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*Following a year-long study of a divisive community issue, a nine-person task force at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock issued a report entitled "Plain Talk: The Future of Little Rock's Public Schools." The project required giving major attention to managing the risks to the university of involvement in a controversial issue.*

## **Managing the Risks of Plain Talk about a Divisive Community Issue**

There are significant risks when a university addresses a divisive community issue. The university's reputation for objectivity and neutrality will be on the line. Partisans might attempt to deflect the project or control the methods and outcomes. Any real or perceived flaw in the university's work will be highly visible. The university's conclusions could be embarrassing or offensive to community leaders and financial supporters of the university, with uncertain consequences.

These risks were all keenly felt when the University of Arkansas at Little Rock (UALR) undertook a year-long study of the Little Rock School District. The 222-page report, "Plain Talk: The Future of Little Rock's Public Schools," was released in March 1997. Enough time has passed to permit reflection on the experience of addressing a community mega-issue and to offer this article for the benefit of other universities considering involvement in a divisive issue in their communities.

### ***School Issues in Little Rock***

The need for a big-picture assessment of the public schools of Little Rock has been shaped by events that began decades earlier. In 1957, President Dwight D. Eisenhower sent federal troops to Little Rock to support a federal district court order challenged by the governor and to assure the safety of nine African American students during the integration of Little Rock Central High School. Those 1957 events started the longest-running school desegregation litigation in the United States. In 1958-59, the governor, acting on statutory

authority later declared unconstitutional, closed Little Rock high schools for the entire school year.

By the mid-1990s, in addition to the ongoing constitutional issues about equal treatment of African American children, there were growing concerns about school safety. There was also controversy over student achievement, particularly the gap between the average standardized test scores of white and African American students. White flight was a decades-old trend. Business leaders feared that the district was headed for bankruptcy. Long-time supporters of the public schools were wondering if the school district was worth saving.

### ***Why Should the University Step In?***

Just because a big-picture assessment was needed did not necessarily mean the university should provide it. Why did UALR step into such a controversial arena? The answer is surprisingly straightforward: the community asked the university for assistance and the university is committed to engagement in community improvement.

The idea can be traced to a community-based process (with two community representatives per one campus representative on each task force) that produced a strategic plan for the university. One clear message that emerged was that the community wanted the university to help solve major community problems. When participants were asked to identify these, the schools, to no one's surprise, were at or near the top of every list. Therefore, the university, in order to fulfill its strategic plan, had to put its money where its mouth was.

### ***Selected Findings of the Study***

A number of the study's findings should be noted for context:

- A majority of both white and African American households in the city favored integrated schools.
- The district was resegregating. White flight had produced a school population that was 2/3 African American and 1/3 white in a city with an overall population that was 2/3 white and 1/3 African American.
- The court requirement for racial balance at each school site, i.e., numbers of African American and white students proportionate to the overall district's student population of the two groups, had become counterproductive and logistically infeasible because of the dwindling number of white students.
- White and African American households had significant disagreements about the means to achieve desegregation, specifically about busing, neighborhood schools, racial balance in each school, and getting the district out of federal court.
- White and African American households generally agreed that magnet schools were effective, that character education was desirable, and that discipline was too lax.
- White and African American teachers agreed that discipline was a significant issue, and both strongly favored the presence of resource officers (uniformed police) in the schools.

- The district had suffered serious instability in leadership. In the 15 years preceding the study there had been 10 changes, including interim superintendents, in the chief executive position.
- The schools were widely perceived as unsafe. The study found that the schools were generally safe, but that discipline was a significant problem.
- In a chapter titled “Overwhelming Complexity,” the task force described a school system tied down like Gulliver in the land of the Lilliputians by a thousand strings of court-mandated operating, reporting, and monitoring requirements, in addition to court appearances.
- The district, although not on the verge of bankruptcy, was financially at risk.
- Little Rock is not a poor city. Comparative data show it could afford a strong school system.
- Achievement data showed a persistent gap in standardized test score averages between white and African American students from the elementary grades through high school. The source of this disparity was traced in part to a readiness-for-school problem.
- Readiness-for-school problems are rooted in the community, not the schools. Data show alarming rates of teen pregnancies and unmarried teen mothers who themselves have not yet, or did not, finish high school. Children from such environments, regardless of race, are less likely to be ready to start school and learn at grade level.
- “Ray Black does not trust Bill White.” The report broke the code of silence that generally prevails on the issue of race in Little Rock. The trust issue was analyzed as an underlying *community* problem that had shaped decades of federal litigation. Two chapters were devoted to the trust issue, one reporting survey data about similarities and differences in white and African American views of the schools, the other explicating the issue in narrative form for the layman.

