

The Status and Influence of Agricultural Advisory Committees in California

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Historically, the American public has participated in educational change at the local level through membership in citizen advisory committees. A review of legislative history reveals action regarding advisory committees in vocational education dating back to the Smith-Hughes Act of 1917 (O'Neal, 1981). In California, Senate Bill 187 created the Agricultural Vocational Education Advisory Committee (California State Legislature, 1981) which recommended, as an operational standard for vocational agricultural education, that "programs of instruction in vocational agriculture shall be advised by a committee representative of the agricultural interests of the community" (Senate Bill 187, 182, pp. 11-12).

The need, status, structure and function of advisory committees across the nation is a concern for secondary and postsecondary agricultural education (Stewart, Shinn, & Richardson, 1977). Lawrence and Mallilo (1981) determined that the formation and effective use of agricultural advisory committees was an area in need of greatest improvement. Faulkenberry (1976) showed that 72% of vocational agriculture teachers in Mississippi had advisory committees. Trotter (1978) indicated that there are no active vocational education advisory committees in some areas of Pennsylvania and that they are underutilized in other areas.

In California, data on agricultural advisory committees had not been collected. Wilson, California State Supervisor of Agricultural Education, expressed concern about the prospect of a low number of functioning advisory committees in California and the possible ineffectiveness of many of the committees (D. Wilson, personal communication, September 21, 1984). Hence, the problem was a lack of specific information relative to the present status and degree of influence of advisory committees in California. These data are needed to plan for more effective use of these committees.

Objectives of the Study

The purpose of this study was to determine the status and influence of agricultural advisory committees in California. The results were used to suggest methods for improving the effective organization and use of these committees. Specific objectives of the study were to:

1. Define the status of agricultural advisory committees in California.
2. Identify and rank in order of significance the recommendations formulated by agricultural advisory committees.
3. Determine the degree of influence of committees as perceived by head teachers, local principals and advisory committee chairpersons.

4. Determine the differences in perceptions among head teachers of vocational agriculture programs, local school principals, and agricultural advisory chairpersons with regard to agricultural advisory committees.

Procedures

The population for this study was those vocational agriculture programs in California with advisory committees. A multistage sampling process was used in this study's design. Stage one was used to identify vocational agriculture programs with active agricultural advisory committees. Stage two was used to collect data on the characteristics and influence of committees.

In stage one, 398 researcher-developed questionnaires were mailed to the head teachers of all California vocational agriculture programs. The response rate to stage one was 78.9% (314 responses). Prior to distribution, a panel of experts reviewed the questionnaire for content validity. A follow-up of non-respondents detected, as determined by a Chi-square analysis, no differences in the status of advisory committees between respondents and non-respondents ($p > .05$). Responses to the stage one questionnaire are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1

Advisory Committee Use by Vocational Agriculture Programs

Type of Advisory Committee Utilized	N	%
For the total vocational agriculture program	210	66.9
For specialty areas in the agriculture program (i.e. horticulture area)	6	1.9
For the total vocational program in the school	27	8.6
Advisory committee is not utilized	71	22.6
Total	314	100.0

Of those programs with advisory committees for the total vocational agriculture program, 100 (50%) were randomly selected for participation in stage two of this study. Schools that had advisory committees representing all of vocational education or only one segment of the agriculture program were excluded since this did not comply with state recommendations and would not provide data for typical California programs.

In stage two, department heads of the randomly selected vocational agriculture programs, their school principals, and the respective agricultural advisory committee chairpersons were mailed the researcher-developed questionnaire. The questionnaire was validated by a panel of experts and pretested in vocational agriculture programs not included in the sample but which met the full criteria for selection in the sample. The reliability of the questionnaire was established by a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of .846 (N = 39).

An initial mailing and one follow-up mailing were utilized to gather the data. The time which elapsed between the first and final mailings was three weeks. Sixty-six percent of the head teachers of vocational agriculture programs, 44% of school principals and 43% of advisory committee chairpersons responded to the questionnaire. A follow-up on a random sample of non-respondents was conducted, and data analyses using Chi-square or ANOVA on all variables in the study revealed no significant differences in the present status of the advisory committees or in the type of recommendations formulated by these committees ($p > .05$).

The data were described using frequencies and percentages. Means were determined for all scaled and numbered responses. The Chi-square or ANOVA was used to determine significant relationships between respondent groups. Analysis was conducted with an a priori alpha level of .05.

