

## CHAPTER ONE



# Democracy in Small Places

The Project for Educational Democracy (PED) fits nicely Tocqueville's ideal of the voluntary, noninstitutionalized, face to face, perhaps altruistic body that both within itself and with its mission reflects a certain idea about how democracy should operate. It represents the coming together of a group of citizens from different backgrounds, different races, classes, and religious affiliations to deliberate about the prospects for improving the responsiveness of public education to community concerns. In its concern to include the voices of parents and community members, and especially of people of color and the poor, at the very beginning of its deliberations about the process of decision making, the PED differs from a number of other attempts to "democratize" the schools.

The PED is composed of teachers, parents, students, and community members. Its core, which has changed over the years, is small, about twenty members, although the term *member* is problematic. No one pays dues, no elections are held, meetings are open to anyone who chooses to attend, and some people come and stay while others come and go. Thus, it is hard to say just what constitutes membership other than the time and willingness to attend meetings, especially the planning meetings. Given these loose requirements, given that some members belong to the teachers' union, two to the school board, that some represent themselves and others represent this or that group, it is even hard to say just what constitutes the boundaries of the PED. They are open, one might even say fuzzy.

Nevertheless, some things can be said: the majority of those attending these meetings are teachers, a reasonable number are parents—a number that increases considerably at the group's community meetings. The majority are also white and middle class, but perhaps a quarter of its

“membership” at any one time is African American and they too increase considerably at the community meetings, often constituting a majority. It has, at different times, involved larger segments of the community, and some of its members share affiliations with the union and the school board. Moreover, representatives from various local organizations often attend the PED’s community meetings.

The PED as an organization is open ended and not neatly defined. For the organization this means that players come and go, that institutional memory is ad hoc, that old ground is traveled over frequently because the value of inclusion and participation is paramount. It also means that its vision of educational democracy, which it refers to as Site-Based Decision Making (SBDM), gives high priority to process over product and to inclusion and participation over a clear statement of goals. And yet, surprisingly perhaps, things do move and the PED has been the principal instrument for moving the formal organs along on its path to some form of increased participation. Although the concept still remains vague and contentious, the PED has succeeded in providing a focal point around which a considerable amount of the energy of the school is being organized.

*SBDM*, although quite a buzz word in education circles, is open ended, the less polite word is *vague*, and has a number of possible meanings. Part of this study involves how this concept is shaped and reformed through formal and informal negotiation with others in the community. Although SBDM is open to a variety of interpretations, it is intended to indicate the devolution of authority and decision making to the “individual schools.” Just what “the individual schools” mean in this context is a part of the informal negotiation. To some the principal is the proper stand-in for the school and should be authorized to make all decisions. To others it is the principal and the teachers, and to still others the school belongs to the parents as well.

Throughout its deliberations the PED has tended to hold to a very broad understanding of the “ownership” of the individual school, wanting to involve not just all of the above, but school staff and members of the community as well, in some form of governing body. And, in the middle and high schools, it wants to include students too.

Members of the PED distinguish SBDM from site-based “management” and identify it with greater participation of parents and community as well as teachers and support staff in the governance of individual local schools. They believe that wider participation is an important and neglected feature of democratic public education. They also believe that with more decision making placed at the school level, schools will see a higher degree of participation on the part of minority group members

and poor people and as a result they expect that many educational inequities in their community will be addressed. Yet in one area, most everyone agrees: they do not want decisions about the firing of teachers or administrators to be done by participatory committees or councils in the individual schools. Teachers fear that the price they would pay in reduced solidarity is not worth the extra empowerment that such a shift in authority would bring.

Although the PED has received some encouragement from the administration and school board, the messages are mixed, and clearly not everyone shares its conception of how schools should be run in a democratic society. Some members of the school board as well as a number of teachers and community members are reasonably content with the system as it is, believing that a board elected by the community at large is best equipped to establish policy in a system of this size. Many members of the administration and probably a good number of teachers would voice significant concern if they felt that localized community decision making would threaten their professional prerogatives. And some believe that the system already has SBDM, especially when compared to other systems.

The PED views itself as fighting for the public school ideal. The ideal represents to them participation, inclusiveness, and equal opportunity. Given this ideal, schools have a special role in American society—they prepare all to be active citizens, although the PED realizes that real schools too often ignore or violate this role.

