

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 132 675

95

EA 008 960

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 TITLE Administrative Representation.
 INSTITUTION Oregon Univ., Eugene. Center for Educational Policy and Management.
 SPONS AGENCY National Inst. of Education (DHEW), Washington, D.C.
 PUB DATE 19 Mar 76
 NOTE 21p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (San Francisco, California, April 19-23, 1976)

EDRS PRICE MF-\$0.83 HC-\$1.67 Plus Postage.
 DESCRIPTORS *Administrative Personnel; *Board Administrator Relationship; Boards of Education; Decision Making; Educational Research; Elementary Secondary Education; *Parent School Relationship; *School Superintendents; *Verbal Communication

ABSTRACT

The informal communication between constituents and educational policy makers is analyzed in three school districts classified in terms of their social-political characteristics and decision-making style. As part of a larger study, data were obtained by recording in weekly sessions all informal constituent communication with school board members, the superintendent, and (where possible or appropriate), the central office staff. The paper describes how the structure of decision-making influences and is influenced by the flow of communication. (Author/MLF)

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ADMINISTRATIVE REPRESENTATION

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March 19, 1976

AUTHORS' NOTE: The authors wish to acknowledge the support of the Research and Development Division, Center for Educational Policy and Management during a portion of the time they devoted to the preparation of this paper. The Center for Educational Policy and Management is funded under a contract with National Institute of Education, Department of Health, Education and Welfare. The research reported in this paper was conducted as part of the research and development of the Center.

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ADMINISTRATIVE REPRESENTATION

Public business is legally conducted at public meetings. The school board, elected to represent a constituency, receives and acts upon constituent requests. Of course, we know that school board meetings do not appear to achieve this ideal. In an earlier paper, we noted that public participation in formal meetings is minimal.¹

Such a finding is hardly surprising, nor does it spell the death knell of participatory democracy in education. Numerous studies of participation in a variety of settings have found formal hearings an inadequate forum for significant participation. The agenda is set prior to the meeting, the rules of discourse are constraining, the meetings are frequently of exhausting length, and the technological language of administrative experts is difficult to comprehend.

Our attention focuses, therefore, upon informal communication between constituents and educational policy-makers (school board, superintendent, and administrative staff).

An exploration of informal communication is necessary to address the question of administrative representation. Since the central governing figure in school governance, the superintendent, is not elected, he has no direct electoral accountability to the public. However, perhaps because of their central role, superintendents are viewed by both the organized and unorganized public as more visible than the board. Thus, whatever their legal responsibilities, superintendents, of necessity, will serve as focus of demands directly from the public as often as they receive such demands indirectly through the conduit of the board. Indeed, it is entirely conceivable that the flow of public demands first centers upon the superintendent who then "represents" such demands to the board.²

To the extent that there is a reversal of roles (e.g., the superintendent serving as a conduit rather than the board), several problems appear. Of all constituent demands sent their way, to how many do they pay attention? Of those received, how many represent views in opposition to their position?

The evidence up to this point is unflattering. Superintendents have tended to listen to and represent the "establishment," interacting with supporters rather than opponents. Further, when compared with board members, superintendents are less likely to be in agreement with the district populace.³

However, the issue is by no means resolved. These conclusions are based either upon case studies or single-time surveys. Our approach is to record, in weekly sessions, all informal constituent communication with school board members, the superintendent, and (where possible or appropriate), the central office staff. Interviews were rigidly structured by precise rules, and interviewers were provided extensive training in the use of the instruments. The interviewing was conducted in eleven districts for nine months.

In this paper, three of the districts are analyzed. In an earlier, more extensive treatment of formal decision-making, we derived the following classification of these districts in terms of their socio-political characterization and decision-making style.

CHART 1 and 2
ABOUT HERE

Informal communication may, of course, modify this classification. Although lay participation appears low to moderate, it may be that such participation is more consistently articulated without the constraints of formal meetings.

