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A Discussion of Two Extremes
In Community-Center Administration

BY
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THE QUICKSANDS OF WIDER USE*

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It is my purpose to point out this morning two or three treacherous spots in the path of the wider use movement. They are places where unwary workers will find the footing exceedingly bad, where without great care they may indeed be completely engulfed. These quicksands consist of schemes or theories of wider use or—as I prefer to call it—community center administration which at the present time enjoy considerable vogue in current discussions of the movement. It is not that either of these schemes, or plans, is wholly impractical or wholly wrong. The danger, as I see it, lies in the fact that they are incomplete, that they each tell a truth but not the whole truth, that each by itself lays an emphasis that is misleading.

There is no intention in this paper to discuss the origin of the notions which we shall attempt to evaluate. They were formulated by men to whom the movement is vastly indebted, without whose imagination, enthusiasm and industry the movement would still be quiescent and but dimly conscious of its large destiny. If we succeed in uncovering defects in the plans these leaders have put forth we must always remember that we are considering the defects of somebody's virtues.

The first of these theories we shall consider is the one that lays emphasis upon an exclusively official management of the school center. According to this scheme a community center is created by act of government. In its management no recognition is given to any private, sectarian or exclusive group. Whatever is done administratively is done by some official of the board of education or of the municipal government.

This plan of administration is presented to us in two forms, the first being that in which the schoolhouse doors are simply opened to the public by the authorities and no staff put in charge. This is exemplified in the Wisconsin statute which compels school boards to open their buildings whenever desired by a non-partisan, non-sectarian, non-exclusive association. The main difficulty with this plan is that under its operation community centers are *not* vigorously promoted. Fortunately there is some experience to

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point to. During the season of 1914-15, according to a report issued by the University of Wisconsin, the meetings in some 500 school buildings, which were denominated community centers, averaged less than one for every two weeks of the school year. Now I don't know how it is out in Wisconsin, but according to my notion of a community center, a school building which is not open oftener than once a fortnight on the average is hardly entitled to be considered in that class. Be that as it may, however, the promoters of school extension work in Wisconsin were themselves not satisfied with the amount of activity this law stimulated because they attempted, without success unfortunately, to amend it so as to provide the services of a paid secretary in schools which were desired as centers. In its present form the section of the Wisconsin law (Section 553D) to which I have referred has the educational value of recording the State's desire that all school buildings be considered discussion centers, but it does not provide the machinery for effectually translating that desire into fact. Another section of the Wisconsin law (Section 435 E), however, provides that the question of levying taxes for community center work shall be made the subject of a referendum. Under this section Milwaukee, for example, is carrying on an intensive school center work of unusual efficiency along recreational lines but it has never laid much emphasis upon civic and forum activities in its programs.

In California there is a school law which declares, in effect, that hereby a civic center is established at each and every public schoolhouse. That law was enacted in 1913, and yet one does not hear that it has so far been responsible for a tremendous amount of activity in the California school centers. If it had produced much I am sure we should have heard more about it. The conclusion of everyone who examines the facts is that just opening school buildings does not transform them into community centers.

We come now to the second case under the exclusively official form of community center management, that in which a paid staff is employed to administer all the activities. This plan has been tried in a number of cities and found to be not wholly satisfactory. Experience shows that it is a form of administration which suits certain types of activity and not others. Through a paid staff selected on a civil service basis organized classwork, public lectures, reading rooms, athletic games and juvenile activities generally may be fairly well administered. But the traditional official form of administration shows short-comings when it attempts to handle many

other activities, particularly those for adults and the older adolescents. I refer to such activities as amateur theatricals, choruses, celebrations, social affairs, public discussions, and mutual improvement societies.

The fundamental difficulty with the purely official type of administration is that it is psychologically not adapted to the material upon which it is supposed to work. Take, for example, the Wisconsin law that is based upon the assumption that a non-partisan, non-sectarian, non-exclusive association can exist, or ever has existed. In school center work we do not compel people's attendance. Of a necessity we deal with voluntary groups. Every voluntary grouping of individuals must necessarily stand for certain particular things and because they stand for those things they are, in a sense, partisan. Being bound together by a common aim they automatically and really, even though not in a legalistic sense, exclude all persons who are not animated by the same purpose. Even the body of citizens who rub elbows once or twice a year at the ballot-box is in a way an exclusive organization. It rigidly excludes minors, convicts, Orientals, all citizens of other countries, and in some benighted states even educated females. A non-partisan, non-sectarian, non-exclusive association is simply a nonentity, and any system of community center administration that is adapted solely for the handling of such bodies is destined to an assured place among the ranks of the unemployed.

It seems axiomatic that, since community centers are necessarily going to be mainly leisure-time resorts, the machinery by which they are run must be adapted to the handling of leisure-time activities. What is the chief characteristic of the forms in which we moderns spend our leisure time? When I play chess, I usually join a club. If I want to study drawing I join an art students' league. When I play basket ball I join a team. When I want to act I join a dramatic club. When I want to participate in social dancing under the best circumstances I take out a membership in a club having similar tastes and similar standards. When as a taxpayer I want to talk over during the evening affairs that touch me and my neighbors I join the taxpayers' association, a body which excludes all those who do not pay their dues and go through some formula of membership. The great outstanding fact of our modern leisure-time life is that it is almost entirely carried on through groups, through some form of voluntary association. We live very little as individuals at the present time. The man who plays

the lone game is limited to solitaire, reading or sitting in the park. Any form of community center machinery which does not take into consideration this fundamental fact of group life cannot function well. The theory of an exclusively official school center system does not fit the facts of social life.

