

TRUANCY IN SCHOOLS - How Can We Reverse The Trend?

Framed at the Public Issues Forum Workshop, Akure, Ondo State Nigeria.
16-20 July, 2001.

Public Issues Forum Workshop Held in Nigeria

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Workshop Organized by Ondo State; Nigeria Teaching Service Commission Akure, Ondo State, Nigeria in collaboration with College of DuPage, Glen Ellyn, Illinois U.S.A; Kettering Foundation, Dayton, Ohio, U.S.A.; Nigerian Teachers Union, Ondo State Wing; The Daily Times of Nigeria, Lagos, Nigeria and Upline Resources Foundation, Akure, Ondo State, Nigeria. Facilitated by and Report Compiled by: Edwin Baiye, Sadie F. Flucas, Albert A. Ilemobade (The following are excerpts from the full report).

Introduction

The idea of holding a Public Issues forum workshop in Nigeria was inspired by the attendance of the Project Coordinator, Prof. A. A. Ilemobade (President of Upline Resources Foundation), at the 1999 International Deliberative Democracy Workshop held in Washington, DC and the 2000 International Civil Society Workshop held in Dayton, Ohio. Professor Ilemobade felt that concepts of public deliberation could be a powerful tool for strengthening democratic practices within the new democratic dispensation in Nigeria. As a result, he organized a grassroots effort that successfully addressed some environmental issues in his hometown of Akure. Later he collaborated with others to launch an NGO, Upline Resources Foundation. It was as part of fulfilling the mission of this NGO that Prof. Ilemobade decided to pursue an initiative that would address issues in secondary schools where future leaders of the community are being trained. The workshop was the first public issues workshop ever held in Nigeria. Outcomes The workshop, which was declared open on behalf of the Governor, His Excellency Chief Adebayo Adefarati, by his Deputy, Barrister Afolabi Iyantani was attended by top government functionaries including the Chairman of the Teaching Service Commission and full-time members of the Commission, officials of the Ondo State Wing of the Nigerian Union of Teachers, officers and members of the Association of Nigerian Conference of Principals (ANCOPS) and the newly appointed Permanent Secretaries in charge of Schools administration. Seniors from two local high schools also attended the opening ceremony. The curriculum provided participants with some of the concepts surrounding the need

for and use of deliberation in a democratic society and how the results of deliberation can be used. It also provided opportunities for participants to practice their moderation skills and to participate in framing an issue. Prior to the workshop, surveys and focus groups were used to identify problems of greatest concern to Ondo State educators. Included in the list were indiscipline, truancy, stealing and undue interference in school administration. Of these, truancy was selected as the topic to be framed by workshop participants as it is a serious problem, not only in Ondo State but also throughout Nigeria.

Truants are found virtually everywhere including on the streets, hawking merchandise, in game parlors playing video games and involved in anti-social behavior throughout neighborhoods. With truancy rates in some communities reaching as high as 20%, it is a problem that has reached a crisis level. This is especially true since truancy often leads to delinquency and delinquency often results in failure to pass mandatory tests used to determine graduation eligibility. This problem has serious economic and leadership implications for the nation. Participants brought much energy to the framing of what was initially named "Truancy in Schools - Which Way Out", but which has through editing evolved as "Truancy in Schools - How Can We Reverse The Trend?". The following three approaches for dealing with the problem were identified.

Choice #1: Families must Live Up to Their Responsibilities. Supporters of this choice believe that the primary cause of truancy is that parents have abdicated their responsibilities for ensuring that their children have the material and emotional support needed for them to attend school. If truancy must be overcome, families must live up to their responsibilities.

Choice #2: High Academic Standards and Adequate Infrastructure Must be Provided. Those who support this choice argue that the declining quality of academic standards and the status of educational infrastructure are at fault. Unless they are remedied by ensuring high academic standards through the provision of qualified faculty/staff and adequate educational infrastructure, truancy in schools will persist.

Choice #3: Restore Societal Values. Advocates of this approach believe that a decline in societal values is at the root of the problem. Until society stops placing greater emphasis on material acquisition than on educational knowledge and abilities that can help students reach their full potential, truancy will continue unabated.

Summary: The level of engagement that participants showed throughout the week impressed facilitators. No one could have asked for a more attentive group. At the end of the workshop participants were asked to evaluate the effectiveness of the workshop and to assess whether or not their expectations were met. With one voice, participants responded in the affirmative. One participant's comments seemed to especially echo the sentiment of the group. She said that prior to the

workshop she had always thought of politics as being something in which only elected officials and special interest groups should become involved; now, however, she has discovered that ordinary citizens also have a role to play in politics. The group's agreement with her comments was overwhelming, both verbally and through their actions. Many participants vied for the opportunity to borrow one of the three display copies of "Politics for People" for evening reading. Virtually every participant wanted a copy to take home. Perhaps the most telling evidence of this newly found understanding of the need for citizen participation in politics was exhibited during deliberation in the test forum on the truancy framework. Participants overwhelmingly rejected the approach that focused on governmental action. This conclusion proved to be somewhat surprising considering that during the first few days of the workshop, virtually every participant, when asked about how to deal with various problems facing education, primarily cited the need for governmental intervention. Their new appreciation for the work of citizens as political actors is significant since it is this type of understanding that will help to move the country forward as it becomes more settled in the skin of the newly reactivated democracy.

Thirty-four (34) invited participants attended the workshop. These were primarily Secondary School Principals from the 18 Ondo State Local Government Authorities (LGA). Participants also included a former Permanent Secretary in the State's Civil Service and a retired principal who had also served as a fulltime member of the Teaching Service Commission. The need to help Nigerian citizens learn "a new way to talk and a different way to act" is deemed vital as the nation prepares for the 2003 state and national elections. Based on the success of this workshop options are being considered for holding a five-day workshop in Abuja or Lagos in 2002. Preliminary discussions involve development of a strategy to identify the three or four topics of major national interest. After the topics are identified, stakeholders and journalists from throughout the country would be invited to participate in the workshop. Everyone would participate in joint plenary sessions. Separate workshops sessions would be used to frame the identified issues and to provide training on civic journalism. Everyone would participate in test forums after the issues are framed. It is expected that government officials would be invited to participate in, as a minimum, the last day of the workshop so that they can see and hear the results of the work.

There are still many details to be worked out and funding must be found to cover the costs of associated transportation, food and lodging and administrative support. It is expected that a team of American and Nigerian facilitators will be used throughout. Efforts are underway in both countries to identify potential sponsors. (You can contact [Sadie Flucas](#) or [Albert A. Ilemobade](#))

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