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An Analysis of Parent Perceptions and Changes in the Oakland Community School District Between 1971 and 1976

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AN ANALYSIS OF PARENT PERCEPTIONS AND CHANGES IN THE OAKLAND
COMMUNITY SCHOOL DISTRICT BETWEEN 1971 AND 1976

Presented to the

Graduate Faculty
University of Nebraska
at Omaha

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Specialist in Education

University of Nebraska at Omaha

by

Gary Funkhouser

May 1978

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FIELD PROJECT ACCEPTANCE

Accepted for the Graduate Faculty, University of Nebraska, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Specialist in Education, University of Nebraska at Omaha.

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

Community support of the school is related to the extent parents perceive that school programs are contributing to the aspirations they have for their children. Generally these aspirations have to do with developing a variety of skills and competencies. However, the parents' comprehension of the relationship between the school program and the success of their children is often generalized, if not elusive. To the extent it is elusive and vague, public trust and support may be jeopardized. For example:

The support and success of public education is directly dependent upon achieving and maintaining public trust in the schools and those who run them, and in assuring that educational programs paid for with public funds are appropriate to the public need.¹

Maintaining community support of public education is a task of considerable magnitude. The community must be informed about the goals and purposes of the school and be aware of the school policies. Problems confronting the district as well as successes should be made known and the community should be involved in finding solutions to the problems. A report of the California State Department of Education concludes "the best way to insure that schools are responsive to the people is through full participation by the people in the evaluation

¹Joint Committee on Educational Goals and Evaluation: Progress Report to the Legislature and State Board of Education, Sacramento, July, 1973, pp. 1-2.

of education.² Furthermore, Morphet claims that it is impossible for a school to provide quality education without community interest and participation. He states:

If one were to look for outstanding school systems or schools it is quite likely that he would find them in those communities in which there had been a very considerable measure of citizen interest. . . . The community that has not taken an interest in the schools has not created a situation that is conducive to the development of outstanding schools. Teachers and administrators serve in a manner that is related to the stimulation they receive through interaction with the community.³

Assuredly, an administrator needs to know how the public views the school. The administrator needs information to improve and correct misperceptions. To obtain this information the administrator may survey parents to ascertain how well the program is being accepted.

There are several ways information can be obtained from parents. Interviews take considerable time but they allow in-depth questioning whether undertaken in person or by telephone. A mailed questionnaire requires additional expense and the inconvenience caused the parent is such that many forms are not returned. However, at parent-teacher conferences parents can complete a questionnaire at the conference with little time involved and minimal costs. Even though it is a biased sampling since only the parents who attend the conferences have the

²Report of School-Community Participation in Determining School Effectiveness. California State Department of Education, Sacramento, 1976.

³Morphet, Edgar L. and others, Educational Administration (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1959), p. 126.

opportunity to express their views, the results can help the school identify areas of weakness as well as strengths.

In 1971, the newly elected superintendent of the Oakland Community School District initiated a survey of parents who participated in the parent-teacher conferences. The conferences were held at the end of the first quarter grading period. The questionnaire was designed to obtain specific and general information from parents. Most of the questions were of a closed nature and little time was needed to mark the answer. There were a few open-ended questions to elicit more reflective parental response.

At the elementary school, parents received their questionnaires from the classroom teachers; at the high school, the questionnaires were distributed at the entrance to the gymnasium. Upon coming to school the parents picked up their children's report cards and visited with teachers at tables set up on the gymnasium floor. At both the elementary and secondary buildings the parents were asked to complete the twenty item questionnaire and leave it at a designated location in the school. Parents were requested to complete one questionnaire even though they may have children at both attendance centers.

The purpose of the questionnaire was to give parents an opportunity to evaluate present practices and programs of the Oakland Community School District. The questions covered areas of administrative communications, teacher reporting of pupil progress, curricular offering, school board procedures, discipline, finance, teacher satisfaction, student attitude, and an overall parent rating of the school. The results were used by the administration and board of education for

subsequent planning.

The results revealed the parents had some knowledge about the school but wanted more information about school policy and the instructional program. Parents indicated as a most informative means of communication the superintendent's monthly newsletter, the School-O-Gram. There was generally satisfaction with the performance of the school board. Only five percent of the parents were of the opinion that the school was not fulfilling the educational needs of their children. The overall rating of the school showed ninety-nine percent of the respondents marking average or above. The greatest problems viewed by the parents were finances, discipline, and parents' lack of interest. Ninety-three percent were satisfied with the twice-a-year teacher conferences. Most of the parents indicated approval of the present school calendar.

As a result of the initial survey the superintendent continued the monthly School-O-Gram which had been initiated at the beginning of the school year. It was mailed to every school family in the district and to other citizens who requested it. The newsletter contained information about school policies, programs, and a monthly activity calendar.

