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Coalitions for Building Community Understanding

This NebGuide identifies eight steps for coalitions involved in building community understanding and applies them to the issue of school-age child care.

Georgia L. Stevens, Extension Family Economics Policy Specialist

The process of building community understanding is an important one, regardless of the area of concern. As more and more citizens recognize a particular problem, that problem moves from the private to the public domain and requires the involvement of a larger segment of the community. Though this NebGuide deals specifically with the example of school-age child care, the process of involving the whole community is relevant to any area of policy-making.

How can citizens get started in building community understanding? The process begins with the awareness of a problem. In the case of school-age child care, it may have become apparent to some members of the community that child care costs are too costly for some families or that there may not be enough child care providers for the number of children needing care or that not all child care is as good as it should be. Individuals may work together in a group or coalition to address these problems. After that beginning awareness, the process of building community understanding follows eight basic steps (*Figure 1*).

Decision-Making Steps for Citizen Action

- **Step 1:** As a public policy issue develops, the first step is to recognize and express concern about the problem. An example would be citizens realizing that their community has made no arrangements for school-age child care. Does your community think that this is a problem? How do parents, school administrators and community leaders feel about this problem? How many school-age children actually lack supervised care? Where can you get facts and figures for your own community?
- **Step 2:** Become involved and identify all players. Can you think of other persons who also could be involved? Who else can you talk with? Talking with others who share your viewpoints is usually not difficult. Challenge yourself also to think of community members who may not share your ideas. Recognize that not everyone sees issues in the same way. Are there ways to involve these persons in the initial discussions so that all of the community begins working together on the

issue and moves beyond their own individual perspectives?

- **Step 3:** Clarify the issue by learning the extent of the problem. Work at trying to understand all sides of the issue. You can talk with other child care providers, community leaders, parents and school officials to further define and clarify the issue. Can you be open-minded and set aside your own solutions for the problem? Are you willing to explore other peoples' ideas? Do you recognize that not everyone sees issues in the same way?
- **Steps 4 and 5:** Consider the choices (alternatives) that are available and identify their effects (consequences). These are the two most critical steps in decision-making. Examining all alternatives and consequences demands that you identify existing alternatives and brainstorm for new ones. For example, you could consider the alternative of applying for government grants to financially support a school-age child care structure. Perhaps you could invite private businesses to bid on developing a building. Or, you could cooperate with the school and with volunteers in an organized effort to supply child care.

Doing nothing can be considered an alternative. Explore the positive and negative consequences for people on all sides of the issue.

- **Step 6:** After all alternatives and their consequences have been considered, it is time to make a choice. Typically, the citizen does not directly make the choice at this step, but does so indirectly by electing and influencing policymakers who are in the positions where decisions are made. Your challenge at this step is to learn how public decisions are made, who makes them and how citizens can participate. You will be able to inform others of the choice that has been made.
- **Step 7:** Commit to a course of action once an alternative is chosen. Your role in activating the choice can be to provide input to the policymaker as procedures are developed for child care. You can identify previous pitfalls and learn what the new procedures will require.
- **Step 8:** Citizens usually evaluate decisions informally as they experience and react to the new solutions. If you are satisfied with the results of the child care issue, you might move on to other activities.

The above eight steps can continue. If you feel that the issue is still not resolved, you may start the decision-making steps over again. Concern that "something should be done" is a signal the steps may need to be repeated.

Decision-Making Steps for Citizen Action

1. Express concern about the problem.
2. Become involved and identify all the players
3. Clarify the issue
4. Consider alternative ways of solution
5. Consider consequences for each alternative
6. Inform others of the choice
7. Activate the choice
8. Evaluate the Choice

Assessing Local Needs

Expressing concern about the problem was identified earlier as the first step in citizen action. It is important in this step to:

- Look for causes, not just symptoms of these causes.
- Ask tough questions so you understand what is going on.
- Gather facts and check them with the experts.
- Discover local needs by collecting information.

If your community is typical, you may find that citizens are not aware of the growing problem of children left to care for themselves or other children. A common response in many areas has been "our town is different." As a consequence, many policymakers have ignored this problem.

To make a case for your concern, you need more than opinions or hearsay about the problem. You need documented evidence that a problem exists.

How do you demonstrate that your concern is a "real" problem in your community?