Although the PED fits Tocqueville's ideal in that all members are volunteers, nothing is quite that pure any longer and some, especially those not in tune with SBDM, see it as a child of the teachers' union. And indeed, it was formed at the initiation of the union regional director, Jerry Mann. Moreover, the one paid staff member, the community organizer, is an employee of the union. We will discuss this ambiguous relation later as we talk about some of the boundary characteristics of this group. Yet to see it as just a child of the union misses a lot.

The idea of SBDM has been supported nationally by business as well as unions and PED members view themselves as largely autonomous. The PED has held some meetings at union headquarters, but many members do not belong to the union. It took considerable pains to hold its community meetings in public spaces or in spaces associated with local African American groups. Jerry Mann had a major role in establishing the PED and moderated its early meetings but he has since stepped back as other members have taken on leadership roles. He continues to have a strong interest in its work, but has never countered one of its decisions, and it is questionable whether he is really in a position to

do so. His hands-off approach was especially significant in establishing the independence of the PED during early stages when questions of strategy arose and the group took off in directions that he questioned.

### **The Issue of Centralized Control**

Whatever the particular form of SBDM, some people fear that it creates too much autonomy for the local school and threatens to disrupt systematized standards and procedures across a district. Some people defend a more centralized mode of decision making (employing the same standardized tests, the same textbooks, the same scheduling, the same standards for hiring personnel, the same ratios of professional to nonprofessional staff and of teachers to students), believing that it provides an additional layer of protection for professional teachers and administrators from outside pressures, and mutes political and educational differences. Where board members are elected at large, it also provides a ready made argument for legitimizing the board on the grounds that each member has in mind “the interests of all the children in the community.”

Yet the PED fears that a centralized system isolates marginalized groups and inhibits them from gaining a voice in the schools thus serving to increase alienation and inequality within and between segments of the community. It wants to find a way to include the voice of these groups in the deliberative process, but how to identify these voices and how to include them in the process is a more complex question than it may appear on the surface. This is the question that the PED has obliged the school board and the administration to address. How can educational and political systems respond when noncorrupt representational systems result consistently in the exclusion of major segments of the community from educational decision-making bodies, and why is such a response important?

The second part of this question may be puzzling from two radically different points of view. From the point of view of the included it may seem puzzling just because a noncorrupt representational system means that everyone has a chance to voice their preference for those who would represent them, and that some have won and others lost. While there may not be a consensus about each and every winner and loser, in a democracy there is a consensus around the process itself. This is exactly what representative democracy means.

Yet, from the point of view of those whose will is consistently overridden or who have learned that voting makes little difference to them

the question is puzzling for a different reason. Surely, if a “representational system” results continually in nonrepresentation for a sizable group of people, then it is not truly representational, perhaps not even noncorrupt in some deep sense. And when the children of those who are not represented continue to have lower achievement rates and higher drop out suspension, expulsion, and incarceration rates, the costs of nonrepresentation are visible day after day.

The question, as it is asked above, addresses only part of the story that we want to tell. Representation signals different things to different people. To some it signals a way to elect the best people, with the most foresight, and with the widest public interest in mind. It is a way to select people who will make good decisions. And, when decisions are made that are less than good, people can be voted out of office.<sup>1</sup> Others believe that the word should signal structures of inclusiveness and participation. Those who are elected should represent communities of participants, people who look, act, or think in ways that are similar to those elected.<sup>2</sup> Here, representation is only a stand-in for structures of direct participation, and where these structures are lacking, there is a need to build and maintain them.

We will see that each of these implies very different structures for school governance. The first involves finding the most “civic minded,” “best educated” people to run for office and guide the system. We call this the “public good” conception of education. Here, participation from below is individualized and episodic. Ideally it involves an altruistic and knowledgeable elite responding on an issue-by-issue basis, and with the good of the community foremost in mind, to individual grievances and issues brought up from below. The second, which we will call the “real people” model of governance involves devolving as many decisions as possible to the grass roots level, to teachers, parents, staff, and community members. In this model, involvement in the process of decision making has a positive effect on the quality of decisions made and is part of the education of the decision makers. As participation grows, it is

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1. The classical proponent of this view of representation is Edmund Burke. A twentieth century proponent who has been very influential in the discipline of political science is Joseph Schumpeter, especially his *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy* (New York: Harper, 1942).

2. See Anne Phillips, *The Politics of Presence* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995); Iris Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990); and Charles Taylor, “The Politics of Recognition,” in Amy Gutmann, ed., *Multiculturalism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

believed, so does the quality of grass roots decision making. This is the path that the PED has chosen to advance. In the chapters that follow we explore and analyze these viewpoints both from a theoretical standpoint and in terms of the path that the evolution of the PED and its ideas take as it comes into contact with the extended political and educational environment of Ed City. As a way to track these interactions, we begin below with our account of the early history of the PED and our involvement with it.