CHART 1

	<u>Grahamdale</u>	<u>Barwig Park</u>	<u>Leeville</u>
Size	Large	Medium	Medium
Wealth	Low	Medium	Medium
Heterogeneity	High	Medium	Low
Formal Structure	Traditional	Traditional	Unique
Informal Structure	Hierarchical	Hierarchical	Bargaining
Conflict Potential	Moderate	High	High
Conflict Articulation	Low	Moderate	High

CHART 2

Summary of Results

	Barwig Park	Grahamdale	Leeville
Purpose of Agenda	Decision	Information/Decision	Decision
Content of Agenda	(1) Students, (2) Curriculum, (3) Finance, (4) District Operation, (5) Student Services	(1) District Operation, (2) Curriculum, (3) Students, (4) Teachers.	(1) Finance, (2) District Operations, (3) Student Services, (4) School Board.
Level of Conflict	Controlled	Low	High
Agenda Setting	Superintendent	Superintendent	Board/Administration
Participation in Discussion	Board active, administrative staff more active than superintendent. Public passive.	Superintendent and staff active. Board passive. Public participation low to moderate.	Board active, superintendent and staff divide responsibility. Public participation relatively high.
Proposals for Action	Board dominant	Superintendent dominant	Board dominant.
Votes	Superintendent usually takes a policy position and wins.	Superintendent usually takes a policy position and wins.	Superintendent less likely to take policy position, but wins when he does so.

WHO SPEAKS?

It is clear that, whatever the nature of the formal process, informal communication is dominated by individuals rather than groups. There is no "group basis of politics." The two major communicators are unaffiliated individuals and parents. However, there is some evidence that these two groups

TABLE 1
ABOUT HERE

of communicators discriminate in their efforts. In Barwig Park, unaffiliated individuals take a more active role than do parents; and all three targets of communication receive roughly the same proportion of their communication from such individuals. In Grahamdale, parents are substantially more active with the superintendent and administrators, whereas there is a more equal distribution of effort with regard to the board. Non-parents apparently select the board as a more suitable arena than do parents. A more stark discrepancy appears in Leeville: parents are relatively inactive in communicating to board members and quite active in talking to administrators, whereas the reverse is true of non-parents. In two of the three districts, then, there is some apparent selection: the superintendent interacts with parents, the board with non-parents. In the case in which such selection does not occur (Barwig Park), parents are relatively inactive.

What do these data tell us about administrative representation? Clearly the superintendent and administration "represent" a selected group on constituents, presumably those with the most direct, immediate interest in education. Boards of education are somewhat more diverse in their communication. Such findings are not altogether surprising. Day to day decisions are made by administrators, and parents are more likely to be keenly attuned to such

TABLE 1
CONSTITUENT CONTACTS

<u>Barwig Park</u>			
<u>Statement</u>	<u>Board</u>	<u>Superintendent</u>	<u>Administrators</u>
Educational Civic Group	2.9		.8
Non-Educational Civic Group	2.0		1.5
Educational Interest Group			1.5
Non-Educational Interest Group	2.9	9.1	.8
Unaffiliated Individuals	71.6	78.8	77.3
Parents	18.6	6.1	15.9
Others	2.0	6.1	2.3

<u>Grahamdale</u>			
<u>Statement</u>	<u>Board</u>	<u>Superintendent</u>	<u>Administrators</u>
Educational Civic Group	5.1	1.1	7.4
Non-Educational Civic Group	5.1	7.9	5.9
Educational Interest Group	3.7	2.2	2.5
Non-Educational Interest Group	3.0	1.1	.4
Unaffiliated Individuals	34.2	9.9	10.1
Parents	43.2	74.2	74.2
Others	5.4	3.3	5.0

<u>Leeville</u>			
<u>Statement</u>	<u>Board</u>	<u>Superintendent</u>	<u>Administrators</u>
Educational Civic Group	1.3	1.3	
Non-Educational Civic Group	3.3	1.3	
Educational Interest Group	.4	2.7	
Non-Educational Interest Group	.9		
Unaffiliated Individuals	72.2	30.7	
Parents	19.7	60.0	
Others	2.2		

decisions. Thus, parents are the "special public," or clientele, of the administration. Such relationships are normal. Indeed, the literature on administrative regulation is replete with descriptions of similar examples of agency-clientele relationships. Realistically, one could hardly expect school administrators to be broader in their communication pattern. However, if one argues for administrative representation, one must add the caveat that such representation is not of diverse segments of the population, but rather of those with immediate concern about specific policies and their implementation at the individual level.

