

Virginia's First Elected School Board

IT IS COMMONPLACE for public school administrations to get out ahead of their communities and thus be hard-pressed for support for necessary school improvements. But it is news when a community within an eighteen-month period rises up to push a lagging school system into an improvement program by demanding and getting a popularly controlled school board—particularly in a state which has had no elected school boards.

This is what has happened across the Potomac from the nation's capital in Arlington, Virginia; technically a county but actually an urban community of 124,000, housing the families of thousands of professional and executive employees of the Federal Government and of many national organizations headquartered in Washington, D. C. In wealth and income Arlington ranks among the highest communities in the United States. In the education of its adult population (median of 12.2 years for those twenty-five and over), it is the number one county in the nation, and second among urban communities over 50,000.

A Lagging School System

Little wonder that parents and other civic-minded citizens became impatient with an anachronistic school system. The schools were not only over-crowded from unprecedented growth in the war years, but were inadequate in program and plagued by run-down buildings; poor facilities for Negro children; only two and a half-hour sessions for first and second grades; no public kindergartens; and dire needs in the high schools. Sporadic efforts over the years to get more support for the schools made little headway.

It was following a disappointing school budget hearing in the spring of 1946 that the Citizens' Committee for School Improvement was born. Starting as an organization of several hundred persons, the Committee in a little over a year, under

the leadership of a government agricultural specialist and former educator, grew to 1,400 active, determined citizens.

Since Arlington's school board was still appointed by a round-about process placing ultimate control outside the county, the Citizen's Committee, with the help of other civic organizations, spearheaded getting enabling legislation at the state capital providing for election of the school board, subject to referendum. The Committee's leaders studied the school laws and, armed with a citizen's petition, made a memorable visit to Richmond in January, 1947, which resulted in the county's delegation in the legislature introducing the bill and successfully piloting it through.

Petitioners Exert Pressure

Meanwhile, perceiving the need for capital expenditures, the Committee had in August, 1946 secured a petition of 5,000 signatures which exerted sufficient pressure on the existing school board to get a bond issue before the people. Although hoped for earlier, the bond question finally appeared in May, 1947 on the same ballot with the referendum. Part of the bond issue was voted (over half of what the petitioners had asked for); but the vote to have the school board popularly elected was overwhelming.

The Citizens' Committee, now growing rapidly in prestige and numbers, began working with several other civic and educational organizations on a convention to nominate candidates for the new board coming up for election in November. Over fifty organizations sent 107 delegates to this convention which, from a panel of twenty-six suggested names, finally chose a slate of five candidates. At first there appeared to be no organized opposition, but before the deadline seven others, including four of the current school board members, filed to run. Following a whirl-wind campaign, probably unprecedented in school board annals, in

which the candidates spoke at scores of civic meetings and in which 400 canvassers called on nearly all the voters in the community to acquaint them with the convention nominees and their school improvement platform, the nominees were elected in November, 1947 with an average vote of two to one over the opposition. Three were elected for four-year terms and two for two years. The amount of energy contributed by enthusiastic, able citizens without thought of personal gain toward this campaign (research, literature, canvassing, and advertising) forms a significant chapter in the history of local democratic action.

Is It Constitutional?

The main battle seemed to be over, but about two weeks before the new board was to take office on January 1, 1948, the old board, after failing election, filed suit challenging the constitutionality of the school board election law. A storm of indignation arose, even among those who had voted against the new board. A trio of the county's top lawyers volunteered to take the case without pay and succeeded in bringing it immediately to trial. They secured by January 6 a decision from the county court, manned by a disinterested judge from another county, that supported the constitutionality of the law and, therefore, the validity of the new board's taking office. Later the case was appealed by the old board to the state's highest court, which postpones a final decision until late in 1948; but few lawyers have any doubt as to its favorable outcome.

Meanwhile the new board, undaunted by the constitutionality issue, began planning its work in December with the advice of a group of top-level educators from the U.S. Office of Education and the NEA—the advisers mostly residents of Arlington. The board first appointed fourteen exploratory committees—made up of teachers, citizens nominated by civic organizations and PTA's, and expert consultants—to advise the board immediately on budget needs for 1948-49 in various areas: primary grades, health, music, personnel, maintenance.

Although the school board secured an increased budget, it fell short of its first goals because final budget approval still rests in the general governmental body of the county. Nevertheless, within its first seven months in office the board, besides its budget revision, has appointed a consultant who is working primarily on a building program; conducted a school census; appointed citizen advisory committees for each school; held board meetings in a place convenient for citizen participants; started on comprehensive building renovations; made key changes in staff; arranged for a sale of bonds; revised the promotional system; corrected teacher salary inequities and established paid sick leave; developed more teacher participation in school policy decisions; and made many other changes which parents had been urging for a decade. Arlington's schools, under popular control, are finally catching up with the community.—O. Glenn Stahl, member of the Arlington County School Board, written for the ASCD Legislative Committee.



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