

SHARED POWER

and

Student Decision Making

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A PRIMARY issue today is how to help create systems of shared power with greater student decision making in secondary schools. Let us look at some models of student decision making, some of the ways one can achieve this, and some of the risks involved in attempting to put such a program into practice.

Rationales

It is clear that many students and educators are concerned with increasing student power in school decision making. The positive reasons for such experimentation lie partly in the consideration of the moral justice and political appropriateness of life in an institution being governed by those people who live in and are affected by the decisions of that institution. This general proposition also may be supported on the basis of the added perspective and expertise in institutional decision making that students may bring to organizational management and administration and to the conduct and supervision of learning experiences.

Only students, of course, truly can represent students' unique interests, views, and preferences about school life. Many educational and industrial research studies indicate that people are more likely to increase their learning and commitment to an organization when they are involved in making important decisions about that organization. With spe-

cial regard to schools, it would seem that if more democratic forms of management and instruction are implemented, they may be important models for students' learning about the nature and opportunity for democratic politics in the American society. And, finally, such change, which meets the political demands of student protest groups, may help cool the crisis in American secondary schools.

Perhaps this last, negative reason has even the greatest appeal, since most school management is now reactive, rather than pro-active or creative in character. Obviously it is an insufficient rationale and only has viability when implemented for reasons or in ways that complement other more positive political and educational rationales. Philosophers, educators, managers, system visionaries, and system stabilizers may all pick their preferred reasons.

The Meaning of Student Power

We do not all have to agree on the single best reason or program for sharing power with students. Those of us with different visions will have to understand our differences and each plan for the adoption of what we prefer. However, we must understand that for student power to be real, not just a

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farce or a hoax or a cynical token to protestors, means it will be expressed in procedures and structures that not only deviate from, but that threaten major institutional traditions and present ways of life in school. It is that much of an innovation!

This perspective should permit us to distinguish between programs which do not alter basic power arrangements but which open communication channels, permit the expression of grievances, and encourage informal influence or advisory action. Certainly these are worthwhile activities, but they do not constitute efforts at sharing power; essentially power remains located in the same places, while a sense of participation alone is engendered.

Student involvement in school decision making means that students must exercise a significant degree of control over major portions of the formal activities and events of the school. One of the areas of school life in which students can exercise power immediately could be in curriculum determination. The content of the curriculum, the organization of classes, the choice of classroom method, the paths of curriculum sequencing, and the criteria for success and fulfillment of a high school education all must be subject to review, guidance, and management by students.

At the present time many students who feel strongly about such matters vote individually by dropping out, sleeping in class, avoiding certain courses, and the like. Others rebel and organize protests to seek redress and change. Still other students obediently move through the system, having learned that power is not shared and not worth arguing about. Yet they chafe, and yet they learn the lesson of impotence from their exclusion. Institutionalized access to power in this arena could decrease the distance between student needs or goals and the organized content of instruction.

Student participation in school decision making also means that the qualifications of teachers as they may be recruited, evaluated, considered for merit pay, and promoted or transferred must be open for student review. A student voice in making decisions about the

professional staff also may extend to the selection and evaluation of the high school principal. A great deal of arbitrary behavior by educators could be curtailed via the use of accountability systems of this sort. The development of criteria for teacher behavior, of observational or attitudinal instruments, and of ways of providing performance feedback would be helpful supports for such decision-making activities.

Student perspectives on such matters would be inputs from a unique vantage point, one not represented by the views of faculty colleagues or administrators. Students' exercise of this responsibility is not merely self-serving; many teachers could benefit from knowing how their students experience the classroom and what suggestions or preferences they have. There is no reason such a help or growth focus could not be built into student power in faculty evaluation and composition. Student power does not automatically have to cause greater acrimony and distance between students and educators.

It also is necessary for students to play a role in the administration of school finances, and in the allocation of monies among various portions of the school budget. Since innovative school activities and programs often founder on inadequate, unwise, or controversial allocations of funds, control over such areas may be required before anything else can happen. To shield students from making decisions on fiscal matters is to remove them from confrontation with some of the harshest realities and most closely guarded preserves of the school.

