

## CHAPTER IX

### PROJECT-WIDE GOVERNANCE AND THE PROMISE OF PHASE-IN

Legitimized community sharing in SEA governance began modestly and late. Once begun, it advanced to prominence and power, then ran into a time of troubles. Still, as federal funding finally phased out, governance was the main means in sight for making sure SEA's contribution to change continued to phase in. Some key episodes have already been sketched. It is time now to put them in order, add some others, and finish out the story.

In winter of Year-1 Jim Kent addressed the question of what to put in place of the Marshall-University policy board idea. For community overview and K-12 responsibility -- as well as "to light a fire under the high school" -- some new group was necessary. Carefully, he proposed a Southeast Community Education Council, soon known simply as Southeast Council.

The Council's primary stated function was tame: to advise the director. In that capacity, however, it was to share in recruiting and interviewing for administrator vacancies in the Southeast schools, and to recommend allocation of both local and federal funds. Those were still somewhat novel ideas, and because the new Council would replace an interim steering committee appointed by the superintendent, its constitution required approval downtown. That obtained, in May, the Southeast Council came into being. Besides parents and staff from the five schools, it included representatives from the chief Southeast planning group, the Park Board, and the Marshall-U policy board. Sitting as chairperson was

Ben Rank, a Tuttle parent and a top administrator in a suburban school district. He would make it clear, hoped Kent, that "we wanted more than a PTA."

Council's first action was to help interview for a new SEA business advisor. Its first show of strength was in rewriting the Teacher Center proposal and prevailing on Experimental Schools to approve it. From there it moved on to community involvement at Marshall-U, and from that into 1973-76 planning.

The Marshall-U question was whether there would be any means for parents and staff to work together on shaping a high school of alternatives. Behind that was the question whether Marshall-U -- with half the SEA students -- would convincingly "join the project." Southeast Council wished it would, of course. Spearheaded (even then) by Marcy representatives, who were joined by other elementary parents with children entering junior high, the Council "mandated" that Marshall-University design and create a high school community advisory council.

From mandate to meetings is a long road, stretching beyond the period of this report. The best that could come of Southeast Council's rather brazen intervention was that "a structure for broadly based participation in governance" became one of Marshall-U's stated goals in the 1973-76 plan, next spring. Three springs after that, it is worth noting, Southeast Council meetings still included plaintive discussions of whether the principal's advisory committee meetings at the high school could be more frequent and more publicized.

Meanwhile, for the rest of Year-2, Council was fully occupied with the multiple versions and diversions of the overall SEA 1973-76 plan. There were five public hearings for school advisory groups to respond to

the first draft alone. After draft two they listened again, and made over 40 substantive changes. Among them, of course, were items concerning junior high options and the governance structure at Marshall-U. Then they had to keep at it through all the subsequent rejections and revisions until a contract was agreed in May. By that time it was no doubt true that Southeast Council was "more knowledgeable than any other group about SEA."

In the midst of these concerns the Council took carefully planned part in another. That was the design of a parent/staff interviewing committee to recommend a new principal at Marcy. Because this was the first attempt at community participation in naming the administrator of a recognized school (Free School could be dismissed as a special case), all saw the need for clear-cut procedure. It would set important precedent for both school and project-wide governance.

The plan worked out was for the parent chairperson of Marcy's advisory council to name two parents and three staff, and for Southeast Council to name two of its own non-Marcy members. Those seven would interview properly credentialed applicants, and make a recommendation to the SEA director.

Kent got the plan through cabinet, and asked the city-wide principals' organization to look it over. People were willing to try. Following visits and interviews, all the applicants themselves evaluated the process. It worked. Thereafter all the new SEA principals were chosen by roughly the same method.

Pretty clearly, though only an advisory body, Southeast Council had started to operate in central, sensitive areas of school governance. School programs, school budgets, and school personnel had become their regular agenda. It was a beginning.

For Experimental Schools project officer Cynthia Parsons, however, a beginning was not enough. The summer before, as Parsons was coming on the job, Robert Binswanger had been concerned "that the SEA governance issue keeps being postponed by the Minneapolis staff." As Parsons saw it, the crux of the matter was a lack of explicit commitment by Minneapolis top administration to "our notion that SEA is providing a comprehensive test of decentralization in a large urban school system." Jim Kent's good intentions were not enough. Neither was an advisory council, no matter how capably functioning. What was needed was some policy from the top.

So Parsons addressed herself to the top. First by letter in October 1972, and then repeatedly through Kent and in person, she tried to get from John Davis a statement on decentralized governance in SEA, and on his intentions for the district beyond Southeast. Evidently the superintendent did not appreciate these instructions. Only on the final day of final refunding negotiations in Washington, May 11, 1973, did he phone something in. It was scarcely definitive: Despite legal constraints, he dictated, "there is developing a capability to transfer authority and power, and more than that, to be comfortable with the new arrangements."

