

Oak Ridge schools: Blankenship's workshops

By: D. Ray Smith | *Historically Speaking* | The Oak Ridger | December 5, 2006

Last week's column introduced the *Adventure in Democratic Administration* — a 227-page historic document written by Alden H. Blankenship and R. Mildred Kidd. This week I will give you a look at the specific approach used by Blankenship to create “democratic administration,” and then next week examine the recent history of present-day Oak Ridge Public Schools Education Foundation — a modern day method similar in many ways to Blankenship's pioneering approach to the administration of schools. I will also show the manner in which Blankenship's approach to shared leadership continues to be practiced in Oak Ridge schools today as led by Tom Bailey.

Briefly mentioned last week was the first “workshop” meeting held at the Center Theater, where 70 members of the school staff met to decide much of what had to be done to open the schools on the coming Monday. Now let's look at the actual way the workshops were set up and functioned.

When Blankenship recruited teachers and administrators to “build a new school system from 'scratch'” he knew that most teachers' participation in planning was limited to carrying out plans and regulations made by those far removed from actual contact with children. He states, “The idea that teachers should be given such opportunity and the fact that they actually had it in Oak Ridge is one of the major emphases in our story.”

An insight into Blankenship's progressive leadership style can be seen by the following statement: “Hampered by no established customs, the superintendent was free to organize his staff in the manner he considered best for meeting the real needs of children. The line and staff pattern of organization was eliminated in favor of a plan under which all staff members could participate on a cooperative basis. The first step in this direction was to share with members of the administrative staff the responsibility for coordinating the program for the whole system.”

I admire Blankenship's gut-level trust in his staff. He hired them and expected them to function at the same high level of performance that he obviously practiced every day.

He went on to describe how he established the supervising principal in each building and how a guidance director was added to the administrative staff, which met with the superintendent regularly and became the central planning group. Soon an assistant in charge of business matters was added, giving the superintendent time for more concentrated leadership in the development of the program.

Teachers, being employed 200 days instead of the usual 180, understood that the additional time was to be used for planning and group work. The teachers were involved in all the planning. Principals' staff meetings were discussions of problems and identifying solutions — all with the focus on a common understanding of the kind of program the children needed. The teachers were asked their opinion on current issues and thus quickly assumed ownership for the solutions.

An example of the type of involvement the teachers had can be seen in the manner in which reporting the children's progress to parents was handled. Through group discussions, the teachers and principals worked out the forms that were used in the first year. Blankenship states that this experience helped to establish the precedent for finding appropriate solutions to fit Oak Ridge and its unique situation.

Another committee determined the type of professional meetings the staff wanted. Using a questionnaire given to each staff member, this committee devised a series of professional development meetings based on the suggestions made in response to the questionnaire. This success led to further involvement through an administrative council composed of the administrative staff and teacher representatives from each building.

This was a new idea to the principals, but one they soon welcomed as a pioneering opportunity in shared leadership that contributed to the overall success of the entire school system. The teachers also had to learn the value of taking their time for such meetings.

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Soon the teachers themselves began to take some initiative in promoting the participation idea. Blankenship says, "As they talked things over in their own building or with other teachers, the idea was expressed that teachers with common problems should get together and share ways of solving them. This suggestion was presented to the administrative staff and two afternoons in April and May, 1944, were set aside for this purpose." In preparation for the first spring workshop, each staff member was asked individually to write out suggestions for improving the program, according to Blankenship's description of how the first workshop was planned.

He states that this workshop at the end of the first year marked the beginning of complete staff participation in planning for the program in Oak Ridge schools. From that point forward, even though the superintendent took full responsibility for leadership, he could increasingly depend upon group thinking to give directions to plans.

By the end of the second year of operation, the pressing issues of what to do about adult education and the need for nursery school facilities, as well as the need to keep the community in close touch with the developing program, resulted in more community participation in the schools. By the fall of 1944, the program was well under way, with community response far exceeding expectations. Within a year's time, enrollment for one quarter reached 1,300 students. By now the community representatives were engaged in the development of the school program.

Parents were organized, participating and wanting to know how they could help even further. Each teacher formed "room organizations" in which the parents took an active role in deciding the type of school program they wished their children to have.