This is not to say, of course, that parents are necessarily uniform in their values or in their communication. Indeed, one can well imagine that parents, as a subgroup of a larger community, are a microcosmic reflection of the conflicts (if any) in the larger community.

WHAT IS THE NATURE OF THE COMMUNICATION?

In our earlier essay, we distinguished between two categories of communication: those which sought a decision (demands), and those which sought information. We found that, in formal communication, demands were relatively scarce. Such is not the case in informal communication. Constituents are requesting a decision at a substantially higher rate than is true of formal communication. In Barwig Park, about two-thirds of the communications received

TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

by board and superintendent has a decision as its goal. In Leeville, an even higher proportion of communication is decision-oriented, with the superintendent receiving more than the board. In Grahamdale, however, a district with

TABLE 2
TYPE OF STATEMENT

Barwig Park

<u>Statement</u>	<u>Board</u>	<u>Superintendent</u>	<u>Administrators</u>
In Favor	43.1	43.8	18.2
Opposed	21.6	12.5	17.4
Request Information	23.5	25.0	57.6
Supply Information	11.8	18.7*	6.8

*Includes exchange of information (3.1)

Leeville

<u>Statement</u>	<u>Board</u>	<u>Superintendent</u>	<u>Administrators</u>
In Favor	43.6	26.7	
Opposed	37.7	68.0	
Request Information	14.1	2.7	
Supply Information	4.5	2.7	

Grahamdale

<u>Statement</u>	<u>Board</u>	<u>Superintendent</u>	<u>Administrators</u>
In Favor	35.4	37.9	35.4
Opposed	34.4	13.8	11.7
Request Information	12.5	25.3	35.2
Supply Information	17.7*	23.0	17.7**

*Includes exchange of information (.7)

*Includes exchange of information (1.1)

lower levels of conflict, the superintendent's communication is evenly divided between demands and request for information, whereas the board's communication is less weighted in favor of information.

Even with these variations, it is clear that informal communication performs a fundamentally different purpose than formal communication. Informal communication is where the action is. Returning again to the validity of the notion of administrative representation, those communications which occur below the level of public visibility are those which contain the greatest potential for representation or misrepresentation. In two fo three districts, administrators are as involved, or more involved, than is the board in the receipt of demands. Clearly, the superintendent is regarded as substantially more than a neutral administrator. Further, when action is requested, the normal pattern is for the recipient of the request to be viewed as the appropriate decision-maker. That is to say, the board is rarely asked to constrain the behavior of the superintendent; nor is the superintendent asked to constrain the behavior of the board.

AGREEMENT BETWEEN SOURCE AND RECIPIENT

These urgings--do something, don't do something--are most likely to be supportive. If there is dissent, the administrative staff, rather than the

TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE

superintendent, is more likely to hear it (of course, the administrative staff can communicate dissent to the superintendent either informally or in cabinet meetings. Our evidence, fragmentary at this point in time, is that they do not). Board and superintendent can take comfort in the fact that, like most decision-

TABLE 3

DECISION-MAKER'S AGREEMENT WITH CONSTITUENT POSITION

	<u>Barwig Park</u>		
<u>Reaction</u>	<u>Board</u>	<u>Superintendent</u>	<u>Administrators</u>
Agree	61.4	57.1	40.0
Neutral	18.1	4.8	12.0
Disagree	20.5	38.1	48.0

	<u>Leeville</u>		
<u>Reaction</u>	<u>Board</u>	<u>Superintendent</u>	<u>Administrators</u>
Agree	70.1	75.0	
Neutral	10.2	5.6	
Disagree	19.8	19.4	

	<u>Grahamdale</u>		
<u>Reaction</u>	<u>Board</u>	<u>Superintendent</u>	<u>Administrators</u>
Agree	50.0	51.0	45.2
Neutral	23.2	28.6	34.1
Disagree	26.8	20.4	20.7

makers, they communicate with people who agree with them.

