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Rural Community Input to School District Strategic Planning: An Action Research Model Using Focus Groups

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A rural superintendent used action research principles in conducting a series of focus groups with community members, students, and staff. The focus group data informed strategic planning. At the end of a carefully designed process, district administrators found more agreement among residents than they had expected. Community members were grateful for the opportunity to participate, and the district's strategic plan contained important goals that would not have been recognized without community input. Administrators believed conducting the focus groups themselves brought more benefit than if they had hired a consultant, because of the interaction with community members. The result was a model that could be used by other rural superintendents.

Many school districts lack a means to provide meaningful two-way communication opportunities with their communities. Rural school districts, in particular, face communication obstacles. Fassig (1987) suggested that what schools often refer to as communication with their communities is actually one-sided propaganda. The purpose of this research was to provide a case study assessment of a methodology for gathering perceptions from community members in a rural school district and to provide a model that school administrators might apply within their own school districts for strategic planning. The methodological framework was action research, using focus group techniques for data collection. The superintendent of the rural school district was the principal investigator for this study.

Rural schools and rural communities, although comparatively small and geographically concentrated, often do not have effective means of communicating. The lack of good communication can have a damaging effect on the relationship between a rural school system and the community. Feldman (2003) found that the attitudes and beliefs of rural communities have a direct impact on the local school curriculum and the school's overall success (see also Browne-Ferrigno & Allen, 2006; Jenkins, 2007). The uniqueness of rural community culture requires that school administrators seek direct open communication with the community, so that educational policy and goal setting reflect local values. Feldman's research found that in rural schools the adoption of curriculum and other policy changes could result in extensive community discussion, if not dissatisfaction. Carefully seeking and evaluating local opinions and needs becomes an important role for the school administrator.

Calabrese, Patterson, Koenigs, Johnson, Neil, S. and Rasmussen (2003), in a qualitative case study of a rural Midwestern community and its schools, found a sense of mutual interdependence that exists between the rural school

and the community. The vision of the school included an understanding of the history and tradition of the community, a vision broad enough to sustain the confidence of the community. The interdependence of the school and community meant that when the rural community thrived, the school had a broader and more reliable tax base and a more involved citizenry. Likewise, when the school system was strong, the community benefited through being able to maintain its population with graduates who could preserve and maintain the community. The significant responsibility of the school administrator in the rural setting is to build and cultivate the relationship between the school and community through communication.

School community relations in rural schools often take on a very different appearance than they do in larger districts. Gallagher, Bagin, and Kindred (1997) noted that large districts often had teams of school personnel dedicated to community relations. In rural districts the absence of substantial budgets for school community endeavors frequently left the responsibility to be assumed by the superintendent and shared by the district principals. Fassig (1987) found that the smaller the school district and the less likely the school to have a specialist specifically for community relations, the greater the responsibility of the superintendent and the teaching staff to carry out this role.

This study was conducted in the Cold Spring District (a pseudonym), a small rural district in Ohio, with a student population of approximately 1,350 students in grades kindergarten through twelve. The product of a consolidation of two small village schools in the early 1960s, the district experienced moderate growth during the 1990s, and it was anticipated that a slight increase would continue in the years ahead. The Cold Spring District contained a large agricultural base and a relatively small population base, with little industry or manufacturing. Many district residents worked in neighboring communities. Approximately nine percent of the students enrolled were included within the

Ohio Department of Education's economically disadvantaged category.

After reviewing state and national polling data reflecting the concerns of communities for their schools, the superintendent still felt a need for information about the perceptions of people living in the Cold Springs District. Therefore, he chose to apply action research methodology to gather insights from the community, construct a strategic plan, and implement the plan's recommendations.