One way to verify the problem is to conduct a local needs study. A study of the current situation can identify strengths and weaknesses in services currently offered. As you think about studying local needs, consider the types of groups or agencies in your community that may already be collecting information (see *Figure 2*). The State Department of Social Services or Education may have useful information. Census data can be valuable.

Figure 2. The following names of state and local groups may help you get started in your area.

State/Local Government Offices

- Cooperative Extension
- Department of Education/Office of Child Development
- Department of Health
 - Division of Maternal and Child Health/Nutrition
 - Division of Environmental Health and Housing Surveillance
- Department of Social Services
 - Day Care Licensing Consultant
 - Dependent Care Grant Coordinator
- Legislator and Staff

Local Government

- City Council
- Police/Fire Department
- Local Library
- Supervisors/Commissioners

Agencies

- Social Services/Family Services
- Family Preservation Teams
- Headstart
- United Way

Youth Organizations

- 4-H, Girl Scouts, Boy Scouts
- YWCA/YMCA
- Church Groups
- Girls Club, Boys Club
- Camp Fire, Red Cross

Service Groups

- Church Organizations
- Rotary, Lions, Kiwanis, Jaycees
- Altrusa, BPW, AAUW, LWV, AEYC
- Chamber of Commerce

Schools

- Principal
- School Board Members
- PTA/PTO
- School Food Service
- ESU
- School Foundations

Child Care Providers

- Private Sector
- Preschool/After School Care
- Recreation/Game & Parks
- Employer Sponsored

You might consider hiring professionals to conduct your needs study. Agency staff or educators from local schools, community colleges or universities may be able to provide the expertise needed to design a survey, code the data, analyze the results statistically and write a report for community distribution.

It may be possible to have volunteers gather information for a needs study. For example, several communities in Nebraska received the results of a school-age child care study from a student who conducted the study for an advanced Scouting badge. Other communities have used high school classes (e.g., civics, government, home economics) to gather information and then distribute it to interested citizens and policymakers. Many grant funding groups provide start-up dollars that enable a community to gather information as the first step in documenting the need for additional services. Documents of this sort can be used to seek additional funding.

Locally collected information will provide data to support your issue. It also can provide a means for looking toward the future and beginning to think about the services that will be needed. Consider a variety of ways to use the gathered information. Take your local report on child care needs and distribute summaries to all parents in the schools. Work with radio and newspaper reporters to suggest story ideas. Talk with elected officials about the information from the study.

Maintaining a Network for Local Involvement

The second step in public decision-making for citizen action was to **become involved and to identify all players**. To begin developing a network for local involvement, you will want to:

- Gain support from other people in the community.
- Develop a list of groups and individuals who might be interested in knowing more about this issue.
- Arrange an "open" meeting for discussion among interested parties.
- Publicize the issue through the media (newspaper, radio, and television) and meetings.

As you decide when and how to "go public" with your issue, be sure that the facts are accurate and that you are well prepared. Remember that the more public you go, the more prepared your argument must be.

Are there key people in your community who should be involved in the issue? Consider members of the media, elected boards and other influential people as you develop your list of contacts. One Extension agent asked elected officials to suggest the names of people who should be included on a task force which was beginning to study the school-age child care issue. This helped make those officials aware of the project and also produced names that might have been overlooked.

As you identify local resources, draw a diagram on paper to check who has been included and whether the entire community has been considered. Write each person's name down the left side of the paper. Across the top of the paper (see *Figure 3*), list the following: occupation, age, male/female, racial background, number and ages of children (this might also include grandchildren), special skills (public speaker, writer, organizer, financial manager, grant writer) and time available (very busy, willing to help, travels a lot). Other categories may be helpful as you develop a diverse list of community members.

Summary

Building a base of community understanding for citizen action on an issue often is not easy. Timing is important because many needs exist at the same time in a community. Consider the other problems facing your community as you develop a plan for citizen action. Does your area have seasons of the year that are particularly busy for citizens? Do you have an upcoming election that could promote citizen participation on your issue?

The time spent in studying local needs can serve as the basis for your issue but also for related issues. Be willing to share your experiences with others. Build and maintain a network of citizens wanting to be involved.

Be realistic about the time it may take to educate others about the issue and to gain their involvement. Our democracy works best when citizens have had a chance to study an issue, discuss the various alternatives available, consider the consequences of each alternative and understand how policy decisions are made.

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