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Building and Sustaining Change in the Culture of Secondary Schools

Ten years ago, the Pittsburgh Public School District polled its teachers, administrators, politicians, and parents for their views on the schools' most pressing needs. It used the results to fashion new programs and new roles to benefit its central concern: the students.

The Pittsburgh Public School District enters the decade of the '90s on the crest of a comprehensive school reform effort begun almost ten years ago. This multifaceted reform includes initiatives addressing curriculum refinement, the changing roles of administrators and teachers, school organizational patterns, effective instructional practices and, most important, the needs of learners in the district's classrooms.

This reform program began in 1980 with the commissioning of a district-wide needs assessment, which was administered to city leaders, educators, parents, and other community members (Cooley and Bickel 1986). The immediate purpose of the assessment was to determine what the public and the school staffs saw as the most pressing needs of the schools. The district also hoped to use the results as the basis for uniting both the board of education and the public around common renewal goals.

The results were not surprising. Improved student achievement, improved staff and personnel evaluation, managing student population decline, improved fiscal management, and building effective strategies for school improvement stood out as the district's crucial needs. The board of education adopted these needs as their priorities, authorized programs to address them, and held district leadership accountable for the results.

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The city's secondary schools clearly showed the urgency of these needs. Student achievement had plummeted, and there were rumors that teachers did not teach but merely kept class. The dropout rate was nearly 35 percent. The populations of three of the schools were so low that they were in danger of being closed. The district conducted the process of secondary renewal in what can now be called phases. Phase I focused on renewing teachers' professional skills. Phase II focused on sustaining and reinforcing the changes begun in Phase I.

Phase I: Renewal for Individual Teachers

The district opened the Schenley High School Teacher Center in September 1983. More than 200 of the district's secondary teachers, supervisors, and administrators participated in the 18 months of its development. The program, woven into the fabric of an

existing high school, focused on each individual teacher in each secondary school as the target of change. Teachers from the district's other 11 secondary schools visited the center in groups of 50 for 8 weeks. They participated in structured experiences to refine and expand their instructional skills, increase their sensitivity to adolescent development, update their content knowledge, and renew themselves both personally and professionally.

An ongoing evaluation of the program (Denton and LeMahieu 1985) indicated that the teachers visiting the center were meeting original program objectives. It also showed that the program was accomplishing more than its planners had anticipated. The Schenley High School resident staff gained many benefits from actively implementing and developing the program for the visiting teachers: they were often involved in decisions that would directly affect their work. And the visiting teachers were also making decisions about the context of their programs, choosing from a variety of options and providing feedback on their experiences to shape future cycles. Visiting teachers returned to their home schools receptive to the premise that staff development at "home" was desirable.

Phase II: Supporting a Professional Climate

In 1986, the district launched the Centers of Excellence Program (COE), challenging each school's staff to institutionalize shared decision-making and school-based professional development. To both fuel and facilitate this process, each school's administrators and teachers were asked to collaborate on identifying a project to address one or more of the board's broad priorities and, further, to design the project using organization development theories (Schmuck and Runkel 1988).

Each school created an instructional cabinet of administrators and teachers who would meet regularly to make decisions related to the instructional climate of the school. The cabinets identified their objectives, how they would achieve them, analyzed the cost of each step, and decided how each objective would be evaluated. These proposals were reviewed by a committee of teachers, administrators, and community representatives. The schools planned their projects in three stages:

- The developmental stage, during which they would build staff ownership of the project and develop materials and implementation processes;
- The implementation stage, for trying, monitoring, refining, and refocusing aspects of the project; and
- The dissemination stage, during which each school would participate in a Secondary School Improvement Network to share ideas and project elements and learn from each other.

School faculties generated a wide range of school-based reform activities as a result of the Centers of Excellence Program. In all the proposals, some common themes emerged, including personalizing the high school environment, especially for at-risk 9th grade youth, and addressing attendance and low achievement problems through a variety of instructional and motivational strategies. While specific approaches varied, these efforts often relied upon the development of mentoring programs and cooperative learning processes, as well as the creation of new curriculums in self-esteem, reading and study skills, and leadership training (Saltrick, Johnston, and Bickel in press).

Central to the Phase II mission is the role of the Phase II facilitator, a teacher at each school who, aside from teaching a maximum of three periods, also functions as an in-house organization development specialist responsible for:

- coordinating and facilitating development, implementation, and dissemination of Centers of Excellence activities;
- serving as liaison between the school and the director of the Centers of Excellence;
- providing feedback to the instructional cabinet and other related groups;
- identifying and scheduling training for appropriate personnel;
- coordinating schoolwide professional development activities with special emphasis on peer observations, teaching clinics, and seminars (Saltrick, Johnston, and Bickel, in press).