Other activities were also initiated. An article summarizing the minutes of the monthly school board meeting was written by the superintendent and published in the community newspaper. American Education Week displays and programs were initiated. An annual Dads' Breakfast was started at the elementary school. An extensive year-end superintendent's report was compiled and distributed at public gathering

places. A needs assessment study was undertaken and the results were used for planning the future of the school program. In order to improve staff communications a weekly superintendent's bulletin was initiated.

The survey was replicated in 1976, to assess parent perceptions of the current Oakland Community School District program. The 1976 survey is compared with the 1971 results for changes in parental perception.

PURPOSE

The purpose of this study was to analyze the relationships of the parent perceptions of the 1971 and the 1976 school surveys and the changes in the Oakland Community School District program between 1971 and 1976.

ASSUMPTIONS

The Oakland Community School District survey taps the perceptions of parents regarding the Oakland Community School District program.

DELIMITATIONS

The project is applicable to the Oakland Community School District.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE PROJECT

The project is significant to the writer for several reasons. The views of parents are always important. A comparison has been made of parents' views after several changes were made in the Oakland

Community School District. The second survey indicated the need for additional changes and the writer suggests more policies to bring about improvement in the school program.

To the reader the project is significant because there is an opportunity to examine a type of parent survey and the manner in which it is administered. A description of several school-community relations programs is presented which could be used in other situations. The results of the surveys could be used for comparisons with other school districts if the reader uses a similar questionnaire.

Chapter 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

A public relations program may accomplish several ends. It may be to communicate accurately for effective decision making, to convince the community that the schools are competently doing their job, or to reduce misunderstandings. In the publication, Profiles of the Administrative Team, a statement is made that there is substantial evidence that changes in the superintendent's position throughout the United States come about because of a relationship gap between the superintendent and his community.¹ This supports the need for a good school public relations program.

But what is a good public relations program? Stewart Harral suggests it is the creation of goodwill and understanding between the school and the public it serves.² In his book Tested Public Relations for Schools Harral indicates that public relations involve more than telling people certain facts about schools. He states it is a social science that can be used to inform administrators and other personnel what the public thinks about education so they can determine what they must do to gain the support and goodwill of others.³

¹Profiles of the Administrative Team, Washington, D.C.: American Association of School Administrators, 1971, p. 2.

²Harral, Stewart, Tested Public Relations for Schools, Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1952, p. 4.

³Ibid.

There are several slightly different definitions of public relations. Edward Bernays writes that there are three meanings to public relations. (1.) Information given to the public, (2.) persuasion directed at the public, (3.) efforts to integrate attitudes and actions of an institution with its public with that institution.⁴ Wright and Christian define public relations as a planned program of policies and conduct that will build confidence and increase public understanding.⁵ Carr states the real 'magic' of school public relations is simply the art of helping the American Public to understand its schools.⁶

The description of public relations by Jones and Stough in A Guide to Excellence in School Public Relations is preferred by this writer. They state that public relations is a form of mass communications refined to the ultimate so as to make every individual reading or hearing the message feel it truly relates to him or her, or to the family children. For schools it is the carefully considered communication of love, respect, and confidence--impressions that school districts want to receive from the public, but too seldom return to the moms and dads.⁷

⁴Bernays, Edward J. Public Relations, Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1952, p. 3.

⁵Wright, Handly J. and Christian, Byron H. Public Relations in Management, New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1949, p. 3.

⁶Carr, David S., and Chaffee, Clifford, Readings for the Principal in School-Community Relations, Danville: The Interstate Printers and Publishers, Inc., 1975, p. 6.

⁷Jones, William, and Stought, Charles, A Guide to Excellence in School Public Relations, Palm Springs: ETC Publications, 1977, p. 3.

A program of public relations has multiple purposes. John Hickey lists several purposes of a good public relations program in his dissertation, The Direction of Public School Relations in Cities of the United States. He writes the purposes are, (1.) to inform the public about the work of the schools, (2.) to establish confidence in the schools, (3.) to rally support for the proper maintenance of the educational program, (4.) to develop awareness of the importance of education in a democracy, (5.) to improve the partnership concept by united parents and teachers in meeting education needs of children, (6.) to integrate the home, school, and community in improving educational opportunities for all children, (7.) to evaluate the offerings of the schools in meeting the needs of the children of the community, and (8.) to correct misunderstandings as to the aims and objectives of the schools.⁸

Sidney P. Marland Jr. offered similar advice when he addressed a national seminar of the National School Public Relations Association. He made the following comments:

Public opinion, as you know so well, operates in a thoroughly mysterious fashion. It is elusive, fickle, and in many ways, unfathomable. Yet it remains the only barometer by which we can finally judge the quality of our performance, the only standard against which we can measure how well we are meeting the needs of the people--not as we see those needs, but as the people themselves see them. And it is precisely in this act of measurement and response that I hold our failure lies. The old gentlemen said, "It's not

