

# Start Your Own Spring Conference

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Let me tell you about my favorite educational organization. The Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development? No, even though it's my major organization and has taught me much. The John Dewey Society? No, even though it's my major minor organization. Maybe then Phi Delta Kappa or the Society of Professors of Education or the American Educational Studies Association? No, once again. Because my favorite educational organization is the Spring Conference.

The Spring Conference? Never heard of it, you probably say. Naturally you haven't. And not because it's a figment of my imagination either--the Spring Conference has been in existence since it was organized 40 years ago.

The Spring Conference is an informal discussion group of 70 people--mostly educators, with a sprinkling of editors, community workers, and government officials--who meet for a weekend in Chicago each spring for "free trade in ideas," as Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes memorably put it. No program is developed in advance, for the members organize their own program at the meeting. No papers to be read to the membership are toted to the conference, for no one, including the factotum, knows till the meeting is well under way which members will provide springboards to discussion. No minutes or proceedings are printed; no publications are issued; no resolutions are considered or adopted. The Spring Conference members simply come together to discuss whatever is on their minds concerning education and the culture.

The factotum? He's the nearest thing the Spring Conference has to an officer - and that's not very near. For a factotum, according to the dictionary, is "a person employed to do all kinds of work, as the chief servant of a household." And it's the members' household. During his two-year term, the factotum sends out the meeting notice and an occasional bulletin and arranges for a meeting room at a small hotel. He squirrels away \$25 in dues from each member, all of which goes into "the put-and-take," a sharing device in the Robin Hood-tradition of taking from the rich to give to the poor. The put-and-take enables conferees whose institutions subsidize their travel to "put" a few of their own dollars into the kitty while their unsubsidized colleagues "take" enough to support most of their travel expenses. At the annual meeting, the factotum presides over an irreverent membership which enjoys overruling him. No one takes the factotum too seriously, including the factotum.

But discussion is taken seriously. The process used in initiating and sustaining discussion is worthy of your consideration. It explains why the Spring Conference has survived and thrived since the mid-1930s when, in an age of crisis similar to our own, a group of educators, bored with the formalities and sterilities of conventional educational conferences, met to organize the first Spring Conference.

In response to the factotum's "What's on your mind these days as to education and the culture?" each of the 40 or so members who happen to attend that year speaks up on his deepest concerns and hopes. Just to hear these varied views is often worth the price of admission. Before noon a committee is appointed to identify four central issues which have emerged from the personal statements that Saturday morning. During the lunch hour, the committee selects and then invites members to introduce one or another of the four. They are not aware in advance that they will be asked to talk on that issue, must then reach into their hearts and minds, rather than into their briefcases, for their forthcoming commentary. They are warned that their comments are to be brief and to the point, so that there will be abundant time for discussion.

When the conference reconvenes after lunch, the first panel sets the stage with three or four viewpoints from people of varied persuasions. In mid-afternoon the conference turns to the second issue, next morning to the third and fourth. Each discussion is open to all and, at its best, is earnest, argumentative, good-humored, and marked by mutual toleration and respect.

Inevitably, there are some memorable sessions, largely traceable to the character and conviction of individual participants. Each member is free to speak his mind without inhibition. To foster free exchange of ideas, to encourage the launching of trial balloons, and to allow calculated and even uncalculated going beyond the evidence, comments by participants are regarded as off the record. Thus remarks and views are not personally attributed to individuals, and are not quoted in discussion or writing following the Spring Conference. The outcome is a weekend of discussion which annually recharges the participants' batteries. On Sunday afternoon all head home, having missed no time from their regular work.

So I have a suggestion for you. Organize your own group for free trade in ideas. Start your own Spring Conference, though under another label. Try out some of the procedures which have worked for us, such as a leisurely opening which allows for personal statements of issues by all, an agenda determined only after each individual has been heard, the selection of provocative views for springboard presentations, sustained discussion of a few selected issues, etc. In your conference, blend WASPs and minorities, men and women, educators and non-educators. Blend young comers with old retirees and defy age segregation, too. Develop your own version of "put-and-take" so that you can subsidize the unsubsidized. Keep membership varied, provocative, and limited. Set the conference far enough from home that no one is tempted to return to the omnipresent office during the weekend session. Establish camaraderie through an assemblage of the early birds on Friday evening and a social Saturday evening on the town. During your discussion sessions, combine informality with earnest concern for better schools and a better society.

You might want to try it. The Spring Conference is a small social invention that works.

*Phi Delta Kappan, 1975*