

WILMETTE PUBLIC SCHOOLS
Wilmette, IL 60091

COMMUNITY REVIEW COMMITTEE

COMMUNICATIONS SUBCOMMITTEE
1990-91

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COMMUNITY REVIEW COMMITTEE
COMMUNICATIONS SUBCOMMITTEE FINAL REPORT

"Communication equals remembering what it's like not to know"
Richard Saul Wurman

In his book, Information Anxiety, architect Richard Saul Wurman calls the ever-widening gap between what we understand and what we think we should understand a "black hole". This gulf between data and knowledge occurs when information doesn't tell us what we want or need to know and produces a condition Wurman names "information anxiety."

It is possible that residents of District 39 are suffering from Wurman's malady but, ironically, so is the school district itself. Whatever communication problems there may be in District 39, they are not due to lack of effort but rather to a lack of information on how messages are being perceived by the community. In other words, if communication is a two-way street, District 39 has been travelling for some time now without seeing any traffic in the opposite direction.

It was with this in mind that the Communications Subcommittee of CRC set about more than a year ago to gather information on just what the public thought of school district communications. Our method of investigation involved the use of focus groups to query various segments of the community about the kinds of communication they were receiving and their opinion on the quality and usefulness. We put together groups of elementary and junior high parents, pre-school parents, and residents who did not use District 39 schools.

We learned basically what Wurman could have told us: "that far too often those who wish to communicate have forgotten what it's like not to know." If communication is to be improved, it is imperative that we develop methods to make that communication two-way. Without feedback, we are operating in a vacuum.

GOALS AND METHODS

One of our goals was to ascertain the needs to various segments of the community for communication with the district. We also wanted to assess the feelings of community members about the sufficiency of existing communication vehicles and opportunities for citizen input into District 39 affairs. We decided the best method of accomplishing those goals would be to conduct focus groups of community residents. Focus groups enabled us to sample the ideas and attitudes of community members in an open-ended way, without the conceptual limitations and superficiality of written survey questions. We did not get statistical data fixing the percentages of the population holding the views expressed, but we did get a useful sampling, in some depth, of the types of attitudes held, and we found surprisingly strong themes running from group to group.

Because we felt parents of District 39 children would have different interests and different sources of information than would residents without children in the schools, we decided to run separate focus groups for district parents, parents of pre-schoolers only, and others. We hoped to survey teachers as well, but felt we did not have the resources to run further focus groups. We interviewed two teacher representatives for general background, but did not use data from that interview in preparing our findings.

Working with a research professional, Jaye Golante from Leo Burnett Advertising, the committee drafted a focus outline. Four focus groups were conducted in the evening at the Wilmette Jr. High School CLR. The groups were tape-recorded with the knowledge of the participants. Each discussion lasted from 45 minutes to 1 1/2 hours. The groups consisted of one group of Wilmette residents with no children in Wilmette schools but with pre-school aged children, one group of Wilmette residents with no children in the schools but who may have had children

in the schools previously, and two groups of Wilmette residents with children currently enrolled in District 39 schools. There were about 8-10 members per group. Participants in the groups were recruited by telephone by committee members from nursery school parent lists, PTA lists, random phone book calls, and personal contacts. An attempt was made to have representatives from each elementary school area in each group; this was not entirely successful.

Our questions sought to establish what needs participants felt for communication with the district and what they thought about existing vehicles and opportunities for communication. We tried to learn what means participants used to get information about the district, and whether they ever communicated their opinions to the board or administration. We asked about their reactions to the Bulletin and to Wilmette Life coverage of school news, their level of interest in District 39 affairs, and what they would like to know more about. Responses were helpful and some very constructive suggestions came out of some of the discussions.

FINDINGS

We found some very strong common reactions which cut across group lines, but we also found that the expectations and levels of satisfaction of the participants sometimes varied along group lines, and we therefore often refer to opinions common among "parents" or "non-parents". For ease of reference in this report, "non-parents" are people who do not currently have either preschoolers or children enrolled in District 39 schools; they may or may not be parents of other children. Similarly, "parents" refers to those with children in the school system, and "preschool parents" refers to parents with preschool children only (i.e., no children of school age).

There was a striking commonality in the reactions of the focus group participants. Certain reactions were expressed by a majority of the participants in every group, although with different emphases according to the special interests of the group. We have summarized those recurring themes here in two subgroups: paragraphs 1-7 setting forth the types of information and communication participants would like to see developed, and paragraphs 8-13 reviewing factors which are perceived to either facilitate or inhibit effective communication. Summaries of each meeting are attached to the report, and tapes are available in the event that reference to our primary sources is desired.

Focus group members commonly expressed the desire for more communication with the district in the following areas:

1. Participants expressed a nearly unanimous desire to be consulted on major issues, and certainly on issues related to taxes and finances. They considered provision of complete information and alternative solutions, as well as opportunity for open debate, to be integral parts of consultation. Even non-parents, most of whom said they generally only skim over school news and do not keep up on educational issues, expressed a desire to learn more about the major problems facing the district. There was widespread feeling that the last referendum was misguided in not openly addressing the issues and "addressing the people without children in the schools and giving them a rationale for it."
2. Non-parents and preschool parents in particular felt a need for some guidance from the district in identifying the important educational issues of the day. Preschool parents especially were very interested in the issues which might affect their children in a few years, but didn't seem to know exactly what those issues might be. There was some enthusiasm for the suggestion that the Bulletin regularly include a letter from the superintendent, highlighting important challenges on the horizon.
3. Nearly all participants, and especially parents and preschool parents, expressed a desire for more substantive, issue-oriented, and in-depth school news. All groups felt the need for more background information on issues, and

for more public discussion of options prior to the board's final decision on a matter. There was a perception that information put out by the district tends to be bland, with a conscious effort to avoid controversy, and to paint a rosy picture. Many participants found coverage of issues to be too superficial to be useful. People want to hear about ways other communities have solved problems similar to ours, and to be given enough information to make an independent judgement about the options available.