⁸Hickey, John M., The Direction of Public School Relations in Cities of the United States, Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Pittsburg: University of Pittsburg, 1945, p. 321.

what the facts are; it's what people think they are."⁹

Edgar Morphet, another noted educational leader, makes the following suggestions regarding a school-community relations program: (1.) Multi-directional communication is essential. (2.) A policy statement should be adopted by the board making clear purposes of the program and the role of the school personnel. (3.) The program must be planned. (4.) An effective program can only be designed with some clearly defined goals in mind. (5.) Reporting is an essential element of the total school program and development in an effective manner. (6.) Involvement of many citizens is desired. (7.) The significance of the individual in school-community relations should be recognized. (9.) Central office should conduct a few system-wide school-community relations programs. (10.) Responsibility for coordination and leadership should be fixed. (11.) Evaluation is important.¹⁰

Literature concerning school public relations is abundant. It has become a topic of increasing interest since some administrators have found themselves without a job largely due to the fact the public was not aware of the accomplishments and successes of the school and the school was not aware of the desires of the community. An administrator cannot be a leader if he does not have followers.

⁹Ideas for Improving Public Confidence in Public Education, Washington, D.C.: National School Public Relations Association, 1972, p. 48.

¹⁰Morphet, Edgar L., and others, Educational Administration, Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1959, pp. 135-37.

Several of the authors which were cited earlier in this chapter agree that to communicate effectively a good public relations program should do the following: (1.) stress the importance of education, (2.) increase public understanding of the school program, (3.) build confidence and support for the school, and (4.) inform the school what the public thinks about the school.

There are many ways this communication can take place with discussions at P.T.A., local civic groups, professional organizations and neighborhood coffee gatherings. Newspapers, newsletters, and parent-teacher conferences are just a few of the ways schools can bring the message to the public. Through interviews, surveys, and opinion polls, schools can ascertain the acceptance of their program by the public. This was attempted by the Oakland Community School District.

Chapter 3

SURVEY FINDINGS AND TABLES (1971)

The Oakland Community School District is located in the eastern portion of Pottawattamie County, Iowa. Serving the community of Oakland, population 1,600, and a surrounding farming area of 124 square miles, the district's enrollment is 600 students from kindergarten through grade twelve. The educational program is financed by a budget for the 1977-78 school year of \$1,190,367.00. The assessed valuation of the district is \$78,095,304.00. The total tax levy for school purposes is 10.14894. The pupil-teacher ratio is 16.1. Per pupil cost is \$1,675.00.

The educational leadership for the school is provided by a seven member board of education for policy decisions and a superintendent of schools, an elementary and a secondary principal make up the administrative team.

The patrons of the Oakland Community School District are determined to keep their small local school district identity. A recent school reorganization proposal was soundly defeated with only 179 votes for the reorganization proposal out of a total of 783 votes cast.

The administration of the school district has been rather stable. The district was served by a conservative superintendent who was also considered to be quite authoritarian. The principals followed the directives of the superintendent who made most of the decisions. However, the top administrator was very astute in school finance. Through close financial management the district per pupil costs were maintained well below the state average. The superintendent was sympathetic to student

and teacher needs and was highly regarded by those who knew him. On the other hand, there was little staff or parent involvement in decision making and limited communication with the staff and the public.

In July, 1971, a new superintendent was hired. During the interview it was revealed that his goal for the school district was to provide the best possible program for all students and do it within the financial limitations which are imposed by the state. The superintendent also indicated he wanted to provide an environment for each student and teacher to do his best. To accomplish this he indicated he asked himself when making a decision, "What is best for the people involved?" He included as many people as possible in making decisions. The superintendent also stated he thought his job was to be on the 'look out' for new programs that could improve the Oakland Community School District program. Furthermore he indicated he encouraged the faculty members to seek new ideas and programs. The superintendent related he desired a staff that cared that every student learns and reaches his potential each day. Because he believed the schools belong to the people, the superintendent stressed the importance of keeping the people informed.

In a recent interview this writer asked the superintendent what he considered the school district's greatest problems or challenge, the following were given: (1.) to help the students develop a better attitude toward school, (2.) to help the students develop good character and self-respect, (3.) to help the students develop a good decision making process, and (4.) to help the students develop pride in their work and a feeling of self-worth.

The superintendent considered the strengths of the school district

to be a good pupil-teacher ratio, a good financial base, a good board of education and program options for students especially at the elementary level.