### **Defining, Controlling, Speaking, and Toning**

The story of the PED begins with the union stimulating the move toward SBDM. The bitter strike had resulted in the somewhat ambiguously worded letter of understanding, attached after the signatures to the contract. The letter noted that a committee would be formed to “summarize” site-based practices in the district. The letter did not mention the union and to our unschooled eyes it appeared to be little more than an expression of interest in exploring aspects of site-based decision making.

To Jerry Mann, however, it had all the signs of a commitment to SBDM. As he tried to steer the process in its early phase, he acted as if the decision to advance a new form of governance had already been made and that all that remained was the implementation. Thus, by defining what it meant “to summarize,” Mann seemed to assure that the union would play a major role in the direction that SBDM took. He also expressed a clear vision of what that implementation would look like and how to go about achieving it.

Mann wanted a governance structure in which the school board delegated power to site-based councils, which would make decisions for their schools. He wanted the support staff, another group he represented, included in these councils as full participants along with teachers, parents, and community members. He understood this might be difficult given that teachers are sometimes hostile to janitors, aides, and cafeteria workers but he wanted to change that.

There were dangers that the union needed to be concerned about as well. He spoke of the need to avoid “Creeping Yeshivism,” referring to the loss of faculty bargaining rights at Yeshiva University on the grounds that the faculty made management decisions. Hence, he wanted to let the administration continue to do the hiring and firing of personnel. At an early meeting of union representatives Mann sketched out a three-year process for implementing SBDM. He exhorted the area representa-

tives, telling them emphatically that “if we can’t do it, the district will and that there will be problems if management does it in a top-down way.”

Yet the low percentage of teacher participation in the project continued throughout the PED’s history and it was never clear whether the majority of teachers in the district shared Mann’s enthusiasm. As in many other movements the work was carried forward by a relatively small number of people even as it gained visibility within the community. Hence, while the majority of teachers did not express any active resistance to the idea of shared decision making, it is unclear whether many supported it enthusiastically. In light of silence on an issue, it is not unusual for leaders to define what the membership wants. Indeed, this is perhaps the major role of leadership, but as we shall see in subsequent chapters, the ethics of speaking for others becomes a major issue for those actively involved in the PED.

Groups must constantly negotiate the issue of tone, depending on whom they wish to include and whom, if anyone, they might wish to exclude. Tone tells us how militant or how accommodating democratic movements might be, whether they are themselves open to be included in the decision-making process, or whether they view themselves as perennial outsiders. This is the issue of cooperation and co-optation, an issue that we take up in some detail in chapters 6 and 7. However, tone is not always arrived at in a consciously deliberative way but often arises as a side effect of other decisions, and often changes during the course of an organization’s engagement with others.

During the early meetings, the PED struggled with issues that would help set its tone. Sponsorship by the teachers’ union was clearly announced for a while as flyers put out in the union’s name and sent to union representatives would list SBDM as the prominent agenda item. Hence, for a time the tone of the union, and, perhaps more explicitly, the tone of Jerry Mann, was the tone of the PED. It was engaged in a struggle where partners one day might be antagonists the next. Jerry emphasized his belief that teachers could collaborate with administrators on site councils one day and sit across the bargaining table from them on the next day.

He also was very conscious of class and race difference, while gender issues were rarely mentioned. Teachers were part of the working class and people in the African American communities and the poor are their natural allies. He saw his mission as bringing these groups together to form a coalition that would balance the influence of those who had the time and money to make their influence felt. Jerry’s tone was never belligerent, but he had a job to do and he could distinguish sharply between his natural and his sometimes allies.

The issue of tone came to a head in two events during the first year of the PED's existence. The first involved the creation and subsequent reaction to a flyer, intended to invite the community to a PED meeting. The second involved the issue of whom to include in the PED and, specifically, whether to include administrators and school board members.

At an early meeting a decision was made to write and distribute a flyer to announce the formation of the PED and invite local citizens to its meeting. The group debated whether to distribute the flyer to PTA members and some objected that the PTA was a subservient "auxiliary" of the school that might swamp minority parents who already feel estranged, alienated, or intimidated. The flyer, which contained the phrase "reclaim ownership of our children's education," proved to be an important turning point in the group's history. It offended some members of the administration and the board, who felt that it implied that the schools had been taken over by an alien force and was calling for direct action to take them back.