Findings

Status of Agricultural Advisory Committees

The random sample of agricultural advisory committees used in this study indicated the following levels of organization and productivity:

1. A majority of advisory committees (61.9%) maintained memberships of 5 to 10 members, followed by 11.1% with greater than 13 members, 9.9% with 4 members or less, and 7.1% with 11 to 13 members.
2. The background and interest of advisory committee members was higher in the agricultural production area ($M_o = 2.0$ members) than in the areas of ag mechanics, horticulture, ag products and processing, ag supplies and services, forestry, or natural resources ($M_o = 1.0$).
3. The agriculture teacher nominated new committee members for 73.2% of the committees. Other committees used principals (9.4%), school board members (5.4%), advisory committee members (4.7%), vocational directors (2.7%), and school superintendents (1.3%) to nominate members.
4. A majority (66.7%) of advisory committees held between two and four meetings during the previous 12 months. Approximately 16.4% of the committees met five or more times, and 14.4% held one meeting or less.
5. Forty-seven percent of committees utilized no school funds to support committee activities. When used, school funds most often were used to pay for committees' postal expenses.
6. Only one-half (50.3%) of the advisory committees provided members with written descriptions of their duties and responsibilities.
7. In a majority of instances (62.3%), minutes of committee meetings were recorded by the teacher. Advisory committee members (19.2%) or a school secretary (12.5%) were also used to record minutes of the committees.
8. Vocational agriculture teachers (85.3%) usually attended agricultural advisory committee meetings. Two-thirds of respondents (66.7%) reported that school principals attended the committee meetings at least once during the previous 12 months.

Recommendations Made by the Agricultural Advisory Committees

All respondents were asked to describe the most important recommendations made by their agricultural advisory committees during the past 12 months. The majority of recommendations (60.2%) were in five categories: (a) revise the curriculum in the vocational agriculture program, 30.1%; (b) develop a school farm, 8.2%; (c) support California agricultural education state standards, 7.3%; (d) recommend science credit for vocational agriculture classes, 7.3%; and (e) recommend equipment needs for the program, 7.3%. The remaining 11 of 16 categories of recommendations were each reported by no more than 5% of the committees. Collectively, these categories accounted for 39.8% of the total number of recommendations. Examples of these categories of recommendations were to employ secretary for the ag program, conduct graduate follow-up, question college/university entrance requirements, and terminate the contract of the agriculture teacher.

Influence of Agricultural Advisory Committees

Perceptions of respondents on the overall influence of committees were solicited. The data indicated (mean scores in parentheses):

1. As individuals, advisory committee members were moderately influential in their communities (3.6), and with the vocational agriculture teachers (3.6). Advisory committee members exhibited some influence with the principals (3.2), vocational directors (3.2) and school superintendents (3.2) (Scale: 1 = No influence, 2 = Limited influence, 3 = Some influence, 4 = Moderate influence, 5 = Extreme influence).

2. Advisory committees were regarded by teachers, principals and committee chairpersons as performing a moderately worthwhile function (3.8). Teachers believed committees performed a more worthwhile function (4.13) than school principals (3.74) and advisory committee chairpersons (3.69) (Scale: 1 = No worth, 2 = Limited worth, 3 = Some worth, 4 = Moderate worth, 5 = Extreme worth).

3. Teachers were perceived as usually acting (4.0) on the recommendations made by the advisory committees. To a lesser extent, vocational directors (3.5), principals (3.2), and school boards (3.2) sometimes acted on committee recommendations (Scale: 1 = Never acts, 2 = Seldom acts, 3 = Sometimes acts, 4 = Usually acts, 5 = Always acts).

Differences in Perceptions Between Respondent Type

The space for this article does not permit providing descriptive information on each of the 139 variables. Examples of variables within the five categories are provided in the text of the article for the purposes of clarification and comparison. The descriptive information on all variables is available upon request from the authors.

A total of 139 variables was analyzed for significant relationships, $p < .05$, among teachers, principals and advisory committee chairpersons. The variables were divided into the following major categories: (a) respondent background, (b) committee characteristics, (c) committee operations, (d) types of recommendations, and (e) influence of the committee. No significant relationships were found between types of respondents and variables on respondent background and recommendations of committee. Examples of variables in the category of respondent background included: (a) age of the respondent and (b) length of association with the advisory committee. Examples of

variables for types of recommendations of committee were: (a) identification of the most significant recommendation made by the committee during the past 12 months, (b) the degree to which this recommendation was implemented by school officials, and (c) the extent to which school officials influenced the formulation of the recommendation.

Significant relationships in responses, $p < .05$, were found to exist between the teachers, principals and committee chairpersons for five of the 139 variables. These variables were in the categories of committee characteristics, committee operations and influence of the committee.