Methodology

Action Research

Action research has its basis in the work of Kurt Lewin. Over time the work of Lewin has been modified and added to by Sagor (1992), Calhoun (1994), Wells (1993), and Stringer (1996) among others. All of the models have the common characteristics of establishing an area of focus or identifying a problem area, collecting data which involves the monitoring and observation of the organization under study, analyzing and interpreting the information, and developing a plan of action that is ongoing. In working through the process the researcher is often spiraled back to one of the earlier steps in the model.

Schools are subject to an ongoing onslaught of new fads and frequently lack evidence to support or refute the newest trend (Kennedy, 1997). The action research model allows the stakeholders in the organization to gather for their own purposes relevant information that describes the existing situation. The stakeholders themselves serve as the central authority responsible for accountability. The information gathered includes the investigators' historical and cultural knowledge of the organization. These data provide specific information that has been often lacking for school leaders. The conclusions that can be drawn from the data are incorporated into a plan of action for improvement.

Focus Groups

The Harwood Group (1993) found that people's dialogue among themselves is a crucial element of public engagement. They noted that the public of a given community become actively involved when they can determine when and how to engage a particular topic. It is therefore important that the public school superintendent's method of seeking and gathering data from the public encourages dialogue, while structuring engagement with relevant topics. Thus the data collection method chosen for this study was focus groups. Hughes and Hooper (2000) defined focus groups as having ten or fewer people who each represent a segment of the community. The focus group serves as a mechanism for identifying and exploring reactions of people in regard to specific issues, problems or changes. It provides data that the school administrator can use in problem solving, and at the same time the members

participate in a process that improves school community relations.

Focus groups allow the school administrator to seek the input of a cross section of community members. Bagin, Gallegher and Kindred (1994) stated that it is important for school leaders to understand and respond to the opinions and concerns of the majority of the people within a community rather than to the vocal minority that often make themselves heard. Carr (1995) concurred in supporting a broad-based stakeholder representation whenever possible so that a disproportional number of favored groups will not skew decisions and actions by the school administration and board members. According to Carr, the membership of the focus groups hold the potential to become political allies and strong supporters of the schools when they realize that their opinions are being recognized and valued as a community resource by school administrators.

Focus groups were used for this action research data collection for several reasons. First, a previous attempt to gather data through the use of surveys was totally unsuccessful. Five thousand three hundred surveys were mailed to families within the Cold Springs district and the return was 36. The second reason for the decision to use focus groups was that the district is not served by a local newspaper or other media outlets that might normally gather public opinion. There are no city government officials and no chamber of commerce that might serve as a focal point for public opinion. The final reason for selecting the focus group approach was the desire to seek representation from numerous sectors of the public with the intent of recognizing and identifying diverse opinions.

Trustworthiness Techniques

The quality of data is of the utmost importance in action research, as it is in any other form of research. If the data gathered will not consistently produce valid results, then any resulting policies or programs that are based on that data will be flawed. It was necessary that this study use good trustworthiness techniques, so that the data could be trusted for use in decision making (Guba, 1981; Wolcott, 1994).

The validity and reliability of the study were important issues because the results of the study were used for planning purposes and to document community opinion. Trustworthiness was maximized through (a) the process used to select participants, (b) detailed and multiple approaches in recording participants' responses, (c) analyzing the consistency of responses among multiple participants, (d) clarifying the data with participants to ensure accuracy, and (e) using a peer reviewer as a check on interpretations of the data.

The first stage of the action research project was to collect and analyze the data from focus groups. The steps taken were to clarify the topics that would be discussed, select the focus group participants, conduct the focus groups, and analyze the data.

Clarifying the Topics

In an attempt to clarify the needs and expectations that exist within the community, the administrative team, consisting of the four building principals, the curriculum director, and the superintendent, composed an initial list of topics that they viewed to be of significant interest. They developed four open-ended questions in the form of a written questionnaire and distributed them to 100 randomly selected community members, 35 district classified staff members, 75 teachers, and 5 board members. There were 139 responses. The responses were compiled and analyzed by the administrative team, and from this analysis came four questions for presentation to the focus groups:

1. What goals might you identify for improvement within our schools?
2. What types of community education programs would be beneficial?
3. How might the communication between the schools and the community be best conducted?
4. What school building (facility) issues do you think would best address our community needs?