Another theory of wider use development whose perilous aspects I wish to lay before you came into being through a violent reaction from the exclusively official system we have just been discussing. This second scheme lays all its emphasis upon the *private* association as the ideal foundation for school center administration. The slogans of those who follow this ideal are "freedom," "self-support," and "cooperation." Their plans are based upon distrust of governmental machinery and provide specifically against official interference. In the scheme of the private-group management there are also two cases, one in which the private association is not allowed to raise funds through the school center activities, and a second case in which the private association maintains certain activities for the specific purpose of raising funds.

Considering now case one, the great likelihood here is that a center managed by an organization which has no power to hold pay entertainments will not amount to much. Without funds no paid workers can be employed. The members of the association, all having business or home occupations, will naturally not be willing to devote much time or energy to the school center work. Under such auspices a one-night-a-week center carrying on a minimum program is possible. Under expert even though volunteer supervision two-night-a-week centers have been carried on by neighborhood groups, but the permanency of centers under such auspices is never assured. As a matter of fact, most of the advocates of the private management theory do not believe that school center work is feasible unless the managing body has the power to develop funds through the school center activities, and we will therefore give this plan no further consideration.

Coming now to case two in which the private association is permitted to raise funds, we find that here the managing body has greater vitality and is able to accomplish more work. An organization which can raise and expend funds has the sap of life running in its veins. Since much of the routine work can under these circumstances be delegated to a paid staff, committee positions and officerships carry a certain amount of prestige and efficient persons to fill these positions are more easily found. There

are, however, several dangers which, from the nature of the case, always threaten an enterprise of this character. The first tendency of such an organization will be to fill up its program with those activities which bring in revenue and to neglect those which do not. Since games, athletics, club work and other activities particularly adapted to juvenile needs are expensive, the tendency will be to omit these features of community center work, features which in congested districts are perhaps most helpful to large elements of the population. A second dangerous tendency will be that of lowering the standards and environment of the activities which are offered to the level of those in the commercial amusement establishments with which they will necessarily be competing. This tendency is most noticed in connection with motion picture and social dancing enterprises. Since, however, one of the strongest reasons in the minds of many people for having school centers is that of furnishing finer and more wholesome types of amusement than those to be found under commercial auspices, any tendency to lower the standards in the school center will bring down sharp criticism upon the enterprise.

A third temptation which will naturally beset successful associations will be that of employing the funds they have raised for purposes which might be construed as more advantageous to the members of the association than to the neighborhood as a whole, the temptation, for example, to give expensive banquets and to hold outings whose public welfare character is not immediately obvious to outsiders. Sooner or later such events are bound to bring criticism from the taxpayers on the score that public property is being used for private gain or advantage.

A fourth danger lies in the very success which private associations sometimes have. If such an association does succeed it is generally due to the energy and ability of one or two of the leading members. Their efforts gain them more or less of a reputation in the neighborhood. The prestige thus acquired is bound to excite the envy of other individuals and to bring about sooner or later a struggle within the group over leadership. In some cases rivalry will develop between the group which is in the ascendancy and a similar group on the outside. In any case contests are almost inevitable, and they will result either in changes in the management, thus imperiling its success, or in squabbles which will bring scandal and public criticism. The fact that membership in such an organization may be open to every one in the community does not obviate

the difficulty. Only those people will join it who find the present members congenial. All of the dangers which I have mentioned are inherent in the private association management. They are practically inevitable, if the associations are uncontrolled. Of course outside of the school buildings many voluntary associations have lived and flourished but the private association working upon public property has a more difficult situation. Even if it should ever develop sufficient ability to be completely self-supporting—something it has not done so far—it is questionable whether it could ever convince its environing community that it was thoroughly representative of all its interests and prejudices.

If, then, neither the private-group management nor the strictly official administration will work, what is the solution of the problem of wider use administration? Obviously the answer is to be found in a combination of the two, in a form of governmental machinery that is especially designed to cultivate group-life. A thoroughly practical community center administration must be based upon the policy which recognizes the nature of the private group, which knows how it lives, what kind of nourishment it requires, and in what kind of environment it will flourish. The voluntary association is a plant. The manner in which it shall live can rarely be laid down from without. The laws of its life are internal ones, knowledge of which may be acquired by observation but not arrived at intuitively.

Take, for example, a choral society composed of men and women living in a school neighborhood. Such an organization would not exist long, upon a purely official basis, *i. e.*, under an arrangement in which the leader was appointed and paid by the government and the members received their benefits without making any direct return, either in fees or service. Experience shows that without contracting some sort of obligation the members will not persist in regular attendance at rehearsals and without regularity the society's productions will not attain public success. Neither will the members make the progress in musical development which they had anticipated. If organized on the basis wherein they pay their own leader, on the other hand, the dawdlers are automatically excluded, the work of each member is more serious, and the leader is stimulated to greater exertions by the more direct relation of reward to effort. On this basis the members naturally expect to participate in the choice of their leader and that responsibility also conduces to more efficient organization.

