

Sociological Inventory

To plan an effective program, the district needs to know about the people who make up the community. The more that is known about them, the better the chances are of designing a program that will achieve its objectives. Therefore, it's recommended that school districts undertake a sociological inventory of their communities. But—and this is a major *but*—those inventories should not be so complex, time expensive, and costly that by the time they're done people don't want to take the time to implement the findings. Too often some educators get wrapped up in the process and place that completed study on a shelf to do little more than wait for its successor. To conduct such a study and not interpret the findings and use the results would be a waste of time and money.

Choosing which items to include in such a study can help ensure the study's success. Some possible topics to include are the following: customs and traditions, historical background, material and human resources, age and gender distribution, educational achievement, organizations and groups, political structure, leadership, power alignments, religious affiliations, housing, racial and ethnic composition, economic life, transportation, communication, standards of living, health, and recreation. It would be extremely time consuming and expensive to include all of the topics. To ensure the effectiveness of the study, school officials should choose the most important categories, focus on them, gather the information in a relatively short time, and then implement the study.

Among the topics that should get serious consideration are customs and traditions, population characteristics, existing communication channels, community groups, leadership, economic conditions, political structure, social tensions, and previous community efforts in the area.

Customs and Traditions

Customs and traditions are the common ideas, attitudes, and habits of people. They may be referred to as folkways, mores, or lifestyles. Significant in regulating conduct and in predicting behavior, they likewise exert an influence in the shaping of social action and in the determination of services rendered by community agencies.

Lifestyle differences found among community groups arise from the impact of race, religion, nationality background, economics, politics, and social class structure. Thus, individuals who live in an urban community may share similar ethnic characteristics and may differ in their way of life, their values, their beliefs, and their habits from individuals who reside in a semirural community. Similar differences in lifestyle also may be found among groups who reside in various geographic sections that make up a metropolitan area. One area may consist of a group having a predominant ethnic or cultural background whereas another area may be a microcosm of the overall population.

The problem in this part of the sociological inventory is identifying and defining the customs of groups in the community. This information is important to the school in guiding its relations with students, parents, and others. Nothing evokes a quicker reaction from parents and citizens than the adoption of policies and practices that run counter to their established attitudes, beliefs, and habits. This has been evident on many occasions when new blocks of subject matter introduced into the curriculum caused students to think or act contrary to the convictions held by parents and relatives. Equally strong reactions are likely if students are retained after school on days that have been set aside for religious instruction.

From another point of view, it is valuable to know how change takes place in group patterns of thought and action. What are the circumstances and forces that produce orderly change? Studies indicate that safe and rapid change occurs during periods of emergency when the need to make adjustments is immediate. Alterations in the physical features of a

PRINTED BY: f2e487c767ef6b6@placeholder.24190.edu. Printing is for personal, private use only. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted without publisher's prior permission. Violators will be prosecuted.

community, such as the construction of new highways, the improvement of housing, or the rezoning of land use, open the way for modifying social habits and customs. Significant changes are also possible when members of different groups are given opportunities to discuss and share in finding solutions to problems that have an effect on their ways of living.

A note of caution is in order here about stereotyping people and groups.

Stereotyping is the process of assigning fixed labels or categories to things and people you encounter or, in the reverse of this process, placing things and people you encounter into fixed categories you have already established.¹

It can be easy to do this with community groups such as senior citizens and young professionals, for example. Not all senior citizens are against spending for education or rigid in their thinking when it comes to educational issues. Nor do all young professionals aspire to send their children to private schools. When studying the characteristics of any population, it's important to remember that not all members of a particular ethnic group, race, or religion hold the same attitudes, opinions, or voting patterns.

Population Characteristics

Population characteristics concerning educational attainment, age, sex, gainful occupation, race, creed, and nationality are important in developing an understanding of the community. Publications and services from the U.S. Census Bureau can provide useful information on population characteristics.

In looking at the educational attainments of the population, attention is directed to the years of formal schooling completed by adults. The amount of schooling may be classified as elementary, secondary, and college, unless the exact number of years is wanted. This information is useful in the preparation of printed materials. Vocabulary, style, and layout are fitted to the educational backgrounds of the audiences for whom they are intended. This information is also useful in estimating the best manner of transmitting ideas and factual information to the community so that attention and interest are generated. Another use of educational attainment information is constructing stratified samples of the population for purposes of opinion polling.

Age data should be broken down into convenient classifications and the implications carefully studied. For example, one community may expect an increase in school enrollments over the next five years, whereas another may just hold its own or suffer a loss. Age distribution may also suggest ideas concerning the future patterns of growth of the community. A fairly young adult population would almost certainly be more demanding of educational services and quality than a population of mostly middle-aged and older people. Similarly, the younger group would most likely support better financing of the school program, whereas the older groups might be more likely to resist an increase in educational expenditures. Thus, it is possible from age distribution to form working estimates of community reaction to various kinds of proposals.

In addition to educational achievement, age distribution and sex distribution are used as control factors in constructing stratified random samples of the population for purposes of opinion polling. Occupational information on gainfully employed adults may be organized according to the classification scheme² used in U.S. census reports. These data are useful in checking population stability, changing occupational opportunities, distribution of occupational classes, and employment outside the community. Findings influence the selection of program activities. The participation of citizens is also considered.

The study of population characteristics should be rounded out with data about race, religion, and nationality. These cultural factors may be important to gain an understanding of the community and some of the underlying causes of social tension and conflict. However, the meaning of the data may not always be clear unless the data are correlated with other information. It is well to treat the data statistically and to prepare summaries of the findings.

These summaries should be used in the planning process, and copies of them should be distributed to key personnel within the system. At the same time, as much of the information as possible should be depicted on social base maps, with separate sections

PRINTED BY: f2e487c767ef6b6@placeholder.24190.edu. Printing is for personal, private use only. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted without publisher's prior permission. Violators will be prosecuted.

being blown up for use in individual attendance areas. Statistical summaries and social base maps often provide leads to the solution of everyday problems that are associated with school and community relations.