Selecting Focus Group Participants

The administrative team used purposive sampling to recruit 70 people for eight focus groups (Krueger & King, 1998). First they identified categories of people that should be represented: business people, parents of school age children (parents with and without college degrees), students, adults without school aged children, retired people, farmers, members of the clergy, school personnel, representatives of higher education faculty, local politicians, school booster club members, Parent Teacher Organization members, and members of law enforcement. They discussed which prospective participants within each category were best able to represent the identified segments of the community.

One focus group would consist of only teachers and one would be made up entirely of high school students. The input from these two groups was important to the overall study, but administrators determined that the ability of teachers and students to respond openly might be best accomplished through providing them with a focus group consisting exclusively of their peers. Letters of invitation were sent to the list of potential participants, and follow-up phone calls ensured both the correct number of participants and a balanced representation.

Conducting the Focus Groups

The focus groups were conducted at schools in the two outlying communities that had elementary school buildings and at the centralized high school. All were conducted within a 30-day period. At each of the focus group meetings,

the participants were welcomed to a common area where they could interact and wait comfortably. The sessions began with the superintendent explaining in detail the process that was going to be followed and the purpose and goals for the focus groups. Participants were randomly divided into the number of focus groups that were being conducted on any given evening.

Each focus group was assigned a moderator (one of the building principals) and the groups were physically separated from each other, although all were within the same large space (the school's gymnasium). The focus groups were each assigned a coded name and the dates of each focus group were recorded.

All focus groups responded to the same four questions, and responses were recorded on chart paper and by tape recorder. Each of the focus group participants were asked by the moderators to respond to each question on a rotational basis, and discussion regarding a response was discouraged, so that everyone would feel free to contribute. Participants could pass their turn if they had no response to give. At the conclusion of the allowed time for each of the four questions, each participant was given five dime-sized stickers to assign values to any response on the chart paper. The stickers could be divided or assigned in any desired fashion among the responses given. In this approach, the responses that met with the greatest approval among the focus group participants were determined by the number of stickers placed beside each response. The procedures used by the focus groups for weighting the value of the various responses were developed by Dr. Ronald Walker of Ashland University.

The superintendent served as the timer for all of the focus groups, and all groups were asked to begin and end at the same time. Each of the groups was granted as much time as was necessary for the slowest group to complete the assigning of the weighted values. To keep the groups synchronized, the starting time for the next question posed was the same for each group.

Preparation for the focus groups needed to be very detailed. Administrators were aware that the school was sending many messages regarding their ability to organize and listen when the public was invited into the schools. The materials for the focus groups included: chart paper that could be hung on any wall without the use of an easel, markers of various colors, stickers to designate weighted values, postage for the letters of invitation, tape recorders, tapes, pizza, drinks, paper plates, napkins and cups.

The offer of free pizza had a far greater than expected appeal to entice participants to attend. In addition, the pizza and socialization time following the focus groups was very productive in terms of offering the administrators and participants an opportunity to interact. The interaction enhanced administrators' understanding of the written responses of the focus groups, because many of the participants took the opportunity to further explain their positions on specific issues or to offer in greater detail their

philosophies regarding a particular topic. The superintendent invited participants to discuss any topic that they wished and made himself available to answer any questions.

Time investment is the most significant cost of this type of research. The administrative team had hours of time invested in the design of the original surveys, the analysis of those surveys, the categorization of people to be invited, the actual invitations to community members and the process of arriving at the four final questions to be presented to the focus groups. Administrators and others invested time in serving as moderators for the focus groups, and the superintendent devoted significant time in scheduling and organizing the focus groups, compiling and analyzing the data, and in the goal setting that followed the analysis.