With respect to public relations the new superintendent devised a questionnaire to assess the parent attitudes and perceptions of the school program, (see Appendix A). Questionnaires were distributed to parents attending first quarter parent-teacher conferences in the Fall of 1971. On the basis of this finding, many changes were made in the program. Subsequently the questionnaire was administered again in the Fall of 1976. The results of both questionnaires are presented in Tables I and II.

The results of the 1971 parent questionnaire revealed eleven percent of the parents knew very little about the school, while twenty-two percent knew quite a lot, and the remaining sixty-seven percent had some knowledge about the school. (Question 1, Table I, page 15)

In order to determine the best means of communication the respondents were requested to check the medium most frequently used. A monthly School-O-Gram, a publication of the new superintendent, the local newspaper, and parent-teacher conferences were indicated by the parents as the way they received most of their information about the school. (Question 2, Table II, page 18)

An attempt to determine specific topics parents wanted to know more about was made in question 3 with a listing of topics to be marked by the respondents. Parents indicated more information was desired concerning school policies, instructional program, school board activities, and extra-curricular programs. (Question 3, Table II, page 18)

TABLE I

Oakland Community School District
Parent Questionnaire

Question	Response	1971		1976	
		N	%	N	%
#1 How much do you know about your local school?	Quite a lot	41	22	51	28
	Some	127	67	118	64
	Very little	21	11	13	7
#4 During the past month, have you read any articles in the local newspaper about the school?	Yes	170	90	167	91
	No	8	4	7	4
	Can't recall	11	6	10	5
#5 Did you vote in the last school board election?	Yes	69	37	78	43
	No	119	63	103	57
#6 How good a job do you think the school board does?	Very well	24	14	23	13
	Satisfactory	146	86	134	76
	Unsatisfactory	Not asked		20	11
#7 How do you feel about discipline in the local schools?	Too strict	1	0.5	0	
	Just about right	89	57	54	29.5
	Not strict enough	66	42	104	57
	Don't know	Not asked		25	13.5
#8 Do you think there should be greater regulation on the way children dress for school?	Greater	57	31	60	33
	O.K. as is	104	56	108	60
	Less	8	4	2	1
	No opinion	17	9	10	5

TABLE I (continued)

Question	Response	1971		1976	
		N	%	N	%
#9 Would you like to have a child of yours take up teaching as a career?	Yes	77	41	81	43
	No	47	25	39	21
	Don't know	62	33		
#10 From what you know, are teachers in our schools pretty well satisfied with their pay and working conditions?	Yes	49	26	44	25
	No	20	11	19	11
	Don't know	116	62	114	64
#11 Do you feel your child likes school?	Yes	177	93	163	88
	No	7	4	16	9
	Don't know	6	3	6	3
#12 Do you feel the school is fulfilling the educational needs of your child?	Very well	51	27	36	19
	Satisfactory	129	68	128	69
	Unsatisfactory	9	5	20	11
#13 Taking all factors into consideration, how would you rate your school?	Above average	37	20	38	21
	Average	148	79	131	72
	Below average	2	1	13	7
#14 Do you feel any phase of the school program is over-emphasized?	Yes	48	29	46	27
	No	118	71	122	73
If you answered "yes", what area? Sports 44 (1976)					
#16 Do you feel that you can approach school personnel when you want information, have a problem or question?	Always	104	56	112	61
	Usually	81	43	64	35
	Seldom	2	1	8	4

TABLE I (continued)

Question	Response	1971		1976	
		N	%	N	%
#17 Presently, we have two formal parent-teacher conference days each year (one in the fall and one in the spring). Would you recommend one or two conferences per year?	Two conferences as now	171	93	165	93
	One conference--Fall	11	6	9	5
	One conference--Spring	2	1	4	2
#18 Are you satisfied with the present school calendar? (Starting date, vacation, etc.)	Yes	150	81	165	90
	No	36	19	18	10
#19 Are there any subjects not being taught or any activities not being offered that you believe should be added to the school program?	Yes	33	20	28	19
	No	128	80	122	81
If "yes", what would you like to see added?					
#20 Are there any subjects being taught or any activities being offered that you believe should be dropped from the school program?	Yes	11	7	6	4
	No	128	80	122	81
If "yes", what do you think should be dropped?					

