

## Snapshot #30

# School Improvement Through Teacher Decision Making

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## Research Findings

Effective leadership and decision making are instrumental to the success of school improvement projects. According to *Effective Schooling Research Practices: A Research Synthesis/1990 Update* (Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, April 1990), the following practices have been shown to foster positive student achievement and affective outcomes:

*1.1.1 Instruction is guided by a preplanned curriculum*

*2.1.1 Everyone emphasizes the importance of learning*

d. Everyone accepts that school is a place for learning. This is reflected in the use of mission statements, slogans, mottos, and displays that underscore the school's academic goals.

e. When educational issues arise, student learning considerations are the most important criteria used in decision making.

*2.3.1 Strong leadership guides the instructional program*

f. The principal and other leaders seek out innovative curricular programs, observe these, acquaint staff with them, and participate with staff in discussions about adopting or adapting them.

l. Resources needed to ensure the effectiveness of instructional programs are acquired; allocations are made according to instructional priorities.

m. School leaders establish standard procedures which guide parent involvement. Emphasis is placed on the importance of parental support of the school's instructional efforts.

p. Leaders express an expectation and strong desire that instructional programs improve over time. Improvement strategies are organized and systematic; they are given high priority and visibility; implementation of new practices is carefully monitored; staff development is supported.

### *2.3.2 Administrators and teachers continually strive to improve instructional effectiveness*

e. The full staff is involved in planning for implementation; specific recommendations and guidelines provide the detail needed for good implementation; plans fit the local school context and conditions.

f. Roles and responsibilities for the various aspects of the school improvement effort are clearly specified.

j. Staff allow adequate time for innovations to become integrated into the life of the school; ongoing support is provided to teachers during the implementation process.

### *2.3.3 Staff engage in ongoing professional development and collegial learning activities*

b. Adequate time is set aside for staff development activities, and at least part of that time is made available during the regular work day.

c. Staff members have input into the content of professional activities.

g. Staff development activities include opportunities for participants to share ideas and concerns regarding the use of new programs and practices.

k. Staff members learn from one another through peer observation/feedback and other collegial learning activities.

l. Collegiality is the norm; it is expected that staff members will routinely share ideas and work together toward the end of improving the instructional program.

### *2.4.1 There are high expectations for quality instruction*

e. Staff development opportunities are provided; emphasis is on skill building; content addresses key instructional issues and priorities. Inservice activities are related to and build on each other; incentives encourage participation.

### *2.7.1 Parents and community members are invited to become involved*

In Topical Synthesis #6, *School-Based Management*, from the School Improvement Research Series, Kathleen Cotton examines the cycle of centralized-decentralized management in educational organizations throughout the history of education in the U.S. School systems at the turn of the century were, for the most part, small and locally operated. This era was followed by the consolidation of small districts into more centrally controlled organizations.

In the 1960s, in response to a need to be more responsive to local communities, districts did

adopt more decentralized management policies. The 1970s and 1980s saw a more centralized response as education reacted to new federal and state legislation. This top-down organizational style was "intended to foster equal and uniform treatment of clients, standardization of products or services, and to prevent arbitrary or capricious decision making" (Darling Hammond 1988).

Current research findings provide the rationale for a return to decentralized management. The following assertions, which are commonly offered as the rationale for implementing school-based management, are drawn from the work of Amundson (1988); Burns and Howes (1988); David and Peterson (1984); English (1989); Levine and Eubanks (1989); Lindelow and Heynderickx (1989); Malen, Ogawa, and Kranz (1990); Marburger (1985); Mojkowski and Fleming (1988); Peterson (1991); and White (1989).

- The school is the primary unit of change. Those who work directly with students have the most informed and credible opinions as to what educational arrangements will be most beneficial to those students.
- Significant and lasting improvement takes considerable time, and local schools are in the best position to sustain improvement efforts over time.
- The school principal is a key figure in school improvement.
- Significant change is brought about by staff and community participation in project planning and implementation.
- School-based management supports the professionalization of the teaching profession and vice versa, which can lead to more desirable schooling outcomes.
- School-based management structures keep the focus of schooling where it belongs-on achievement and other student outcomes.
- Alignment between budgets and instructional priorities improves under school-based management.