Analysis of Data

The superintendent began the data analysis process by transcribing every response and the weighted values assigned to each. Post-session discussions were held with each moderator to further clarify the responses that were written. Responses were ranked in order based on those given the most weight. Analysis was made for the top responses of each focus group individually and then collectively for all responses from all focus groups.

Some interpretations or generalizations of the data were made by the moderators and then when necessary, by the superintendent. For example, one focus group identified equal funding for all public schools as their most desired goal. Another focus group identified better funding for all public schools. Although there was a subtle difference between the two answers, for the sake of analysis, these responses were combined under the general heading of a desire to improve state funding for public schools.

There were 421 responses to be considered and categorized. Very few new responses were given after the completion of the first six focus groups, and no new responses that merited any significant weighted values appeared after the first six focus groups. This suggested that the number of participants need not be large to gather reliable data. Still the analysis and manipulation of the data were time demanding tasks.

Focus Group Preferences

The first analysis looked at all responses across all questions. The top three responses (the desire to construct new school buildings in the Cold Spring District, the desire to see parenting classes offered in the schools, and the desire to make the school buildings a greater resource for the community as a whole) appeared in all focus groups except the group composed of teachers.

In a second analysis, the responses from groups conducted in the two geographical locations were considered separately and compared. The people making up the focus

groups coded I came from a generally wealthier area, while the membership of the focus groups coded J came from a more economically deprived area(see Table 1).. The focus group made up of teachers and that made up of students were considered separately, because they involved people from both geographical areas

The answers to Question One were consistent with the expectations of the administrative team that there would be significant differences in the opinions of the two communities. The J community was concerned about basic school funding, while the I community wanted to upgrade the district's buildings and to concentrate additional resources toward upper level students. However there was amazing agreement in the answers from the two geographically distinct groups on every other topic.

These findings of overwhelming similarities between the diverse communities revealed a historic misconception in the Cold Spring District. Since consolidation of the two community based schools in the early 1960s, school and community leaders believed that a basic problem existed in any district-wide strategic planning because the goals of the communities for their schools were significantly different. An ongoing belief was that the two communities would strongly oppose any effort to do away with the elementary schools that remained in each of the two villages and that an effort to consolidate on a central site would be difficult. The research revealed that in reality, at this time and in this place, the two communities were extraordinarily similar in their goals for the district and that strong support existed for further consolidation.

The students' responses were consistent with those of adult community members. However, the teacher group identified issues more directly related to instruction, methodology, and philosophy of education. The teacher group did not mention at all the need for improved school buildings, and yet this response was overwhelmingly the choice of the other groups. This result is consistent with the generalization that community input to strategic planning often goes unheard completely, or is at best misinterpreted, when school personnel alone are involved in the goal setting.

Although the top responses garnered the most attention in the strategic planning effort, the less prevalent responses also provided information that was used. An example was that many of the participants wanted the school system to conduct activities that draw the community together. While the desire to have the schools provide "Family Fun Nights" or "Family Movie Nights" did not rise to the level of being a high priority, the fact that this desire was listed in multiple responses suggested that additional attention could be provided in this area by school leadership, and that in so doing a previously unidentified community need could be fulfilled.

Another example was that some focus group participants wanted to see social service agencies brought into the Cold Spring School buildings. Community members had to travel to distant locations in the county to access social services.

Although district personnel had often referred families to social services, consideration was rarely given to the financial and time constraint hardships that this could entail. While the need for more readily accessible social services is not applicable to the majority of the people in the district, the role that the school could play in providing assistance as a satellite for these types of services could be significant. Again, had it not been for the collection of data from the focus groups and the analysis of all responses, this need would have gone unidentified.

