

A ROLE FOR COMMUNITY RELATIONS ORGANIZATIONS IN PUBLIC EDUCATION

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A community relations agency can be a great resource to the schools. It can help them understand the needs of their Jewish students; it can provide them with information about speakers in its areas of expertise such as the Holocaust, Soviet Jewry, First Amendment issues and Israel; and it can help them address issues that require a neutral outside body or catalyst.

The public school system has been a major factor in the upward mobility that characterized the immigrant experience in the United States. Public schools allowed first and second generation immigrants to receive a solid, basic education, an essential building block necessary for success. Free and open to all, the public school system provided an important opportunity to those who wanted a chance to succeed.

Throughout modern history, Jews have valued education and recognized its importance. In this country, the Jewish community knows the key role that public education has played in its success, and it has worked actively to protect and strengthen the public school system. Jews are often leaders in local PTAs and serve on school boards. Many enter the teaching profession. Advocacy for quality public schools remains high on the Jewish public affairs agenda.

Jews also have certain special interests regarding the schools. One particular interest is in the maintenance of a firm line of separation between church and state so that religious activity does not occur in public schools. Even though the courts have ruled that religious activity in school is not permissible under the First Amendment, the Jewish community frequently finds itself in the position of having to explain to Christian neighbors why Jews,

although a religious people, object to religious practices in public schools. At first thought, prayer in the schools or Christmas celebrations might seem to be unifying rather than divisive activities.

However, religion by nature is sectarian and its promulgation is only for those who accept the particular religious doctrine being offered. By sanctioning particular religious activities, usually Christian, school officials are promoting one religion over another. This gives the impression that the doctrine behind the religious activity being supported by the schools is somehow more correct than beliefs left unmentioned. Students holding minority beliefs find themselves in an uncomfortable and even somewhat threatened position when forced to decide if they will participate. Precisely for this reason, the First Amendment prohibits state sponsored religious activity. The Jewish community has a unique role to play in explaining the importance of religiously *neutral* public institutions.

On the other hand, absenteeism for Jewish holidays often requires an explanation. To demand special dispensation for Jewish holidays like the closing of schools in areas with a large Jewish population would violate our own standard requiring a strict separation between church and state. However, making school officials aware of the dates of major Jewish

holidays so that scheduling conflicts can be avoided alleviates problems later on. Community relations organizations should provide school personnel with information on Jewish holidays, the Sabbath, and Bat and Bar Mitzvah to further understanding of the Jewish faith and clarify the practices of Jewish children. As a service to the entire community, Jewish organizations should consider supplying schools with a calendar of all religious holidays.

Because of both our general view of the importance of education and the particular needs of Jewish children, the Jewish Community Relations Council of Philadelphia (JCRC) has long considered the promotion of quality public education to be one of its priorities. Most of the activity undertaken by JCRC in this area has centered around a process of building bridges to local school officials. Establishing a close relationship with school personnel has helped them to be more sensitive to the needs of Jewish children and has allowed us to respond and be helpful to their needs.

Since the Jewish population in Philadelphia has shifted in part from the city to the suburbs, Jewish children are now enrolled in many different public school districts. Some suburban schools have substantial Jewish populations, while others have minimal numbers. Unlike many other Northeastern cities, one-third of the Jewish community in the Philadelphia area has remained within the city of Philadelphia. Those who use the public schools primarily live in one neighborhood, Northeast Philadelphia.

About ten years ago, it became clear that the JCRC needed to approach the schools on some kind of systematic basis rather than by calling an unknown principal or superintendent each time a problem arose. In the two suburban areas where Jews resided, the JCRC organized introductory meetings in the late afternoon with local superintendents. In both areas, the superintendents were interested in learning about the needs of Jewish

children and mindful that Jews made up an organized constituency within their school districts.

The agenda for the initial meetings focused on the Jewish holidays and religious celebrations in public schools. While most of the superintendents invited attended the meetings, each had to be contacted individually to assure his presence. Both the JCRC and the superintendents recognized the value of these meetings and so they have been continued annually.

The meetings allowed the JCRC to raise other important issues such as Holocaust education and the handling of the Middle East in the school curriculum. Superintendents were given the opportunity to ask questions about Jews and Judaism as well as to discuss public policy issues affecting the schools. The year after the equal access act became law, for example, a frank discussion was held on the merits of the law and how the schools were implementing it. It became evident that the superintendents were as troubled by the law as we were and hoped for its repeal in the courts.

At a yearly meeting with one group of superintendents in 1982, the discussion drifted to a conversation on an increasing problem with racial slurs and what seemed a serious lack of sensitivity on the part of some students and teachers. Even though the superintendents were concerned about the problem, they were reluctant to address it directly for fear that they could be seen as accusing faculty members and students. One of the superintendents asked if JCRC, as a neutral outside agency, would want to put together a conference for teachers on human relations.