The task force noted the necessity of setting priorities and urged two agendas as the path to the future. One agenda was to be addressed by school officials: the safety/discipline issue, a budgetary strategy that should be publicly announced and explained, and encouragement of experimentation at the school level. The second agenda was to be addressed by the community on the premise that the school system’s fundamental problems were at root community problems, not school problems, and therefore required an outside-in approach.

The second agenda called for the city board to initiate a community congress on the public schools because the community as a whole needed to develop a better understanding of the school district’s problems and their sources; would have to achieve a consensus on what the community needed and wanted from its schools; and then would have to decide on the steps to achieve it. An approach was sketched for initiating such a broad-based, participatory process, with a congress of equal numbers of white and

African American citizens who would be chosen, one each, by a wide range of organizations, from a local African American sorority to the city's largest corporation.

Those familiar with urban school districts will read much that is familiar in the findings reported in *Plain Talk*, although documenting a community's unique mix of issues is important for good policy-making. And, issues not typically found elsewhere are discussed, such as analyses of the complexity resulting from court involvement, attention to the African American/white trust issue, a discussion of character education and its potential, or the advocacy of an outside-in rather than an inside-out approach to the schools.

### **Risk Management Measures**

A number of steps to limit the risks of the project were taken before it began, and others were taken as it evolved.

#### ***Selection of the Task Force***

The most important step taken to limit risks was the selection of the nine-member task force. First, in order to have relevant expertise, we needed to include scholars from a variety of academic disciplines. Second, the members could not be perceived as opposed to public education because litigants and other partisans might discredit its report as the biased work of an unsympathetic group. Third, because the chancellor and provost wanted to make the project an example of outreach for the whole campus, an additional goal in selecting members was to include at least one faculty member from each of the university's seven colleges and schools. The group selected included the provost, seven faculty members, and one senior research associate with adjunct faculty status in the UALR Institute of Government.

How were members selected? Several months before the project was announced, the provost hosted a half-dozen lunches, each attended by eight to ten faculty members, most of whom had been suggested by the deans. Faculty were invited to discuss the broad subject of how the university could more effectively relate to and assist the public schools. This topic inevitably led to lively discussion of the problems of the schools, revealing individual interest, experience, and insight about school issues that was duly noted by the provost. A short list of potential members, whose participation was discussed with the deans and the chancellor, was produced, and eventually the individuals chosen were contacted.

The chancellor then formally appointed the provost and the eight persons recommended by the provost. At the initial meeting, with their deans and chairs in attendance, those to be appointed were asked to put aside their own research agendas for the duration of the project. They had been informed earlier that they would not receive extra compensation or given reduced teaching assignments. Although they had an additional week to consider the appointment, all accepted within 24 hours.

Here are selected characteristics of the nine-person task force:

- Disciplines represented were finance, sociology, educational administration, law, public administration, mathematics, higher education, audiology and speech pathology, and political science.

- Seven were white and two were African American; six were men and three were women.
- One was a certified public accountant.
- One had earlier served as attorney for the statewide teachers association.
- One was a controversial activist on behalf of less privileged segments of the community.
- one worked weekly in the elementary schools with children with speech and hearing problems; three had been public school teachers earlier in their careers; one had earlier served as supervisor of mathematics in the Little Rock schools; one had been a public school principal and had recently served as associate superintendent in the Little Rock School District.
- One had been a student at Central High School during the 1957-1959 crisis years.
- Two had attended, in other states, public schools segregated for African Americans.
- One had been a county government budget director; one was a former county election commissioner; one was a former political party county committee chair; and one formerly served as a state agency head.
- One formerly served as executive vice president and interim president of the University of Arkansas System.
- In all cases, the children of task force members were currently attending or had graduated from public schools.

The group included a broad spectrum of academic expertise, and much more. Individual members' experience added a powerful and practical dimension to the group's capabilities. Weekly meetings of the task force were disciplined by a practical awareness of members' personalities, data sources, issues of race and education, sequences of historical events, court procedures, school district decision-making processes, and community fault lines.

The chancellor, it should be noted, was an informal tenth member of the task force. From time to time he dropped in on meetings of the group to report on off-campus conversations or meetings he had had that might be relevant to the work of the task force. These visits reaffirmed the importance of the work and re-energized the group.