Peer Reviewer

A final analysis of the data gathered involved a fellow superintendent, Mr. Bud (a pseudonym), who had previously served in the Cold Spring District. This colleague was asked to review the data, comment on the interpretations, and offer input as to how he might use the data for strategic planning. In response to how the findings could be applied to the strategic planning process, Mr. Bud stressed the value of significant community input. He did emphasize that ignoring or negating the community members' input could have very negative implications in community relations. Mr. Bud believed that the interpretations that had been made in the study were logical and emphasized it would be important to communicate to the community why some of their significant desires were out of the control of the school district and more dependent upon state or federal actions.

Mr. Bud specifically addressed the strong desire of participants to see the schools serve as community centers and that the schools should serve as an additional resource for adult community members. His perception was that many state and federal laws that affect schools have left local community members with a sense of loss of control. He believed that part of the difficulty that schools had in passing local tax levies was because the community members had begun to associate schools as something other than their own and something other than their responsibility to financially uphold. Mr. Bud pointed to the findings of this study which suggested that people longed for a school that would once again serve as a focal point for the community, a host of community gatherings, a site for adult education programs, etc. Mr. Bud's belief was that there was a desire on the part of many community members in many districts, "especially perhaps rural districts," to go back to the day when "the school is ours" and the school provided an understandable and recognizable need of the community. Mr. Bud did not want to imply that the educational role of schools should be ignored or that federal legislation had lessened that role. Rather he suggested that the demands placed on schools to concentrate on new priorities had become so significant that school personnel may have been giving less attention to the "whole of their community".

The involvement of Mr. Bud provided not only a new perspective but also an additional means of analyzing the

findings. Involving an outside analyst of the data was a component of this research that provided additional credibility and helped to ensure that the conclusions drawn were appropriate.

Developing and Implementing the Strategic Plan

The carrying out of the strategic plan became an ongoing process within the district, but the experience of using the focus groups was an excellent beginning point. The process of seeking community involvement provided a means for our school leaders to communicate to the community that their input was of the highest importance and that goal setting could successfully occur only with the community's participation.

The major focus groups preferences that were addressed in the continuous improvement planning were (a) a need for change in the state school funding formula, (b) a need for new school facilities at a central location, (c) a desire for adult continuing education, (d) a desire for improved technology for communication with parents and the community, and (e) a desire to see the schools host additional community social events.

Each of these five major findings, and many of the lesser findings, became aspects of the Cold Spring District's continuous improvement effort for the district as a whole and for individual school buildings. The planning process began with the administrative team analyzing each finding and the related issues. This information was forwarded to the Board of Education for their additional input. The need for additional data became apparent. For example, the community desired an upgrade in the district's technology to improve communication. The feeling among school personnel had been that the district had a very sophisticated school website available to the community, and that a computer program that enabled parents to check their child's teacher's grade book on a daily basis was very advanced. While they knew that this application of technology was more advanced than that used by many of the surrounding districts, Cold Spring administrators needed to revisit why the community still identified a need to increase technology to improve communication.

The administrative team and the Board of Education prioritized the major and lesser findings. Targets or goals emerged in the continuous improvement plan and carried with them what would be accomplished, who would be responsible for accomplishing them, and a timeline. The continuous improvement plan was shared with the community. Ultimately the continuous improvement plan was used for self-evaluation and to show the Board of Education and the community progress on the goals that they had established. The time frame for this establishing of goals, working to carry them out, and the self-analysis was 18 months from the compilation of the focus group findings.

Conclusions and Implications

The data collected from the focus groups provided valuable information for planning that administrators would otherwise have missed. Rural superintendents know that rural communities are very close knit and often resist change bitterly (Lamkin, 2006). In this case, contrary to the expectations of administrators, socioeconomic differences between the two distinct communities in the Cold Spring District did not result in major differences in their responses. Additionally, responses from both communities indicated support for a building initiative and even further consolidation into a centralized campus. Although these findings did not guarantee the passage of a bond issue, the experience points out the importance of conducting the study, in that a widely held perception of public opinion was proven wrong. In fact, as of this writing, the Cold Spring community did pass a bond issue and began construction on a new central facility. The opportunity to participate in structured dialogue about important topics did result in a strengthening of the ties between the schools and the community, as the Harwood Group (1993), Carr (1995), and Calabrese, et al. (2003) would predict.

