

THE CASE FOR RANDOM SELECTION OF PUBLIC SCHOOL
ADVISORY GROUP MEMBERS

by

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Over the years, we have talked about the value of citizen advisory groups as a means for the development of citizen leaders for education. Certainly, many members of public school boards of education were elected because they became known as local educational leaders through serving on vocational agriculture department advisory councils. It appears, however, that we are developing procedures for the selection of advisory group members which will severely limit the development of citizen leadership for education. This is not wise from the standpoint of either the development of citizen leaders for education or the successful functioning of citizen groups advisory to the public schools.

Purpose of Advisory Councils

As stated in Organizing and Working with Departmental Advisory Councils in the Public Schools* the purposes of advisory councils are:

1. To provide an effective means of two-way communication between a board of education and the general public.
2. To provide an effective means for utilizing the talents and abilities of persons in the community in solving school problems.
3. To provide more personnel for the study of various school problems that can be made available by a board of education with its limited manpower.
4. To mobilize the force of an informed public opinion behind actions needed for developing and maintaining sound, progressive educational programs for all the people of a community.
5. To make unnecessary the formation of special-interest pressure groups within the school district to influence school policy.

If we really believe in these purposes, and especially in the fifth purpose, we should examine critically the procedures being recommended for the selection of advisory council members. Although each purpose carries some implications for the development of citizen leadership for education, it is the accomplishment of the fifth purpose that requires strong lay citizen leadership in educational matters within a community.

* Krebs, A. H., Interstate Printers and Publishers, Danville, 1965.

Common Membership Selection Procedures for Vocational Agriculture

At the present time, much of the literature on advisory councils contains recommendations on procedures for selection of advisory council members which are not sound if we seek a council representative of the public and which could lead to the discovery and development of lay citizen leadership for education.

One common procedure recommended is for the teacher of agriculture and the administrative staff to make a list of persons who would be "good" members. The board of education then appoints the desired number of persons from the list. In some instances, this procedure has been modified so that the teacher of agriculture, the school principal, and the current advisory council chairman select the new council members.

Another procedure in use is for the current advisory council members to select their own replacements. Thus, if you don't belong to the right groups, you have no chance of becoming a member. It is normal for a person to turn to his friends to seek his own replacement.

A more acceptable procedure recommended by many educators is the appointment, by a board of education, of a selection committee. It is recommended that the selection committee consist of the teacher of agriculture, a school board member, an administrator, and enough lay citizens to maintain a lay citizen majority. The selection committee is responsible for submitting nominations to the board of education. The selection committee may use a variety of means for securing nominations. The recommended procedure is for the committee to canvass the community to secure nominations from a large segment of the public and then screen these nominations, using a list of population characteristics, to obtain a representative group. At best this procedure is cumbersome, but it has resulted in the appointment of some very effective advisory councils. At the worst, this procedure can evidence the same weaknesses present in the first two procedures described.

Random Selection Procedure

A procedure which has been used very little but which appears to be the most promising of presently known procedures is some form of choosing by lot, a random selection procedure. Basically, this procedure consists of developing a list of all persons eligible for membership based on certain eligibility requirements. For a school sponsored departmental citizen advisory council, these requirements could be eligibility to vote in school affairs, being a member of the population served by the department concerned, and not being a school employee or board of education member. For a school-wide advisory council, the membership requirements would be eligibility for voting in school elections and not being a school employee or board of education member. The persons to be nominated are then selected by use of a table of random numbers. Although only the exact number to be nominated needs to be drawn or obtained by use of the table of random numbers, a few additional names usually are identified to provide for replacements or to replace the person who declines to serve.

Members are always appointed from the list in the exact order in which their names are drawn or obtained in the random selection procedure. (It is interesting to note that, as a result of the 1968 Federal Jury Act, a random selection procedure for selecting panels for federal juries has been instituted.)

Pros and Cons of Random Selection

The arguments against use of a random selection procedure for identifying advisory council members are interesting and quite revealing of our faith in the democratic process. The usual response is an immediate and vigorous "That won't work!" The reasons for the negative response usually center around a fear of selecting persons who are "undesirables," who are opposed to school policies, or who are unable to make decisions about school affairs. It is argued that advisory councils should be composed of persons who are strongly interested in school affairs and who are highly intelligent. Some educators feel that only these kinds of people "can get things done." It would also, of course, be possible to establish eligibility requirements which would make the procedure practically useless.

The arguments for using a random selection procedure are not many in number, but they are telling. With the exception of the potential procedural weakness in establishing membership eligibility requirements, the arguments against use of a random selection procedure illustrate beautifully why it should be used. In essence, the case for a random selection procedure rests on a faith in people and a belief in the democratic processes.

A group representative of a community is not composed only of highly intelligent people who are highly interested in school affairs; it is composed of people of varying degrees of intelligence with varying degrees of interest in school affairs. All need the opportunity to serve on advisory councils. Persons insufficiently interested will refuse to serve. A "hand-picked" advisory council is representative only of itself; it is not representative of the community.

The idea of selecting persons capable of making decisions indicates a lack of faith in people and in the democratic process. It is a principle of democracy that the people, if adequately informed, are capable of sharing in making those decisions which affect their lives. If advisory councils function correctly, they serve as study groups and do not make recommendations without information as a basis for them.

And who are the undesirables? Persons opposed to present school policies or persons who disagree with the opinions of the persons who select the advisory council members? There are probably few people in this world who would not be considered undesirable for membership on an advisory council by someone.

The fifth purpose for having advisory councils, as quoted earlier in this article, implies a need and responsibility for developing informed leaders for education. One excellent way to do this is through appointments

to advisory councils. When advisory council members are selected by a few individuals, the process usually results in the appointment of friends or other well-known persons who are already leaders. The great wealth of untapped leadership remains unknown and undeveloped. When a random selection procedure is used, each eligible person has the same chance to be selected. The unknown and undeveloped leadership potential may be discovered.

For the person who worries about the capability of a randomly selected group to make proper decisions, it should be re-emphasized that advisory councils do have professional guidance, they do make use of consultants, and they are study groups making recommendations only. There is still an official board of education to take official action. The advisory council should not be so composed as to become an "unofficial competing board of education." It should also be pointed out here that wisdom and intelligence are not synonymous; that what is needed is to open the channels of communication to all segments of a community.

In communities with competing organizations and groups, there is yet another advantage of using a random selection procedure. When a random selection procedure is used, it is quite simple to explain to a community why various persons are or are not on the advisory council.

Finally, there is ample evidence nation-wide of the ultimate effects of failing to involve various segments of society in the process of making decisions affecting their lives. By failing to develop leaders, society has been forced to deal with persons who became leaders because they were willing to take the risks involved in sponsoring activities which made them highly visible. These new, untrained leaders used socially disruptive techniques because, in part, they knew no other way to get the attention of society and the power structure. Our country is "learning the hard way" that those persons previously "left out" of the decision making process can also "get things done." Agricultural educators should not contribute to this situation by failing to involve persons who should be served by the agriculture program.

Contribution to the Democratic Process

If we believe that people are rational beings, that rational people having adequate information will arrive at rational decisions, and that people have the right to be involved in making those decisions which affect their lives, then we should welcome the use of a random procedure for the selection of advisory council members. Although the procedure will not guarantee perfect results, it is more likely to achieve desired results than other possible selection procedures. In addition to increasing the odds in favor of obtaining a truly representative council with contacts in all segments of a community, we would also be developing the new leadership for education so much needed in our country.