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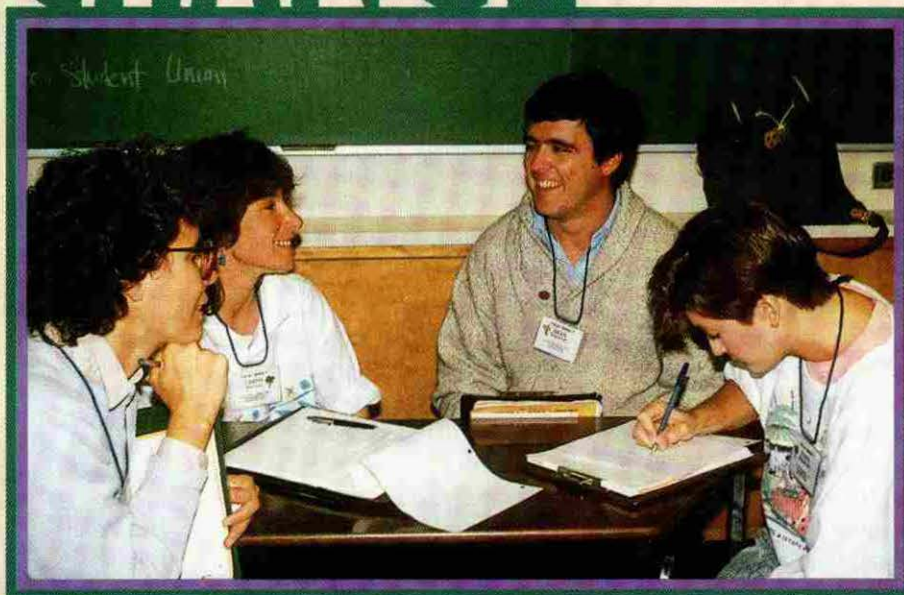
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THE ROAD TO CLASSROOM CHANGE



THOMAS R. GUSKEY AND KENT D. PETERSON

Before school-based decision making can change teaching and learning for the better, we must make some changes in the reform itself.

The road to classroom change through school-based decision making obviously has more potholes than its proponents originally thought. Although this attempt to decentralize authority and involve teachers, parents, and students in decision making is intended to further student learning, evidence linking it to improvements in student outcomes is scant (Jenkins et al. 1994, Malen et al. 1990, Summers and Johnson 1995).

The guiding premise of school-based decision making is that administrators, teachers, and parents are the ones who best understand the contexts and cultures of the school, and so we must build their capacity to be jointly responsible for student learning (Darling-Hammond and McLaughlin 1995). Accordingly, these people are represented on the school-based decision-making councils—teams that typically are given the authority to make decisions regarding curriculum and instruction, and the budget. The problem is, few councils take up learning-related topics (David 1994).

What's the Problem?

We believe that a variety of specific problems are keeping school-based decision making from improving teaching

and learning, and that we can take some specific steps to refine the process and overcome these difficulties. We will begin by detailing the problems, then offer some guidelines to solve them.

The Power Problem. The assumption behind school-based decision making is that reducing the bureaucratic controls on schools will prompt principals, teachers, and parents to exert greater initiative and to tailor instruction to the needs of students. Aside from some peripheral change, however, current evidence indicates that in many cases, the true locus of power and authority remains where it has always been—with school boards, central office staffs, and state authorities (Bimber 1994).

Kentucky, for example, explicitly grants school councils the right to make policy on the “planning and resolution of issues regarding instructional practices.” At the same time, Kentucky requires all elementary schools to implement a non-graded Primary School Program, with an accompanying list of “critical attributes” that focus specifically on instructional practices.

Thus, while Kentucky purports to treat educators as professionals and empower them to make decisions about how best to meet student learning goals, the top-down, mandated Primary School Program controls and directs how elementary educators are to meet those goals. Even elementary schools with site-based decision-making councils have little choice regarding the way they group students for instruction or which pedagogic practices they employ.