The initial planning was handled internally by JCRC staff and lay leadership without direct involvement of school personnel. Because the Anti-Defamation League has substantial experience in human relations training, it was invited to co-sponsor the conference. The conference was designed around two major objectives:

1. to help teachers and administrators recognize prejudice and the problems that prejudice can cause in a classroom or school; and
2. to show the attendees how to develop responses to prejudice by using people's differences as a positive and enriching focus rather than a negative one. The planning committee formulated a tentative conference program and at a meeting with superintendents went over the agenda and structural details of the forthcoming conference. The chairmanship of a superintendent was considered crucial to assure attendance of his colleagues and give credibility to the project. A speaker gave a short presentation on the conflict resolution technique in reducing prejudice which she planned to present more extensively and a JCRC lay leader led discussion of specific arrangements.

The superintendents chose a school day for the conference, each agreeing to provide release time for ten teachers; they also agreed to cover the cost of the conference and one superintendent volunteered part of the high school in his district as the setting.

When the conference took place, there were 120 attendees: two superintendents, four directors of curriculum, guidance counsellors, principals, and elementary and secondary teachers.

Six weeks after the conference an evaluation meeting took place to determine if the schools were implementing any of the ideas discussed at the conference. Two of the school districts had instituted human relations committees in their schools, stimulated by a conference workshop presentation that had featured an elementary school principal from another area who had set up a human relations committee in her school district. This principal and other workshop leaders have served as consultants to a number of the school districts.

At the evaluation meeting, the JCRC suggestion that a similar conference be of-

ferred for high school students was taken up and such a conference took place a year-and-a-half later. Ten students and one teacher from each school district were invited. One of the school districts selected students from the human relations committee which had been formed as a result of the first conference.

The second conference focused on how students can recognize and address human relations problems in their schools. Students spent the day conceptualizing human relations techniques, identifying human relations problems that exist within their own schools and suggesting approaches for resolving these issues. By progressing from the general to the specific, the program showed students how they could have an important effect in their own schools. The teachers attending served as group facilitators to support further the importance of student involvement in resolving human relations issues. JCRC is currently planning a follow-up to this student conference.

In the other suburban area where JCRC meets with superintendents, it approached them with a different idea for a teacher conference. The idea arose from a feeling among local Jewish leadership that the Jewish community was not paying enough attention to educating the community regarding the reality and dangers of nuclear warfare. The JCRC leadership wanted to see how schools were handling this complex, politically explosive subject.

JCRC leaders called local school superintendents, most of them now well acquainted with the agency, to learn if teachers were including the issue in their lessons and to assess their interest in a community meeting. It became quickly apparent that school personnel were grappling with how to teach the subject themselves and wanted to explore the idea further. Most superintendents agreed to send a representative to a planning meeting. The administrators who came liked the idea of a conference but suggested that because of the political im-

plications of this issue attendance be limited to school personnel.

Unlike the human relations conference, school personnel were directly involved in planning and participating in the conference which was held under the title, "Nuclear Awareness: How Do We Educate Our Children." The conference took place in the late afternoon/early evening with 45 attendees from seven school districts and the Catholic Archdiocese of Philadelphia. Most of the speakers at the conference taught in the invited school districts. They presented approaches and curriculum that they were using in their own classrooms.

The conference proved successful because teachers were able to see how their colleagues were approaching the subject of nuclear awareness creatively. One presenter had helped high school students organize a full day of activities related to the differing political strategies concerning arms control, another taught the subject as part of his history lessons on global interdependence, while an elementary school art teacher handled the subject by asking the students to draw images of war and peace. In retrospect, the teachers could have used even more time than allotted to discuss these ideas among themselves.

The conference served the original purpose of beginning to involve the organized Jewish community in examining the reality of life in the nuclear age but also had other positive community relations benefits. New contacts were established with school personnel, some of whom have already been called on regarding other issues. In one school district, JCRC has run an extensive workshop for social studies teachers on the Holocaust and was able to offer a forum where a sensitive public policy issue could be discussed

under neutral auspices. Further, JCRC showed the schools how they could handle the nuclear awareness issue internally.

Because this issue involves public policy decisions, several groups have organized to advocate on behalf of their individual concerns. JCRC established contact with many of them, particularly the local chapter of Educators for Social Responsibility, which also examines how the schools teach nuclear awareness. These contacts have remained important in dealing with related issues.

JCRC work with the schools also includes an extensive Holocaust education program. The JCRC co-sponsors an all-day youth symposium on the Holocaust with the Philadelphia public, Archdiocesan, and private Quaker schools. Over 800 students from diverse backgrounds have come together to learn the universal lessons of the Holocaust. Similarly, the JCRC runs a creative arts competition for high school students allowing them to express their reactions to the Holocaust through writing, art, dance, and song. Of course, the contacts established through the process outlined above have helped with these projects as well.

A community relations agency can be a great resource to the schools. It can help them understand the needs of their Jewish students; it can provide them with information about speakers in its areas of expertise such as the Holocaust, Soviet Jewry, First Amendment issues and Israel; and it can help them address issues that require a neutral outside body or catalyst. Each piece of its program vis-à-vis the schools can build on the success of another part. By establishing sound relationships with those involved in public education it can serve the best interests of the Jewish community and strengthen the public schools.