A research sub-question was whether time spent on this process by community members and school staff was warranted in view of the benefits, particularly, since Cold Spring, like most other rural school districts, had a superintendent who performed many administrative functions himself, without assistants (Fassig, 1987, Gallegher, Bagin, & Kindred, 1997; Lamkin, 2006). In fact, using the focus group format to gather information from the public in Cold Spring was effective and cost efficient. The largest cost was time investment on the part of the school administrators, but it was outweighed by the benefits, including recognition of previously unidentified public perceptions. This project confirmed the importance of involving students, teachers, administrators, and community members in thinking about new roles for the school in the rural community (Unruh & Lunt, 1999), and it did prove to be a catalyst for the district's improvement efforts.

Focus group participants indicated that they appreciated being involved in the study. They repeatedly voiced a sense of pleasure in having an opportunity to interact with school leaders and have their opinions shape school improvement efforts. It was a somewhat strange experience for the researcher, as the superintendent of the district, to be thanked repeatedly for "inviting me to come." Perhaps this response should not be surprising. Rather, it may indicate willingness on the part of the public to be involved and bias among school leaders who assume that the public lacks the desire to participate in school planning.

Two of the five school board members participated in focus groups, but generally the board members tended to look at research and data analysis as roles best carried out by school administrators. They were pleased that community input was used as the basis for the revised

continuous improvement efforts of the district. They believed that their role was to use the finished product to assist in establishing district goals. Their primary view of the research was as a public relations tool.

The importance and value of the superintendent and principal leadership in the overall process of this study was crucial. Enlisting an outside research group to gather community input might have produced similar results but would have lacked the valuable interaction that occurred between school leaders and the community. Meeting face to face resulted in the development of a degree of comfort, familiarity, and trust (Jenkins, 2007). Having school leaders and members of the community directly involved in the gathering of information increased the participants' desire to support proposals for change. The communication of and the commitment to a clear vision for district goal setting were significantly easier, because the school and community collaborated to arrive at the initiatives.

Future implementations of the action research model described here will incorporate some modifications. First, survey respondents should be asked for the five to ten most important issues facing the district, in an attempt to minimize the influence of the school administrators on the list of topics for the focus groups. Second, the structure of the focus group questions should make clear the reality of constraints on local decisions. This might prevent groups from listing goals such as eliminating statewide standardized testing. Third, focus groups should consider only one question at a time. Because all four questions were read out at once, the last one about facilities may have affected answers to the first one about over all goals for district improvement. Fourth, more discussion of ideas in the focus groups as they are being written on the chart paper should be permitted. The intent in limiting discussion was to avoid potential intimidation because of fear that the response would not meet with approval within the group. However, the end result may have been the loss of valuable conversation that would have allowed for greater depth of insight.

If the model provided in this particular study is adopted in other locations the format will by necessity vary. However, the lesson from this case study is that the common basis of strategic planning must be an acknowledgement that the schools are in partnership with their communities for the well being of the students. Gallagher, Bagin and Kindred (1997) advised that schools that communicate with their external publics in some meaningful way are likely to gain greater public support and likely to face less criticism. Planning that occurs without significant community involvement, regardless of the sincerity on the part of the school leaders, is at risk of being viewed as out of touch with the community values and community desires and therefore unworthy of the community's support. Any strategic plan that begins with the knowledge of community opinion can seek to draw together the varied stakeholders in the education process.

The self-analysis conducted in this action research project will continue to serve the Cold Spring District in a way that an external study could not have accomplished. The immersion of school leaders in the topic of better communication with the community served as a catalyst that will drive the district forward in the months and years ahead. It is a model that other rural districts may use profitably.

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