At each school, the cabinet is responsible for setting school goals based on the board's priorities. These are translated into departmental targets by individual departments. The principal coordinates this process to ensure that the staff shapes the goals continuously and keeps the goals in focus. Finally, the individual school goals drive the school-based professional development program at each site. For example, a group of teachers at one site who wish to implement a different teaching strategy (cooperative learning, for example) may be given on-site time and resources to learn the strategy.

Lessons Learned

The district is in its third year of the Phase II effort, and each school is at a different point in its development. While much has been accomplished, it is clear that much still remains to be done. It is an appropriate time to take stock of what participants have learned about district strategies for improving professional climates in secondary schools.

Shared decision making. It is clear at this point that working to establish a viable shared decision-making process is a valuable and complex goal. The shared decision-making process provides schools with the genuine opportunity to define program goals and implementation strategies. This builds the "individual meaning" and school commitment so necessary for success (Fullan 1982).

Shared decision making represents a significant change in the traditional culture of schools; the nurturance of such change requires much time and support and the redesign of existing roles. For example, the principal, charged both by law and by the board with responsibility for all decisions made in the school, must find a way to meet these responsibilities while allowing staff substantive decision-making input—not an easy task.

The Phase II facilitator role. This role is crucial in supporting movement toward shared decision making. For example, the data-based feedback provided by the facilitator on where the cabinet process stands at a given point in time directly contributes to improving the quality of the process. Additionally, the facilitator assists the

principal in agenda setting, which helps to define the level of cabinet members' involvement in decision making related to each agenda item. The facilitator's status as a member of the faculty has added immensely to the credibility these individuals brought to their functions.

District support. Another lesson learned deals with the district's sustained support and encouragement. Such support took many forms and was significant in several ways. For example, the district's staff development team provided ongoing training and time for facilitators as they assumed their new roles. This helped them increase their problem-solving and process observation techniques. At the same time, these sessions provided important time for the facilitators to share ideas, successes, and failures and to develop a support network to sustain them in their new roles. Last, they became more politically astute and aware of the informal ways in which the district functions.

District support similarly enabled individual faculties to come together to plan or to share where they were in the process. These sessions stimulated the exchange of ideas and served as motivational catalysts to schools that were moving more slowly in the process.

The superintendent himself set the broad conceptual framework of shared decision making by offering a position paper to all staff members for critical comments. Ideas for the superintendent's paper came from conversations between and among district leadership, administrators, and Phase II facilitators who felt the need for a clearly articulated vision of shared decision-making in the district. Eventually, the concepts in the paper became the template against which each cabinet's functioning could be measured. The superintendent signaled further support for Phase II by establishing a director's office responsible for overseeing this effort. At about the same time, the Pittsburgh Federation of Teachers circulated a memorandum among its members supporting teacher participation in the shared decision making of the instructional cabinets.

Resources. While commitment is the most critical factor in the change process, funding is also important. Each school was awarded up to $15,000 each year to help support specific components of its center of excellence activity. Resources were also made available to support cross-project functions such as the facilitator role. In this regard, the district benefited from support offered by several foundations (the Ford Foundation, the Heinz Endowment, the Hillman Fund, and the Pittsburgh National Foundation.)

Unresolved issues. In hindsight, the program might have benefited if some things had been done differently. For example, the district made a relatively modest effort to build faculty members' evaluation skills. Although each school tried to develop some plans to measure the impact of its initiatives against its original goals, this concern received relatively little attention compared to the organization development aspect of the program. This mirrors the traditional way in which things get done in education: much time is spent on development and implementation but relatively little time is devoted to determining what worked and why. Given the importance that a data-based orientation to change could have on sustaining change activity over the long term, more resources were warranted.

Another area of concern involves the problem-solving function of school cabinets. Initially, they addressed relatively superficial issues. They seemed to have difficulty keeping informational items off the agenda, and putting true problem solving items before the cabinet. Few schools have as yet made decisions which challenge district policy boundaries, real or imagined. In this regard, the program could have assessed the maturity levels of the organization and groups within the organization and targeted specific resources in each school.

In facilitating school-based shared decision making, districts need to be sure that everyone in leadership positions knows the "chorus" and supports the reform objective. It does little good for a district that commits to shared decision making to leave few areas of perceived freedom in which decisions can be made. Progress in this domain is being made one decision at a time. Over time, enough incidents should clarify and expand the range of possibilities for meaningful shared decision making.

Not surprising. There is one additional lesson we can share that will hardly seem surprising to anyone who has been involved in school improvement activities: Change takes time. The amount of time needed can tax even the most generous funders and the most sophisticated boards of education. Nevertheless, the lesson from this experience reflects the larger literature on educational change.

Three years into the process, each school has made progress, but the need for further progress is still evident. We like to think about change in this context in terms of cycles of organizational renewal. If we are to sustain improvement through the years, we must develop capabilities that will be applicable to future needs. The program has tried to address this issue by encouraging the development of a professional climate in which personnel are both the guiders of and the recipients of change.□

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