

the issue just died, and no one in the group would discuss it with me. While the grumbling about the teenagers went on, there was no more talk of the centre at all.

Since there was no formal or informal discussion, I am not at all clear why they dropped the idea of opposing the project. Perhaps they were ashamed of their behaviour toward Ken, who really had shown great patience. Maybe they vented their anger sufficiently so that they did not feel the need to oppose the project, or perhaps they had actually heard some of what Ken said. It may even be that I overestimated the likelihood of them actually acting against the teens in the first place. In any event the centre was eventually built, and my work with the KCWG continued as if there had never been an issue.

questions

1. *Was this organizer's approach successful, and why? What might have made it more successful?*
2. *What are some of the possibilities and challenges when a community organizer's job involves casework and community development?*
3. *How might you work to build further understanding between the seniors and the young people?*
4. *Often community organizers are asked to mediate conflicts. What mediating strategies might have been useful (i) in the meeting (ii) generally between the youth and the seniors?*

discussion

1. Intergenerational conflict is an issue in many communities. As people of different age groups distance themselves from each other, there is increasing mistrust and sometimes fear. As a group, brainstorm possibilities for building bridges between different age groups. Consider broad practices of prevention and mediation or problem solving in situations where tensions already exist.

2. At times, members of the communities with whom we work may view their situation within a progressive, inclusive framework, but when it comes to people who they perceive as strangers or outsiders, their attitudes can become punitive and distrustful. When do you think you should challenge a group on these beliefs? At what point do you think it might begin to threaten the community building process? Why might you choose not to challenge community members? What are the costs and benefits of either approach?

5

Resisting the Closure of Community Schools

Don Jaffray

the problem

Parents of school-age children were concerned about the closing of schools in their neighbourhood and dissatisfied with the way the local Board of Education had made its decision.

the setting

In the late 1970s, 80s and 90s there was a province-wide concern that school enrolment was falling due to a declining birthrate among the so-called baby boom generation. One response was a reduction in education spending, and ultimately, at the municipal level, the closure of many schools. In this particular city, the Board of Education had cited six different schools across the city as targets for closure.

Each of the six neighbourhoods had established independent community committees to challenge the closing of their community's school. Some of these committees were large and well-organized with substantial resources in skills and cash, while others were small, poorly supported, and lacking in direction. The richer neighbourhoods, unsurprisingly, offered the strongest challenge to the Board of Education and provided the most leadership and input into strategy. In the beginning representatives from the six neighbourhoods had little contact with each other and consequently had very little impact on the Board.

the actors

Don: the narrator. I was a community worker with the local Social Planning and Research Council. I became involved with this issue when a neighbourhood group contacted the Council for some assistance with preventing the closure of their school.

Concerned Parents: independently of one another, six groups of parents had organized to protest the closing of "their" schools. They were worried about their children's access to good schools, the problem of travel to more distant schools, and the apparent

loss of community resources represented by the closure of schools which had more than simply educational functions.

The Board of Education: the Board was faced with a provincial mandate to cut costs and was very unpopular as a result.

the events

Local parents were concerned that the Board of Education was not listening to or adequately consulting with them and other neighbourhood residents prior to closing a school. For example, the committee which ultimately decided the fate of each school was believed to be withholding information about meeting dates from the community. Moreover, the information that the Board was using to justify the various closures (particularly population projections) appeared to be out-of-date or inaccurate. The process the Board had used to arrive at its decisions was neither transparent nor democratic, and seemed to deliberately exclude parents from participating meaningfully in the proceedings. Parents felt that the Board had already made its decisions and was simply putting up a façade of a consultation process in order to smooth things over with the residents.

Although the Board had a review committee to assess the situation in each affected neighbourhood, it was stacked with people who were sympathetic to the Board's position. The review committee was thus believed by many parents to be a means of promoting the Board's position in the community.