4. Parents especially wanted vehicles for more input into the decision-making process. Both parents and teachers emphasized the two-way aspect of communication and felt the administration and board both lack means for adequate input from parents and teachers. Parents wanted to be consulted on curriculum changes, class sizes, and budgetary matters, among other things.

A number of participants, not all parents, noted a need for earlier notice to the entire community of issues the board intends to address. Last spring's budget cuts and the institution of foreign language study in fourth grade were cited as examples of too little public input solicited too late in the process. A few people mentioned the need for some kind of formal public notice of issues before the board; others suggested board agendas be regularly published in the Wilmette Life. There was a widely-held feeling that reliance on the Bulletin (too infrequent), the PTA newsletters and meetings, sporadic Wilmette Life coverage, and word-of-mouth results in an undue advantage to those heavily involved in the system, or heavily invested in a particular issue.

5. Parents, non-parents, and preschool parents all shared some areas of particular interest, for instance, finances, taxes, curriculum, class size, quality issues (particularly comparisons with other countries, times and districts), and teachers. Respondents were quite uniformly supportive of teachers and saw them as the heart of the system. They were very interested in hearing the opinions of teachers on education issues - e.g., class size, testing, foreign language study, etc. There was great interest in what actually goes on in the classrooms on a regular basis (as opposed to special projects, which are generally considered more newsworthy). In-depth interviews with teachers and administrators about teaching methods and philosophy (in laymen's language) were requested.

6. Non-parents were particularly interested in more information on financial matters - waste (particularly administrative waste and "unnecessary frills"), taxes, the causes of financial need - and in weighing program costs and benefits. Several non-parents (and members of other groups also) expressed this concern, always in the context of their support for quality, tax-funded public education. One gentleman summarized the prevailing opinion in the non-parent group particularly well: "For those of us in our position - some of us on fixed income - we want to be real sure that the money is spent well, and that there is not too much overhead, too much administrative fat. I have no idea how many people there are in the administration building, and I don't know what they do. I know what teachers do."

We need to remember that older non-parents have a different educational frame of reference. They pointed out that their reference is large classes, no administration, no outside consultants, no frills. Moreover, they are aware of the educational bureaucracy problems attributed to the Chicago school system, and they need to be reassured that we do not have that problem. They want to be told why education is so costly now, and that includes both full financial disclosure and information on the nature of modern education - new subjects and teaching methods, state mandates, and administration costs, to name but a few topics.

7. Preschool parents were interested in information on preschool behavior, kindergarten readiness, kindergarten registration procedures and enrichment, and transitions. They expressed the need for a pamphlet introducing pre-kindergarten parents to District 39 and explaining the method of selection of a.m. and p.m.

kindergarten classes. This is an emotional issue because of the desire to take advantage of enrichment classes and schedule baby-sitters, part-time work, etc., and rumors evidently fly fast and thick. A written policy statement from the district could clear up a lot of suspicion and bad feeling about the selection process.

The focus groups were also helpful in identifying factors which prevent or interfere with communication between the district and its constituents, or which might happily assist communication.

8. One of the greatest obstacles the district faces in its efforts to improve communication is the limited investment the non-parent community feels in the school system. Most non-parent participants acknowledged that they do not follow educational issues closely, and only "look over" or "glance at" the Bulletin and Life articles about the schools. They skim the Bulletin, although they tend to think it is really intended for parents. Many want to be supportive, and they certainly pay attention when the district mentions the need for more money, but they really don't consider it primarily their concern. The burden of getting their attention and giving them the information is, by default, on the district and the parent community.

9. Participants uniformly stipulated a high regard for our school system and a very high value on quality education. Discussions of comparative systems, quality, test scores, etc., were always lively and fully engaged in all focus groups. People are interested in education; they simply have not been engaged.

10. Insufficient vehicles exist for input by citizens into the district's decision-making policy. The board has been sincere and explicit in its desire to have citizens attend and speak at board meetings, but in a busy community only those already heavily invested in a particular issue will attend. Insufficient notice of agendas, and public ignorance of background information further chills participation. We need to develop more grass roots forums for discussion of issues and to institutionalize the flow of ideas back and forth between the school board and the citizenry. It is unrealistic to expect a substantial number of people to regularly attend evening board meetings if they have to take the initiative in learning the time, agenda, research their own background information on the issues, in many instances, hire a baby-sitter, and then attend a meeting at which there is a heavy agenda which does not easily afford time for all attendees to air their feelings.

11. However real the board's desire to fully inform and invite the input of the community-at-large, there remains a strong suspicion among the citizenry that the board and administration regularly withhold information and release one-sided "PR" in an effort to control the constituency rather than inform it. Referring to the commonly-held conviction that issues never seem to appear in the Bulletin or the Wilmette Life until they are near decision or decided, one resident said, "I don't think they want you aware of what they're considering until it's a fact." Most participants were not so cynical, but they were determined to make their own judgments and draw their own conclusions; and most people expressed the opinion that the information currently made available to them is too superficial, too self-serving, and too late to allow that.

Any communication from the district must be open and thorough enough to overcome natural suspicion. This is a sophisticated community and people are well aware of the natural tendency of any organization to protect its product and its autonomy. They are happy to learn of all the awards the district earns and of the many interesting opportunities offered to our children, but they want to know what the inevitable problems are.

A number of participants of all ages pointed out that a more spirited and debate-oriented presentation of school news would be both more interesting, and more believable. They acknowledged a tendency to pay more attention to controversial

news, especially the letters to the editor. One mother of grown children commented that the Bulletin doesn't touch on controversies, "but I'm sure there are some - there always have been. It makes more interesting reading." It also appears to make for more believable reading; many people felt the district communication, written and oral, presents a too-rosy picture of a perfect school system with few unmet needs. This is not only unbelievable in itself, but raises questions for many participants about the district's claim of financial need. In the words of one parent, "There's a gap there. We need more money, but at the same time, we're OK?"