In districts with low or moderate conflict (Barwig Park and Grahamdale), there is more diversity. Although in neither case does negative communication achieve parity with supportive communication, board, superintendent, and administration receive some negative and neutral communication. In Leeville, where conflict is more pronounced, a higher proportion of communication is supportive. Perhaps the protagonists are choosing sides, as each elite (board and superintendent) publicly adopt policy positions in opposition to each other. In this case, each actor can attract a core of supporters, and negative communication is fruitless.

However, the point should not be carried too far. If two antagonists are attracting supporters, then the topic of communication should be similar. School boards and superintendents should be talking with their supporters about the same things. Whereas substantial correlation does exist, there are appreciable differences in all three districts. In Grahamdale, students (e.g., discipline, conduct, etc.) account for the highest proportion of informal communication with board, superintendent, and staff. A similar concentration is found in Barwig Park. In neither of these districts does the level of conflict approach that of Leeville. In Leeville, however, communication to the board is heavily concentrated toward financial issues, whereas the superintendent hears more about student services. Here, with conflict highest, the major participants receive communication on different topics, perhaps mitigating the possibility of confrontation. In spite of these variations, the correlations between superintendent and board are quite high (Barwig Park, .63; Grahamdale, .75; and Leeville, .75).

THE EFFECTS OF COMMUNICATION

As much communication is supportive, we would expect it to be effective. Persuasion is most likely to occur when source and recipient are in fundamental agreement. This expectation is not supported very convincingly. In Barwig Park,

TABLE 4
ABOUT HERE

the superintendent and staff appear to be virtually immune. No communication influences their behavior. However, the board is substantially more receptive. In contrast, the superintendent and administration do not stand out as unpersuadable in Grahamdale. Indeed, the superintendent is, depending upon how one reads the table, more vulnerable to persuasion than the board. However, neither board nor superintendent can be considered open to persuasion, especially in comparison to Leeville. Here we find our most persuadable superintendent (who also, as we have seen, receives mostly supportive communication).

In each district, for each recipient, vulnerability to persuasion is clearly related to perceived agreement with source. In Barwig Park, where both superintendent and staff regard themselves as invulnerable to persuasion, the source of the communication is of no consequence. The board, however, is quite normal. 81 percent of the supportive messages, as contrasted to 11 percent of the dissenting messages, are regarded as persuasive. In Grahamdale, where the general level of persuadability is low, the board is influenced by 50 percent of the supportive messages, as compared to 6 percent of the hostile messages. 29 percent of the supportive messages influence the superintendent, in contrast to none of the hostile messages, and 43 percent of the hostile messages are persuasive. In Leeville, the superintendent is vulnerable in

TABLE 4

CONSTITUENT EFFECT UPON DECISION-MAKER'S POSITION

<u>Barwig Park</u>			
<u>Effect</u>	<u>Board</u>	<u>Superintendent</u>	<u>Administrators</u>
Some	64.6	4.5	4.0
Small	4.9	0.0	4.0
None	30.5	95.5	92.0

<u>Leeville</u>			
<u>Effect</u>	<u>Board</u>	<u>Superintendent</u>	<u>Administrators</u>
Some	51.3	68.1	
Small	11.6	6.9	
None	37.0	25.0	

<u>Grahamdale</u>			
<u>Effect</u>	<u>Board</u>	<u>Superintendent</u>	<u>Administrators</u>
Some	31.8	25.0	25.0
Small	15.6	36.1	15.8
None	52.5	38.9	59.2

87 percent of the exchanges of supportive communication. Indeed, he is even more vulnerable than the board (62 percent).