None of the six neighbourhood protest committees had contact with or much knowledge of the others and were thus unable to have much of a collective impact on the Board's actions. Given the existence of formal organized groups, my task was to determine how to coordinate six neighbourhood committees to force the Board to make its activities more transparent.

questions

1. *What challenges might an organizer face in trying to bring these six neighbourhood committees together?*
2. *What are some specific strategies you could use to bring the committees together and to co-ordinate their attempts to shape the Board's decisions regarding school closures?*
3. *This scenario highlights some of the tensions involved in participatory processes, namely that while one is able to participate it is often difficult, if not impossible, to have input into the*

actual decision making process. Why would governments and organizations establish such inaccessible participation processes? How could you change them?

suggested readings

- Arnstein, S. (1969). Rungs on the Ladder of Citizen Participation. *Journal of the American Institute of Planners* 35, p. 216-224.
- Kothari, U. (2001). Power, Knowledge, and Social Control in Participatory Development. In Cooke, B. and Kothari, U. *Participation: The New Tyranny?* (pp. 139-152) London: Zed Books, Inc.
- Rahnema, M. (1992). Participation. In Wolfgang Sachs (Ed.), *The Development Dictionary: A Guide to Knowledge as Power* (pp.116-131). London: Zed Books, Inc.

strategy & analysis *At the request of one neighbourhood committee, the Social Planning and Research Council (SPRC) set about identifying and contacting concerned parents and community groups. We invited them to a meeting to introduce them to each other, to share knowledge about the issue, and to lay out their concerns, problems, and/or plans for action. I hoped that this would help them begin to work together towards common objectives.*

action

The initial meeting was a success. Those present decided that they had much in common and could learn from and help each other in various ways. In order to maintain this momentum, the SPRC helped arrange and facilitate additional meetings of neighbourhood representatives.

Subsequent meetings resulted in the formation of an action group, the Coalition for Neighbourhood Schools (CNS). Once the organization was formed and a leader was identified, it appeared that the community could manage their project on their own. I withdrew my full participation with the organization and instead supervised two social work students who the SPRC had placed in the community. In the first fourteen months of activity

the CNS members made significant headway:

- United to raise the profile of the issue of school closings.
- Helped each other draft statements and presentations for meetings with the Board of Education.
- Created and maintained an effective communications network regarding meetings with the Board, and distributed information about school trustees and their voting patterns.
- Developed a roster of assignments to lobby trustees on school closure issues. Members bombarded trustees with telephone calls, mail, and requests for their attendance at community meetings.
- Shared “confidential” information that was leaked by unidentified members of the Board of Education.
- Mounted a powerful publicity campaign to inform the general public on the issues.
- Carried out fundraising activities, including securing a government grant
- Carried out research on the social impacts of school closures. The results were presented to the Board of Education as “new evidence” that had not been taken into account in the original process of determining which schools would close.
- Prepared to field CNS candidates in the next election of school trustees (At this point the SPRC was disengaged from the organization).

outcomes

The formation of the Coalition was effective in that people were able to share information and strategies which might otherwise have been unavailable or unevenly distributed. The Coalition also offered a great deal of mutual support and increased energy and enthusiasm levels. Concrete results of the CNS were:

- The Board of Education recognized the group as a vital community force and eventually became more responsive to requests for information.
- CNS members recognized that their reaction to the Board proposals had come too late in the planning process to create significant change, and as a result they recommended significant alterations in the public consultation process used by the Board of Education.
- Coalition members gained organizing skills, community

contacts and friends, and a greater appreciation for and participation in the electoral process.

epilogue

Of the six schools slated for closure, one was kept open, one was kept open pending further study and then closed, and the other four were closed as proposed.

questions

1. *Would you consider this process a success? Why or why not? Are there different ways to understand success?*
2. *This coalition seemed to have been able to stay together, even though the groups could have become easily pitted against one another. Tensions often rise when there are few resources and people are put in the position of competing with each other to protect the few resources that they have. What strategies could you use to help a coalition stay together in such a situation?*

discussion

Coalitions are useful at particular stages of a struggle and require particular skills to build and maintain. As a group, discuss where and why organizers and communities build coalitions, why might coalitions be useful at some times and how might they limit a particular struggle. What skills might be particularly useful when engaging in coalition politics?