Ironically, Kentucky, as well as the Chicago Public Schools, are two of the

few jurisdictions that mandate a move to site-based decision making. In most school districts at present, the shift in governance is strictly voluntary.

The Implementation Problem. The new forms of authority, communication, and decision making that accom-

pany school councils to take up core issues related to curriculum, instruction, or student outcomes.

The Ambiguous Mission Problem. Much research demonstrates that a clear mission is a key factor in school effectiveness (Deal and Peterson

Governance structures must be altered to give administrators, teachers, and parents real power and authority if they are truly to work together to make major changes in established educational practices.

pany site-based decision making make implementation exceptionally difficult. There are new structures to design, new stakeholders to involve, new procedures to institute, and new skills to develop. Years after implementation, some schools still struggle with how best to gather input from teachers, parents, and students. In other schools, the process for generating ideas, making decisions, and gaining permission to carry out those decisions is left fluid and ill-defined (Peterson and Warren 1994).

Implementation is made all the more difficult when overall goals remain unclear. School-based decision making is a process that defines *how* decisions should be made. It does not, however, prescribe *what* issues should be addressed. Without the direction of clear goals for student learning, there is nothing in the process that compels

1994). When that mission is teaching and learning, the staff, students, and principal tend to focus more on these areas. Otherwise, the attention of members of the council is easily diverted to management, scheduling, and other ancillary concerns.

The Time Problem. Those who have studied school-based decision making consistently note the dilemma of there being too little time for regular council meetings (Mohrman and Wohlstetter 1994). Meaningful discussions and carefully reasoned decisions about complex issues require considerable time. Given the nature of classroom teaching assignments, however, staff members have little flexibility in their daily schedules for new activities, especially activities as demanding and involved as these meetings. Council meetings often must be wedged in before or after

school, or between classes. It is little wonder that most groups avoid dealing with the crucial issues of curriculum content and teaching strategies.

The Expertise Problem. Administrators, teachers, and parents collectively have a wealth of experience. Yet they also work under very demanding conditions that make it impossible for them to develop expertise in the most current ideas and research on student learning. Further, in most schools, the time and resources allocated to professional development are sorely inadequate. At best, then, shared decision making becomes shared naiveté, and at worst, shared ignorance.

This lack of expertise is one reason councils often avoid curriculum and instruction, concentrating instead on issues with which they feel more knowledgeable, such as discipline and extracurricular activities (David 1994). One danger of this is that personal agendas may take precedence over the best interests of students. For example, several site-based councils at Kentucky high schools *lowered* the academic requirements for students to participate in interscholastic sports (Mayhan 1993).

The Cultural Constraints Problem. All organizations have behavioral norms and assumptions about work that shape how employees and others think, feel, and act (Deal and Peterson 1994). These aspects of the school culture are cognitive maps that prescribe the "normal" features of work. School-based decision making, however, requires that traditional school roles be redefined so that teachers and parents can work collaboratively on schoolwide decisions.

In most schools, teachers and parents traditionally have not been involved in critical decisions about budget, personnel, and other policy issues. And even with the best resources, some teachers and other

stakeholders believe it is not their job to make these decisions; they simply want to teach or be a parent (Weiss et al. 1992). Further, some teachers feel the classroom is their exclusive domain, and many parents feel uncomfortable pushing for change, even when they believe it's needed.

The Avoidance Problem. Some school-based councils tend to avoid, ignore, or neglect issues related to teaching and learning (Summers and Johnson 1995). In addition to constraints of time and expertise, teachers at some schools may fear taking risks or lack higher-level support for doing so (Odden and Wohlstetter 1995). Other schools have a history of staff conflict about instruction.