In the category of committee characteristics, the variables showing significant relationships between respondent type were: (a) type of school officials who attended committee meetings, $\chi^2 (2, N = 150) = 7.28$ and (b) criteria used for selecting agricultural advisory committee members, $\chi^2 (2, N = 153) = 12.26$. Examples of committee characteristics which did not reveal a significant relationship were: (a) number of official committee members, (b) position of the person officially nominating new members, (c) extent to which the membership of the advisory committee is representative of the local agricultural industry, and (d) number of meetings held during the past 12 months.

In the category of committee operations, the variable for which there was a significant relationship between respondent type was the extent to which the school principal influenced the committee, $F (44, N = 45) = 3.76$. For this variable, principals perceived a higher ($\bar{X} = 3.27$) level of influence than did advisory committee chairpersons ($\bar{X} = 2.97$) or teachers ($\bar{X} = 2.64$) (Scale: 1 = No influence, 2 = Limited influence, 3 = Some influence, 4 = Moderate influence, 5 = Extreme influence). Examples of variables which did not reveal a significant relationship in this category were: (a) type of committee meeting minutes, (b) type of description of duties and responsibilities presented to members, and (c) type of individual to whom committee recommendations were directed.

In the category of influence of the committee, the variables for which there was a significant relationship were: (a) the extent to which agricultural advisory committees performed a worthwhile function, $F (150, N = 151) = 3.92$; and (b) the degree to which committee recommendations were implemented by school officials, $F (66, N = 67) = 4.52$. In the former case, teachers perceived a higher ($\bar{X} = 4.13$) worthwhile function than did principals ($\bar{X} = 3.74$) and advisory committee chairs ($\bar{X} = 3.69$) (Scale: 1 = No worth, 2 = Limited worth, 3 = Some worth, 4 = Moderate worth, 5 = Extreme worth). Teachers perceived a higher ($\bar{X} = 3.91$) degree of implementation of committee recommendations than did principals ($\bar{X} = 3.67$) or advisory committee chairs ($\bar{X} = 3.67$) (Scale: 1 = Not implemented, 2 = Slightly implemented, 3 = Somewhat implemented, 4 = Moderately implemented, 5 = Fully implemented). Examples of variables in the category of influence of the committee that were not significant with regard to respondent type were: (a) the extent to which the committee, as a whole, was influential with school personnel, and (b) the extent to which committee members, as individuals, were influential with school officials.

Conclusions

The following conclusions apply to California agricultural advisory committees and are based on the perceptions of respondents in this study:

1. Agricultural advisory committees provide a worthwhile function and are used in a majority of California vocational agriculture programs.

2. California agriculture programs without advisory committees (23%) are not in compliance with the California State Standards for Vocational Agricultural Education and are not taking advantage of an important resource.

3. In general, effective California agricultural advisory committees have five to ten members, more members from production than other agricultural fields, hold two to four meetings a year, use school funds for postage and general office activities, take minutes at each meeting (usually by the agriculture teacher), have regular attendance by the agriculture teacher, and have occasional attendance by the school principal.

4. Effective agricultural advisory committees in California focus most of their attention on curriculum development, management of teaching facilities, equipment selection and use, program evaluation, and articulation with the school science curriculum.

5. Agricultural advisory committees have influence in the school and community that could be used to improve and support the agriculture program.

6. Vocational agriculture teachers, school principals and advisory committee chairpersons generally have similar views on the characteristics and influence of agricultural advisory committees. Hence, they should be able to work together effectively. Differences found to exist between the respondent groups for a few select variables indicate that these three groups could work together even more closely with discussion and resolution in these areas.

Recommendations

1. Agricultural advisory committees should be established and maintained for all vocational agriculture programs.

2. Operational procedures for advisory committees should include: (a) providing advisory committee members with clearly written committee functions and goals at the time members are enlisted into committee service, (b) involving local school principals in advisory committee meetings, and (c) including local school boards in the nomination of new members.

3. Agriculture teachers, advisory committee members and school administrators should establish strategies to improve communications and working relationships between members and with school policy makers.

4. Advisory committees should focus on issues that have a significant impact on their programs and not become burdened with small matters that waste time, or for which their influence is limited.

5. Further studies should be conducted to: (a) investigate the reasons for differences in perceptions of agricultural advisory committees by agriculture teachers, advisory committee members and school administrators; (b) determine why 71 California vocational agriculture programs do not currently utilize the services of advisory committees, and to investigate methods of assisting these programs in doing so; and (c) determine the organizational and operational variables related to the successful use of advisory committees.

(Continued on page 48)