12. Coverage of District 39 news in the Wilmette Life was almost universally regarded as inadequate. Parents were particularly adamant about this, but preschool parents were unimpressed, as well. Many parents found coverage to be inaccurate and spotty; people in several groups noted that articles tend to be event and enrichment oriented, with only minimal coverage of issues. Our participants wanted to see more coverage of board agendas, discussions and actions, and more background information in issues of concern to the district. They also would like to see a forum for public debate, encouraging letters from readers, and full discussion of the concerns of readers.

13. The Bulletin can be a valuable tool for the school district in improving communication, since the newsletter is already a primary path of communication and has the attention of the populace. Everyone was familiar with it, claimed at least to skim over each issue, and took it seriously. That in itself is an amazing accomplishment. Most participants seemed to think it is professionally done and serves a valuable purpose, since it is the only school news some households receive.

Non-parents generally found the Bulletin adequate for their purposes. The Bulletin was appreciated as a general overview of District 39 news, especially by those who have no other contact with the district. It was interesting, however, that participants of each focus group agreed that the Bulletin is primarily directed to some other interest group, and of limited interest or usefulness to their own group. Most members of all focus groups said they only skim over the Bulletin to find the few items they want to read.

Parents and preschool parents were almost unanimously critical of the content of the Bulletin. They tended to find articles perfunctory and one-sided ("PR" was used fairly often to describe the tenor of the publication), and therefore of limited value. Most readers, even those who liked the publication, found it both bland and of limited credibility. It is unanimously viewed as a public relations document, and therefore, is not taken very seriously. This is its Achilles's Heel.

Many participants felt the Bulletin should put less emphasis on reporting school activities and more on issues, curriculum, and teachers or teaching methods. Parents found it to be out of date, and concerned with events and programs parents already know about. Preschooler parents complained that while the school news coverage gives them a general impression of lots of enrichment and interesting activities, it doesn't really tell them what they want to know about District 39 classrooms or philosophies, nor does it address their special needs (for a discussion of those needs, see paragraph 7 above). Parents, non-parents, and preschool parents all said they glance at the articles about school activities, but only for an overview. Those articles could probably safely be cut down to a fraction of their current space.

Suggestions for improvement made by participants have already been covered in other sections of this report; more expansive coverage and explanation of issues, more notice of issues and agendas, timetables, etc., prior to decision-making, more background articles and discussion of alternative actions, more controversy, letters to the editor or other opportunities for citizen input, and more special interest news. Our own review of past Bulletins revealed that there has been

consistent coverage of the issues people mentioned in the focus groups, both before and after decisions. Coverage has been brief, however, and has evidently not offered readers enough information to hold their attention.

SUBCOMMITTEE RECOMMENDATIONS

We recommend that the board take the following actions to improve communication and trust between the school district and the public. We believe that two basic elements of good communication - a sincere desire by both parties to exchange ideas, and the existence of some vehicle for communication - are already present. However, inadequate channels for community input into district decisions, inadequate contacts between the majority of the community and the school system, and a perception that the district is more interested in public relations than in communication have hampered district efforts to engage the community's active interest. We feel that the following steps would encourage community members to give more attention to school issues and hence to better understanding the district's needs. Simultaneously, they give the district an opportunity to better understand the needs of the community.

A. We recommend the establishment of advisory school councils at each of the district schools in order to provide an opportunity for discussion of issues with input by the administration, teachers, parents, and others. Provision should be made for the board to put issues before the councils for discussion and to set a date for non-binding recommendations to the board by each council. The board would defer decisions until after recommendations have been heard. The council could independently raise its own issues for discussion and submit its findings to the board. The board may wish, immediately or at a future date, to make council decisions on some local issues binding.

The councils would give parents the opportunity for input they have requested, provide another vehicle for the flow of information and ideas on school issues, give parents, teachers, and administrators an opportunity to discuss problems in a situation where input from all three is readily available, and encourage interest by more parents. Council members would have prior notice of issues under board consideration and would be responsible for disseminating information to members of the school community and receiving comments.

In order for the councils to be effective as conduits for communication, there must be grass-roots input on the make-up of the councils. We suggest that PTAs, teachers, and the administration be consulted on their ideas on who should serve, lengths of terms, who should appoint or elect how many members, etc. These groups should also be consulted on what issues should initially be presented to councils and how often the councils should meet. Since the goal is to encourage the flow of information and ideas both ways, it is imperative that there be strong community ownership of the councils, and that they not be viewed as merely "inside" rubber stamps of board policy.

Ideally, councils would also include non-parents from the local community. In the event that councils spend significant time on details not of interest to non-parents, the board could consider some sort of associate or advisory role for non-parents.

Some study will be necessary before implementing councils. We recommend that the board delegate that study immediately and expedite consideration of the matter, so that the councils can be put into action as soon as possible. We further urge that the board keep in mind that the councils must have some real power in order to attract serious community input. There may be several methods of empowerment possible (making some council decisions binding, guaranteeing council input before certain types of board decisions are made, etc.) The Glenview school district is using school councils - effectively, we understand - and might be one resource in studying council possibilities.

B. While the school council proposal is under consideration, the administration, the board and the PTAs should work together to inform and involve the parent community. The local PTAs currently devote only a small percentage of their time and resources to issues before the board, school finances, legislative school issues, curriculum, etc., and very little effort goes into communication with the administration or the board on those matters (except, of course, when an occasional issue catches fire - usually after an unpopular action has already been taken.) If the board provided the PTAs with agendas of board meetings (to the extent known) and some of the background information given to board members, and the administration offered regular briefings or other information to the PTA board observers or other leaders, the PTAs might be prodded into putting more of their time and resources into dissemination of that information and discussion of issues before the board. At least the parent community might become more involved if the PTAs could be encouraged to be more participatory, and the board might find itself with better parent input.

