

FUNCTIONAL RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN UNIVERSITIES AND PUBLIC SCHOOLS

ROBERT L. CARPENTER AND MARC C. MAHLIOS

*Division of Professional Education, State University of New York
Binghamton, New York 13901*

This article presents a general model for university-public school cooperation based on the experiences of the authors engaged in such activity. Elements of the cooperation model are: volunteerism, responsiveness, bilateral decision making, a nucleus of commitment, and a sense of organizational evolution. These characteristics are operationalized through activities in the areas of curriculum development, organizational and staff development, and educational research.

The nature of the relationship between universities and public schools has historically been problematic (Barzun, 1968; Schlesinger, 1967). Various organizational models designed to foster cooperative relationships have been proposed, some even implemented; but the commonsense understanding continues to be something of the fashion that such relationships are essentially ideosyncratic, dependent on the personalities of the individuals involved more than any particular structural approach. Without entirely discounting the "truth" of this position, we submit that there are certain characteristics that appear related to at least initial success in evolving mutually helpful relationships.

We suggest in this article such characteristics gleaned from first-hand experience in establishing a cooperative relationship in our case, ERSC.

The Educational Research and Services Council (ERSC) is composed of the three school superintendents who are also the steering committee of the Regional Chief School Officers Association, two education faculty members, and the University's Dean of Education. The group meets on a regular basis inviting other members of the educational community as necessary. This presentation is from the perspective of the university partici-

pants, with verification from the school participants.

Essentially, ERSC can be characterized by five important attributes: volunteerism, responsiveness, bilateral decision making, a nucleus of commitment and a sense of organizational evolution.

Volunteerism: Each school district, and for that matter, the university, is free to choose whether or not to participate in an ERSC sponsored activity. Participation is on a pay-as-you-go basis; an approach that distinguishes this relationship from many others where membership dues are charged and a program then made available to the membership. In this way, participants feel a greater degree of commitment to the activity and dissatisfaction is minimized.

One of the first functions ERSC sponsored was a dinner evening with a nationally recognized speaker for all the central office administrators and members of boards of education from the surrounding twenty school districts. Part of the design for the evening was to acquaint these people with the purposes and potential of ERSC. Invitations were extended to the superintendents and school board presidents. School districts were free to choose whether or not they wished to participate, and if so, to what extent.

Costs were recovered on a per person basis.

Responsiveness: How well an organization resonates to the needs of its constituents is a primal measure of organizational effectiveness. Meeting on a bi-weekly basis, our group has been able to respond, in a very immediate way, to local issues of potentially mutual concern. Frequent, regular, direct contact allows decisions for programming to be made quickly, and follow-up procedures straight-forward. Further, this sort of interaction results in a degree of role transformation between university and public school personnel. One is, to a degree, able to empathize with the other.

For instance, a newly appointed superintendent perceived one of the short term goals of his school board to be to enhance communication skills of the district and building level administrators vis-a-vis the faculty and the public. Through ERSC, a small grant proposal was written to a state source of funding for public service employee management skills enhancement. This grant will largely underwrite the cost of a two-day workshop and follow-up on communication skills development for the districts' administrators.

Bilateral Decision-Making: Clearly involvements such as research projects, for instance, may be of more interest to university personnel; while certain inservice programs would be of more interest to school people. Such one-sided projects are managed on a *quid pro quo* basis. Mutually interesting projects are, of course, jointly developed.

A project involving survey research, the development of a comprehensive service delivery model for gifted education, and a proposal to the SEA to implement and test unique elements of the model is an example of a joint project with components of special interest both to the university and the schools. This project is currently in progress and will be described later.

Public school officials and university faculty/administrators need be sensitive to the sometimes diverse interests of each group as well as different client and organizational pressures. Each group's goals and perceived missions are not always parallel. Therefore, ERSC has determined that even if projects are not sufficiently mutually acceptable to be conducted under ERSC auspices, such projects are open to being pursued independently with the tacit cooperation of all members.

Nucleus of Commitment: As described above, the school superintendents and the university administrators and faculty who originally met to develop the cooperative effort have remained on the executive committee. Not only do these individuals share that feeling of ownership and responsibility peculiar to the creators of things new; but the time and resources mutually expended have resulted in closer emotional ties between the members.

Organization Evolution: ERSC members share the perspective that it is important for this organization to retain a high degree of flexibility in order to remain responsive to the area's needs. Further, the future directions open to ERSC are subject to ongoing speculation. Representatives from several other educational groups (principals' organizations, school business, officers' group, intermediate district officials, curriculum directors, etc.) were invited to a recent meeting to share in the planning for the coming year. Yet, circumstances have, to a large degree, been allowed to prescribe the direction of this organization. The executive committee is comfortable with this arrangement as the relationship embodied by ERSC is viewed from a developmental perspective.

These organizational characteristics are operationalized in the spirit of comprehensive educational planning for fifteen school districts in the area. ERSC activi-

ties may be described in terms of curriculum, organization, staff development and research.

In the area of curriculum, there are currently two projects in the early planning stage. The first involves a response to the need for gifted program development at all grade levels. Recognizing the diverse character of the various districts and respecting the concept of local autonomy, a team of university faculty and assistant superintendents are developing a universal model for gifted programming implementation. The model illustrates through modified flow charting the implications of various ideological positions toward gifted education, the necessary support group to identify and encourage, the requisite staff training, facilities and equipment necessary, and the resultant programs that emerge from formative decisions.