## Situation

**Junction City School District.** Two thousand students attend the district's schools, which include one high school, one middle school, and two elementary schools. Junction City is adjacent to Eugene and is a combination of suburban and rural settings.

**Laurel Elementary School.** Five hundred students in grades one through four attend Laurel Elementary School. Over fifty percent of the students qualify for free or reduced-priced lunches, and the school has a mobility rate of thirty percent.

## Context

Laurel Elementary School has implemented a system for involving staff in the decision-making process. The development of the current model has evolved over the past four years. Initially, teachers met in cross-grade-level meetings to discuss curriculum issues. This experience was planned by a building-level team of teachers.

Members of this team served as conveners and met with a group of teachers representing all grade levels. Noncertified staff members were invited to join the groups. Topics for group discussions were selected by the building-level committee and presented to staff members prior to the meeting date. At each meeting they were to discuss one academic area and one nonacademic area.

Examples of academic topics addressed include:

- What skill could have helped you be a better teacher if the previous grade level had taught that skill in reading?
- Explain the use of D'Nealian and handwriting skills development.
- Should we continue to teach cursive writing?
- What is good about the current spelling series, and what material would improve the skill of spelling?

Examples of nonacademic topics include:

- List ways that closure can be brought to the end of the school day for children.
- Share with the group one memory of your elementary school experience.
- What special recognition days should we teach?

The cross-grade-level meetings encouraged communication and raised awareness of curriculum issues. Staff did not feel threatened, since they were merely asked to spend the time in collegial dialogue and submit a list of the topics they discussed. Items from each group list were then consolidated into a master list that was shared with the entire staff. These cross-grade-level meetings represented the school's first attempt to engage staff in meaningful discussions of issues that affected their school. The building-level team that planned these initial activities was the beginning of a School Leadership Team.

## **Current Practice**

A unique aspect of the leadership and communication process at Laurel Elementary is that most staff meetings are not mandatory. Each staff member is merely responsible for knowing what decisions are made at each meeting. Agendas are published prior to each meeting, and the role of facilitator is rotated among members of the staff. Minutes of each meeting are published and provided to every member of the staff. This practice demonstrates a great deal of respect for teachers' time and their professionalism.

The School Leadership Team, or Site Committee (the title for this group has changed over the years), makes building-level decisions and provides the direction for school improvement. Six staff members have been selected and trained as facilitators. Each facilitator has a group of teachers with whom he/she meets throughout the school year. These teacher groups represent different grade levels. Facilitators receive information from the Site Committee and share it with their groups.

Information travels both ways: decisions and items for discussion generated in Site Committee meetings are brought to cross-grade-level committee meetings, and concerns from cross-grade-level meetings are brought to the Site Committee. The staff facilitators coordinate the discussions and activities and are assisted by a member of the Site Committee or the principal.

The Site Committee meets monthly for one hour. Longer meetings are scheduled when needed. The cross-grade-level groups meet quarterly. Facilitators meet prior to the cross-grade-level meetings for planning purposes and meet afterwards if necessary to debrief. Released days, designated for curriculum planning, can be used for committee meetings.

## **PRINCIPAL PERCEPTIONS**

Principal John Davies identifies the following strengths of the site-based management approach taken at Laurel:

- Empowerment of staff
- Shared leadership
- Increased ownership through more direct involvement
- Assumption of the leadership role by staff, with the principal functioning as a motivator
- Better implementation of decisions due to broad-based involvement
- Staff monitoring of improvement activities, with staff members working to motivate one another.

At the same time, Davies offers the following cautions for leaders to consider:

- Lack of control by the principal
- The process may be good, but the outcome may not be
- Potential for a high level of controversy
- Potential for other staff to view the Site Committee as a secret group playing favorites
- The need for facilitators to receive training in how to work with groups and how to best communicate with adults.