### ***Having a Mandate***

The mandate to help solve the community's most pressing problems, with the schools topping the list, permitted the university to position itself as a consultant to the community as a whole, rather than to school officials or any other organization or group. It was an effective shield from criticism that the university was sticking its nose uninvited in someone else's business.

### ***Senior University Official as Chair and Project Director***

It was not a given that the task force would enjoy ready access to all of the talent across campus that it needed to produce a quality product and to complete its work in

a timely fashion. Therefore, the provost, as chair of the task force and project director, was key to the risk management strategy. In a project requiring expertise from many disciplines, leadership of a senior university official whose normal authority enables him/her to call upon such expertise whenever and for whatever length of time it is needed, may be essential. In this study, the task force, at the provost's request, was given significant assistance by faculty in history, criminal justice, educational leadership, secondary education, reading, management, and economics. In addition, an associate dean of education interviewed all living former superintendents of the district about the impact of court involvement in district operations. Staff in the survey research center conducted two major community surveys for the task force. With the provost as chair, the task force had ready access to these additional university resources.

### ***Chancellor Alerts Community Leaders***

To avoid taking the community leaders by surprise, the chancellor made the rounds privately to key civic and business leaders to inform them of the study and its purpose. They responded with buy-in and anticipation.

### ***Second Community Survey of African Americans***

The Institute of Government had conducted a community telephone survey of 800 households on school issues for the task force. When the data were sorted into white and African American categories, there were interesting comparisons and contrasts in opinions. Although households had been selected randomly, only 211 of the 800 were African American. Because the task force wanted an unquestionably defensible basis for whatever it said about African American opinions, it asked the Institute of Government to conduct another survey, this time of 400 African American households only. Members of the task force were not surprised that the responses in the second survey consistently tracked the African American responses in the initial survey. Nonetheless, the data had been buttressed in one of the most sensitive areas of the study.

### ***Costs Underwritten by the University***

The chancellor made the crucial decision that the university would underwrite the costs of the study, which were substantial—approximately \$30,000 in direct costs and six times that amount in indirect costs, primarily the time of the task force members and of other faculty and staff who assisted. University funding made it possible for the task force, as it saw fit, to conduct the study, and to draw conclusions and to present them, thereby protecting the integrity of the project.

### ***Interviews to Touch All Bases***

The task force, with two important purposes in mind, used interviews extensively during the first three months of its work. One was to make an inventory of possible issues for its own research agenda. A second was to give recognizable players in the school arena a sense of having been asked for their views. To this end individual

members of the task force conducted one-on-one interviews of some four dozen school and community leaders. In addition, the task force asked a half-dozen major participants in school controversies, such as the superintendent, the principal civil rights lawyer, and the director of the Arkansas Department of Education, to meet individually and at length with the whole task force at one of its regular weekly meetings.

### ***Data-Rich Report***

The task force had unprecedented sources of data and information. The report, which reinforced perceptions of neutrality and well-based conclusions, was data-rich, with a variety of charts, graphs, and illustrations. Skeptics could study and interpret the data for themselves.

### ***Pre-Release Briefings***

In an effort to prevent misunderstanding of the report's content when it was released, a number of key community and school leaders were given advance briefings. The superintendent and the primary civil rights attorney were given the near-final version of the report a month before its release.

### ***News Conference***

The university invited about 200 school and community leaders to the news conference for release of the report. The event featured a summary presentation, distributed later in the day in print form to all media outlets, and the task force members were introduced and served as a panel to answer questions from the audience.

### ***Language for Nonacademic Readers***

To avoid misunderstanding and maximize usefulness, the task force wrote a report that could easily be read by nonacademics.. An editorial in the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette* (April 11, 1997) described the report this way, "An academic study that reads like anything but."

## **Did the Strategy Work?**

Did the strategy for managing risks work?

Most importantly, the report stood up well to critical scrutiny, which showed that an appropriate task force had been selected. One unexpected evaluation came from a member of President Bill Clinton's seven-person advisory board for the president's initiative on race. Former Governor William F. Winter of Mississippi said in a letter to the chancellor on August 13, 1997 (quoted with permission):

"I have just spent about two hours going over this report, which is so engaging and so readable that I literally could not put it down. It is the best study that I have seen on this intractable problem that involves so many complex facets.

The thrust of this report in calling for the involvement of a total community effort is obviously the key."