The point is, no matter how hard Experimental Schools might push -- even waving its check-book -- it could not make a strong superintendent say one word more than he wanted, sooner than he wanted, on the subject of decentralized power. The further point is that it is well Southeast Council did not wait for full empowerment from on high before trying to travel as far as it could on an advisory ticket. In fact, there was still a lot of ground it could cover.

Two weeks after his Delphic message to Washington, Davis announced

the Minneapolis three-area administrative decentralization plan. That posed the first question for Southeast Council in Year-3: whether to accept the timetable for SEA merger with one of the new areas next year, or to advise Jim Kent to argue for something different. Chaired now by a Pratt-Motley parent, Richard Purple, they not only advised him, but invited position papers from the schools, composed one of their own, and sent it with him to cabinet. In the name of the Southeast community, they argued for a year's delay. The position paper as presented by Kent proved persuasive -- or perhaps what persuaded was the fact by itself that the well organized community had a position.

Year-3 also brought an administrators' mechanism for shared decision-making, the SEA Management Team. This was Jim Kent, the principals, and the chief managers of K-12 services meeting regularly together as a group directorate. Kent had final authority, but pledged himself not to veto any consensus except for reasons stated during the meeting itself. Though most of its agenda were administrative, there was high likelihood that Management Team would move also into just those broad policy areas where Southeast Council was developing a role of its own. Some people in each group were distinctly edgy about the other. Before long it was agreed that Council could send two "observers" to Management Team meetings. And a year later the Team elected an administrator representative to sit without vote on Council. For two years that meant three long-suffering people heard a lot of issues discussed twice; but they also kept communication lines open.

There was a working division of labor between the two groups. Southeast Council, for instance, did by far the greater amount of work on the SEA reorganization described in the previous chapter. It distributed and

studied Level I's student mobility data, and solicited from the schools their reasoned preferences for location. Management Team, however, probably had the greater share in discussing and detailing budget allocations. Even though Council had review and approval of the budget (i.e. advised Kent on it), the administrators were inevitably more familiar with how it affected their organizations' self interest.

All fall in Year-4 Southeast Council worked on reaching a firmly grounded recommendation regarding SEA's merger with another area. The attempt was to know which area offered the most promise of continued commitment to alternatives, decentralized school governance groups, and the K-12 outlook of Council itself. A public meeting was held for all three of the area superintendents to be questioned on these matters by groups of Southeast parents staff and students. After that, Council representatives met with Davis, to discuss with him what Southeast preferred, and why. It was the kind of honest session, said the Council chairperson afterwards, which "left you feeling like democracy can work." Council had recommended West area, and West area is what Davis approved.

In that same fall Jim Kent suggested in Management Team the idea of their functioning in Year-5 as a project-wide leadership without director. He was not just hinting that he might leave. The serious invitation was to consider phasing out the directorship a year early. While there were still funds for strong office assistance, Management Team might make one of its own members chairperson, and really manage as a team. It would be "in keeping with the decentralized consensus approach," and Southeast Council could become to the Team as a whole what it already was to the director.

There were cries of disbelief at the thought of all that work, but

for a brief while the idea, and variations on it, got some consideration. Curiously, it seems never to have been raised or discussed at all in Southeast Council. People heard of the proposal, of course, but only with the "automatic feeling that no one could do it."

In spring of Year-4 Kent announced his resignation, effective at the end of June. He was leaving to become superintendent of a district in Massachusetts. A Council committee interviewed candidates for his one-year successor, and recommended (to the West Area superintendent, now) David Roffers. Roffers was former principal of North High in Minneapolis, just finishing a sabbatical when Kent would be leaving.

As they were considering candidates and strategizing for a future in West area, Council and Management Team came to an important decision for Year-5, namely, that the two groups should become one. The basic rationale was that the growing amount of overlapping work made separate meetings wasteful. There were alternative proposals, too, but support for full merger was strongest.

The most difficult problem of design was to keep the membership to a reasonable number. All five building principals retained their seats. Interestingly, the three strands at Marshall-U were now recognized as separate constituencies -- like their elementary counterparts -- and each give representation for parents, students, or staff. Functions of the new Council were to be much the same as the old, but spelled out a bit more clearly. This time Council was empowered to override a director's veto (by two-thirds majority), but the director could appeal to his West area superior.

The spring 1975 SEA parent survey reported 72% wanting Southeast Council to continue after joining West area. In its new form it would.

By mid-June it had all the necessary approvals. It was to convene for the first time in August.

Considerable preparing for merger with West area had gone on in winter and spring. Budgets were prepared and co-ordinated; Teacher Center planned for common staff development; Marvin Trammel, area superintendent, had met several times with Kent and others to prepare for transition. A major reason for Southeast Council's recommendation to Davis was Trammel's strong support for an alternatives pattern, and his encouragement of cluster groupings somewhat like SEA in the West area already. By the end of Year-4 the vast majority of SEA's financial phase-in questions had already been decided. Many prospects for smooth re-integration with the system looked good.

It took most of a year before good prospects outshone present problems, though. Three or four converging circumstances made fall and winter of Year-5 the hardest yet for SEA governance.