C. In order to encourage community participation at school board meetings and maximum citizen involvement in issues before the board, we recommend that agendas for all school board meetings be published in the education section of the Wilmette Life, that the board consider meeting occasionally in the various schools (perhaps with some pre-planned participation by the school council or a special emphasis on hearing issues related to that school), and that the school board meetings be televised. The agenda should be published weekly in the same place in the paper, and might be set off by a special box so that it is easily found. Of course, the entire agenda would probably not be available in time to publish, but some items are known well ahead of the meetings. The agenda might also be broadcast on the cable TV channel for local affairs.

D. Inasmuch as the local newspaper is an important channel for communication with most households in the community, we suggest that the board consider obtaining a double-page spread in the Wilmette Life on a regular basis. The space could be donated, subsidized by local businesses or individuals or PTAs, or sold to the district at a reduced rate. It would be most effective if regular, perhaps twice monthly, and dedicated to educating readers on the state of education in the 90s and the specific problems and challenges faced by our school system. One possible approach would attack a single topic in each issue, including several short articles on different aspects of the topic - general trends, how another district has handled the issue, the pros and cons of various possible solutions, detailed information about the situation in our district. Each issue should contain a section for letters from citizens. Articles must be balanced, present both sides of issues, and provide some depth to an issue. It seems that a little controversy would be appreciated by most readers.

E. The Bulletin coverage of school events should be reduced, and more space should be devoted to coverage of issues before the board, changes in the field of education, curriculum issues, teacher interviews, and an emphasis on the daily classroom rather than special events. Issue coverage should include exploration of different approaches to problems, background information, open debate, hard facts, and dates of meetings (where known). Discussions of curriculum and educational philosophy should avoid the use of "educationese" and concentrate on specifics. Articles on awards won by schools and teachers should be interspersed with articles containing frank discussion of imminent or potential problems or things that need improvement. A regular feature briefly highlighting some issue people should be aware of would be very helpful; some participants liked the idea of a letter from the superintendent in each Bulletin to serve this function. Finally, each issue should reserve some space for letters to the editor - this is crucial to create the feeling of exchange and to add interest.

F. The school board should use the school councils, the PTAs, the Bulletin, and the Wilmette Life to test the waters on issues early in the decision-making process. It ensures that all points of view will be considered and gives the board some early information about community reaction. Moreover, it keeps the

board from getting too far ahead of the community on issues; when that happens, the board has to either wait for the community to catch up, or force a decision that the community isn't prepared for or doesn't fully understand - both of which are situations to be avoided.

G. The board and administration should make use of the high level of interest participants expressed regarding certain issues to get and hold their attention. Our participants were very interested in teacher opinions (about class size, curriculum, readiness for school, etc.) and in giving teachers awards and special recognition. They wanted to learn more about how our schools compare in quality and philosophy with others. These topics should be explored in the Bulletin, as potential programs for community groups, etc.

H. We need to develop means of addressing the specific concerns of subgroups in the community. There were two very good suggestions to deal with the special interests of preschool parents: 1] that the Bulletin include a regular feature addressed to parents of preschoolers and dealing with readiness questions, kindergarten scheduling, questions from parents, etc., and 2] that there be a preschool PTA, as there used to be when Wilmette schools offered preschool. They are both very good suggestions, and we suggest they be implemented. The preschool PTA might be a service the school PTAs could offer to parents in their district; probably a few meetings a year would be sufficient. Others suggested a handbook for preschool parents to introduce them to the system, and that merits consideration also. Kindergarten enrichment is a very big issue in this group, and a knotty public relations issue for the schools could be resolved if someone could convince the park district to offer more enrichment possibilities.

Non-parents are a little harder to address, but they did express a need for more background on issues, and on modern educational needs in general. Perhaps a special column in the Bulletin could be devoted to discussion of the ways in which education has changed, the number of "frills" which are either state-mandated or paid for with special grants, the advances in computer education, and other issues foreign to them. Those articles would no doubt be of general interest, but they would be of particular usefulness to those whose knowledge in the field of education is out-of-date.

I. In order to develop stronger ties between the schools and the community they serve, and particularly between the schools and the non-parent majority, efforts should be made to take the schools to the people. To some extent, this can be accomplished by simple means: perhaps a permanent display area in the Wilmette Library, where resources on education and information about our schools could be kept, as well as more eye-catching displays; a booth at the Community Fair and other public gatherings; making the junior high bands and choruses available to community groups (especially senior citizens). Many of the informative programs the district offers to PTA and other school groups would be interesting and enlightening to other community groups as well, and should be offered, or even marketed, to them. Older non-parents liked that idea and expressed an interest in programs about curriculum, FOCUS, and other special conferences, anti-drug programs, finances, and teacher profiles. They also suggested that more discussion groups "like this one" (the focus group) would be interesting and informative.

J. We recommend the formation of an advisory committee to assist the board and administration in implementing some of the communication initiatives suggested by this report. This group could be particularly useful as resources for the district on issues to include in the Bulletin and the Wilmette Life, and as sounding boards regarding the presentation of those issues. The committee might include a Village-Wide PTA representative (with the suggestion that each PTA have a representative to funnel ideas and questions to the Village-Wide person), a CRC representative, an at-large member, and perhaps a preschool parent.

CONCLUSION

We feel that communication between the district and the community can not be substantially improved without an organized effort to secure community involvement. If the recommendations of the committee are implemented, a network for two-way communication can be developed, easing the frustration currently felt by both the board and the community. Unfortunately, the burden of initiating changes and reversing the inertia and cynicism of the community must rest on the board and administration, but the PTAs and parent community are likely to accept the challenge readily and have the potential to help reach the community at large.