Communication Channels

Since the development of public opinion takes place through the exchange of ideas and information, it is necessary to know what communication channels are available in the community, how extensively they are used, and which ones are most effective for reaching different segments of the public. These questions are sometimes difficult to answer, but they can be worked out by persistent inquiry. It may be found that the public at large relies on the Internet, radio, television, and daily newspapers for most of its news and information, making the news media influential in shaping public opinion on some social issues. However, the investigation may reveal that members of special groups in the community receive information from a variety of other sources. These may include publications of clubs and organizations, religious organizations, labor unions, volunteer fire companies, neighborhood publications and newspapers, and foreign-language newspapers. On this last source of information, it is reasonable to assume that parents who speak and read a foreign language in the home may experience some difficulty in understanding student progress reports, school notices, and school news reported in traditional news sources. Where these conditions prevail, it would be advantageous for the school district to employ a number of bilingual home and school visitors, offer school materials in more than one language, and prepare news releases for foreign-language periodicals and newspapers.

The Internet, social media, and smartphone apps have added many new channels for information and notably increased the speed of communications. Web sites and e-mail, and the proliferation of cell phones and text messaging, also allow immediate, two-way communication.

An unexpected benefit of this new technology is the reduced need for paper and physical files. E-mail and text messages can deliver information to many people with the press of a button. This saves time and the need to make copies to send by regular mail. Messages also can be retained for quick, on-demand access on school Web sites.

Community Groups

The American community is a composite of groups of people who are organized around special interests. Some of the groups have little or no influence on community affairs, but others have a great deal. Many are highly cooperative with those who hold similar interests, but a number are uncooperative. The variety is tremendous, and the numbers vary considerably from community to community. Informal groups that come into existence because of some common belief or cause may assume many different forms and often blend into a formal type of organization. No sociological inventory is complete without knowing the purposes and programs of these groups and the influence they exert on public opinion.

Although cooperation with community groups having an educative function to perform should be encouraged fully, care must be taken to prevent their possible exploitation of students. To some, cooperation means the right to insist that the school approve their requests and modify its program to achieve the ends for which they are working. To others, cooperation is nothing more than a guise for the privilege of disseminating self-serving information in the classroom, promoting product sales and services, and conducting contests for the sake of publicity.

On the other hand, some community organizations dominate school politics but are not concerned primarily with educational matters. Composed of small business groups, property and homeowners' associations, and civic improvement leagues for the most part, they take practically no interest in such matters as dropout rates, standardized test scores, or the qualifications and selection of professional school personnel. Instead they are concerned about the impact of school policies on the community, and they take a strong interest in school costs, especially tax increases and bond proposals.

Other community organizations are those known as special interest groups. Many of these are vehemently opposed to each other; even so, they all

PRINTED BY: f2e487c767ef6b6@placeholder.24190.edu. Printing is for personal, private use only. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted without publisher's prior permission. Violators will be prosecuted.

converge on schools and pressure them to accept their philosophical positions and to alter educational programs. Often they move to change the school curriculum and to censor textbooks and library books. In any inventory of the community, school officials should attempt to identify special interest groups, become familiar with their philosophies, and perhaps anticipate and prepare for their contacts with the schools.

The extent to which individuals and families participate in the activities of organized groups, particularly those having to do with civic welfare, should be addressed in the course of the survey. The amount of participation is usually a rather reliable index of community spirit. Research in sociology shows that individuals and families who are active in organized group programs likewise take a strong interest in what happens to their community and that those who are inactive or take part occasionally show only slight interest in needed community improvements.

Leadership

The next aspect of the inventory concerns the status of leadership in the community. Leadership is a relational concept implying two things: the influencing agent and the persons who are influenced. In other words, when persons are influenced to express organizational behavior on a matter of group concern, then leadership has occurred. Even though this concept may seem too simple and may represent a variance from others that could be cited, it nevertheless provides a feasible base for the examination of leadership and the leadership process.

At this point, it might be well to review a few findings from leadership studies without getting involved in too many details. Leadership is not related necessarily to social status or position in the community. An individual usually holds a position of leadership because his or her characteristics approximate the norms or goals of the group. It is equally true that leaders have traits that set them apart from their followers, but these traits may vary from one situation to another. However, all leaders usually have certain characteristics in common, such as special competence in dealing with a particular matter, wide acquaintanceship, easy accessibility, and contact with information sources outside of their immediate circle. Also, they are sometimes members of several community organizations and have more exposure than nonleaders to mass media. These characteristics are acknowledged as important, but they will not necessarily produce leadership. One school of thought sees leadership more as a consequence of an individual's occupying a certain kind of position in the social system, whereas another view holds that leadership is a situational matter requiring a particular issue and the exercise of influence on others.

In any event, the inventory task is that of identifying individuals who are recognized leaders of community groups and organizations and who have an influence on the attitudes and opinions of the members. Information should be obtained about their personal backgrounds, family connections, group affiliations, business interests, fraternal memberships, social and political convictions, special competencies, methods of operation, attitudes toward public education, and power in the community. Knowing their backgrounds is requisite to approaching group leaders on educational community problems and to determining their value in rendering particular services.

In working with leaders, it must be remembered that they are not always free to express their own ideas or to take independent action. Their behavior is dependent on the nature of their groups and the beliefs and opinions of the members. They may be especially sensitive to questions concerning patriotism, private property, economics, religion, politics, and respected conventions. They realize that any radical departure from the feelings and convictions of their followers on matters like these could quickly undermine their own security. Leadership, however, is a reciprocal arrangement in that group members depend on leaders to initiate

ideas and execute plans of action. The leaders sense what members think and want, and so they can direct thought along lines that meet with acceptance. In doing this they play a powerful role in the determination of the attitudes and opinions held by their followers.

The study of leadership should extend to neighborhoods within elementary- and secondary-school attendance areas. Every neighborhood

PRINTED BY: f2e487c767ef6b6@placeholder.24190.edu. Printing is for personal, private use only. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted without publisher's prior permission. Violators will be prosecuted.

contains a number of men and women who are consulted by neighbors and friends whenever questions come up about the school and its relations with students and parents. Their opinions and judgments are important determinants of grassroots public opinion. It is vital to locate these individuals and to involve them in school activities. They become channels through which the school may be interpreted better on a neighborhood basis, and they can do much to win loyalty and support for institutional policies and practices.