TABLE II

Question	1971	1976
#2 How do you receive information concerning the schools? (check the three methods most valuable to you)		
Monthly SCHOOL-O-GRAM	172	160
Local newspaper	130	140
Parent-Teacher Conferences	117	101
From Students	115	97
By word of mouth	52	57
High School Yearbook	17	14
Other	6	9
#3 What information would you like to receive that you are not now receiving? (check as many as needed)		
School Policies	48	49
Information about Instructional Programs	43	42
Board Meetings	27	19
Extra-Curricular Activities	24	27
Financial Information	20	12
School Lunch	12	10
Transportation	9	3
Other	1	2

TABLE II (continued)

Question	1971	1976
#15 What do you think are the biggest problems with which your school board must deal? (Check the three that you feel are biggest problems.)		
Finances	101	75
Discipline	97	80
Parents' Lack of Interest	74	50
Teachers	47	27
Students' Lack of Interest	46	37
Curriculum	32	37
Bus Transportation	26	19
Administrators	20	22
Buildings	15	35
No Major Problems	16	8
School Lunch	9	6
Other	2	7
Merger		65

Most parents had read articles about the school in the local newspaper with ninety percent marking they had read an article during the past month. (Question 4, Table I, page 15) To ascertain parent participation at the ballot box the respondents were asked if they had voted in the last school board election. Thirty-seven percent stated they had. (Question 5, Table I, page 15)

Parents were asked to evaluate the job of the school board and eighty-six percent indicated the school board was doing its job in a satisfactory manner. Fourteen percent marked that the board was doing very well. (Question 6, Table I, page 15) Another area the superintendent desired parental input was in the field of discipline. There was some dissatisfaction with the overall discipline in the school with forty-two percent of the parents indicating it was not strict enough while the majority, fifty-seven percent, marked it was just about right. (Question 7, Table I, page 15) Often thought of in terms of discipline is the student dress code. Parents were asked if there should be greater regulation in the way students dress. There was general approval of the dress code as it was. (Question 8, Table I, page 15)

When asked if they wanted their child to take up teaching as a career there was mixed reaction from the parents. Forty-one percent approved but twenty-five percent did not approve and another thirty-three percent did not know. Parents were asked if they believed the teachers were satisfied with their pay and working conditions. Most responded they did not know. (Question 10, Table I, page 16) When asked if they thought their child liked school ninety-three percent of

the parents indicated they did while only four percent indicated they did not believe their child liked school. Seven percent did not know. (Question 11, Table I, page 16)

Twenty-seven percent of the respondents believed the school was fulfilling the educational needs of their child very well, while only five percent marked unsatisfactory. (Question 12, Table I, page 16) In rating the overall school operations twenty percent of the parents marked above average, seventy-nine percent checked average, and only one percent marked below average. (Question 13, Table I, page 16) When asked if they thought any phase of the school curriculum was over emphasized, seventy percent of the parents reported no. (Question 14, Table I, page 16)

Several questions dealt with the parents' perceptions of problems of the district. Parents indicated finances, discipline, and parents' lack of interest to be the biggest problems faced by the board of education. (Question 15, Table II, page 19) When asked if they could approach school personnel when they wanted information or had a problem, fifty-six percent of the parents stated they always could. Forty-three percent said usually and only one percent indicated he could seldom approach the personnel for help. (Question 16, Table I, page 16)

In order to determine the parent attitude toward the frequency of parent-teacher conferences and toward the calendar schedule for the school year, two questions were raised. Generally parents endorsed both the twice-a-year conferences and the school year schedule. Ninety-three percent approved of the twice-a-year conferences and eighty-one percent

approved the school calendar.

When asked if any subjects should be added or deleted from the curriculum, eighty percent of the parents indicated their approval of the present curriculum with no changes being recommended. (Questions 19 and 20, Table I, page 17)

Generally the parents approved of the way the school was operating with the exception of discipline. There was also a desire to know more about the school.

Chapter 4

SURVEY FINDINGS (1976)

The results of the 1976 survey of parents revealed that seven percent of the parents knew very little about the school while ninety-three percent indicated they had at least some knowledge if not quite a bit of knowledge concerning the school. (Question 1, Table I, page 15) The monthly School-O-Gram, a local newspaper, and parent-teacher conferences were designated the most popular ways in which parents received school information. (Question 2, Table II, page 18) Even though parents had indicated they were informed about the school there was a desire to know more about school policies, instructional programs, and extra-curricular activities. (Question 3, Table II, page 18)

Ninety-one percent of the parents had read an article about the school in the local newspaper the month preceding the questionnaire. (Question 4, Table I, page 15) Even though a majority of the respondents had not voted in the last school board election forty-three percent had exercised this right. (Question 5, Table I, page 15) In rating the job the school board does most parents marked satisfactory and very well with only eleven percent showing their disapproval. (Question 6, Table I, page 15)

A majority of the parents did not believe discipline was strict enough. In question 7, fifty percent marked this category. (Table I, page 15) At the same time most parents were satisfied with the student dress code. (Question 8, Table I, page 16)

When asked if they would like their child to consider teaching

as a career, forty-three percent of the parents gave their approval; however, thirty-five percent indicated they did not know and twenty-one percent were of the opinion they would not like their child to consider teaching. (Question 9, Table I, page 16) Many parents were unaware whether teachers were satisfied with their pay and working conditions. Sixty-four percent revealed they did not know while twenty-five percent believed teachers were satisfied. (Question 10, Table I, page 16)

