (92 per cent). But where 75 per cent of those Negro parents who had reached a judgment were optimistic, only two of five Puerto Ricans who had an opinion thought it would be a "good thing" and, among the whites, nine out of 22 (41 per cent).

Among our Negro parents, there seems to be considerably more hesitation about and less unanimity of opinion in support of community control than press reports led us to believe. Among our non-Negro parents, attitudes are more firmed up, (in opposition to community control) but there is still a large reservoir of good will. In general, both white and nonwhite parents are "waiting to see."

The big question then is the specific impact of a crisis such as this one in attitudes toward decentralization. Did news of the controversy serve to reinforce prior dispositions towards decentralization? Did it convert opinion or did it make no difference? And why?

Parental Responses to the Crisis

"After what has been happening," parents were asked, "are you more or less sure than you were that decentralization is a good thing or a bad thing for the education of New York City school children?" Among 21 who said that prior to the news they had thought decentralization a good thing, 9 (43 per cent) became "more sure" of their opinion and 5 (24 per cent) became "less sure;" the judgment of the others was neither reinforced nor thrown in doubt. Among 19 who said they had judged decentralization a "bad thing" for education, 17 (89 per cent) became "more sure" of their prior opinion while the other two became "less sure."

The net effect of the Ocean Hill-Brownsville news among these parents, then, was negative. Optimism concerning the educational value of community control was partially dissipated while pessimism was largely reinforced. Nor was the impact of the news on the attitudes of blacks or whites significantly different. Two of nine Negroes and two of nine whites who initially thought

decentralization a "good thing" became "less sure" of their judgment; among both groups negative feelings were reinforced. Why this negative effect? What did parents make of the events they read, heard about, or "saw" via television?

Asked whether the Ocean Hill-Brownsville governing board had a legal right to dismiss the teachers and administrators, the consensus was overwhelmingly "no." Only three persons (all of whom believed decentralization would be a "good thing") thought the action legal. Asked why they thought the educators were "dismissed" -- whether because they weren't helping to teach the children or because they were against the governing board -- about one-third of the parents found it hard to judge the validity of one or both explanations: 17 of our 52 respondents "couldn't say" if the dismissal was due to the educators' neglect of duty and 15 "couldn't say" whether the dismissal resulted from their sabotage of the governing board's mission. Of those who had a firm opinion, however, far more saw the action resulting from opposition to the board than from any failure by the teachers to carry out their educational responsibilities: some 17 per cent (nine parents) agreed that the teachers were dismissed because they hadn't taught the children; 36 per cent (19 persons) thought they were "against the governing board." While similar proportions of Negroes and whites (37 and 38 per cent respectively) saw the dismissals as retaliation for non-cooperation, a much higher proportion of Negroes than whites (32 per cent as opposed to 12) laid them to the "failure to teach the children." None of our seven Puerto Rican parents saw the dismissals resulting from the "failure to teach;" two attributed them to non-cooperation.

Interestingly enough, those parents who had not received any information via television were far more inclined to lay the dismissal to the teachers' intransigence than to their failure to help the children. Does this suggest that newspapers, more than television, played up the controversy between the U.F.T. and the lay leadership of the district? -- or does it indicate that "print-oriented" parents pay more attention to the political implications of such events?

In sum, then, the parents did not think the dismissals "legal" but a sizeable proportion ventured no opinion on what prompted them. Most parents who had an opinion thought the dismissals the product of an organizational controversy -- a power struggle between the community-controlled board and the dismissed educators.

But, even in this context, when parents were asked, "Did the governing board, on the whole, do the right thing by dismissing the teachers?" the answer was overwhelmingly "no." Only four persons -- two black and two white -- unequivocally said "yes." Another eight persons -- five whites and three Negroes -- couldn't or wouldn't answer this summary question. Almost four-fifths (40 persons) of those parents exposed to some news of the Ocean Hill-Brownsville school crisis thought the governing board had not done the right thing. Moreover, asked if the "Board of Education did the right thing when they called in the police to assist the dismissed teachers in re-entering P.S. #271," almost three-fifths (30) of the parents said "yes," while only about one-fifth (12 persons) gave a flat "no." Individual responses to the action in calling the police were completely unrelated to the individual's judgment of decentralization as a "good" or "bad" thing. Virtually the same proportions of whites and Negroes reacted negatively to the employment of the

police. But those whites not opposed to calling the police were much more likely to say the Board did the "right thing" in calling them, while those Negro parents not ready to condemn the Board's action were also not ready to call it a "right" move -- about one-third gave no opinion.