Economic Conditions

An analysis of economic conditions will provide essential data for obtaining a better understanding of the community. Though a great deal of information about the economics of the community is available in governmental and business reports, an overview is needed. The overview should be limited to generalized findings on agricultural, commercial, industrial, and transportation activities and to employment, employment stability, and wage conditions. Related information on land use, property values, and tax rates should be considered. Such information is usually available in the school system's business office, which plays an important part in the planning of the annual school district budget. If further data are wanted, attention should be directed to such items as production output, retail stores, levels of income, amount of savings, and standard of living. These details are relevant, as economic conditions determine in some measure the financial support available for public education. Moreover, these conditions affect public feelings toward the school and the means used for trying to bring about closer relations between the school and the community.

Political Structure

For generations, the public school has tried to uphold the idea of keeping politics out of education and education out of politics. It has done this on the assumption that the school as a nonpartisan, classless, and social institution should remain apart from the political life of the community. As meritorious as this may seem on the surface, the truth is that the school cannot and should not separate itself from the political scene.

More money is spent for education at state and local levels than for any other single function of government. This fact alone makes education a thoroughly political enterprise. The support received is the product of political struggles for the tax dollar. These struggles involve the interaction of special-interest groups, political leaders, members of legislative bodies, boards and departments of education, opinion leaders, professional educators, and others. Such items as formulas for the distribution of state aid to local districts, the assessment of property tax rates, and the location, size, and cost of school buildings are frequently matters of political conflict and resolution.

If educational leaders are to cope successfully with the problem of getting adequate public support, they need to acquire a sophisticated understanding of political realities. They should seek this understanding through a somewhat detailed study of the political structure and the political process within the local area. It is important that they know who makes political decisions, how these decisions are carried out, and what political instruments are available. In some matters, a similar type of study should be extended to state and even national levels.

Social Tensions

Social tensions and conflicts exist wherever people work and live together. Some are normal expressions of human behavior; others are indications of weakness in the social structure. These tensions are evident in the refusal of neighbors to speak to one another, sectional conflicts over the location of new school buildings, claims that the board of education is favoring the better residential part of the district, interracial confrontations, the formation of cliques within parent-teacher associations, and discrimination against minority groups.

The causes of social tensions may be nothing more than personality clashes, misunderstandings, spite, or petty annoyances, but they may also be associated with economic rivalry, cultural differences, social class competition, racial discrimination, religious conflict, and other major aspects of society. These tensions, no matter what the causes, are disruptive to life in the community and detrimental to the kind of consensus often needed for school success.

Power Structures

After completing the sociological inventory, attention should be turned to the power structure or structures and decision making in the community. The concern here is understanding the essential characteristics of the power structures, the areas in which they operate, and the effects of power decisions on educational policy and the school program.

In every community certain people exercise considerable control over decisions relating to social, economic, and political matters. They obtain this power for a variety of reasons, such as family background, financial status, political leadership, social influence, property ownership, or labor connections. Mostly, they are members of informal groups that sustain themselves through mutual interests. Because these relationships can be described as a structured way of influencing community decisions, they are identified as power structures.

A *power structure* is an interrelationship among individuals with vested interests who have the ability or authority to control other people, to obtain their conformity, or to command their services. They are accorded this power because of their involvement in the decision-making process and the influence they have on decisional outcomes.

General Characteristics

If the school is to deal intelligently with the power structure or structures in the community, it should have some knowledge of the characteristics peculiar to this form of organization. Power structures are controlled by people of influence who try to shape community decisions in ways that either protect or advance their own interests or do both. Those who constitute the power structure may have few if any scruples about getting what they want. They are usually individuals with high intelligence and real leadership ability; otherwise it is doubtful that they would be able to command the status they enjoy.

Members of power structures are drawn from a wide cross-section of community life. They may be professional people, business executives, bankers, labor leaders, land speculators, newspaper publishers, or industrialists. Many of them make it a point to be associated with influential clubs and organizations, where they have numerous contacts with others of their kind and where they can use the membership to spread their propaganda and to mobilize popular support for policies and projects they favor. They do this very quietly and without thrusting themselves into the limelight. Typically, they use a secondary corps of influential individuals to handle matters for them and to report on the nature of public sentiment toward their proposals and the effectiveness of the strategies being employed.

Interestingly enough, power structure members are sincerely concerned with the well-being of the community, especially from an economic point of view. They know that they stand to gain as well if the community moves ahead and enjoys prosperity. It is not unusual for them to assist in bringing new industries into the community, to put pressure on politicians for modifications in the local tax structure, or to secure public funds for such items as urban redevelopment, a new highway, or a recreational area. However, when the public welfare on an issue does not coincide with their interests, they may take steps to swing the decision in their own favor.

Members of power structures find it advantageous to align themselves with political parties and holders of public offices. This allegiance gives them not only an opportunity to know what issues are under consideration but also an opportunity to influence the decisions that are made. For example, knowing some months in advance of the public announcement that a superhighway will be constructed around the borders of the community enables them to purchase land at reasonable prices and to locate motels, stores, gas stations, and other businesses from which large profits can be reaped.

Power structures influence decision making through a system of rewards and punishments. Rewards are given for going along with the wishes of the power group. These rewards may take the

PRINTED BY: f2e487c767ef6b6@placeholder.24190.edu. Printing is for personal, private use only. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted without publisher's prior permission. Violators will be prosecuted.

form of advancements to positions of higher social or economic status in the community, such as chairing of prestigious committees, and membership in socially prominent clubs and organizations. Often such rewards consist of monetary gains through means of stock options, franchises, land investments, information on public contracts, and so on. On the other side, punishment is meted out to those who do not comply with the wishes of the power group, and this may take the form of a loss of social position, occupational status, and economic welfare. Punitive measures include such examples as the failure to renew a business contract, refusal of membership in a country club, transfer to a position of lesser importance, reduction in purchase of goods and services, or the stirring up of labor troubles. At times the retribution may be handled so cleverly that the victim is scarcely aware of what is happening.