The Motivation Problem. Early advocates of school-based decision making assumed teachers and parents would jump at the opportunity to participate. After all, teachers are highly motivated when decisions affect their classrooms (Lortie 1975), and most parents are deeply concerned about their children. But in Kentucky, where more than 85 percent of schools have site-based decision making councils, the number of parents running for council positions and voting in council elections remains dismally small. In fact, only 4 percent of eligible parents have voted, according to a 1992 survey conducted by the Kentucky School Boards Association. In some schools, council formation had to be delayed because parents were unwilling to take part (David 1994).

This turnout is not surprising considering that the effort and responsibilities are substantial, the rewards few, and the outcomes often distant and fraught with controversy. Most people work hard at activities that pay off in some way, with either intrinsic or extrinsic rewards and incentives. And parents perceive that this involve-

ment will eat up substantial time, while their influence on school policies will be modest at best.

Similarly, teachers tend to weigh the rewards of new activities, roles, or expectations against the loss of the professional satisfaction they derive from devoting their time and energy to the classroom (Lortie 1975). They often are reluctant to participate in school-based decision making because it means adding new responsibilities to an already burdensome schedule. Further, they know that the goals typically have little influence on day-to-day classroom practices. In short, the costs far exceed the benefits.

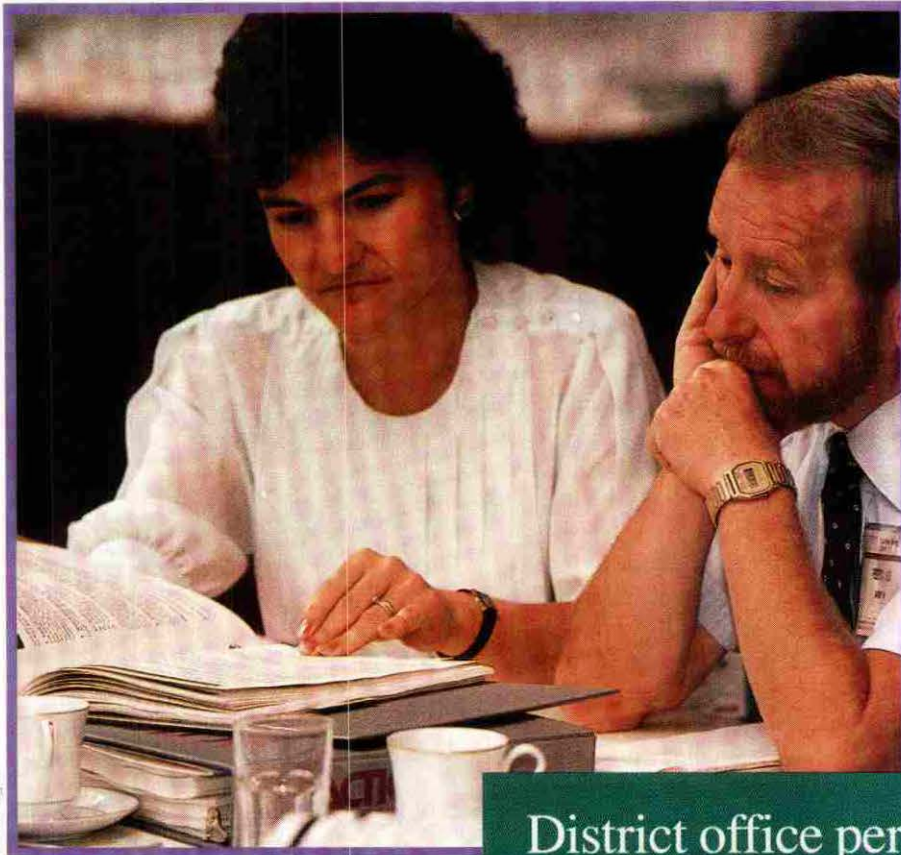
Guidelines for Improvement

In the face of all these problems, what can we do to bridge the gap between school-based decision making and classroom practices? We believe the following steps are crucial.

