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PREDICTION OF PUBLIC OPINION BY SCHOOL TRUSTEES AND PROFESSIONAL EDUCATORS

ABSTRACT: This study sought to determine whether or not job affiliation, life orientation, or biographical factors correlated with ability to predict public opinion on educational issues. When a group of trustees and four groups of professional educators were compared it was discovered that school counsellors were better predictors of public opinion than either teachers or school principals. The implication of this study is that educators wishing to get a reading of public opinion on educational matters should consult counsellors in their schools.

Two polls were conducted by the senior author between February 14 and March 9, 1973. The first poll obtained a measure of the opinion of the general public on certain educational issues (Brosseau, 1973). The second poll, conducted at the same time, sought to discover the groups responsible for education who could best predict public opinion on educational issues. The results of the second poll are reported here.

Subjects for the poll were selected from school trustees and professional educators responsible for education in the Public School System and the Catholic School System, located in Edmonton, Alberta. All school trustees, central office personnel at the level of director or above, principals, and counsellors were selected, as well as a random sample of teachers. A proportional allocation (Stephan & McCarthy,

1958) with a ratio of 3 : 7 was used in selecting the random sample of teachers from the two school systems. Table 1 shows the numbers and identity of each group of school trustees and professional educators who were selected.

TABLE 1
COMPOSITION OF SAMPLE

	Edmonton Catholic School System	Edmonton Public School System	Total in the sample
School Trustees.....	7	7	14
Principals.....	75	149	224
Counsellors.....	29	94	123
Central Office			
Administrators.....	14	36	50
Teachers.....	120	280	400
Total.....	245	566	811

School trustees and professional educators were asked to complete the same questionnaire as was completed by the general public in the first poll. However, the instructions were changed. School trustees and professional educators were asked to answer the questions as they believed the general public would. They were not to give their personal opinions, as was the case with the first poll (the general public). Thus, what was being sought was the degree of accuracy with which school trustees and professional educators could predict public opinion as measured by the first poll. The questionnaire used to obtain the measure of public opinion was a modification of The Annual Survey of the Public's Attitude Towards the Public School by Gallup (1971).

In addition to the public opinion questionnaire, school trustees and professional educators were asked to provide biographical information on themselves, as well as complete a Life Orientation Test (LOT). The LOT was developed by Fox (1969) and provides a measure of one's life orientation on the dimension of biophilia and necrophilia, as described by Fromm (1967).

The objective of this study was to determine which of the factors of job affiliation, life orientation, and biographical information contributed the most in identifying the best predictors of public opinion on certain educational issues.

The test booklets containing all of the questionnaires were sent to the professional educators by mail. School trustees, on the other hand, were contacted personally to complete the test booklets.

A total of 568 questionnaires were returned of the 797 that were sent out to professional educators for a rate of return of 71 percent. On the other hand, 12 of the 14 school trustees in Edmonton completed the questionnaires for a return rate of 86 percent. Table 2 outlines the percentage of questionnaires returned by each of the five subgroups.

TABLE 2
RATE OF RETURN OF QUESTIONNAIRES

	Number returned	Rate of return in percentages
Teachers.....	252	63
Principals.....	185	82
Central Office Administrators.....	36	72
Counsellors.....	95	77
School Trustees.....	12	86

The responses that school trustees and professional educators made on the poll were scored as follows. First, the responses made by the general public to each question in poll one were analysed. Those questions in poll one that had one alternative selected by a significant majority of the general public were identified. The alternative in each question in poll one that was selected by a significant majority of the general public was keyed as representing the wishes of the public. Persons completing poll two who chose the same alternative were given a score of one, any other response was given a score of zero. These scores obtained by school trustees and professional educators on poll two were then totaled. High scores indicated a good predictor of public opinion while a low score indicated a poor predictor of public opinion.

A one way analysis of variance was performed on the scores obtained by school trustees and professional educators. The results indicated that differences do exist between the ability of the various groups, based on job affiliation, to predict public opinion (see Table 3).

TABLE 3
MEAN SCORE OF EACH GROUP ON PREDICTING PUBLIC OPINION

Group	Number	Mean
Teachers.....	252	30.94
Principals.....	185	30.82
Central Office Administrators.....	36	33.75
Counsellors.....	95	33.37
School Trustees.....	12	33.41
TOTAL.....	580	31.52

The analysis of variance between groups on the variable public opinion yielded an *F* statistic of 3.81 which was significant at the .10 level. In view of these results a Scheffé simple pair-wise mean comparison was done. The results of the Scheffé yielded significant dif-

ferences in comparison between variable 1 (teachers) and variable 4 (counsellors) as well as between variable 2 (principals) and variable 4 (counsellors) at the .10 level (see Table 4).

TABLE 4
PROBABILITY MATRIX FOR SCHEFFE-MULTIPLE COMPARISON OF MEANS

Group	1	2	3	4	5
1 Teachers.....	1.000	0.999	0.266	0.073	0.831
2 Principals.....		1.000	0.246	0.072	0.809
3 Central Office Administrators..			1.000	0.999	0.999
4 Counsellors.....				1.000	1.000
5 School Trustees....					1.000

Thus, we can safely say that counsellors are significantly better predictors of public opinion on educational issues than are either principals or teachers. The mean scores obtained by the school trustees and central office administrators were, in fact, higher than that of the counsellors but were not statistically significant. This lack of significance was probably due to the small numbers in these two groups as compared to the counsellor group.

No significant correlations were found between either life orientation or biographical factors and ability to predict public opinion. Therefore, one should not look to either life orientation or items of biographical data as used in this study to identify good predictors of public opinion. Although neither life orientation nor biographical factors assisted in the identification of accurate predictors of public opinion, this study found that counsellors were better predictors of public opinion than either teachers or principals. Thus, occupational group affiliation appears to have merit as a method of discriminating between accurate and inaccurate predictors of public opinion.

There was no evidence found to suggest that school trustees are better predictors of public opinion than are either of the four groups of professional educators. Therefore, school boards wishing to get an accurate estimate of public opinion should not rely on the school trustees' perception of public opinion as opposed to the perceptions of professional educators. It appears that school boards wishing to have an accurate gauge of public opinion should use methods such as a public opinion poll rather than rely on their own perceptions or the perceptions of their professional educators.

Due to shortages of time and money, it is not always feasible to conduct accurate readings on public opinion such as can be obtained by a public opinion poll. In situations like this, those responsible for decision making who wish to reflect the wishes of the public often contact a few persons to see what their opinions are. This study found

that counsellors are significantly better predictors of public opinion of educational issues than are either teachers or principals. In view of these findings, decision makers would probably be well advised to solicit the counsellors' views of public opinion rather than views of teachers and principals.

RESUME: Cette étude cherchait à déterminer si l'appartenance à un emploi, l'orientation de vie, ou des facteurs biographiques étaient en corrélation avec l'habileté à prédire l'opinion publique concernant les problèmes de l'éducation. Lorsqu'on a comparé un groupe d'administrateurs (trustees) avec quatre groupes de professionnels de l'éducation, on a constaté que les conseillers scolaires prédisaient mieux l'opinion publique que les professeurs ou les principaux d'écoles. La conclusion de cette étude est que lorsque les éducateurs souhaitent obtenir le pouls de l'opinion publique concernant les problèmes de l'éducation, ils feraient bien de consulter les conseillers de leurs écoles.

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