Eighty-eight percent of the parents indicated that their child liked school and the same percentage believed the school was fulfilling their child's needs. (Questions 11 and 12, Table I, page 17) In the overall rating of the school district nearly twice as many parents rated the school above average as compared to those who rated it below average. The remaining seventy-two percent of the parents rated the school average. (Question 13, Table I, page 16)

When asked if there was an overemphasized field in the school, twenty-seven percent of the parents replied there was and sports was listed by the parents as being the overemphasized area. (Question 14, Table I, page 16) Parents were requested to check what they considered to be the biggest problems with which the school board had to deal. Discipline, finances, and a merger study proposal were the problems most frequently listed. (Question 15, Table II, page 19) Almost all parents, ninety-six percent, indicated they could approach school personnel for help with a problem. (Question 16, Table I, page 16) Parents showed their approval of the parent-teacher conference schedule with ninety-six percent supporting the twice a year conferences.

(Question 17, Table I, page 17) Support was also given for the school calendar with ninety percent of the respondents indicating their satisfaction with the arrangement. (Question 18, Table I, page 17)

Most parents said they thought the subjects and activities of the school were adequate. Eighty-one percent responded that no additional subjects or activities need be added. (Question 19, Table I, page 17) Eighty-one percent of the parents were also in general agreement that no subjects should be dropped from the school program. (Question 20, Table I, page 17)

Chapter 5

DESCRIPTION OF ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGES 1971-1976

As a result of the information acquired in the Fall of 1971, through the use of the questionnaire, the superintendent saw the need to improve communication. Eleven percent of the parents indicated they knew very little about the school while only twenty-two percent indicated they knew a lot about the school. The survey revealed parents needed more information concerning school policies, instructional programs, board meetings, extra-curricular activities and finances.

To meet this need the monthly School-O-Gram, a newsletter to patrons of the school district, and the local newspaper coverage were expanded because the respondents indicated these two media were the most popular vehicles for receiving information about the school. These publications were also used to convey the information about school that was requested on the questionnaires. The survey indicated parents believed the greatest problems of the school district to be finances, discipline, parents' lack of interest, and teachers. Through the School-O-Gram and newspaper articles information about these concerns was presented. A new discipline procedure policy was published. Information describing how the school's budget is determined was published.

Previous to the employment of the new superintendent, reports about the school board meetings were not published in the local newspaper. A monthly news article was written by the new superintendent describing the business of the board of education at its meetings. The articles were

not identical to the regular board minutes; however, all items under consideration were reported.

At the suggestion of the superintendent the students in the high school assumed responsibility for providing news for a school page in the local newspaper once each week. In this way more publicity was given to school news concerning students and activities.

American Education Week activities were expanded to include displays of school work made available for public viewing inside a school bus parked in the business district. A teacher was available to answer questions as the displays were viewed. Special art displays and music concerts were scheduled during American Education Week. Parents were invited to visit school and receive a free lunch at noon. Funds for the lunch were provided by the board of education.

Because many of the students' parents worked during the daytime, part of the parent-teacher conference time was scheduled during an evening to allow working parents to visit school and talk with teachers about their children's progress. Conferences were held in the classroom at the elementary school. At the high school all teachers were located at tables in the school gymnasium because each student had several teachers throughout the week and parents could visit with as many teachers as they desired in one location.

The results of the survey revealed fifty-six percent of the respondents indicated they could always approach school personnel when they wanted more information or had a problem. Another effort to improve communication between parents and teachers was a dad's breakfast and a mother's breakfast. At the elementary school the dads were invited by

their children to eat breakfast and stay and observe classes as they were regularly scheduled. The cost of the meals was provided by the board of education. A mother's breakfast was arranged at the high school with a similar invitation for visiting classes.

A weekly newsletter was initiated by the superintendent to keep the staff informed. A detailed calendar of activities for the coming week was included with the other announcements deemed necessary. The newsletter was distributed to all staff members--teachers, custodians, cooks, and bus drivers.

In order to create more positive attitudes toward the school, 'good news' notes were made available for the elementary teachers to send home when a student deserved particular recognition for something well done at school.

The superintendent's Annual Report was enlarged to allow for more information concerning the year's activities so a fairly complete record would be available from one source. Awards received by students, attendance records by grade levels, listings of various class and organizational officers, honor rolls and athletic contest results were included in the report. A complete bus transportation record and many other budget explanations were included. Copies of the report were distributed to various locations in the community for public viewing.

In order to learn more about the community's expectations of the school program, a needs assessment was undertaken. Parents, non-parents, students, and teachers rated the importance of various goals and indicated the school's responsibility in meeting the goals and the attainment they felt that had been accomplished at the time of the needs assessment survey.