A D D E N D A

1. Preschool Parents Focus Group Summary
2. Non-Parents Focus Group Summary
3. Parent Focus Group Summary
4. Summary of Discussions with Teacher Representatives

CRC COMMUNICATIONS SUBCOMMITTEE
PRESCHOOL PARENTS FOCUS GROUP
JUNE 25, 1991

Short introduction and revelation of the fact that discussion will be taped.

Q: WHAT IS YOUR PRIMARY SOURCE OF INFORMATION ABOUT OUR SCHOOLS?

Parents in neighborhood mostly, but also newsletter and WLife.

Printed word--doesn't know many parents

Not well-informed

Bulletin, WLife, or students--babysitters, kids at church--hasn't paid a great deal of attention to it--not yet too relevant, and more interested in nursery school news

WLife and Bulletin

Same--especially Bulletin

WLife and nieces and nephews and friends

Parents and students, followed by WLife and then Bulletin...has read it only once. Finds different things in WLife and Bulletin.

Neighbors and parents of kids' friends. Bulletin.

Q: LET'S TALK ABOUT COMMUNICATION WITH NEIGHBORS AND FRIENDS. ARE YOU EVER PUZZLED ENOUGH OR HAVE QUESTIONS SO THAT YOU CONTACT SOMEONE IN THE SCHOOLS TO GET MORE INFORMATION?

There seemed to be a willingness to call the school or the principal, but discussion was in the context of questions that would specifically affect their children--e.g. morning or afternoon kindergarten placement. In response to a follow-up question about whether there is a need for a booklet or other source of names and numbers to call, participants said no. They felt they could get that information readily and would only lose a directory.

One woman noted word-of-mouth can be misleading. There followed a discussion of the negative word out (and resulting worries) about how a.m. vs p.m. kindergarten selections are made, and concerns about being able to take advantage of the Park District enrichment program. One woman said she had never seen anything in writing about how that is handled, but perhaps the district would provide that information as the time got closer. Several said they would call the schools about that, and a need for information from the district to combat rumor seemed apparent.

Q: LET'S TURN NOW TO THE WRITTEN WORD. ARE YOU GETTING THE KIND OF INFORMATION THAT YOU NEED?

One woman thought the account of the cutting of some health personnel in the Bulletin was much more veiled than the clearer and more informative account in the WLife. She felt there was a striking discrepancy in clarity of presentation.

Another commented that the Bulletin is boring, and she only checks to see if there is anything which will directly affect her kids.

Someone else found it interesting, but superficial. He seemed to want to hear

more about people in depth, about teachers (other than the name of someone who got an award). He said from reading about the AIDS death, he felt he learned more about the type of people in the system and was very impressed. (He agreed that to some extent a written newspaper was not the best source for the type of information he wants, but seemed to feel it could be more helpful than it is). Another speaker said she got a better feel for the schools from reading an article about Beth Savage (which she thought she had seen in some other source), than from anything she had ever seen in the Bulletin.

Someone felt the Bulletin was geared more toward parents of kids in the schools than toward the preschool parents, but others felt there were items of interest to their group. There were again concerns that issues were inadequately or muddily covered, and agreement that issues addressed should be addressed more thoroughly and clearly. One woman felt there was a "conscious effort to avoid making it controversial or getting people aroused". One dad said he didn't expect it to be controversial or contain "fair-minded" discussions of issues, because it is basically a PR piece for the administration and does not represent the views of teachers or parents. He felt most such newsletters could be expected to be bland and to simply try to give a good impression. He also noted that the WLife is not apt to contain any hard-hitting stories, but is geared more toward positive profiles, etc. He concluded that none of the written material is useful for getting an idea about the quality of teaching, etc., but is event and PR -geared.

Q: DO ANY OF YOU WANT TO COMMENT ON HOW SCHOOLS ARE REPORTED ON IN THE WLIFE?

There was generally an awareness of articles about special events and programs, but not a great deal of interest in actually reading or following it. There was a feeling that it didn't address their need for information about curriculum, quality, etc., but a few people did feel it gave a generally good impression about the enrichment offered.

Someone raised the question about whether the district offered any information of a substantive nature for preschool parents, and Bob referred to the new parent orientation nights at the schools.

Q: IT WOULD BE HELPFUL IF WE COULD BE VERY SPECIFIC ABOUT HOW THE DISTRICT COULD IMPROVE COMMUNICATION. ARE WE GIVING YOU THE KIND OF INFORMATION YOU WANT, OR IF YOU WANT DIFFERENT INFORMATION, PERHAPS YOU COULD RECOMMEND WAYS WE COULD GET IT TO YOU BEFORE YOU BECOME A PART OF THE SYSTEM. WE FEEL WE ARE NOT REACHING ALL PEOPLE, PARTICULARLY ABOUT THE CRITICAL PROBLEMS FACING THE DISTRICT.

The immediate response was: what are the critical problems facing the district? Usually a bulletin from another type of organization is accompanied by a letter from the head which addresses the most important challenges or issues are.

It is not apparent to the reader of the Bulletin or the WLife what those issues are for the schools. Perhaps the Bulletin should contain such a column or letter to focus the important issues or challenges for people.

Another parent suggested a column to address the concerns of preschool parents, and perhaps one for nonparents, and one for school parents. Some feeling

was expressed that it was ok for it to be bland and noncontroversial --or at least to present the positive viewpoint, so long as it addresses real issues or various constituents so that they don't just "chuck" it. There are other forums for long, issues-oriented and controversial discussions.

The parent who originally said the Bulletin was bland and a PR piece clarified that that was not really a criticism, but an assessment that it is the product of a bureaucracy protective of its product. He feels there is no substitute for visiting classrooms, attending meetings, and direct contact for parents who really want to be informed.

