

Group XIII—Parliament Room

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How Should Administrators Deal With School Fraternities and Sororities?

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THE existence of sororities or fraternities in any high school indicates that they are serving some need. It is, therefore, important in the approach to the problem to analyze carefully what needs they are serving. One may be the need for social activity and may indicate the lack of a social program which should be offered by the school. Another need may be the opportunity to belong to a gang or group. Such gangs or groups may represent minorities, social or economic cliques of the student body. For example, in some schools where fraternities and sororities do exist, we find that certain of these groups restrict their membership to certain nationalities, color, race, or creed. In other schools, membership is restricted to individuals of certain economic and social home backgrounds within the community. Some of these may be the "upper uppers" or the "lower lowers." There are other groupings, and each school and community must first of all analyze the membership of these clubs and determine the need that these clubs serve. A question that each faculty, board of education, or parent group should ask is, "What need do they satisfy?" Do these clubs satisfy the gregarious instinct, or do they give evidence of the lack of an adequate social and extracurricular program of the school? Is there some other reason for their existence? Before we can say that they should or should not exist, a definite study should be made to determine the need and reason for their existence.

The second step in the approach to the program is to analyze the characteristics of a high-school fraternity or sorority. They provide an opportunity for the individual to identify himself with a small group which receives recognition through the following means:

1. Their restricted membership (Prestige)
2. Their closed meetings (Secrecy)
3. Their pins, sweaters, insignia (Identification with a group)
4. Their social affairs (Social recognition)
5. The support given individual members for school offices (Allegiance)
6. Their initiations (Adventure, fun, etc.)

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You will note that none of these in themselves is objectionable and whenever elimination of the sororities and fraternities is suggested, it is *sometimes* difficult to point out that any of these characteristics in themselves is detrimental to either the individual or the school. However, there is not one of these characteristics of the sororities or fraternities which could not be transferred to a school club or group. There is a sharp difference between a school organization and the sorority and fraternity. It is the distinct difference which must be kept constantly in mind not only by school people but also by parents and students. The primary difference between the school group and the fraternity and sorority is the principle of *exclusiveness and its undemocratic principle of selection*. No public school has a right to sponsor or permit the existence of any organization whose membership is not open to all who can qualify. It is not to be implied that every organization should be open to any individual who desires to join whenever he has the urge and to resign whenever he wishes. A club or any group within the school should establish its own standards within reason, regardless of how high the standard may be. But when a person has met these standards and can prove his qualifications, he should not need to fear the blackballing by any students or teachers. It would be absurd to say that anyone could join the Tankateers, a girls' swimming club. Naturally, the girl would need to meet the qualifications of demonstrating her ability to swim, dive, and float, as well as present a record of good conduct, citizenship, and perhaps scholarship. The boy desiring to join the German Club would need to have some knowledge of German to meet the qualifications. The boys or girls joining the Hi-Y or Y-Teen groups should be required to demonstrate that they are willing to live according to the standards established by the group. However, when these standards are met, every boy and girl should be assured that he would have an equal opportunity to become a member of such a group.

No public school in a democracy has a right to tolerate any group which places membership on any basis other than qualification, merit, and achievement. The only principle upon which a school can operate is "all for one, and one for all." That immediately eliminates the possibility of one brother being taken by a group and another rejected, or of witnessing little comrade groups during junior high school days being broken up when they reach high school because one has been taken by the select group and another rejected. It also eliminates the right of any group to set up its standards on any bases other than merit, qualification, and achievement for membership.

The right to the pin, the insignia, the pennant, the special dance, the club party, and other privileges should be extended only to those groups

which have the approval of the school and which are based upon the democratic principle of a fair opportunity to all. The requirements for groups not supported by the school should be supervised by a responsible, organized parent group to serve as a supervisor, and then only if provision for membership be clearly understood and defined. The need for other organizations should be met by an aggressive and progressive program of school parties, clubs, sports, and other extracurricular activities sponsored by the school or responsible community agency.

Do not plan to abolish undesirable organizations within the school and then expect a vacuum to remain. If the school is unwilling to provide for the social and leisure-time needs and activities of the boys and girls, the authorities should not be critical if the boys, girls, and the parents meet the need in their own way.

In dealing with this problem, it is important to keep in mind that each school has a local social pattern within which it must work. Conditions, circumstances, and people differ, and the way in which the problem is solved will depend upon these factors. Nevertheless, the problem should be faced squarely and an honest answer given to the constituents, parents, and students of any school.