One was the extent to which the whole district, especially West area, seemed forced to mark time. Late in Year-4 both John Davis and his top deputy resigned. A successor was not chosen until December, and did not move to Minneapolis until May. On top of that, Trammel himself, in whom SEA had vested such hope, resigned in January. West area had only an acting administrator until late June. It was impossible to answer a crucial question; will new leadership continue an alternatives policy?

Another circumstance was the certainty of large-scale budget retrenchment throughout the system in 1976-77. The first for-discussion suggestions of ways to achieve it, in winter, slashed heavily at staff development and resource positions essential for strengthening alternatives. The school board did not seem alarmed.



Third, entry into the working groups of West area was difficult, and sometimes unsettling. Inevitably envies and resentments of SEA's long-favored position had not faded away overnight. A good many principals and teachers clearly disliked the governance expectations, in particular, of Southeast activists. Organizational structures and organizational behaviors were very different from what SEA people had spent four years learning to like. Some in West area looked on Southeast Council as coming in to take them over.

Fourth, the new Council itself was not functioning well. The mixture of five principals and a new director with many new faculty and parent members set back the dynamics of the group considerably. Discussion did not flow, feelings were not shared, issues were avoided. For a long time such decisions as were made were the work of an executive committee only. As Roffers reported in December, the merger of Management Team and Southeast Council "shows some strain and lack of achievement."

All these factors made for a low-energy winter, with poor participation levels from all the schools in the self-governance of their own cluster. Only with spring did Southeast Council seem to draw itself together and begin to lead again.

A major stimulus, without doubt, was the threat posed by preliminary district budgets. Several Southeast people played active and welcome roles in the large group of parents, teachers, and principals which West area organized to explore different ways of budget-cutting. The city-wide alternatives task force, again with strong SEA participation, made detailed recommendations based on the district's own policy commitment to alternatives. In actions like these, people's trained familiarity with school system finances and group decision-making paid off

practically. It confirmed respect for SEA, rather than suspicion, in West area groups. Judy Farmer, CRC at Marcy, was chosen to speak for the area in making their budget presentation to the school board.

For its own part, Southeast Council went before the school board to talk about better ways of budgeting. SEA's experience with priority setting and decision-making in open discussion at the building level, they argued, should be exploited system-wide. It works not just for proposing larger budgets, but precisely for reducing them. After all, having just successfully planned their way back to 100% local funding, who has more experience in creative budget cutting than the SEA cluster?

With talk like this, spirits lifted. It helped, of course, that the final district budget came out much better than first seemed likely, for alternatives in general and the West area in particular. It also helped that the new Minneapolis superintendent, Raymond Arveson, was becoming a known quantity, and was willing to name continuance of alternatives among his top three priorities.

Perhaps most important, though, was simply the increasing discovery of ways and occasions for SEA people to act in other contexts without special pleading for SEA interests, but still with special application of SEA governance skills. For the most part these are a host of small and constructively political abilities. Many are highly informal, but genuine skills nonetheless. Others are semi-technical, but interpersonally crucial nonetheless. They include anticipating deadlines, publicizing meetings before and after, knowing the bureaucratic report-lines, inviting involvement and showing how to start work, expressing and accepting strong feeling, sharing credit, naming people to carry out decisions, using critical

evaluation, knowing how to read a budget printout, willingness to work for other people's goals.

These are the kinds of abilities which the ups and downs of governance in SEA have both demanded of people and taught them. Most important, the demands and the teaching have applied equally to parents and professionals. In Southeast Council such parents and professionals focus the potential for ongoing development of SEA itself, and for influence and change beyond.

Practically speaking, real phase-in of the SEA dynamic with the rest of the system depends jointly on how SEA maintains its own life and how that melds with the other structures and leadership of West area. It is thus encouraging to report at the end of Year-5 that there are grounds for optimism in both these dimensions.

Within SEA, Southeast Council ended the year with a presentation of community interest and ideas for a city-wide school facilities planning committee; and with a start on cluster-wide program planning strategies for the next five years. Because of Council's fall-winter doldrums, both documents fell far short of what had been intended, and were based on much narrower participation than usual in Southeast. Nevertheless, both also surfaced open-ended questions for action, and left people in motion, not stalled.

In the SEA/West area relationship people and patterns began to emerge for governance to deal with practical alternatives issues. The new area superintendent, Richard Green, began work in June with expressions of support not only for what exists in Southeast, but also for future strengthening of the alternatives cluster concept as such. Also in June the large West area parent advisory group elected Southeast

Council's chairperson, Marcy parent Timi Stevens, to chair their activities as well. She had not been shy about explaining what she stood for. The West area parents were voting for a veteran in shared decision-making for educational choice.

That is phase-in at a level where it counts. The hard open-ended questions remain: options for secondary students, community resource co-ordinators, staff development and evaluation for new programs, building-or cluster-based allocation of resources, and many others. The will of SEA in Southeast Council to keep such questions alive and answerable still seems strong. If that will continues strong, so will the process of comprehensive change.