Others felt the Bulletin ought to address the critical issues, and do it clearly and fairly.

There was considerable interest expressed in class size issues.

There were more expressions of interest in a letter from the superintendent in each Bulletin -- perhaps directing attention to other important articles in the issue. The problem with the WLife, or any newspaper, one man noted, is that you never know when you are being called to battle based on misinformation, and the administration should speak to issues, even if it is "the party line", so that there is a source for the administrations's point of view.

Q: WHAT DO YOU THINK OF THE QUALITY OF THE EDUCATIONAL REPORTING IN THE WLIFE?

Someone said they just repeat what is given to them, and another responded that they don't even do that -- that it's almost impossible to get news in.

Again it was stated that one would have no way of telling from the printed material available whether Dist. 39 schools are good, sliding, etc. The report card was noted as an exception, with some qualification as to usefulness of standardized tests. General faith in the quality of the schools was expressed.

Q: ANY FINAL WORDS?

Do you send out a "This is what happens when your child goes to school" type booklet? How identify families about to enter the system? Bob responded that there are newspaper notices to register.

How do you know if your child is ready for school? Several people wanted to know what basis the school uses to assess readiness. Holding back children was discussed and a great need felt for information. Orientation time is too late. Bulletin should address. A kindergarten book is given out at registration.

An article by the superintendent and the kindergarten book (or something with the needed info) were again requested.

CRC Communications Subcommittee
Nonparent Focus Group
June 27, 1991

Facilitator: Robert Blaufuss

Participants: Wilmette residents who do not currently have children in Wilmette schools.

1. Short introduction and revelation of the fact that discussion is being taped.

2. Participants:

- a. mother of St. Francis children and one who just graduated from WJHS
- b. mother of N. Shore Country Day children -- oldest went through Dist. 39 and New Trier .
- c. retired man -- 4 kids went through D.39 schools
- d. retired school psychologist -- mother of grown children
- e. mother of 4 D.39 kids all grown
- f. father of 3 D. 39 kids all grown
- g. mother of 4 kids grown --worked yrs ago as aide for D39

Q: PLEASE SHARE THE PRIMARY SOURCE OF YOUR INFORMATION ABOUT OUR SCHOOLS.

1. Bulletin and jr. hi mail -- negative to WLife
2. WLife --mostly event source-- hard to keep track now that she has no kids in D39 schools -- gets newsletter but perceives as "lot of PR--only good things are reported". Seemed to think biased and not more informative than WLife
3. ret. Pres of PR firm -- thinks Bulletin informative and helpful and likes W. Life-- finds them adequate
4. same sources
5. no word of mouth

others said do read Bulletin and W. Life

There followed a discussion of the Report Card and whether it is mailed to only parents-- some nonparents remembered having read reports of it in the WLife but none remembered having received it. General agreement it would be interesting to see. It was noted that not all residents get W Life, and so it is important for the school district to see that important information gets to all homes in the district.

Q: ARE THERE THINGS THE WLIFE DOES NOT COVER THAT YOU WOULD LIKE IT TO?

1. It doesn't seem to cover awards to teachers or special efforts or programs.
2. There should be more information about enrollment at specific schools and testing and rating of schools, without need to wade through the whole report card.
3. nonparents less apt to read whole Bulletin -- give it overview
4. tend to pay attention only when \$ asked for

Q. ARE WE GETTING PEOPLE ENOUGH INFORMATION TO ENABLE THEM TO FORM, OR

PERHAPS CHANGE, OPINIONS?

One woman said the Bulletin doesn't touch on controversies, but she's sure there are some--there always have been. It makes more interesting reading if controversial issues are addressed and debated.

Q : WHAT IS NECESSARY TO MAKE SCHOOLS MORE EFFECTIVE?

1. Money -- one of the parents of children currently enrolled in private school felt that in the referendum campaign, the issue of cuts which might have to be made was "overblown". She also thought that the previous board had felt if they spent the entire reserve, the community would come to the rescue, but with the schools doing so well and class sizes so low (she mentioned primary classes when her daughter was at Central), it might be hard to sell.

Q: HAS ANYONE RECENTLY BEEN MOVED ON ANY ISSUE TO ATTEND A BOARD MEETING OR WRITE A LETTER OR OTHERWISE EXPRESS AN OPINION OR QUESTION?

Silence and mumbled nos. One woman pointed out that its hard once you're "outside the system" -- until a proposal comes for more money. Someone (a/) said a bad job was done on the last referendum campaign. She or someone else added that it had been a mistake to only inform and campaign to parents, and that obviously a lot of non Dist.39 parents had voted.

The same woman (Speaker "a". I think) asked whether nonparents would go to a board meeting or otherwise speak out and over what issue-- finance? or curriculum?

An older lady said taxes went up dramatically last year and if the schools felt a need to ask for more, it would "raise a red flag--I know it would with my husband".

Q: WHAT ARE SOME OTHER THINGS YOU WOULD LIKE TO KNOW ABOUT THE SCHOOLS?

Curriculum. Whether its staying up to what I thought it used to be. Also profiles on teachers, special conferences, FOCUS (a explained what this is and that it is very well done). Someone mentioned anti-drug programs and steps to keep gangs out (referring to New Trier).

Q: ANY OTHER ISSUES YOU WOULD LIKE TO RAISE? (silence)

Q: (Oak Stevens, who was sitting in as an observer): ARE THERE ANY OTHER VEHICLES YOU WOULD LIKE TO SEE DEVELOPED TO GET INFORMATION?

PTA newsletters noted. When asked, others said they might be interested in receiving it (response was lukewarm)

Q: (by Linda Hunt^{Hey:}~~ington~~, CRC observer) IF THERE WERE SPECIAL OPEN HOUSES AT THE SCHOOLS FOR CITIZENS WHO DO NOT HAVE CHILDREN IN THE SCHOOLS, WOULD YOU ATTEND?

