

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The results of the survey indicate that there are sufficient grounds to consider the possibility of successfully establishing school councils in state schools located in the Darling Downs Region. However, as with any proposed change there are considerable barriers to be overcome. The wealth of research information on barriers to change¹ provides an indication of where resistances to such a proposed change might arise. In reviewing these forces it is convenient to examine those barriers that might arise prior to the implementation of the change and those that might arise after the proposal has been put into effect.²

Rejection of similar proposals in other Australian education systems, either in whole or in part, by concerned organizations has indicated that barriers relevant to the traditional method of operation of schools need to be overcome.³ From the very beginnings of state education in Australia, the people have been content to leave the administration of their

schools to a bureaucratic hierarchy. The Australian public, infused with the concept of equality of opportunity in education, have accepted the principle that a centrally organized state education system is the best way of ensuring that such equality is not only advocated but also practised. The fear is inherent that public involvement in decision making at the local level may lead to inequalities in education. The result has been that, until recently, the community has made no demands to be involved in the management of their schools.

Even though some demands have appeared in recent years to this effect information now being compiled from research findings and experience in other states is beginning to shed doubt on the extent of the community demands to be involved in school decision making. As the concept of school councils, as proposed earlier, depends partly on community involvement a major barrier that could arise is to convince the members of the public that such involvement would be beneficial to both school and the community.

Both of the barriers referred to so far stem largely from a lack of knowledge and understanding of the concept of a school governing council in the

Australian setting. Comments written on some of the responses to the survey support the contention that both teachers and members of the public fear the introduction of school councils largely through ignorance of the aims, objectives, composition and functions of a local school governing body. The problem therefore exists to educate those concerned with school councils as to the possible purpose and structure of such organizations.

Nevertheless, the success of school councils would not rest solely on a thorough understanding of their operation. Structures need to be created by the Department of Education to provide support services for their operation. A prime consideration would be the provision of key people with the knowledge and, preferably, experience in the operation of school councils, to act as consultants. There would need to be a sufficient number of such persons so that all councils could have ready access to them on short notice. The task of the consultants would be to ensure the smooth operation of the school councils.

The success of the consultants may depend upon the establishment of adequate communication channels. Council members need to know whom to contact

and, if necessary, that contact may be made in order to seek advice on any particular problem. On the other hand both the consultants and the Department need to have efficient means of communicating with the councils. The success of councils may ultimately rest upon an adequate and efficient two-way communication system.

It would not be sufficient for people elected to the councils to have a thorough understanding of their structure and functions. The participants must be educated to the fact that the council is a corporate body in which free discussion of issues must take place. Of importance here is that members should feel that discussion should take place on an equal footing but remembering that individual members may have particular expertise in certain areas under discussion. Accordingly, the position of the principal may need special attention in order to prevent the feeling that democratic discussion is not being blocked. Members of staff should feel free to express their points of view even if they contradict that of the principal. On the other hand the community members should not feel that their opinions are of minor importance because the principal is the person traditionally thought of as being

responsible for, and experienced in, the operation of the school. The barrier to be overcome then is to show that all members of the council have an equal responsibility to discuss freely all issues at the council meeting.

Careful planning prior to the implementation of a school council proposal is essential. The planning period should be broken up into a general guideline stage and a specific planning stage. In the initial period general guidelines should be set out and sufficient time given to all groups to discuss the proposals. This will assist in overcoming the problem of proposing a function or structure that may be contrary to the opinions of the majority. Only after adequate discussion and research has taken place should the specific proposal be drafted. In this planning stage it is essential that sufficient finance be allocated to ensure a thorough examination of the proposals to be undertaken.

Finally, in this pre-implementation period, it should be the responsibility of the initiating body i.e. the Department of Education, to create an atmosphere, or climate, conducive to change or at least one which will encourage experimentation. If the

people concerned in the change are not prepared to undertake such a venture the removal of all the before-mentioned barriers will have little effect on the success of the proposal.

Once these barriers have been removed, or at least mitigated, and the proposal implemented, a new set of barriers may arise. Not all of these may be foreseen or even identified if they happen to arise during the implementation. Therefore there needs to be a mechanism for continuing evaluation to seek out further resistances and provide feedback to the councils on how to overcome these new obstacles. To provide this type of information the communication system needs to be extended to create channels for the dissemination of information such as how other councils have coped with similar problems. This would be an ongoing function of the central authority.

To overcome all these barriers it is therefore suggested that the first step to be taken should be to launch an extensive programme designed to educate and elicit discussion among those people who are to be involved in such proposals as to the aims, objectives, composition and functions of a school council. The

success of the A.C.T. boards stems largely from the fact that the whole community was initially involved. This programme should not be a one-way affair. It should energetically elicit responses and reactions from the people concerned so that the final proposal is agreed to by the majority. The final draft may need to allow for minor variations in the structure of the councils according to geography, socio-economic background and ethnic groupings. In-service courses could be conducted to elaborate on and provide the means by which different geographic groups may come together to discuss fully problems and implications. In this way a genuine attempt would be made to encourage the change to grow from the "grass roots". Because councils are so foreign to Australian tradition and many people carry the fear of being dictated to by an inexperienced and ill-informed minority, an abrupt imposition of the proposal from "above" is to be avoided.

New structures would need to be created to cope with the problem of communications, the training of consultants, the dissemination of information and the facilities for group discussion of issues. Only after sufficient time has elapsed for adequate dis-

cussion should a survey, similar to the one reported on in this thesis, be conducted to determine the feelings of all groups on the various aspects of school councils. The data collected from such a survey could then be used as a basis for the final proposal for the model (or models) of school councils to be adopted in the region under discussion.

Initially it would be a wise move to introduce governing bodies into selected schools with diverse backgrounds and settings, but only where a strong desire for such councils has been indicated. This procedure would allow the central authority to cope with unforeseen problems in the best possible situation while at the same time indicating to other more doubtful groups that such an organization is a more beneficial method of managing schools than the currently practised administrative structure. If they prove to be successful then they could be introduced into other areas throughout the State as the need or desire is indicated.

Finally, it must be pointed out that although the survey reported on here has indicated that school councils might be successfully introduced into the Darling Downs Region it is not an argument for a state-

wide implementation. There have been no parallel surveys conducted anywhere in Australia and it is strongly suggested that a similar procedure be adopted in other regions before any definite steps are taken. The data presented here could provide a valuable basis for purposes of comparison.

NOTES

1. Some of the more relevant references on change in education include:-

Bennis, W.G. et.al. The Planning of Change, 2nd ed. N.Y., Holt Rinehart and Winston, 1969.

Miles, M.B., Innovations in Education, N.Y. Bureau of Publications, Teachers College, Columbia University, 1964.

Bushnell, D.S. and Rappaport, D., Planned Change in Education: A Systems Approach, N.Y. Harcourt, Brace, 1971.

2. An important study that has highlighted the need to take account of barriers after implementing a change is:-

Gross, N. et.al. Implementing Organizational Innovations: A Sociological Analysis of Planned Educational Change, N.Y., Basic Books, 1971.

3. A useful reference that has listed facilitators for change based on research findings is:-

Wilkie, R.A. "Garden Springs Elementary School: A Case Study of Educational Innovations", in Miller, R.I. Perspectives on Educational Change, N.Y., Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1969.

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