Decentralization and Education for Children

Thus, news about the developments in Ocean Hill-Brownsville reinforced negative attitudes while dampening the optimism of some of those favorable to the concept of decentralization. Further, it appears that the developments reinforced prior doubts about the educational value of decentralization: in sum, our respondents said that while increased parental influence might make it easier to "fire" teachers and administrators, it would not guarantee "better teachers" in the school, prevent "community groups not run by parents" from taking over, or stem the repetition of open conflict situations such as this in other areas of the city.

For most of the parents -- whether "for" or "against" decentralization, black or white -- "decentralization" and "increased parental influence" go hand-in-hand. Asked, "If school decentralization comes about in New York City, will parents have more say about what goes on in the schools?" 75 per cent said "yes" and only 12 per cent gave a flat "no." Similar proportions of Negroes and whites agreed that parental influence would increase. Among those who believed "decentralization would be a good thing for education," fully 93 per cent saw an increase in parent influence. Almost three-fourths (74 per cent) of those who thought it would not be a "good thing" also expected parents would have more of a say in what goes on in the schools.

Responses to other questions indicated, however, that "increased parent power" was not equated with improved education. Both Negroes and whites, both parents "for" and "against" decentralization, implied that the expected "parent power" would be largely "veto power": about equal proportions (two-thirds of each) of both whites and blacks agreed that if school decentralization came about, it would be easier to "fire" teachers and administrators.

Asked whether situations like that in Ocean Hill-Brownsville would be repeated in other areas of the city, almost all white parents (88 per cent) said "yes" as compared to 48 per cent of Negro parents. Among those who thought decentralization would be a "good thing" for education, 64 per cent said "yes;" of those who thought decentralization a "bad thing," 89 per cent expected like situations elsewhere. Those who thought the situation would be repeated explained that similar confrontations would take place wherever people disagreed with what teachers were teaching, where parents were too involved in the schools, or -- more generally -- wherever racial conflicts existed. Those who were convinced that the situation would not be repeated felt there would be fewer problems as parents were given more of a say about what goes on in the schools and that some difficulties involved in decentralization would be ironed out before decentralization went into effect throughout the city.

There was a more clear-cut relationship between changing attitudes towards decentralization and beliefs that decentralization had positive educational value. Close analysis of the interviewees' responses to the Ocean Hill-Brownsville story suggests that the parent positively inclined towards the concept of decentralization was most likely to grow "more sure"

it was a "good thing" if he conceived of decentralization as meaning "better education" for children. However positively inclined towards the idea, he was more likely to waver if he had not attributed to decentralization such educational gains. In the same way, a negative evaluation is most likely reinforced by an event such as the Ocean Hill-Brownsville controversy where the parent sees no positive educational gain stemming from local control. At any rate, there were particularly sharp differences between those "for" and "against" decentralization in the evaluation of possible educational gains. Forty-three per cent of those who thought decentralization a "good thing" thought that through it schools would get "better teachers" and 57 per cent thought children would receive a "better education." This contrasts to the 10 per cent considering decentralization a "bad thing" who expected "better teachers" and the 16 per cent who expected children to get a "better education." Also, among those positively oriented, 36 per cent expected "community groups not run by parents" to take over compared to 53 per cent of those negatively inclined.

Conclusion

Both among white parents positively inclined towards decentralization and among Negro parents who generally live in communities whose leaders are solidly behind decentralization, there is, as of now, little agreement on how "parent influence" is to be translated into "better education" for their children. Nor are those who favor decentralization demanding, according to information, "parental control." As indicated, the black parental community in New York City is only gradually translating the demand for increased parental influence into a demand for some say about what textbooks are used and what subjects taught. It is still less ready to demand a voice in the hiring of

teachers. Like the white and Puerto Rican parents whose children are still in New York City schools, they are overwhelmingly inclined -- as surveys show -- to agree that the "parents should not run the schools -- that's a job for professionals."

The findings from this poll are not definitive but suggestive: taken together with other findings from recent surveys they seem to underline the unlearned lesson of the desegregation controversy: decentralization, as desegregation was not, has to be debated as an "educational issue," with parents informed of how their children's daily and long-range education would be furthered by such basic reforms. Just as the issue of desegregation was polarized around the extraneous issue of "neighborhood schools," the issue of decentralization is likely to polarize around the issue of "community self-determination," "teacher tenure," or even "anti-Semitism" -- with no one paying attention to the parent's plea that his child "learn" before it's too late. In the instance of the Ocean Hill-Brownsville school closings, parents saw an internal "controversy" between governing board and teachers that meant further disruption of an educational process much disrupted during the year. Nothing any spokesman said -- district administrator, governing board, Mayor Lindsay, or newsmen -- succeeded in showing these parents what the "dismissal" of teachers had to do with improving education or assuring better teachers and administrators. In fact, organizations opposed to decentralization were in a position to exploit fears that children might be caught in the middle. The issue involved was interpreted as a political struggle, bringing conflict and disorder, the educational implications for the individual child remaining mainly unstated.