Due to the lack of social responsibility on the part of power structure members, the community and its citizens pay a price for such individuals' influence on decision making. Instances are legion of sound social proposals that have been defeated because they ran contrary to the interests of the power structure, whereas socially undesirable proposals were adopted because they represented the wishes of this group. However, since power structures are an integral part of the American scene and influence decisions affecting public education, the school must learn to live with them and to neutralize some of their actions when necessary.

Many researchers have studied community power structures, and some have studied their relationships with schools. Smith studied community power structures, school board types, and superintendent leadership styles in North Carolina. She found that compatible relationships occur between school board types and community power structures and between school board types and superintendent styles. In contrast, she found that a compatible relationship did not exist between community power structures and superintendent styles.³

The Schools and Power Structures

How can a board of education and its professional leaders handle incursions of power structures into school matters? As suggested, an assessment must first be made of the structures existing in the community with reference to action of participants in decision making and issue resolution.

Many opportunities are available for acquiring the necessary information to assess the current state of understanding and support a school system holds among its key audiences. Among them are continual scrutiny of stories carried in local newspapers, simplified content analysis of public documents, informal conversations with friends and colleagues, utilization of informative contacts through involvement in civic organizations and social activities, attendance at meetings where proposals are under consideration, and long-term observation of selected individuals connected with the power structure. Consistent collection and study of such information enable the board and its professional leaders to understand what they are dealing with and to note shifts taking place in the district's power picture. The National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA), for example, includes such analyses as part of its research and assessment efforts when conducting school-communication audits for school systems.⁴

Power structure members often take a direct interest in some phase of school operation. On occasion they will try to block proposed changes in curricular policies and programs when these represent a possible departure from the established way of doing things. They will profess a concern for school welfare and progress and will support a millage increase or a bond issue, but usually their interest centers on the financial side of the school, where decisions about the spending of money can result in a profit to them. They may try to influence the selection of school building sites or the placement of contracts for new and remodeled construction, for transportation of students, and for insurance. They likewise want a share in the thousands of dollars that are spent annually for supplies, equipment, and textual materials.

Perhaps the best protection the school has against power structure pressures on financial and other decisions is a well-planned and carefully implemented program in school and community relations. By taking parents and other citizens into complete confidence about the institution, its policies, its needs, its operating procedures, its problems, and its

Measuring Public Opinion

Measuring attitudes and opinions of taxpayers, parents, teachers, and students regarding education and the local school system is a third avenue through which community cooperation is accomplished. Sociological inventory and power structure analysis provide an informational framework within which the community relations program will be carried on. On the other hand, measurement of attitudes and opinions tells how people think and feel about the school system. It also tells what should be done to increase public understanding, support, and participation in the schools.

Opinion Research Technique

Opinion research started in the field of marketing and soon spread to other walks of life. Its reliability has been demonstrated over and over again in predicting election results, ascertaining consumer wants, determining audience reactions, modifying products, and forecasting trends in public thought and action. Schools have been somewhat slow to employ opinion research, despite its proven worth, in the planning and evaluating of their community relations programs. However, a noticeable gain has been observed in the number of school systems either undertaking their own studies of public opinion or hiring commercial firms to do this work for them. Increasingly, they are coming to realize the value of having precise knowledge of the opinions held by a specific group of people or those held by a representative cross-section of the population.

Opinion research is indispensable in planning, conducting, and evaluating the school–community relations program. It may be used to determine how people get their information about the schools, to learn how citizens judge the quality of their schools and the criteria they employ, to ascertain whether a proposed change will arouse controversy, to discover if a shift is taking place in public opinion, to find out how well the public understands the education program, to locate points of popular satisfaction and dissatisfaction with the school system, to identify problems that must be solved before increased cooperation and support can be expected, and to know the educational goals and aspirations of parents and citizens.

Opinion research can likewise reveal areas of improvement desired by citizens, their relative willingness to support financially the educational program, the nature of misinformation they possess, the motivations behind their defeat of a tax levy or a bond proposal, and the kind of information they want and how they want to get it.

As an extra dividend, opinion research actually stimulates the individuals who are contacted to form opinions about the subject being investigated. Individuals who have not thought seriously about the schools and school programs for some years are forced to do some thinking about them when their opinions are being sought in a research study. Moreover, they feel important for being asked their opinions.

When applied to staff members and students, opinion research discloses their attitudes toward the institution and the values they place on its policies and practices. The capable administrator uses this information to improve internal relationships and to make appropriate changes in the management of the school.

Types of Opinion Research

Opinion research comes under many names, scientific and unscientific, formal and informal, quantitative and qualitative, and probability and nonprobability. The name is determined by the manner in which the research is carried out. The results of unscientific, informal, or nonprobability opinion

PRINTED BY: f2e487c767ef6b6@placeholder.24190.edu. Printing is for personal, private use only. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted without publisher's prior permission. Violators will be prosecuted.

research cannot be projected with any statistical assurance onto the total group from which the sample is taken. On the other hand, the results from scientific, formal, or probability opinion research can be. The reason lies in how the respondents are selected to participate in the research. Only in the scientific, formal, or probability method is everybody in a population given an equal chance of being selected, that being the criterion used to determine if the results of a sample represent the thinking of a larger group.

Examples of unscientific opinion research methods are forums and conferences; advisory committees; some consumer panels; key communicators; mail surveys; newspaper, radio, TV, and magazine surveys; and some quota surveys. Among the scientific methods are simple, systematic, stratified, and area or cluster surveys.

The following descriptions of selected opinion research methods—forums and conferences, advisory committees, consumer panels, key communicator programs, and public opinion surveys—are designed to acquaint school personnel with some of their options.

Forums and Conferences

Open forums are a method of soliciting frank discussion among a selected group of persons on some educational topic of current interest to taxpayers, parents, teachers, or students. The discussants are asked to state their views on topics, such as the construction of a middle school as a new unit in the structural arrangement of the school system, and the reasons for their views. After a specific period of time, people in the audience are invited to direct questions to the speakers or to express their own opinions. An attempt is then made to summarize the entire discussion and to estimate how those present stand on the question. Sometimes this estimate represents the judgment of the chairperson or the collective judgment of an evaluation committee. Sometimes it is based on a show of hands in response to specific questions asked by the chairperson or on the oral and written comments received shortly after the close of the meeting.