Unanimous no, although someone suggested perhaps preschool parents would. It was also suggested that a booth at the Wilmette Fair (or other affairs when people are already out) might be effective. "Something on curriculum or what's new at school" could be featured. People are too busy to make a special trip out, but if you can catch them when they are already out, they may be

interested.

Q: EMPHASIZED THE POINT THAT GENERALLY WE THINK OF GIVING CURRICULUM INFORMATION ONLY TO PARENTS, AND THAT GIVING SOMETHING MORE SUBSTANTIVE, LIKE CURRICULUM, TO THE GENERAL PUBLIC WOULD AT LEAST GIVE THEM A BASIS FOR ASKING QUESTIONS.

Response was more lively than heretofore, and there followed a brief discussion of curriculum changes, whether such changes are positive or negative, and how performance can be assessed.

One gentleman, emphasizing that he was very supportive of the schools and their need for adequate funds, expressed his concern (which he felt was common among older citizens) that there are too many "frills, or possibly unnecessary things" and too much administration. He noted that when they went to school, there were no administrative people; and he referred to the Chicago situation. He also stated that he didn't think anyone would want to reduce the teaching staff. "For those of us in our position...some of us on fixed income...we want to be real sure that the money is spent well and that there is not too much overhead..too much administrative fat. I have no idea how many people there are in the administrative building, and I don't know what they do. I know what teachers do..."

Another person stated that the district does very well in keeping these costs down, and there was some discussion (and a great deal of interest and participation on the part of most or all present) in how many administrators there are, their roles, the administrative and general cost per student, etc. Bob and others present briefly shared some knowledge on the subject, and there were some expressions of satisfaction and even mild admiration.

Another older gentleman complained of forced retirement of several (at least 6) older, but "very good" teachers. He claimed they were forced to take "voluntary" early retirement by administrative harassment, unfair evaluation reports, etc.

Q: WHAT KIND OF GRADE WOULD YOU GIVE THE SCHOOL SYSTEM AND WHAT KIND OF GRADE SHOULD A SCHOOL SYSTEM IN A COMMUNITY LIKE WILMETTE GET?

One gentleman gave the system an "A", or on a scale of 1 to 100, a 100 .

He added that certainly retired people are reluctant to have any tax increases, and if one is needed, they should be addressed and "given a rationale for it". There followed a discussion of how few taxpayers have children in the schools and how necessary it is to target nonparents in any referendum campaign.

An ex-district 39 parent said she would think schools would be in better financial shape now than years ago, when there were more students for roughly the same number of taxpayers. Someone mentioned that there are many more programs necessary now -- many state-mandated, and others came up with

examples: computers, learning disability programs, etc.

Another participant cited several articles maintaining that children graduating from grammar school today are not as well educated as they were 30 years ago. There followed a spirited discussion of negative comparisons of American students today to Japanese, German and earlier students. This led to comparison of Wilmette students at New Trier with students from other feeder schools, and it was stated that Wilmette students tend not to score as highly as some others, although no one seemed too interested in this.

It was suggested that legislative issues be discussed in the Bulletin --the tax cap issue and the court case challenging school funding were cited as examples.

Q: WHERE SHOULD THIS INFORMATION COME FROM AND IN WHAT FORM?

1. The Bulletin
2. A weekly column in the WLife about educational issues
3. Letters to the editor -- they always get read.
4. An area of the public library could be devoted to displays about the schools or educational issues. Perhaps reports and articles relevant to current issues could be kept there. The library attracts a wide variety of people.
5. Discussion groups like this one.
6. Returning to the problem of reaching preschool parents, one lady asked if we still have a Preschool PTA. Evidently, Wilmette once had a PTA for parents whose children would soon enter the system (perhaps only when the schools also had a preschool program?). It was an effective way to get necessary information to those people and to allow them to meet and support each other. This brought conversation to the regular PTA and there was some interest in hearing some PTA news.

Q: I'D LIKE TO GO AROUND THE CIRCLE AND GIVE EACH PERSON THE OPPORTUNITY TO HAVE ONE LAST WORD.

1. She would like to see awards for exceptional teachers (and read about them).
2. A question was raised about the type of salary schedule we have and the salary range of the highest-paid teacher.
3. Someone asked if Wilmette follows the same procedure as New Trier re laying off and rehiring newer teachers.
4. A private school parent suggested that all the PTAs give some money to a central fund, to which classroom teachers could apply for grants (it's unclear exactly what for, but it appears she means more for study opportunities for teachers than for classroom projects). North Shore Country Day does this and it rewards and renews teachers and produces enthusiasm. She thinks the PTAs now spend too much on enrichment which is almost distracting and excessive.
5. Suggests teacher excellence awards made within the system.
6. It looks like the Bulletin will have to be expanded.

"If you're on the PTA, you know everything."

For District 39 parents who are not actively involved in the PTA, getting accurate information about what is going on in Wilmette schools can sometimes be an impossible mission.

Parents who participated in two focus groups held on July 11, 1991, felt that they had to make a concerted effort if they wanted to have up-to-date information on the workings of their schools.

The focus groups, set up by the communications subcommittee of the Community Review Committee, were comprised of approximately eight parents from each of the four feeder schools and Wilmette Junior High. Some of the parents had preschoolers as well as school-age children while others had children at the elementary and junior high level. One parent had a child at New Trier in addition to the elementary and junior high schools.

The focus group parents also represented different levels of involvement with their respective schools. Some were very active in the PTA while others were unable to attend meetings because they still had young children at home. While the method of selection was far from scientific, an attempt was made in setting up the focus groups to obtain a variety of parents in terms of feeder schools, ages of children and level of PTA involvement.