In an article written for *Oregon Principal*, John Davies was quoted as saying that, "There are some basic components that will assist an administrator in working through the development of a positive school council. I am suggesting that these components are ordinal in origin. Theoretically, the movement through the steps could be a guide for measured change. The following steps are critical to success:

1. Administrator trained in group interaction skills.
2. Administrator trained in consensus decision making.
3. Administrator trained in time management.
4. A team consisting of a building administrator and five staff are trained in large group communications and interaction skills.
5. A team consisting of the building administrator, five staff, and two parents are trained in community relations and limit setting.
6. The site-based decision-making team begins to implement their agreements as to parameters of the site-based decision-making agreements.
7. The site-based decision-making team's school council conducts training sessions for staff in consensus decision-making strategies."

Laurel Elementary incorporates a differentiated staffing model reflecting the conviction that groups of professionals should have the power to make decisions. As the staff has grown and matured, the framework for communication has also developed further. An interview with principal John Davies resulted in the following observations regarding development of a process for involving staff in decision making.

"Build a model based on staff perception of how much responsibility they are willing to accept. The administrator, meanwhile, must answer the question, 'How much responsibility am I willing to give up?' The strength and power of what we do is founded on agreed focus and purpose. A commitment to the common goal and accountability for achieving it are the main ingredients of the process. Minimum standards, adhered to by all staff, with maximum expectations for implementation, continue to be the identifiable characteristics of our survival.

"Initially, the staff needs only to be involved with curriculum and staff development issues. Committee and group membership is important. Groups need to be carefully selected, and rotation of members may be appropriate at times. Select facilitators based on their expertise and leadership. Each leader will need to expend energy on keeping the vision. They must not be distracted by political, economic, and personal agendas. The vision must be focused on the students. Every aspect of the schooling process must tie to the vision to assure continual growth and implementation."

## **STAFF PERCEPTIONS**

Interviews with staff members provided further insights into the school's success. Staff agree that communication at Laurel Elementary has vastly improved over what it was five years ago. Staff members described it as "open," "powerful," "progressive," "timely" and "relevant."

Teachers, they note, are responsible for developing and facilitating staff meetings. Those interviewed also see it as significant that staff meetings are not mandatory; instead, staff members are responsible knowing the content of the meetings. They feel this arrangement results in increased professionalism of the staff. Many interview respondents remarked that ownership and commitment are increased since all staff members share equally in the process. Opinions of all staff members are valued. The Site Committee is particularly sensitive to input from others. Staff members surveyed felt that the facilitator process provides a genuine avenue for staff to provide direction for the Site Committee.

During the past few years, Laurel Elementary has successfully developed and implemented several curriculum and procedural changes. These include a writing process; a thinking model; a process that includes teacher, student and parent in conferences and goal setting; projects and thematic units; and multi-age grouping. These innovations have brought about a high degree of staff and community satisfaction. It was felt by staff members that these innovations will remain a part of Laurel Elementary, largely due to the process involved in their inception.

The most strongly agreed upon response from the staff interviews was the conviction that innovation is encouraged at Laurel Elementary. Staff felt respected as professionals, with individual strengths and uniqueness strongly valued. Staff members viewed themselves as progressive and open to change. They appreciated being allowed to experiment with new ideas.

When asked how they deal with differences in staff strengths and ideas, however, some discomfort was apparent. Respondents noted that dealing with differences is not easy. Typical comments were: "We must allow staff to be at the level of expertise that they are at," and "We must remind ourselves that we as adults are developmental and each of us must become comfortable with each innovation."

The staff at Laurel Elementary had some advice to share with schools that might consider developing a similar leadership model. Be aware that change is often a threat to some individuals, commented the inter-viewees, and expect at least slight resistance initially. They emphasized the importance of developing a model that fits local needs. Since the strength of the model will be in the process that was used to develop it, it's important to be sensitive to fears and concerns of staff members: proceed slowly and allow staff members to adjust to change. It is the Laurel staff's experience that the composition of the leadership of committees needs to change periodically, and that staff may need training in facilitation skills.

And while all this proceeds, they say, keep your focus on the learner and the learning outcomes.

The Laurel Elementary School staff has experienced considerable success in engaging broad-based involvement in school leadership and are able to share their experience in this approach to school improvement activities.

Questions should be directed to the Site Committee at Laurel Elementary School, 1401 Laurel Street, Junction City, Oregon 97448, (503) 998-2386.

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