The point is that, when persuasion, or influence, occurs, it is most likely to be found in supportive exchanges. Such exchanges are not designed to change opinions, but to reinforce a previously agreed upon course of action. Thus, supportive individuals who do not seek to modify or constrain behavior are most influential.

Whether such people are parents or non-parents varies with district and recipient. In Grahamdale, where level of vulnerability to persuasion is low, neither group is more or less successful regardless of the recipient. In Barwig Park, where the board is vulnerable, but the superintendent and administration are not, parents are more successful. In Leeville, where both board and superintendent are vulnerable, parents are substantially more successful. 72 percent of the messages received by the board from parents, as contrasted to 46 percent from non-parents, are persuasive. 72 percent of the parental communications to the superintendent, as compared to 57 percent of the non-parental communications, are successful.

THE RESULT OF COMMUNICATION

One should not attach too much importance to perceptions of persuasion. Specifically, one should not assume that a tangible outcome in accord with the wishes of the constituent was achieved. Being persuaded to pursue a course of action is a far cry from bringing the matter to a conclusion. Indeed, in many cases, an ultimate resolution was not achieved during the course of our observation period.

Our data allow us to describe the extent to which a communication was

initiated with the expectation that a decision would be made, or an action taken. We can also report the extent to which such expectations were realized.

TABLE 5
ABOUT HERE

The results do not lend themselves to easy generalization. In the two districts with lowest conflict, neither the board nor the superintendent provide an adequate response. In most cases, the action requested was not taken. The rate of outright refusal is low (with the conspicuous exception of the non-persuadable Barwig Park superintendent, who has a relatively high rate of refusal). The normal response is to make no response (we'll consider it and get back to you). However, in both these districts, the administrative staff is more active in providing a resolution (note again the relatively high refusal rate of the Barwig Park administrative cadre). Of course, it may be that actions requested of administrative staff are so routine that action is easy to take. In any case, clients in these district are more likely to achieve satisfaction below the highest levels of decision-making.

In Leeville, where conflict is highest, board and superintendent both respond favorably. Conflict does seem to have a salutary effect, contrary to the nostrums of educational administration.

CONCLUSIONS

Administrative representation seems to take the following form. Superintendents "represent" parents who support them. In low conflict districts, superintendents are only occasionally influenced by such communication. Further, in such districts, the response to demands is normally one of delay. However, in the high conflict district, the superintendent is influenced, and action is taken in response to demands. Again, since the communication

TABLE 5
ACTION TAKEN AS RESULT OF REQUEST

Barwig Park

	<u>Board</u>	<u>Superintendent</u>	<u>Administrators</u>
Action Taken	23.1	27.8	49.5
Action Refused	9.2	33.3	20.2
Action Pending	67.7	38.9	30.3
	64	55	83

* Proportion of cases in which action expected

Leeville

	<u>Board</u>	<u>Superintendent</u>	<u>Administrators</u>
Action Taken	59.4	60.0	
Action Refused	12.4	7.1	
Action Pending	28.2	32.9	
	86	93	

Grahamdale

	<u>Board</u>	<u>Superintendent</u>	<u>Administrators</u>
Action Taken	29.3	32.1	51.7
Action Refused	3.7	3.6	2.9
Action Pending	67.0	64.3	45.4

is supportive, a favorable response is not surprising. What is more puzzling is the failure of superintendents in low conflict districts to provide a comparably adequate response.

FOOTNOTES

1. Zeigler, Harmon, Harvey J. Tucker, and L. A. Wilson, II, "Communication and Decision-Making in American Public Education: A Longitudinal and Comparative Study," (National Society for the Study of Education, 1977 Yearbook, forthcoming).
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3. Zeigler, Harmon, M. Kent Jennings, and G. Wayne Peak, Governing American Schools (North Scituate, Mass.: Duxbury Press, 1974).