The idea of school decentralization is still reasonably acceptable among these parents but continued controversy that erupts into open conflict which, in their eyes, has nothing to do with educating their children will, our poll indicates, not likely convert the unconverted but rather dissuade the persuadable and polarize emotions around divisive symbols. If decentralization is inevitable -- as we think it is -- it is time to inform the parents whose children will be intimately affected about what there is in it for every one of them.

Footnotes

1. Robert Crain and Morton Inger, "Urban School Integration: Strategy for Peace," Saturday Review, February 18, 1967, pp. 77-78+.
2. Gladys Engel Lang, Morton Inger and Roy Mallett, Resistance and Support for School Desegregation Proposals: A Study of Parental Reactions in Rochester. New York: Center for Urban Education, October 1967 (mimeo). The study is described in the report though the statistics cited here are not included.
3. Anon. Community Attitudes in Bedford-Stuyvesant: An Area Study, New York: Center for Urban Education, Summer 1967, pp. 64-79.
4. The final report, which does not focus primarily on responses to decentralization, is scheduled for completion by the Center in August 1968.
5. Fifty of the 57 interviews were held on May 16 and May 17. Interviewers were: Roslyn Beitler, Leonard Fontana, Ronald Fox, Roy Mallett, Helen Muller, Sheila Rothgart, researchers on the Mass Media staff. Puerto Rican parents were interviewed in Spanish. The small number contacted reflects absence of telephones, absence from home, etc.
6. See footnote 2.

QUESTIONNAIRE

INSTRUCTIONS TO INTERVIEWERS

You are to interview the mother of the household (the name indicated on the list). If the mother is not at home during the second call, ask to speak to the husband. If he is not at home either, then go on to another name on the list.

NAME _____

SCHOOL _____ Telephone Number _____

(CHECK ONE) RESPONDENT _____ INTERVIEWER _____ TV/CHILD _____

BEGIN: "I am _____ calling from the Center for Urban Education."

PANEL RESPONDENT: "You have recently been interviewed about the information that you have been getting on the New York City schools."

TV/CHILD: "You have recently helped us in our study of children's viewing habits."

PANEL INTERVIEWER: "You have recently helped us in our study of the New York City schools."

"Can I take a few minutes of your time right now to ask you a few questions about news you may be hearing?"

1a. Have you heard anything about what has been happening in the schools in the Ocean Hill-Brownsville section of Brooklyn?

Yes _____
No _____

1b. (If Yes) Can you tell me in a few words just what has been happening?

1c. (If No) This is the school in which some teachers and administrators have been refused admission to the school. Have you heard anything about this?

Yes _____

No _____

(If Yes) What have you heard?

(If No) TERMINATE INTERVIEW

2. Have you seen anything about this on television?

Yes _____

No _____

3. Have you heard anything about this on the radio?

Yes _____

No _____

4. Have you read anything about this in the newspapers?

Yes _____

No _____

5. Do you think that the governing board in the district had the legal right to dismiss the teachers and administrators without a hearing?

Yes _____

No _____

6. Do you think that they were dismissed because they weren't helping to teach the children?

Yes _____

No _____

7. Do you think that they were dismissed because they were against the governing board?

Yes _____

No _____

8. On the whole, do you think the governing board did the right thing by dismissing the teachers?

Yes _____
No _____

9. Do you think that the Board of Education did the right thing when they called in the police to assist the dismissed teachers in reentering P.S. 271?

Yes _____
No _____

If school decentralization comes about in New York City:

10a. Do you think that the schools will be taken over by community groups not run by parents?

Yes _____
No _____

10b. Do you think that it will be easier to fire teachers and administrators?

Yes _____
No _____

10c. Will parents have more say about what goes on in the schools?

Yes _____
No _____

10d. Will it be possible to get better teachers?

Yes _____
No _____

10e. Will children receive a better education?

Yes _____
No _____

11. In general, would you say that decentralization will be a good thing or a bad thing for the education of New York City school children?

Good thing _____
Bad thing _____