Open forums lend themselves well to radio and television presentations. Such forums evoke wide interest if the issue under discussion is one of community concern and sufficient publicity is built up in advance. Interest is added when participants are known and carefully chosen. Open forums are used commonly in parent–teacher association meetings and in high school assemblies with students in charge. Open forums are difficult to defend on the basis of scientific appraisal of public opinion. They do, however, enable school officials to obtain rough but significant measures of how people think and to discover areas of their satisfaction or dissatisfaction. These forums have the added advantage at times of releasing tensions and enabling those who are interested to express themselves freely.

Advisory Committees

The advisory committee concept centers on the idea that a selected group of laypersons, representing a balanced cross-section of interest groups, can express the needs and reflect the opinions of the community. Meeting with school officials on a systemwide or individual-school basis, the members of the advisory committee are asked to suggest what should be done to solve the educational problems that are presented to them. Their recommendations are in no way binding and can be accepted or rejected. This method affords educators a practical method for evaluating group attitudes. Although it is always a danger to assume that the personal opinions of committee members are those of the group they represent, the danger lessens as experience is gained in using the method and as the personalities of participants are better understood. Moreover, this system familiarizes people with school problems and brings out their reactions before decisions are made. See **Chapter 8** for more details.

Consumer Panels

Consumer panels, also referred to as focus panels, are another approach to the measurement of public opinion. This procedure calls for the selection of a panel or jury of laypersons who are interviewed by trained members of the school staff. Usually, panel members are either selected to include representatives from organized interest groups, chosen in accordance with criteria for a stratified sample of the community, or tapped for expertise in a related field.

PRINTED BY: f2e487c767ef6b6@placeholder.24190.edu. Printing is for personal, private use only. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted without publisher's prior permission. Violators will be prosecuted.

Two types of panels have a place in the measurement of opinion on matters involving public schools. One type is highly transitory and may be regarded as a one-shot affair. It is used for observing changes in opinions or behavior caused by a particular action or experiment entered into by the local district. As an example, let us say the system increases class size, or eliminates some extracurricular activities, or establishes experimentally a year-round school. An initial set of interviews is held before any of these changes occurs in order to record attitudes and opinions on the subject at the time. The interviews are held either individually or collectively with panel members. Then, after the change occurs, a second set of interviews is carried out to determine the effect of the change on members' opinions and behavior. Once this is done, the panel members are dismissed.

In the second type of panel, the members serve on a continuing basis. Interviews are held with them individually in order to elicit their opinions on a scheduled series of open-ended questions and to estimate the intensity of their attitudes and feelings. Interviews are conducted informally without reference to any printed set of questions, and the length of the interview is left to the discretion of the parties. When the interview is over, conversational highlights are recorded in private by the interviewer on prepared forms.

Research on the continuing type of panel indicates that such interviews reveal emotional tones in opinions; the nature and amount of information, as well as misinformation, about topics under discussion; the qualifications attached to stated opinions; the contradictions in expressions of beliefs; and some of the reasons underlying favorable and unfavorable points of view. It has been found that repeated interviews with properly selected panel members not only give a statistically reliable measure of opinion but also bring out causes for shifts in opinion. However, repeated interviews with the same individuals over a long time may produce mental sets that consciously or unconsciously bias their replies. To meet this problem, continuing panel operations can provide for the rotation of panel members, with a limit placed on the length of time to be served by any one person.

Key Communicator Program

Another method of getting opinion feedback from a community is through the key communicator program. It calls for identifying those people in a community who sit on top of a hypothetical pyramid of communications and asking them to pass along information from the schools to the community. Conversely, they are asked to relay information about the community to the school officials. They are usually invited to a luncheon or a get-together to talk informally about the schools. The program can be very effective in identifying and squelching rumors in a community. It can also provide a quick pulse of community thinking on major educational issues. **Chapter 8** details the program.

Public Opinion Surveys

This method of opinion research can provide the most precise results of all of the preceding techniques if conducted properly. For this reason, schools and organizations are developing solid databases of community opinions through public opinion polls. Valid results will often silence vocal critics or vehement pressure groups, provide the basis for school officials to make a major decision that will be accepted by the community, and identify community values and priorities for educational programs.

Before surveying a community, a school should give some thought to the issues, the method of getting the information on a survey, the sampling technique, the construction and the wording of the questions, interview techniques, the design of the questionnaire, the use of data processing, and the handling of the results.

Methods of Getting the Information

The commonly used methods include the personal interview, the telephone interview, the mailed questionnaire, the automated telephone interview, online surveying, and the drop-off/pick-up questionnaire. In the last method, the survey instrument is delivered to a respondent's home or place of work and picked up a day or so later. Of all these methods, the best for comprehensive and usually valid results is the personal interview. The telephone interview is widely used, and the mail questionnaire provides proportionally the lowest returns. **Table 3.1** shows the advantages and limitations of the methods.

PRINTED BY: f2e487c767ef6b6@placeholder.24190.edu. Printing is for personal, private use only. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted without publisher's prior permission. Violators will be prosecuted.

Table 3.1 Advantages and Limitations of Six Methods of Surveying

Source: Edward H. Moore

PRINTED BY: f2e487c767ef6b6@placeholder.24190.edu. Printing is for personal, private use only. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted without publisher's prior permission. Violators will be prosecuted.

Two types of panels have a place in the measurement of opinion on matters involving public schools. One type is highly transitory and may be regarded as a one-shot affair. It is used for observing changes in opinions or behavior caused by a particular action or experiment entered into by the local district. As an example, let us say the system increases class size, or eliminates some extracurricular activities, or establishes experimentally a year-round school. An initial set of interviews is held before any of these changes occurs in order to record attitudes and opinions on the subject at the time. The interviews are held either individually or collectively with panel members. Then, after the change occurs, a second set of interviews is carried out to determine the effect of the change on members' opinions and behavior. Once this is done, the panel members are dismissed.

In the second type of panel, the members serve on a continuing basis. Interviews are held with them individually in order to elicit their opinions on a scheduled series of open-ended questions and to estimate the intensity of their attitudes and feelings. Interviews are conducted informally without reference to any printed set of questions, and the length of the interview is left to the discretion of the parties. When the interview is over, conversational highlights are recorded in private by the interviewer on prepared forms.