"I missed a few PTA meetings and found out at the next one that I had been redistricted," one mother told our focus group.

A reminder that information about the redistricting plan had appeared in the District 39 newsletter brought a flurry of comments about that publication.

One participant said it was "nicely printed, very fancy but out of date." Another felt that the purpose of the newsletter was to touch base with members of the community who don't use the schools. For parents, she called it "very out of date."

"I don't read that," another participant commented, "I feel like those are fluff pieces, propaganda. What I want to know is the rationale and analytical thinking behind their decisions. I feel like that's not going to be communicated."

"I don't think the newsletter contains enough information or details," said one mother. "I kind of agree that it's a fluff piece. If I needed information, I wouldn't wait for that to come."

"They ignore all the garbage you know is going on and nobody wants to talk about it," another added.

"We need to know what our tax dollars are going for not just the nice stuff but the meat," said one resident.

Participants in both focus groups felt they could not count on Pioneer Press to provide news of the schools. One resident told of attending a school board meeting and then reading about the same session in the Wilmette Life.

If was as if the resident and the reporter had been to entirely different meetings.

Focus participants felt that other than attending PTA meetings, the best way of learning what was happening in the schools was face to face or phone-to-phone communication with other parents or school personnel.

Another communication vehicle mentioned was the newsletters put out by the various PTAs. In discussing the value of this communication, one participant characterized the principal's report as "a feel good message," pointing out that this section would be an opportunity to provide more substantive information.

"I don't think they want you aware of what they're considering until its a fact," one resident said.

Both focus groups felt that communication between the administration and parents was much better at the primary school level than at the Junior High.

"I feel the Junior High seriously needs some work" one parent said. "I know a lot of people who feel they don't want to talk to you. They don't want to return your calls. They don't want to tell you what's going on. I think their attitude is that your kid is old enough and they don't need you to be involved.

Parents in the second focus group of the evening agreed with one participant who pointed out that communication was a two-way street. This mother said she wanted an opportunity to communicate back and used the newly adopted foreign language program as an example.

"Was there any attempt on the part of the board to get input from both sides on foreign language?" she asked, adding that she would have liked to have had an opportunity to oppose the program.

She said there should be some kind of prior formal notice that the board is considering a change in the curriculum. Perhaps the District needs its own version of the Federal Register.

Concerning major issues facing the District 39 Schools, both focus groups felt money was a prime consideration.

"They obviously want to get money from the community," one participant said. "They must think that to do their job they have to get more money. I really don't know whether they do need more money. We're trying to control taxes at all levels in our society."

Another participant talked about the ambiguity of a recent letter from the District concerning cutbacks.

"Either you believed the cuts wouldn't hurt us, which meant we didn't need the nurses in the first place, or you disbelieved the letter. There's a gap there. We need more money but at the same time we're okay?"

Both focus groups expressed concern that increasing enrollment in District 39 would make any financial problems worse.

"I'm concerned for the future because isn't our school age population growing? That's why I'm worried about money. If I think things are tight

now, what about the future? Why did we tear down Howard School and close New Trier West?"

Class size was an issued briefly discussed by focus participants who agreed it posed something of a dilemma for everyone.

"You can't set hard and fast rules on class size," one participant said.

"Class size is not a monetary issue, it's a philosophical one," another said.

Responding to a request for ideas on how to improve communications, one focus member suggested taking school board meetings to the various feeder schools. Another suggested publishing a detailed agenda for each school board meeting in the Wilmette Life.

The subject of broadcasting the meetings on Cable T-V came up. Several mothers with very young children said they would welcome an opportunity to see the meetings on television or be able to tape them for later viewing.

Other suggestions were:

More first class letters from the schools on various topics

More background information on administrative decision-making

A benefit/cost analysis of the District 39 Newsletter

Devising a method of obtaining feedback.

SUMMARY OF 7/31/91 DISCUSSION BETWEEN MEMBERS OF THE COMMUNICATIONS SUB-COMMITTEE OF THE CRC AND REPRESENTATIVES OF WILMETTE DISTRICT 39 TEACHERS

An informal discussion between committee members and teacher representatives focused on communication between teachers and district 39 administrators and Board of Education. The teacher representatives were drawing upon their own opinions and surveys they had conducted with all district 39 teachers.

The teachers expressed a desire to improve communication with the administration and the Board of Education. They want "involvement, not public relations." They want an administration that has a philosophy of inclusion. Their goal is to move towards a consensus model of decision making that might even include non-parent groups. Some discussion was held about Glenview's moves towards "building councils." The teacher representatives expressed great interest in that concept, although not necessarily following Glenview's model exactly. They suggested forming advisory building councils with a list of specific issues to be reviewed by each council.

The committee structure was a source of frustration to the teachers. Because they have limited input in picking representatives for the various committees, they did not feel the committees added to communication. More importantly, especially in curriculum areas, they felt the committee recommendations were not strongly endorsed because of alienation from the committees. Committees are seen as an extension of administration authority, not a true consensus mechanism.

The teachers also expressed frustration at what they referred to as "the impersonal nature" of much communication from the administration. They felt the administration and the Board should spend more time in the classroom and in pursuing informal communication with teachers. The staff felt much information was being concealed from them, especially around economic issues.

The teachers felt the Board has no specific mechanism for getting feedback from the community or teachers. They felt frustration at their participation in an administrative survey that was conducted in May in order to give the administration and the Board feedback about teacher attitudes. They felt the Board did use the survey and they aren't clear as to the reasoning of the Board.

Teachers feel they are "meetinged to death", that most of these meetings are not constructive, and that the agendas are manipulated. Written communication is overwhelming and not particularly useful. Teacher/administrators, that is, jobs that are listed as teacher positions but that don't have direct student contact, are looked upon as barriers to communication, not enhancers of communication.