As early as December 1945, Blankenship states that teachers in the high school were beginning to be more and more conscious of the philosophy of dealing with each student as an individual and there were many clashes between "standards" and "where the student is." He commented that during the workshop periods that year, the faculty organized into three problem groups to discuss ways of understanding students better.

Some teachers even discussed the "inter-relationships among various subjects" such as English and social studies. They also considered combining these two fields as a step toward a "core" system. Of course this approach is common today, but in 1945 these teachers were plowing new ground.

Remember that 1945 had a tremendous impact on all of Oak Ridge as the city learned of its vital role in the winning of World War II when the atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, Japan, with the resulting increased awareness of things nuclear. Blankenship tells the effect knowledge of the atomic bomb had on the teachers and also on the students.

Charles Coryall spoke to the Oak Ridge Education Association on December 10, 1945. Blankenship points out that some students already interested in the subject attended the meeting. They and their English teacher came away deeply struck by the imminence of the danger and the necessity for action — world action. The 200 students in Oak Ridge High School "practically demanded a revision in the curriculum." They organized themselves into a "Youth Council on the Atomic Crisis."

This YCAC planned significant changes to the curriculum. Blankenship notes that teachers recognized the importance of this issue and allowed it to leaven the thinking of their classrooms. The YCAC read widely and reported to their classes, promoting lively discussions. Both physics and chemistry classes spent time in study of such topics as isotopes, the cyclotron, cosmic fission, use of radioactive byproducts in medicine, etc., according to Blankenship. He proudly speaks of the accomplishments of the students during this period of intense study to learn the worldwide implications of the introduction of the atomic bomb and the associated technology.

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By August 1946, members of the YCAC had traveled to 10 states, participated in 10 radio broadcasts, written over a thousand letters and sent the special issue of the school paper to over 3,000 schools. Blankenship lauds the involvement of the students in the “planning and thinking of their activities on a very high level.”

Oak Ridge High School students at this early stage were already involving themselves in challenging studies far beyond the typical high school student. It reminds one of the recent accomplishments of three Oak Ridge High School students who are on a quest for national recognition by winning science competitions, and at the same time introducing concepts that may well lead to accelerated use of alternate energy sources.

In the fall of 1946, seven teachers volunteered to try out the combination of English and social studies as a step toward the “core idea” well ahead of other schools. In citing this accomplishment, Blankenship states, “What they were trying to accomplish is admirably described by one of them speaking to a group of parents after the group had carefully discussed the problems presented.” The teacher stated, among other things, that “during one of the Saturday morning workshop periods we all reported to each other...” I think it is significant to note that these teachers were meeting in workshops on Saturday morning.

Section XI of “Adventure in Democratic Administration” is titled “The Task of Leadership,” and Blankenship summarizes by stating, “The school system was actually built and operated on the assumption that members of the teaching profession can and will do an effective job of developing a complete school program when they are given time, opportunity and encouragement.”

He went on to say, “The policy of giving staff members time for group planning by employing them for a longer period of time than is actually spent in teaching results in benefits to children, teachers, and the community worth many times the financial cost.”

Blankenship takes several pages to cite the specific difficulties identified and overcome during the years of the experiment of creating a school system from scratch. Among the numerous leadership insights are many that are modeled today in the Oak Ridge school system.

Tom Bailey and I talked recently regarding the workshops Blankenship promoted and noted the similarity to the workshops today, often referred to as charrettes. Examples of these charrettes are the group sessions used by the various stakeholders planning for the renovation of the Oak Ridge High School. Intensive group planning sessions were held to address the final design characteristics of the various facilities of the state-of-the-art high school being constructed.

These stakeholder meetings included students, school staff and teachers, construction contractors and other interested individuals. Blankenship would have been proud to see his ideas continuing to be put to good use.

Next week will begin our focus on the history of the Oak Ridge Public Schools Education Foundation.

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A present-day charrette, or Oak Ridge schools workshop, featuring Ken Green, Chuck Carringer, Kay Moss, Alice Crook, Ray Thach, Kelly Parker, Nita Ganguly, Nancy Lesesne, Benita Albert, Marsha Tipton, and Jim French, with Rachel McGuffin, Mitchell Lauback, Tom Penney, Terry Lloyd and Dale Randels in the background