To increase involvement, responsibility for the operation of the school was delegated to the principals and meetings to discuss problems with the superintendent were scheduled regularly. Increased staff involvement in textbook selection, school calendar, and staff selection was initiated.

A special tax levy of sixty-seven cents per one thousand dollars assessed valuation was approved by the patrons of the school district which would allow the board of education to improve facilities and acquire additional equipment thus allowing a greater proportion of the general fund to be used for staff salaries.

To increase parent knowledge and understanding about extra-curricular programs evening meetings were scheduled with parents of students who participated in the extra-curricular activities. At these meetings which were held at the start of each activity season, the practice schedule, rules, and objectives of the program were explained and parents were given the opportunity to ask any questions they might have to help reduce any misunderstandings.

The questionnaire was distributed again in the Fall of 1976, at the first quarter parent-teacher conferences. The purpose was to see if parents' perceptions had changed as a result of the new programs initiated by the superintendent and the board of education.

Chapter 6

SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The 186 parents of the students who responded to the questionnaire in 1976, were better informed about the school than were the parents who responded in 1971. In 1976, there was a six percent increase in the number of those responding that they knew quite a bit about the school and a four percent drop in the response of those indicating they knew very little about the school. It appears that the changes in parents' perceptions about the school may be related to several factors. Foremost among them are the communication procedures implemented by the superintendent.

Parent participation in school elections had increased in 1976, over 1971. A larger percentage of the parents voted in the 1976 school board election--up six percent over the 1971 findings. Parents were more active. In a time when the country and economy have been becoming more conservative and critical of schools and government, the parents noted they are more informed and involved in the schools.

Perhaps because they were more knowledgeable about the school the parents were also in a position to be more critical in some areas. The overall rating of the school declined; however, ninety-three percent indicated they thought the Oakland Community School District was average or above and this is a very commendable percentage.

Even though parents indicated the educational needs of their children were not being met as well in 1976, there were still eighty-eight percent who indicated their child's needs were being met satisfactorily or very well.

An increased positive response was noted on several other questions. There was a greater approval of the teachers, the school calendar, and parent-teacher conferences in 1976. The number of parents who indicated teachers were a problem decreased by fifty percent. More parents responded they could approach school personnel when they wanted information and help in the 1976 survey. Even greater approval was given for the school calendar in the second survey with ninety percent marking their approval.

The problems of the Oakland Community School District were similar to those listed in the 1976 Gallup Poll.¹¹ Parent indication of school problems shifted from finances in 1971, to discipline in 1976. There was a fifteen percent increase in those designating that discipline was not strict enough from forty-two percent in 1971, to fifty-seven percent in 1976. The Gallup Poll indicated twenty-five percent were concerned about discipline in a nationwide survey in 1976. In a breakdown of the questionnaires, the parents of high school students showed a great concern for stricter discipline in 1976, with sixty-nine percent responding discipline was not strict enough at the secondary level.

As mentioned in chapter 3 the patrons of the Oakland Community School District were determined to keep their local school rather than merge with another school district. Partially as a result of the support shown for the district on the parent questionnaire, the school district investigated the possibility of adding to the facilities of the local high school. A forty-member citizen committee was formed. Within this

¹¹Gallup, Geo. W., Eighth Annual Gallup Poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools," Phi Delta Kappan, Oct. 1976, p. 198.

group smaller committees were organized to determine curriculum needs, building needs, site location, finances, and publicity. The citizen committee recommended a \$1,700,000 bond issue be presented to the patrons of the district. An addition to the present high school building to be located on the same block was approved by 62.81 percent of the 771 voters on May 16, 1978.

Even though there was some decline in the favorable responses in the 1976 questionnaire over the 1971 results, the eighty-eight to ninety-three percent scores on several questions is an enviable record and this writer believes the slight decline would have been much more significant had not the public relations program been improved under the new superintendent.

Based upon the results of the two parent questionnaires the following recommendations are suggested.

1. The superintendent's School-O-Gram, newspaper articles, parent teacher conference schedule, and the teachers' 'good news' notes be continued.
2. Student discipline needs to be improved. If the administration needs help in determining what steps to take, a parent advisory committee should be formed to identify and formulate solutions to problems.
3. To improve student attitude additional ideas for positive reinforcement are needed. Teachers should give more credit to students who complete their assigned work, do special projects, achieve high grades, and are especially considerate of others.