Research on the continuing type of panel indicates that such interviews reveal emotional tones in opinions; the nature and amount of information, as well as misinformation, about topics under discussion; the qualifications attached to stated opinions; the contradictions in expressions of beliefs; and some of the reasons underlying favorable and unfavorable points of view. It has been found that repeated interviews with properly selected panel members not only give a statistically reliable measure of opinion but also bring out causes for shifts in opinion. However, repeated interviews with the same individuals over a long time may produce mental sets that consciously or unconsciously bias their replies. To meet this problem, continuing panel operations can provide for the rotation of panel members, with a limit placed on the length of time to be served by any one person.

Key Communicator Program

Another method of getting opinion feedback from a community is through the key communicator program. It calls for identifying those people in a community who sit on top of a hypothetical pyramid of communications and asking them to pass along information from the schools to the community. Conversely, they are asked to relay information about the community to the school officials. They are usually invited to a luncheon or a get-together to talk informally about the schools. The program can be very effective in identifying and squelching rumors in a community. It can also provide a quick pulse of community thinking on major educational issues. **Chapter 8** details the program.

Public Opinion Surveys

This method of opinion research can provide the most precise results of all of the preceding techniques if conducted properly. For this reason, schools and organizations are developing solid databases of community opinions through public opinion polls. Valid results will often silence vocal critics or vehement pressure groups, provide the basis for school officials to make a major decision that will be accepted by the community, and identify community values and priorities for educational programs.

Before surveying a community, a school should give some thought to the issues, the method of getting the information on a survey, the sampling technique, the construction and the wording of the questions, interview techniques, the design of the questionnaire, the use of data processing, and the handling of the results.

Methods of Getting the Information

The commonly used methods include the personal interview, the telephone interview, the mailed questionnaire, the automated telephone interview, online surveying, and the drop-off/pick-up questionnaire. In the last method, the survey instrument is delivered to a respondent's home or place of work and picked up a day or so later. Of all these methods, the best for comprehensive and usually valid results is the personal interview. The telephone interview is widely used, and the mail questionnaire provides proportionally the lowest returns. **Table 3.1** shows the advantages and limitations of the methods.

PRINTED BY: f2e487c767cf6b6@placeholder.24190.edu. Printing is for personal, private use only. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted without publisher's prior permission. Violators will be prosecuted.

Table 3.1 Advantages and Limitations of Six Methods of Surveying

Source: Edward H. Moore

PRINTED BY: f2e487c767ef6b6@placeholder.24190.edu. Printing is for personal, private use only. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted without publisher's prior permission. Violators will be prosecuted.

Table 3.2 Sample Size for Two Levels of Confidence with Varying Degrees of Tolerance

Source: Edward H. Moore

The Sampling Technique

If findings of a survey are to be used to make decisions on budgets, personnel, buildings, and programs, the results should be projectable to the entire community or population from which the sample was taken. This can be done if the sample is selected by random, but random sampling doesn't mean a haphazard selection of respondents. Standing outside a supermarket and selecting every tenth customer won't give you a random sample that will represent the thinking of the entire community.

A sample must represent a larger population if it is to be statistically valid. A sample is to a pollster what a model is to an architect. Each represents a larger entity within a certain degree of accuracy. A sample will represent a larger population if all the people in the population have an equal chance of being selected.

A properly selected sample of 400 respondents will give you answers that can be projected to a larger population within a predictable 5 percent error. This is true if the population is 4,000 people, 40,000, or 100,000 or more. *The size of the population generally does not determine the size of the sample.* Instead it depends on how closely you want the sample to represent the total population and how much time and money are available to do the survey. **Table 3.2** gives the percentage of error regardless of the population size at the 95-times-out-of-100 and the 99-times-out-of-100 confidence levels. If you don't have to be sure 95 percent or 99 percent of the time that your tolerance or margin of error is plus or minus a given percentage, you can lower the confidence level. **Table 3.3** provides sample sizes at various levels of confidence. If the population you want to survey is fewer than 400 or 500 people, it would be wise to survey everyone rather than take a sample. Attempt to get at least an 80 percent return in order to have the results represent the thinking of all 400 or 500 people.

PRINTED BY: f2e487c767cf6b6@placeholder.24190.edu. Printing is for personal, private use only. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted without publisher's prior permission. Violators will be prosecuted.

Table 3.3 Sample Size Required to Achieve Desired Levels of Confidence and Tolerance of Error

Source: Edward H. Moore

PRINTED BY: f2e487c767ef6b6@placeholder.24190.edu. Printing is for personal, private use only. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted without publisher's prior permission. Violators will be prosecuted.

Avoid leading questions. An example of a leading question is "If your taxes were reduced, would you favor light industry locating in the school district?" The phrase "If your taxes were reduced" is leading. Many people will answer yes to any question that will indicate their taxes will be reduced.

- Avoid double-barreled questions. For example: "Do you work full- or part-time? Yes__ No__." If the respondents work full-time, how do they answer it?

- Avoid ambiguous questions. The question "Don't you think reading should be emphasized in high school?" is impossible to answer. What does a yes answer mean? "Yes, I don't think . . ." or "Yes, I do think. . . ."

- Pretest all questions on a small group similar to the one to be surveyed. (See **Table 3.4** for examples of wording used in a Gallup poll.)

Interview Techniques

In cases in which you choose to conduct personal interviews either at the front door or over the phone, interviewers must be recruited and trained. Where can you get volunteer interviewers who will do a good job? One district used young mothers with children not yet in school to do a telephone survey. These young women were enthusiastic about doing something that extended their contacts beyond the home. Senior citizens, parent groups, college students, or community groups can also be helpful if they have proper training.

Each survey situation differs and dictates some variations, but some general rules of interviewing should be followed whether the personal interview method or the telephone interview is used. Whatever the method, interviewers must strive for neutrality, avoiding any possibility of influencing the answers.

The following are major suggestions for interviewers:

- In face-to-face interviews, interviewers should dress similarly to those people being interviewed to foster better cooperation.
- Interviewers should become thoroughly familiar with the questionnaire, but should not memorize the questions.
- Interviewers should follow the wording of the questions exactly.
- Responses to open-ended questions should be recorded exactly as given.
- Interviewers should be friendly and show a genuine interest in the respondent without appearing to be meddling.