CHRONOLOGY OF ABOLITION

Permit me to review briefly the events and circumstances relating to the abolition of sororities and fraternities in one community in the Midwest. It was my privilege to have been principal of that school from the fall of 1941 until February 1, 1948.

The community is a residential city of 70,000 people. It has three junior high schools with grades from the seventh through the ninth years and one senior high school with grades from the tenth through the twelfth years. In 1941 the enrollment of the senior high school was 2300 students and at present totals about 1800. Sororities and fraternities had existed for about thirty years with many of the school leaders holding membership. Although the clubs had begun originally as small social and natural neighborhood groups, primarily interested in fun and leisure-time activities, gradually the idea spread and soon many small clubs were competing for membership, prestige, and school offices. It was easy to detect at any athletic game where the fellow members of a player were by their loud applause of his achievements. Sometimes clubs would unite in backing each other's candidates for offices. Club members chided in the cafeteria, at games, and about the school.

If you were "in," you had arrived; if you were "out," you were of little count. The Hi-Y was composed of two chapters, and although their

standards were higher, they were also "closed" groups. It was more important to some to wear the insigne of their club than those of the school.

When a student became a member, he found it quite embarrassing to quit or rebel against the club leadership. This situation gradually became worse. In order to be accepted, a pupil did what the group wanted him to do, and after he belonged, he stayed in line. The school had no control and many of the parties, dances, and week-end affairs were poorly chaperoned or supervised. The clubs were powerful enough to unite and "make" or "break" any school activity.

Parents were dissatisfied but feared social repercussions against their children if they raised public objections. Many were helpless in trying to dissuade their children from joining because the clubs operated openly and little was done to discourage them. Parents who dared to "stand out" against them were embarrassed by the parents who thought that membership in a sorority or fraternity was necessary in order to be accepted socially.

An analysis of the situation disclosed three important facts. The first was that fraternities and sororities served the need for social activities which were lacking in the program of the school. Second, many of those who belonged desired something better but felt forced to join. Third, and not the least, was the fact that many leaders in the communities were willing to back any individual or group who dared to tackle the problem provided they would not be out in front if the attempt should fail.

It might also be said that there were many parents who would resist such an attempt because they fully realized that their children would not hold leadership in groups which did not depend upon money, family social status, and an automobile, but rather upon personal merit and achievement. Morals, scholarship, and school spirit suffered because of the leadership which had gained control of most of the clubs. Their parties, initiations, and week-end affairs, in many instances, gave the school a bad reputation.

A careful plan was made for their abolition. First, a social program was planned to meet the need, which would be superior to anything offered by the fraternities or sororities. Second, a definite program of publicity was organized which would give notice to all that these clubs were not approved by the school. Third, a counter offensive was started to remove control and power of the fraternities and sororities in school activities. Fourth, leaders of the unapproved groups were dealt with fearlessly whenever they attempted to interfere with the general welfare of the school. Fifth, a definite goal was set to strike the final blow to have them officially abolished when we were certain of three things: first, that the majority of the students would back the administration; second, that the

Board of Education would demonstrate their backing by unanimous action; and third, that the new social program would first prove its superiority in meeting the needs of the students in a social and extracurricular way. It was also hoped that improvement in scholarship, school spirit, and community backing would be evident.

When the general objectives and plans were completed, the program was put into operation. Students, parents, and community leaders were informed that the practice of "closed" membership and the undemocratic selection of members were contrary to the principles of a public high school in a democratic society. The general slogan of "all for one, and one for all" was widely used. Monthly school parties were planned. The first one was attended by 1700 students. Everyone co-operated, as it was important to make the first one successful. A dance floor was placed on the baseball diamond, lights were strung about the botanical gardens, a miniature golf course was constructed in the garden, and booths were erected. Everyone had an enjoyable time. The next party was scheduled for indoors, and then more problems arose. How could we compete with parties held at the country clubs and hotels? We had to make the school an attractive place. A large canopy purchased for the purpose of transforming the appearance of the room was drawn up inside the running track in the boy's gym. Now, decorating was easier, indirect lighting was possible, and a festive atmosphere was created in the "old" gymnasium. The girls' gymnasium was used for booths and games, and the swimming pool was opened for mixed groups. The first indoor party had one thousand present and school parties took a new place in the social life of the school. Each party was planned by students and teachers together. Members on the faculty were rotated so that everyone served on a committee at some party. One teacher was appointed to serve as social director. These parties are now an established part of the extracurricular program and attendance averages more than seven hundred. The annual Thanksgiving night dance of the fraternities was matched by a school victory ball in the Masonic Temple. The Christmas formal was matched by one under school auspices. Soon the fraternities and sororities were given second place socially, and after suffering severe losses at some of their parties, they offered to co-operate. Their co-operation was refused and their social program was matched party for party.