4. To help students see the needs for learning specific skills, an attempt to correlate the educational activities with work-related activities might help students see how the skills will have future use.
5. Additional administrative communication to students, and students to administration is recommended as an attempt to help students understand why certain policies are designed as they are.
6. A student-parent handbook with course descriptions would help both groups understand the objectives of various classes and what subjects are required for various fields.
7. An attempt to determine parents' attitudes and perceptions has been made and an attempt to obtain students' attitudes and perceptions through the use of a questionnaire or interview might be worthy of consideration. The school would be in a better position to meet students' concerns if the school knew what the concerns were.
8. It is recommended the questionnaire be repeated again in the future so comparisons can be made with past results to see what improvement has been made and what areas still need additional attention. If the questionnaires were administered in other school districts a comparison could be made to see if other schools' problems are similar. Perhaps they are working on solutions which the local school district might want to consider.

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APPENDIX

OAKLAND COMMUNITY SCHOOLS

School Questionnaire

Evaluation is an important factor in the educational process. The Board of Education feels that everyone concerned with the schools should have an opportunity to evaluate the present practices and programs of the Oakland Community Schools. For this reason, we want to know how the parents view the local schools. Using the results of this questionnaire, the School Board can more effectively plan for the future.

Would you take a few minutes, then, at the end of your parent-teacher conference, to complete this questionnaire? You need fill out only one even though you have several children in school. Thank you for your cooperation.

1. How much do you know about your local schools?

Quite a lot Some Very little

2. How do you now receive information concerning the schools?
(Check the three methods most valuable to you.)

<input type="checkbox"/> a. Local Newspaper	<input type="checkbox"/> e. Parent-Teacher Conferences
<input type="checkbox"/> b. High School Yearbook	<input type="checkbox"/> f. By word of mouth
<input type="checkbox"/> c. From Students	<input type="checkbox"/> g. Other _____
<input type="checkbox"/> d. Monthly School-O-Gram	

3. What information would you like to receive that you are not now receiving? (check as many as needed)

Present information is adequate

<input type="checkbox"/> a. Information about instructional program	<input type="checkbox"/> e. School Lunch
<input type="checkbox"/> b. Financial information	<input type="checkbox"/> f. Extra-curricular activities
<input type="checkbox"/> c. School policies	<input type="checkbox"/> g. Board meeting
<input type="checkbox"/> d. Transportation	<input type="checkbox"/> h. Other _____

4. During the past month, have you read any articles in the local newspaper about the school?

Yes No Can't recall

5. Did you vote in the last school board election?

Yes No

6. How good a job do you think the school board does?
 Very good Satisfactory Unsatisfactory
7. How do you feel about discipline in the local schools?
 Too strict Just about right
 Not strict enough Don't know
8. Do you think there should be greater regulation on the way children dress for school?
 Greater O.K. as is Less
 No Opinion
9. Would you like to have a child of yours take up teaching as a career?
 Yes No Don't know
10. From what you know, are teachers in our schools pretty well satisfied with their pay and working conditions?
 Yes No Don't know
11. Do you feel that your child likes school?
 Yes No Don't know
12. Do you feel the school is fulfilling the educational needs of your child?
 Very well Satisfactory Unsatisfactory
13. Taking all factors into consideration, how would you rate your school?
 Above average Average Below average
14. What do you think are the biggest problems with which your school board must deal? (Check the three that you feel are the biggest problems.)
- | | |
|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> a. Bus transportation | <input type="checkbox"/> g. Teachers |
| <input type="checkbox"/> b. Finances (Money) | <input type="checkbox"/> h. Parents' Lack of Interest |
| <input type="checkbox"/> c. Curriculum | <input type="checkbox"/> i. Students' Lack of Interest |
| <input type="checkbox"/> d. Discipline | <input type="checkbox"/> j. School lunch |
| <input type="checkbox"/> e. Buildings | <input type="checkbox"/> k. No major problem |
| <input type="checkbox"/> f. Administrators | <input type="checkbox"/> l. Other |
15. Do you feel any phase of the school program is overemphasized?
 Yes No--If you answered yes, what area? _____

16. Do you feel that you can approach school personnel when you want information, have a problem or a question?
- ___ Always ___ Usually ___ Seldom
17. Presently, we have two formal parent-teacher conference days each year (one in the fall and one in the spring). Would you recommend one or two conferences per year?
- Two conferences as they are now scheduled
- One conference only which would be held in the fall
- One conference only which would be held in the spring
18. Are you satisfied with the present school calendar (starting date, vacation, etc.)?
- ___ Yes ___ No--If No, please indicate change you would like to see _____
19. Are there any subjects not being taught or any activities not being offered that you believe should be added to the school program?
- ___ Yes ___ No--If Yes, what would you like to see added _____
20. Are there any subjects being taught or any activities being offered that you believe should be dropped from the school program?
- ___ Yes ___ No--If Yes, what do you think should be dropped _____
21. If you have any other comments concerning any phase of the schools, please state them below. Include any strengths or weaknesses that you feel the school might have.

THANK YOU FOR YOUR TIME AND COOPERATION.