

*Cooperative***Faculty Study**

As a school staff attacks its common problems, a dual purpose is served: teachers and administrators grow professionally and the setting for learning is improved.

RECENTLY a workshop of elementary school principals invited several classroom teachers into their group. They asked the teachers to tell them how principals can help teachers improve the instructional program in the individual school. In a panel discussion, the teachers highlighted ways they had received help from principals in their schools. The teachers agreed that the most beneficial experience had come through the individual school faculty working cooperatively on common problems.

A principal asked the teachers to tell how such cooperative work had helped them. Some of their responses were:

"It helped me to feel more a part of things."

"It gave me an opportunity to actually try some things we talked about."

"We really did things rather than merely talk about them."

"It gave me self-confidence."

"It helped me better to understand the other teachers."

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"It enriched my teaching as materials and ideas were shared freely."

"It helped our faculty develop group unity."

This discussion by elementary school principals and teachers highlights the importance of cooperative faculty work at the individual school level. It points toward the opportunities afforded for professional growth and curriculum improvement when local faculties arrive at decisions democratically and make wise use of resources in attacking their common problems. The discussion also raises the question of the leadership role of the school principal in such a program. This article focuses on important characteristics of cooperative local school in-service programs, and on the principles which should underlie their development.

Organization

The organization should provide for cooperative decision making and use of the talents of all participants.

How may this be brought about? A number of schools work together under the guidance of a planning committee, composed of representative teachers selected by the staff, and including a

chairman and recorder. This committee guides the staff in planning their cooperative activities, helps bring these into a workable plan of action, and leads the group in continuous planning, evaluating and revision as needed. The principal serves as a resource person to the committee. In such an organizational setup all members of the faculty share in the leadership responsibilities as leaders of faculty discussions or small group meetings, as chairmen of special committees, or as resource persons to help on particular problems.

Several principles are important for the effective functioning of a staff organized for work under its own leadership.

1. The faculty must feel free to make decisions following cooperative exploration of different courses of action. If, instead, compulsion is felt to please the principal, supervisor or other status leader, critical group thinking is stifled.

2. Decisions should be made by consensus as a result of cooperative sharing and harmonizing of ideas. Agreement thus reached has the backing of all concerned and makes for a feeling of group unity.

3. The planning committee in its coordinating efforts must feel responsible to the staff as a whole, and must attempt to carry out the decisions made by the staff. Such respect for the thinking of the faculty develops morale and builds confidence in the democratic process.

4. Use of the talents and contributions of all members should come as a matter of course as plans are made for attacking the problem jointly

chosen for study. Each person needs to feel that his help is needed. Each needs to feel that it is a teamwork job where all must pool efforts in order to make progress.

Developing a successful working organization within a local school staff takes time. There must be time for planning, time for exploration of the thinking of the group, time for consideration of various courses of action, time for continuous planning and evaluation as the program moves forward. Such process cannot be rushed.

Selection of Problems

Selection and identification of problems should be a cooperative undertaking. Several pertinent facts should be considered as a staff works together in choosing a problem.

1. It is important that teachers work on problems about which they are really concerned.

2. In order to choose problems about which all are concerned, teachers must reach agreement through free discussion with participation by all.

3. The problem chosen should be practical—one about which something positive can be done.

4. The problem should be defined so that it is clearly understood.

These facts indicate that sufficient time must be given for sharing and discussing ideas before decisions can be reached. It takes time to develop an understanding of the aspects of a problem area and to reach agreement on one aspect. If this is not done the group usually flounders and ends up with discouragement. For example, one faculty that chose to work on "reading" never developed any practical way of working

and considered its time wasted. Another faculty, however, identified for attention one aspect of the reading area—"the improvement of reading skills in social studies." In this case the faculty recognized specific benefits from its work.

Selection and clarification of a problem, therefore, call for critical thinking on the part of the entire staff. A meaningful problem chosen through consensus by the faculty is a first step in cooperative problem solving.

Methods of Working

Methods of working should emphasize effective problem solving techniques and use of a variety of learning resources. After identifying a problem and delimiting it so as to secure a workable aspect, faculties frequently bog down through lack of a systematic approach in attacking the problem. A first step in such an approach is to secure a better understanding of the problem. Some of the most important planning teachers in a school can do is to think through together: how to extend their understanding; how to find out what others have done; how to secure the best thinking of authorities in the problem area; how to pool their own resources. A variety of ways is usually needed to secure information and to deepen understanding.

One faculty group was initiating parent-teacher conferences in lieu of a written report. Members of the group read from several authorities and discussed their ideas, viewed a film on conference techniques and listened to a tape recording of both a poor and a good parent-teacher conference. After evaluating the ideas gained and bring-

ing together their own thinking, the staff members used one meeting for role playing of parent-teacher conferences. These various activities provided opportunities for wide participation. Parents helped with the tape recording and contributed to the discussion. The elementary school supervisor served as a resource person in one of the meetings, while teachers had such responsibilities as leading discussions and engaging in role playing. Through these various means, the staff developed both understanding and confidence in relation to parent-teacher conferences.