The actual intent of the teacher who composed the flyer (she did it quickly and by herself) was to get the attention of parents and community members, which it did, but neither she nor the others expected the concerned response they got from the board. As the teachers backed off, explaining to members of the board that this was not meant as an attack on them, the actual tone, and indeed the control of the PED, was shifting in a subtle but important way.

This was amplified in the second tone-setting incident, a PED community meeting where Mann, Rhonda Silver, a high school teacher, and William Purcell, a primary school teacher, argued vehemently against inviting administrators and board members to attend PED meetings. They were overruled by the other people present. As a result of these two incidents a more conciliatory cooperative tone was established, and shortly thereafter, some school board members who had expressed concern about the PED became more open and two of them ultimately worked with it. Despite this shift in tone, what was never compromised was the PED's strong commitment to minority inclusion. As a teacher proclaimed at one meeting:

We have no fixed agenda. We know what site-based should look like. We don't want white-only. We want it inclusive—democratically and racially conscious at the same time. That's all we got and all we should have.

Disappointed by the defeat at the meeting, William Purcell never returned as an active member of the PED. However, three years later,



and against the opposition of almost all of the school board members, he initiated a successful movement to change the way the board was elected so as to maximize the probability of minority representation.

### **Early PED Meetings**

There have been two kinds of PED meetings, community and task force. The latter sets the agendas of the community meetings. Everyone attending the community meetings was invited to also participate on the task force, but its meetings were invariably smaller than the community meetings.

To encourage minority parents to come, the first community meeting was held at one of the African American churches, an older wooden building located in a mixed neighborhood on the border of the main commercial area in the downtown. This site had been chosen by the task force to encourage African American citizens, who might otherwise find a public school inhospitable or intimidating, to attend. Nine white people and seven African Americans attended the very first meeting. Among this group were four teachers from the PED task force and an African American teacher who had not yet been to a Task Force meeting. The other African Americans included a school outreach worker and a local community organizer, both of whom were to join the task force, along with a leader of the Urban League, a social worker, two parents, and a representative from an organization called the Best Interests of Children.

Jerry Mann opened the meeting by saying:

All of us are volunteers here with a commitment to seeing the school system governed in a more diverse and democratic way. The school district and the teachers' union have made a legal contractual commitment to site-based decision making during the last negotiations. Our aim? Not to make premature decisions—we're here to decide what to do next. How do we take the right amount of time to form a truly representative group? We want real folks here. We want to make sure the real folks are represented. Our agenda is open. What do we do next?

The discussion that followed raised many of the themes that the PED would continue to promote. An officer of the Urban League said that "we must begin with parent involvement." There then followed a discussion of time constraints on parents who have to work, whether employers would give parents time off, when to have meetings so that

people could best attend, and whether teachers were already being asked to do too much on their own time.

Olive Mercy, an African American outreach worker at Steer School, spoke of the need for a room where parents would feel comfortable visiting the school during the school day. A white teacher said, "I have a vision of the school as a community center. There is a huge need for families to feel the school belongs to them. The schools need to become active places." Frank Johnson, the PED outreach organizer hired by the union, said: "This is the concept of the 'neighborhood school'—it's ours; we utilize it; there are recreation areas, places to wash clothing, day-care centers, etc. How can we make our schools family friendly." Olive Mercy: "We need a grassroots effort, one step and one community at a time." Teacher Adele Stein then added,

For so long, schools have been the most racist of institutions. We have been the "gate-keepers." We are the ones who have promoted racism in the most subtle, unconscious ways. We have to look hard at ourselves, rethink, and move forward. We need to look at all aspects of schools in order to change our relations with the community.

Kareem Saleem, an African American community organizer from Ed City:

It's a process of community education. Part of it requires going to the people and asking what they think; to exchange their thoughts in regard to their children's education. The atmosphere has to be open and receptive—which it isn't now. We must empower people, open the lines of communication—not stand in the stead of parents, but help them to speak. And we must also keep in touch with the students . . . don't think that a simple nine to five involvement is enough. Yes, as teachers your plate is already full. But if you want parents involved, if you want a family relationship among the schools, the parents and the children, then you must offer a greater involvement to them.

And an African-American teacher raised the issues of overburdened mothers, especially single ones, and class.

These issues—time, comfort, commitment, and racism, along with inclusiveness and participation—provide a thematic structure for following the PED's subsequent engagement with the community and the development of its ideas on SBDM.