In addition, despite the variety of participants in the school arena and their strongly held, often contradictory views, the work of the task force was generally perceived as objective and evenhanded. The findings of the study succeeded in both comforting and afflicting all parties. In a story about it in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* (September 26, 1997), Peter Schmidt wrote, "The report's findings do not appear to conform to anyone's agenda." The task force viewed all the major participants in the local drama as honorable and able, and nowhere did their report bash lawyers, judges, school personnel, parents, or anyone else.

Although not unanimously in any of these groups, school board members, school administrators, the teachers union, African Americans, whites, civic and business leaders, columnists, and editorial writers all in general received the report well. However, there were two noteworthy individual exceptions. One was a distinguished, long-time civil rights attorney for a group of intervenors in the ongoing litigation. The other was an esteemed business leader who had been a former president of the school board. Both had been interviewed during the study.

A number of avid supporters of the public schools who had expected a rah-rah report that minimized the negative and accentuated the positive gave the report a luke-warm reception. The same was true of others who felt that a community congress would duplicate a traditional strategic planning process in which they had recently been involved.

As the study evolved, members of the task force felt anxious about how the report's treatment of the underlying race questions would be received by both African Americans and whites. The general reaction, with occasional exceptions, was commendation for speaking candidly on this sensitive subject.

During the middle of the study there was one well-intended attempt to get the task force to unite its efforts with a blue ribbon committee that was appointed to make recommendations to the school board. The co-chairs and several members of that committee were influential local and state citizens and friends of the university. They requested that the university task force share its data and become the research arm of the new group. To ensure that its work would not be deflected by another group's agenda, the task force, with the chancellor's full support, respectfully declined.

When the dust had settled after the report's release, university officials breathed a sigh of relief. The risk management strategy had worked. The task force had succeeded in offering plain talk on a divisive community issue. It had made its way through a local mine field. Along the way it had triggered only a few small explosions, none of which caused any serious damage to the university.

### **Early Score Card**

Because the current chapter in the school district's history is still unfolding, the jury will be out for some time on the impact of *Plain Talk* on the course of events in Little Rock. Moreover, in such a complex situation it is not easy to sort causation from reinforcement of or coincidence with events that would have occurred in the absence of the university's report. However, four observations can be made:

1. The report provided a wealth of carefully developed information and data, clearly presented. Approximately 900 of 1100 printed copies were distributed in the Little Rock metropolitan area, and the report was made available on the university's web site. School board members, among others, credited it with being helpful in framing complex issues.
2. The chapter on the result of extensive court involvement in school operations, "Overwhelming Complexity," has been vindicated by subsequent events. An interim superintendent secured a one-year moratorium on court monitoring and reporting, during which a federal mediator helped achieve a revised and simplified interim desegregation plan that was agreed to by all parties to the litigation. The court will evaluate progress in June 2001. Relieved for three years from extensive court involvement, school personnel have been free to focus sustained attention on the challenges of educating 25,000 school children. Under a new superintendent, there has been an explosion of educational initiatives in many areas, including math, reading, technology, condition of facilities, conversion to middle schools, expansion of alternative schools, and more. Notably, the number of student suspensions has dropped dramatically. A national consulting firm was brought in to analyze the budget and to recommend financial management strategies.
3. The jury will also be out for some time on the success of the school district's revised desegregation plan. There have been notable instances in the past when high optimism was dashed by later events. It remains to be seen if, in the long run, the school district can improve achievement scores, successfully deal with growing numbers of children not ready for school, secure needed financial support, and enjoy the trust of both African American and white parents, as well as the small but growing number of Hispanic households in Little Rock.
4. The report's capstone recommendation was not accepted. A community congress was seen by the task force as a means to a solution that fit the problem. It is an idea that attracted some, offended some, and still intrigues some community leaders. The city board discussed the proposal, but because the school board was unenthusiastic, the city board never formally acted on the matter. The school board can rightly say that they have recently made progress without it.

Whether in the long run traditional approaches by school officials can rally wide and deep support in the community remains to be seen. In a presentation to a joint meeting of the city board and the school board, the task force had offered the image that the improving situation might be like a row boat in the Gulf Stream. The boat was pointed toward New Orleans, its destination, and appeared to be moving in that direction, yet the broader and deeper Gulf Stream, unnoticed, was carrying the boat out into the Atlantic.

Whatever the course of future events, the university had candidly addressed a community mega-issue and had successfully navigated the risks along the way.

***Suggested Readings***

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- "The K-16 Agenda," *Metropolitan Universities: An International Forum*, 10 (2, 1999).
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