These reciprocal relationships constitute the bonds which tie such a society together and make it a normal, living body.

What now is the function of a school center director in respect to such an organization? He can help to start it by telling about the advantages of such a society and how one could be organized. He may not say his patrons shall have such a society. If they manifest a desire to organize one, he can suggest the names of several leaders. If the members are willing to pay the leader's salary they will have to be given a say in his selection. By virtue of affording the meeting place the center director can make certain rules about the use of the room but they cannot be so stringent as to prevent the members from singing or accomplishing the ends of the organization. Otherwise it will die. Thus the director may exercise guidance over the society but he may not substitute his will for that of the members within the province of what they may rightly consider their own jurisdiction. They must do their own living.

Similarly every club, group or association lives in accordance with definite internal principles which may not be violated and the organization continue in existence. The skillful director of the future will study these inner laws diligently in order that they may have unimpeded operation because the success of his work will be gauged by the number of these private bodies he has brought into life and kept in healthy condition.

By implication at least I have said that private groups should share in the administration of school centers. What I mean is this. Each group must be allowed to exercise those responsibilities respecting its own activity which are essential to its normal group-life. In the case of the choral society just analyzed they consisted in choosing the leader, paying his salary and deciding perhaps what oratorios or cantatas they would render. These decisions, these money arrangements, constitute an important part in the administration of the activity, and it would be an unwise plan that laid them upon official shoulders. In the same way every group must be allowed to discharge those functions which are essential to its existence.

Is a neighborhood association which purposes to manage all the activities of a school center a practicable organization? Who can say! I know of none so far that has done the whole thing, created itself and then sustained and directed a full program of center activities. The dangers and temptations which threaten such

an enterprise I have already pointed out. Many of the perils mentioned could be avoided if the associations were under the tutelage of a competent director. Plants and shrubs are improved by pruning and the same treatment may be given to the voluntary association provided the pruning is scientific and not annihilatory. It is conceivable that an extraordinary, high-minded, and efficient group of citizens might exercise entire control over a flourishing school center without public criticism for a long period but that would be an exceptional association working under exceptional circumstances. Personally, I am not contending for complete private association control. I am advocating solely the principle that in the management of school centers there be a clear and hospitable recognition of the necessities of group-life and that private organizations devoted to wholesome purposes be given the widest latitude that is consistent with their own development, the advancement of society, and a proper utilization of the premises they are permitted to occupy. A community center administrative scheme which does not provide for the proper balance of the two principles, official machinery and group-life, is bound to be engulfed in the quicksands of impracticability.

The third and last way of thinking about the wider use movement which I wish to bring to your attention is in reality a way of *not* thinking. At the present time the movement is floundering in statistics which mean nothing, which tell us nothing about the direction in which we are traveling, which furnish us no guidance for future administrative changes. What do we find in current community center reports? Mainly statistics of attendance. We are informed that the average attendance during the season in City A was 391, in City B 221, and in City C 580. What help do those figures give us? Can we with any certainty let ourselves understand that these figures mean different individuals, or must we reckon with the fact that in City C the attendance records, by the conditions under which they are necessarily taken, must include some duplicates? Suppose we are told that the nightly per capita cost of school centers in City X was 13c, in City Y, 11c and in City Z, 7c. What assistance do those facts give us for the guidance of our own system unless we have some basis for comparing the programs which were carried out in those cities, unless we have some good means of assuring ourselves that the attendance records upon which the per capita figures were based, were kept in a uniform manner? As a matter of fact, is it possible by any system

to keep attendance records which will be accurate enough to afford per capita cost figures? Indeed would a per capita system be worth anything even if it were trustworthy? Should not our thinking have progressed far enough by this time to have an answer to that question?

During the last couple of years several cities have been trying different administrative plans. Can any of them show data by which one can determine which of the plans tried is the most economical? I know of none. Isn't it time for us to begin to take our work seriously? Shouldn't we begin to think about methods whereby we can obtain reliable data concerning our wider use enterprises? Ought we not to adopt soon some means by which we can chart our future progress? The objection generally urged is the cost, but do we know of any worth while enterprise in the industrial or commercial world that goes without adequate book-keeping, no matter what it costs?

In conclusion, must we not face the fact that community centers cannot be maintained on a self-supporting basis and that any administrative scheme that is worth anything at all is going to require funds, and more funds perhaps than have ever been appropriated for it in the past? The type of ability required to develop and supervise private associations is expensive. But we must have it. We must recognize the fact that the minimum organization required to run a school center will from an absolute standpoint seem expensive. The justification for the expenditure will be found in the importance its output will have for society. We believe in the significance of that output. Why not ask society for the requisite funds? Isn't it just this that a sense of decent preparedness requires of us for the safeguarding of the future of the community center movement?

Community Center Activities

BY

CLARENCE ARTHUR PERRY

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