Table 3.4 Example of Wording in a Survey Question from the 45th Annual PDK/Gallup Poll

What do you think are the biggest problems that the public schools of your community must deal with?

Source: Retrieved from the Internet October 25, 2013, <http://pdkintl.org/programs-resources/poll>. Reprinted with permission of Phi Delta Kappa International, www.pdkintl.org, all rights reserved

PRINTED BY: f2e487c767ef6b6@placeholder.24190.edu. Printing is for personal, private use only. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted without publisher's prior permission. Violators will be prosecuted.

At least one training session is necessary for volunteer interviewers. In addition to some practice interviewing with each other, the volunteers should be briefed on the purpose of the survey, how the questionnaire was designed, why each question was included, how the interviewees were chosen, and how the data will be processed and analyzed.

Design of the Questionnaire

The design of the questionnaire helps respondents cooperate without feeling they are being exploited. First, they want to know how long the questionnaire is. If there are too many questions, respondents become frustrated and will not complete the questionnaire. If the copy is crowded and difficult to read, the respondent will give up quickly. If respondents have to work to find the place to check an answer, they will lose enthusiasm. A good rule to follow is to put all possible answers on the right side of the page near the end of the question. (This also will make the job of tabulating the results much easier.)

Whether it is a telephone interview, a mailed questionnaire, or a personal interview, the structure of the questionnaire is basically the same. Each should have an introduction, main section, and conclusion. The sections should include the following:

Introduction

- A brief description of the purpose of the survey
- The sponsor of the survey
- Instructions on how the questions are to be completed and returned if a written questionnaire is used
- Nonthreatening questions

Main Section

- Opinion questions that deal with the basic problems the school is attempting to learn about
- Questions in a sequence to provide the respondent with a logical thought process

Conclusion

- Open-ended questions to get unanticipated information, such as "Are there any other thoughts you have on the East Bank School District?"
- Demographic questions (e.g., age, gender, parent or nonparent, length of residency)
- A note of thanks

Use of Data Processing

Tabulating results by hand takes an inordinate amount of time and is prone to numerous mistakes. With the availability of office computers, it is strongly recommended that data processing be used in determining the results of a survey. It will provide a quick and accurate process for transferring information from numerous questionnaires to a report with total results. Also, data processing will quickly break out information by various demographics, such as the thinking of parents or nonparents, voting or nonvoting taxpayers, males or females, or any other demographic in the survey. If you decide to make use of data processing, be sure to involve the data-processing specialist before the questions and the format of the questionnaire are finalized.

Handling the Results

If a decision is made to survey a community, a public announcement should be made through radio, TV, newspapers, and the school newsletter. The local citizens and staff need to be informed of the purpose of the survey, the approximate time when it will be conducted, the size of the sample, and that the results will be made public. In these ways, citizens are alerted to the possibility that an interviewer may call on them.

When the results are tabulated, they should be published. Otherwise, people will feel that something is being hidden. One of the surest ways of reducing credibility with the public is to hide the results of the survey.

A definite procedure should be followed in revealing the results of the survey. The sponsors (usually the board of education) of the survey should know the results first, followed by those who worked on the survey, employees, and students. Once the internal public is informed, release the results to the media in the form of a news release or news conference. Finally, the detailed answers to each question in the survey should be highlighted in a school newsletter or other external publications.

Provided that school officials construct and conduct surveys carefully, results will provide valuable information about the concerns and attitudes of citizens, and, in the long term, help schools continue to bridge the school–community gap.

PRINTED BY: f2e487c767ef6b6@placeholder.24190.edu. Printing is for personal, private use only. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted without publisher's prior permission. Violators will be prosecuted.

Planning for Opinion Studies

Before detailed plans for making opinion studies are developed, the administrator should answer certain questions to his or her own satisfaction and that of the board of education.

The questions that must be answered are the following:

Exactly What Is the Problem to Be Studied?

Too often individuals are carried away by their enthusiasm for something they believe is important without taking the time to consider just what the problem is and what kinds of facts are needed to solve it. This is evident in some of the questionnaires that school systems have devised for appraising the attitudes and opinions of parents and taxpayers.

The school administrator will strengthen his or her case and gain board support more readily if he or she has defined the problem and has outlined the exact points to be studied. This is illustrated in the work done by one superintendent who was faced with a steady barrage of criticism about the schools. An investigation of the problem brought out the fact that several individuals were openly declaring that the public had lost confidence in the educational program. With the permission of the board, the superintendent undertook a series of interviews with all persons known to be skeptical and antagonistic toward the schools. From these interviews he was able to determine the exact points around which most of the criticism revolved. He then formulated a statement of the problem and the points needing investigation. The board approved his statement in short order and then voted the money for conducting an opinion survey. The administrator and board members wished to find out whether confidence in the schools had been destroyed and, specifically, what practices were under strongest protest. The results of the survey showed conclusively that the large majority of people believed in the worth of the instructional program and had faith in the competency of the administration. The results showed further that most of the opposition stemmed from a small but articulate minority who misunderstood many of the practices they were complaining about.

Too much emphasis cannot be placed on the advisability of formulating the problem for study in writing and attaching to this statement the reason why this information is required to solve the problem. This becomes not only a matter of record, when approved by the board of education, but also a guide to those who are charged with responsibility for making the study.

What Method Is Best to Obtain the Desired Information?

The choice of method depends on the problem and the information needed. Leaving financial consideration aside for the moment, the point is that one method or combination of methods may be more effective than another for obtaining certain types of data. For example, it would be wasteful to conduct an interview poll if the problem were one of trying to get a broad, general picture of how opinion was developing around a given issue. For this purpose, sufficient information could be collected economically and quickly through the open forum, the advisory committee, or the panel methods of measuring opinion. By the same token, none of these methods would suffice for obtaining an accurate measure of public understanding—say, concerning guidance services in the school. Actually, the methods brought into play do not have to be costly and complicated when all that is wanted is a general estimate of opinion.

How Much Money Is Required to Conduct Opinion Studies?