Another aspect of effective problem solving is the need for a plan of action and for getting started on doing something about the problem. This may not always await the conclusion of a period of activities leading to a better understanding of the problem, but may take place concurrently with identification of the problem. Planning how to attack the problem calls for cooperative thinking by the faculty. A variety of approaches may be suggested and explored. Here, too, the principal has a role in assisting the faculty in a thorough exploration of alternative approaches. Consultants also are often helpful in evaluating the methods suggested. Choices of approaches then should be made on the basis of those which seem most practical to the group. At the same time the question of "who will do what" must be decided, and whether or not all should work on the same approach or try different ones.

When the faculty previously mentioned chose the problem of parent-teacher conferences, it decided to hold

several joint conferences with parents. Therefore, after an initial period of learning more about the purposes of such meetings, the teachers began these conferences. Thereafter, their cooperative work on the problem included: (a) sharing ideas about successes and difficulties they were having; (b) planning by teacher and principal, in certain instances, for joint conferences with parents; (c) listening again to tape recordings and engaging in role playing to see if further insight can be gained; (d) planning together how to keep records of conferences; (e) planning how to get more time for conferences; (f) determining parents' reactions to conferences in lieu of a written report; and (g) evaluating progress and planning next steps.

As indicated in this illustration a plan of action calls for trying out ideas, evaluating how well they work, securing more information when necessary, and revising plans in terms of findings. Faculty plans for working on a problem, therefore, should be flexible. Throughout the year, cooperative decision making is essential in planning next steps.

Role of Participants

Cooperative faculty study involves all members of the staff in decision making—decisions as to choice of a problem, the particular aspect on which to concentrate, ways of securing understanding, approaches in attacking the problem and revision of plans in light of accomplishments. Likewise, it utilizes the talents and resources of all staff members—all assume various leadership roles and share responsibilities as they work together

toward solution of the problem. Cooperative faculty study also involves the services of parents, supervisors and special consultants as they are needed. The role of the principal is a particularly important one. It may be summarized as follows:

The principal sets an example in good human relationships and cooperative ways of working together. He does this through respecting teachers' ideas and having faith in their ability to grow. He encourages them to share ideas, to be creative and to try out new practices. He gives recognition for their work and effort. He seeks to discover and develop leadership in others. He respects the decisions of the group and helps to create an atmosphere in which there is freedom of decision and thinking.

The principal realizes that effective relationships cannot be achieved merely through being "a good person well-met." He knows that such relationships evolve as teachers work together on common purposes, as they have security in decision making, and as they share in carrying forward responsibilities and assuming leadership. He attempts to do his part in making this possible.

The principal serves as a resource person to the planning committee, sub-committee, and the faculty as a whole. In this capacity he assists the staff in identification and clarification of the problem, in finding and securing materials and resources, in getting and using effective problem solving techniques, and in improving group processes. Because of his wider experience, his leadership should enable the group to explore more possibilities in gaining

understanding and in working toward a solution of the problem. Likewise, it should assist members of the group in getting more depth in their study of the problem.

The principal particularly has a role in assisting teachers as they attempt to carry out a plan of action. He should work side by side with a teacher or group of teachers as necessary and also provide opportunities to talk over plans, problems and progress. He especially needs to give encouragement, to

show appreciation of effort and to recognize accomplishment. Frequently he may need to take the initiative in arranging for teachers to share ideas and help each other as they encounter difficulty or achieve success. Thus, he serves as a coordinator of their efforts.

Cooperative faculty attack on common problems plays a fundamental role in growth of teachers and curriculum improvement. How to speed this process at the local school level is an urgent educational problem.

HENRY J. OTTO

PRINCIPALSHIP PREPARATION at the Crossroads

What is the principal's job? What personal qualities and preparation will help him carry his responsibilities? Through in-service education and college programs, today's principal should be getting far greater professional assistance than he actually is receiving.

WHAT IS done, or left undone, during the next five years will cast the mold for elementary education and for the general organization for school administration and supervision for the next generation. In the United States there are somewhat more than 21,000 public school workers who hold the title of elementary school principal. In 1948, 26 percent of these principals were 50 years old or older. As these persons reach retirement new principals will be recruited to take their places. No doubt 5,000 new elementary schools will be built during the 1950's.

This means that between 1950 and 1960 or 1965 about 10,000 new elementary school principals will enter the school administration field. What these people bring with them to their new jobs, and what they can become after their initial appointment, will determine, in large measure, the direction that elementary education will take during the coming generation. A plan for immediate action can be envisioned from the facts at hand.

Leadership Is Expected

The trend of educational thought for

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