Another blow to their groups was the adoption of a policy that only the insignie of the school was permitted to be worn in and about the school. This was difficult to enforce, but the defiants were soon ready to recognize that the school and not outside groups would determine policies of administration. In all of these procedures, the students and faculty were co-operating. Gradually, it came to be recognized that it was not wise to advertise your

association with one of the unapproved groups. Letters to new students and parents clearly emphasized that fraternities and sororities were not approved, and students were urged not to participate.

A coat-of-arms was adopted by the students and teachers, and those entering the twelfth grade or graduates were permitted to wear it. This pin replaced the fraternity or sorority emblem. Teachers completing ten years of service were awarded these pins on Honor Day.

The Hi-Y groups opened their memberships to those who would meet certain standards and maintain them. The best leaders of the faculty were assigned as sponsors and assistants. Recognition was given them in every way possible. Soon the Friendship organization comprised of girls became the outstanding girls' club, and Hi-Y, the boys' group. Awards were made on the basis of participation in school clubs, activities, and sports as well as scholarship. Within two years it was no longer considered "smart" to join a fraternity or sorority and membership in them hit a new low.

School spirit, scholarship, discipline, parent support, and student interest improved. Constantly, fraternity and sorority members were harrassed and discouraged. Careful supervision at athletic games discouraged demonstration by groups, and it was considered wise not to be seen "hanging around" together because they might be identified as a group of undesirables.

School offices, appointments, honors, and recognition were gradually being awarded to those who backed the school program. It was no longer necessary to join a fraternity or sorority to be accepted socially in the school or community. At this time it was felt that the remnants of the old groups could be eliminated only by official action. The Board of Education prohibited membership in them after six months from date of notice. The same board also made it mandatory for each school to establish a satisfactory social program.

The arguments for the fraternities and sororities were greatly weakened. First, there was no longer a need for them socially. School clubs had increased to over forty in number; sports, to more than twenty-five; Hi-Y chapters, to nine; and Friendship membership, to over four hundred. Scholastic records of those not in the sorority and fraternity groups were superior to those holding membership. The large majority of students, parents, and community leaders were in favor of the new program and the abolition of the undesirable groups. The real determining factor in the successful abolition of the groups was the reaction of the student body. They gave the administration their backing because they wanted the new program to continue and were convinced that the best policy was "one for all, and all for one."

Naturally, a few tried to circumvent the board ruling and one or two groups had to be dealt with severely. Nevertheless, the greatest satisfaction

came in the voluntary surrender of books, minutes, and records, and in the united resignation by those members who represented the oldest, strongest, and most outstanding clubs. Their leadership was quickly followed by those of the newer and smaller groups.

Two years after the formal action by the Board of Education, the signs and evidence of the existence of any unapproved groups had disappeared. Some said that they had been driven underground. If that were true, we had no worry. As one student said "What fun is there belonging to something that doesn't dare to do anything publicly." Then, too, parents were convinced that the school was a better place since they had been abolished. Former members supported the school because of the progress which had been made in meeting the needs that the fraternities and sororities met, only in a better and more democratic way.

SUPPORT OF STUDENT BODY ESSENTIAL

The fundamental factor in abolishing fraternities and sororities from any high school is the support of the student body. Any board of education action, faculty decision, or legislative act is of little value if the student body does not support the administration and high school faculty. When the majority of the boys and girls are convinced that such clubs should be abolished and are willing to back such a movement, you can succeed. Without their support, you will fail.

Fraternities and sororities can be abolished. Nevertheless, something better must be substituted. It is not recommended to oust them unless the school and community are willing to meet the needs that they serve. The best defense is a strong offense.

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C. ELWOOD DRAKE

OUR experience in the Newton High School during the past two or three years may give some suggestions for an answer to the question under discussion at this meeting. At least it presents an approach which may be possible in some communities.

For many years there had been fraternities and sororities among youth of high-school age in Newton. Several had Greek letter designations; one was known as the Sophomore Club. They were relatively small groups. Their total membership probably did not include more than ten or fifteen per cent of the total student body. Yet their influence was felt rather strongly

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