Such activity is not only stimulating to university faculty interested in expanding on the theoretical implications, but should be imminently useful to most of the school districts in the area currently grappling with these questions. ERSC may approach the state education agency for money to develop area wide assessment research techniques based on this general model.

Other opportunities for cooperative endeavors around the process of curriculum articulation within districts are also envisioned. In all cases, where the focus of our collective efforts has been curricular in nature, successful outcomes are achieved when the interaction is characterized by: 1) local yet shared ownership of the curriculum problems, 2) a clearly perceived need for the activity, and 3) shared responsibility for the success and subsequent refinement of the project.

Responses to felt organizational needs constitutes an important area of activity. ERSC is sponsoring a series of in-service modules this spring for local school board

members. A fall course for new school board members is being planned. Further, ERSC is studying the whole field of in-service training for middle management personnel. Through ERSC, superintendents are seeking resources to engage principals and other building staff in renewal and rethinking of their approaches to a broad spectrum of work centered issues.

Other staff development projects will be possible through ERSC. Unique approaches have been discussed by which the university is able to generate FTEs through non-conventional, custom made programs/consultancies to individual school districts. Still other examples of staff development projects include a comprehensive communication and interpersonal skills inservice for one district's administrative staff, school board members and teachers. In yet another instance, area administrators, curriculum coordinators and department heads from many districts will participate in an ERSC sponsored workshop on curriculum articulation processes and program evaluation techniques.

Much of the above holds potential for field-based research, curriculum and program evaluations, or program development through joint grants. Specific research activities include one district's efforts at evaluating their efforts in teaching higher level cognitive processes to fifth graders in social science classes; assessment of faculty knowledge bases and sources underlying programming for giftedness; and an ATI study of pupil learning styles and methods of phonics instruction. Several other research efforts are also in progress and are coordinated under ERSC auspices, thus allowing for equitable assignment and quality control. Moreover, the council acts as coordinating mechanism for university faculty who wish to conduct research in the schools. This practice promises to reduce several

of the problems associated with research projects in a university community.

Beyond these specific projects, ERSC has begun to extend the thinking of both university and school personnel. Both parties are beginning to see ERSC as a mechanism for action, an opportunity heretofore unavailable to experiment with

ideas in an encouraging, supportive atmosphere of other educators.

References

- Barzun, J. *The American University*. New York: Harper and Row, 1968.
- Schlesinger, A. The university in an urban society. *The Massachusetts Review*, 1967, 8, 470-476.

Language and Literacy. The Social Psychology of Reading. Volume 1. John Edwards (Editor). Institute of Modern Languages, Inc., Silver Springs, Maryland, 1981, 244 pp. The editor maintains that because of the fundamental nature, reading has always attracted much interest by the researcher. In the area of reading there is a large social psychological component. This book, then, is focused on that aspect, and with the full conviction that learning to read does not occur in a vacuum, but rather in a social environment. One chapter, for example deals with the socio-economic factors of one's class, dialect differences, and teacher expectations in relation to learning progress. The opening chapter provides a review of literature on sex differences in reading—North American girls are found to be superior to boys, but not a global phenomenon. Cultural factors seem to be the cause for such differences. The second chapter deals with the matter of 'speed reading.' The third chapter deals with the factor of 'motivation,' and seeks to deal with the question of Why so many persons with an opportunity fail to learn to read effectively? In chapter 4 classroom organization is examined in relation to reader motivation, and where some degree of freedom of pupils has a distinct advantage over the older traditional 'stiff discipline' approach. Chapters 7 and 8 deal with the bilanguage approach, and where in Canada the research suggests a detriment to each language.

Tales from the Mohaves Herman Gray. The University of Oklahoma Press, Norman, Oklahoma, 1980, 94 pp. In the eight Mohave tales the author offers enjoyable and exciting reading as well as a fresh look at a remarkable Indian culture. The tales center on the adventures of the mythical hero, Swift Lance, and the stories told him by his grandmother, White Flower. Some stories—"The Spirit Deer," for example—are legendary and illustrate well the Mohave concepts of the relationship between people and nature, others, such as those telling of Swift Lance's trip to Apache land and the war against the Pimas, are historical rather than legendary. They touch on the traditions and values of the Mohaves while describing the incessant raiding that was an integral part of Mohave life. The author, Herman Gray, is a Mohave

Civilization and the Story of the Absentee Shawnees. As Told to Florence Drake by Thomas Wildcat Alford. The University of Oklahoma Press, Norman, Oklahoma, 1980, 202 pp. Thomas Wildcat Alford, born of parents of the Absentee Shawnee tribes of Indians in 1860, relates the story of his life and his tribe during the period from which the influence of the white race first began to be felt, up to . . . when so called civilization of the white man . . . superceded almost to annihilation the old tribal mode of life. In this book the great-grandson of Techumseh recounts the story of the impact of the white man's civilization upon the Shawnee Indians. Thomas Wildcat Alford was one of the first of his tribe to attend Hampton Institute, Virginia. Upon returning to his tribe, he became an important figure in its affairs. The author, Florence Drake, was a resident of Alford's home city of Tecumseh.

Copyright of Education is the property of Project Innovation, Inc. and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.