The answer to this question varies with the nature of the studies made. Large citywide surveys can be expensive, costing thousands of dollars, and because of costs many administrators shy away from opinion studies without realizing that limited surveys can be conducted on restricted budgets. However, a preliminary or pilot study of opinion often yields satisfactory results and costs very little. Some survey organizations regularly make pilot studies before deciding whether or not it is necessary to engage in a large survey project. The argument on cost falls apart once administrators and school boards understand the need and value of knowing what the public thinks.

How Much Time Is Needed to Complete a Study of Public Opinion?

The amount of time will vary with the method employed. The time required is short for the open forum and advisory committee methods, somewhat longer for the panel method, and considerably longer

PRINTED BY: f2e487c767ef6b6@placeholder.24190.edu. Printing is for personal, private use only. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted without publisher's prior permission. Violators will be prosecuted.

for questionnaires and direct interviews. The last two methods, starting with a definition of the problem and ending with the publication of results, may consume several weeks. This length of time can be reduced with experience in polling procedure. One national polling organization is now able to conduct a nationwide survey and report the findings in less than a day. The significant thing is not how much time is required, but rather learning how to make opinion studies and putting the findings to work in building stronger relations with the community.

Who Should Do the Research in Public Opinion Measurement?

Typical school administrators do not have the background or training and experience for this research. They can familiarize themselves with the procedures involved and can learn to apply the more simple ones in their own communities, but they may not be competent to undertake direction of scientific polls. If they wish to undertake scientific polls, they should either employ outside experts or else subsidize the training of staff personnel. Although the more convenient alternative is to hire outside experts, this is difficult to sell to boards of education because of the cost involved. The better choice in the long run is to subsidize the training of staff personnel who are then available to conduct studies whenever they are needed. Staff personnel who take over this responsibility should be assisted at the beginning by an expert consultant who can show them shortcuts in procedures, eliminate confusion, and prevent serious errors.

How Should the Findings Be Used?

The answers to this question will be governed by the nature of the findings. The findings may show that the superintendent should act at once to solve a pressing problem or that action by the board of education is necessary before anything can be done to clear up an unfavorable situation. They may confirm the soundness of present public relations procedures and the effectiveness of the program or point up the need for studying further a practice that is causing trouble. They may reflect a shift in public opinion calling for follow-up studies to chart direction. They may reveal problems for which immediate provision should be made in the public relations program. They may reveal many other things that are important in guiding relations with the community.

In general, the findings should be published in booklet form for distribution to staff personnel and citizens in the community. Such a publication serves to increase interest in and understanding of the educational program.

Online Surveying

The Internet and emerging computer technology have created new methods of surveying, other than the traditional personal, telephone, and mail surveys. These surveying techniques can include telephony and Internet-based surveys through Web sites, smartphone apps, and e-mail.

Telephony—Two methods are used in this type of polling: in-call account and out-call account. In the first method, community members are contacted and asked to call a special number to respond to a recorded questionnaire. In the out-call account, a system initiates the poll by calling a predetermined set of phone numbers. The automatic system then asks each survey question, and the respondents press a number or speak to register their answers. Specialized companies can provide school districts with technical assistance and software to conduct these polls.

Online surveys—Online surveys have become increasingly accepted options for school communication research. *The School PR Research Primer*, published by the National School Public Relations Association, notes:

E-mail and online surveys continue to grow in both popularity and acceptance among researchers. Although they have been used for some time, they were at first considered suspect by some researchers—who perhaps lumped e-mail and online surveys in with the many informal polls and other unscientific “question-of-the-day” data collection efforts common on web sites. But properly designed and implemented, e-mail and online surveys can offer reliability and validity comparable to other survey methods.⁶

PRINTED BY: f2e487c767ef6b6@placeholder.24190.edu. Printing is for personal, private use only. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted without publisher's prior permission. Violators will be prosecuted.

Most Web development programs now contain an option for creating, conducting, and tabulating these types of polls. A school district can compose a survey and post it on the Web or send e-mails and ask (by phone, e-mail, mail, etc.) a select universe to visit a certain Web address or reply to an e-mail to complete the questionnaire. Or the district can post the survey on a public page—their home page, for example—and just ask all visitors to fill it out. This latter type, though unscientific, is typical of the polls often promoted by TV news shows (“Visit our Web site to give us your opinion on the question of the day.”). When respondents select themselves, the results are always unscientific.

The options of school communicators seeking to use online survey techniques continue to grow. A number of vendors, such as SurveyMonkey and Constant Contact, offer online surveying services and support. Online survey options are available in online storage and sharing services, such as Google Drive. Some vendors, such as K12 Insight, offer online survey services and support specifically for school systems.

Sampling in online polling can be both scientific and unscientific. Results are sometimes representative of the population from which the sample was taken. In the out-call, Web site, and e-mail methods, a representative sample is difficult but possible to get. This can be done by a panel of respondents preselected by chance. E-mail addresses of a large population, such as an entire school district, virtually do not exist. As a result, e-mail surveys often are best used to query distinct populations easily reached by e-mail, such as staff members, parent groups, community organizations, business associations, and so on.

Online Surveying

The Internet and emerging computer technology have created new methods of surveying, other than the traditional personal, telephone, and mail surveys. These surveying techniques can include telephony and Internet-based surveys through Web sites, smartphone apps, and e-mail.

Telephony—Two methods are used in this type of polling: in-call account and out-call account. In the first method, community members are contacted and asked to call a special number to respond to a recorded questionnaire. In the out-call account, a system initiates the poll by calling a predetermined set of phone numbers. The automatic system then asks each survey question, and the respondents press a number or speak to register their answers. Specialized companies can provide school districts with technical assistance and software to conduct these polls.

Online surveys—Online surveys have become increasingly accepted options for school communication research. *The School PR Research Primer*, published by the National School Public Relations Association, notes:

E-mail and online surveys continue to grow in both popularity and acceptance among researchers. Although they have been used for some time, they were at first considered suspect by some researchers—who perhaps lumped e-mail and online surveys in with the many informal polls and other unscientific “question-of-the-day” data collection efforts common on web sites. But properly designed and implemented, e-mail and online surveys can offer reliability and validity comparable to other survey methods.⁶