1. *Begin with a clear mission that focuses on student teaching and learning.* Councils should jointly develop a statement that articulates a school's vision of success and the outcomes being sought. This should not simply be a document filed in some office cabinet. It should be regularly reviewed and reevaluated as the foundation upon which all decisions are based.

Some schools hold offsite retreats to review programs and evaluate efforts in light of their vision of success. Others post the mission statement in the entryway and have all staff members sign it. Still other schools' staff members meet before students arrive to write advertisements for the school and their classrooms to reaffirm what the mission means to them.

By consistently referring to a strong mission for teaching and learning, council members make avoidance of these issues more difficult. At one school, for example, a member of the



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council began every session with the question, "How will this help students learn?"

2. *Set clear and explicit goals for the decision-making process.* Having process goals will focus attention on core issues rather than peripheral concerns. It will also minimize ambiguity about authority and empowerment. The goals should be important and attainable and should give individuals a sense of efficacy in the process.

3. *Ensure that school-based decision making is seen as a process for bringing about a broad set of reforms, not as a goal in itself.* Some schools incorrectly believe their restructuring is complete once a school-based decision-making council is established.

4. *Alter governance structures to give administrators, teachers, and parents real power and authority.*

District office personnel must actively encourage thoughtful experimentation and risk-taking, and invite honest evaluation of current practices.

They will need this power and authority if they are truly to work together to make major changes in established educational practices.

5. *Be responsive to parents' concerns, and involve them in the school community.* If parents are to be partners in reform efforts, they should be active participants in *all* school activities, not merely in occasional bake sales and ceremonies. Schools also must make sure they inform parents and value their involvement. For this reason, schools should schedule council meetings and

training sessions at times that are convenient to parents.

6. *Redesign schedules to give teachers time to participate in decision making.* Some schools grant the teachers on school-based decision-making councils additional release time to work on specific tasks. Others arrange schedules so that teachers share a common planning period or have time together outside of their regular teaching schedule.

7. *Invest in high-quality professional development, and make significant changes in the way these activities are planned, organized, and carried out.* Successful schools invest heavily in professional development to expand both their organizational and individual staff capability. These activities should ensure that those responsible for carrying out school-based decision making are skilled in group

processes, consensus building, and in the change process generally (Fullan 1993). They should include all staff members and be open to parents.

8. *Obtain the necessary expertise on which to base decisions.* To ensure that they make decisions based on valid evidence rather than on persuasive opinions, council members will need ready access to knowledgeable and reliable sources and the best evidence available. (But beware of individuals who repeat research findings but fail to offer specific citations.) In these efforts, educational resource

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centers, educational cooperatives, and school-university partnerships and other collaborative relationships are especially useful.

9. *Ensure active support from all levels of the organization.* Councils will need political support from all levels as they revise policies and implement new programs. District office personnel must actively encourage thoughtful experimentation and risk-taking and must invite honest evaluation of current practices. In addition, they must be ready to offer technical assistance and support in response to school requests. Similarly, principals must learn new ways of leading to be supporters and managers of change. Also needed is social support because conflicts will inevitably arise.

10. *Reward accomplishments, large and small.* Thank you notes, articles in school newsletters, and other acknowledgments do much to encourage involvement. End-of-school functions, dinners, and other public events can also recognize efforts and celebrate achievements.

11. *Work to establish a collaborative school culture focused on improvement.* Principals are instrumental in changing attitudes so that teachers and parents realize that their new shared responsibilities are part of their normal roles. Principals must offer leadership that influences, facilitates, and manages the change process. Ceremonies, retreats, and joint recre-

ational activities can cultivate a collegial spirit. To forestall the tendency of councils to avoid issues of teaching and learning, some councils directly address the history of change and risk-taking in their school.

Reformers will continue to implement school-based decision making to foster more democratic schools and, in the process, make schools more effective. Solving the most basic problems they will have to face will not only bring greater democracy to schools, but also improve relations among administrators, staff members, and parents. Most important, it will increase the odds that teaching will improve and students will learn more. ■

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