In any effort to build new forms of power, we cannot settle for the simplistic replacement of a principal or a ruling body of faculty by several students. First, there are more complex and interesting designs, which may include faculty or student senates, committee structures, divisions of labor and others. Perhaps more important, an exchange of persons to fulfill already established roles or positions is a personnel move which does not constitute organizational change. Substituting one set of persons for another set of persons will not accomplish anything unless the intervening structure of representative

politics and governance is changed. For instance, if a principal is replaced by six students we may have changed the persons, but in no way decreased distance or increased dialogue about political matters between the mass of students or faculty members and student and/or faculty decision makers. Thus, it is crucial to design and establish representative political structures as well as to man these structures with new personnel.

Such structural changes will require major elements of time, energy, and skill to work effectively. An hour a day, and several hours a week of each homeroom, may have to be set aside as a time for students or faculty to meet in small cell groups and/or assemblies. At these times they could consider the political and educational decisions that must be or have been made for the school that week, and to solicit support and commitments for policy suggestions. Moreover, representatives can transmit their feelings, findings, and decisions to their constituents, and receive feedback, suggestions, and pressure from them. Only with such continuing legitimate and structured opportunities for political conversation and activity will such a new political apparatus succeed despite the ravages of time, low energy, other priorities, traditional professional role definitions, political opposition, and the like.

In these examples we have gone beyond merely suggesting that students can be advisors to adult policy-making groups, or that the acme of student power is for students to have autonomy over their own social and athletic facilities and activities. Clearly open channels of informal influence and autonomy are two important functions, but they represent only the beginning of strategic reform. Unilateral student control over clubs, dances, and other school-associated social events may be helpful in developing adult and student expertise and acceptance of more sophisticated and serious efforts.

For student decision making to be real, however, means the students must have real power, real authority, and hence, and only hence, responsibility for educational decisions and administrative governance of the school. Suggestions that actualize these per-

spectives clearly threaten current legal and professional definitions of administrative power, union or association standards and agreements regarding teacher security and tenure, criteria for student certification as a high school graduate, and certainly well accustomed and traditional notions of students' appropriate roles in school.

Implementing Shared Power Systems

The second major issue that must be raised about the potentials under discussion is how we may begin to institute new models of shared power and student decision making. If we accept some of the general definitions and outlines noted here, if we commit ourselves to their implementation, how do we bring about such change? Several assumptions about the ways in which power patterns and decision-making structures can be altered must first be considered.

A primary question is whether power as it is presently constituted is likely to be shared gracefully with students by administrators, faculty members, boards of education, or communities at large. Is decision-making power likely to be reallocated to a serious, not merely token, degree? Are privileged positions and honored traditions likely to be altered voluntarily by people who now wield power in the name of those privileges and traditions?

There is quite a bit of evidence that such is seldom the case, and that for meaningful power to be shared it must be taken, not given. This tendency exists both for people who have power and for those who do not have power. Those in power seldom give up control of their own free will—without threat or actual force. Those out of power seldom trust new power roles unless they themselves have built them. This history does not necessarily constrain the future, but it does provide us with clear predictions and expectations about the conditions for change.

Contingent upon the answer to this question is the matter of whether students and adult educators can collaborate in reallocating power or whether they must, for a time, confront and compete with each other

for power. Collaboration itself often is so difficult that it simply drains away energy from the central track of change in decision-making relations. Moreover, collaboration often is used as a goal, and thus obscures the concern with different forms of power or of quality education as the goals. If people are clear on the goals, then they can consider collaboration as one means which may or may not be essential to their realization. There is no particular evidence that would suggest that people of different status, who have different interests at stake and different degrees of power at the moment, can collaborate effectively to change their system in serious degree. It may be much more important for students and community members or students and faculties to organize together and coercively demand reallocations of administrative power, or for students and faculty to organize separately to each press their separate professional and political interests in the school.

This perspective should not be taken as a case against collaboration. When it works, or can work, it is a valued process that should be used. Students with grievances typically do try collaboration first; both adults and students hope they can "get along" while fulfilling different needs. However, such efforts do not necessarily work to the mutual benefit of both groups. Collaboration often is distorted to mean agreement by students to work for change on adults' terms. When collaboration does fail, students seek more confronting and coercive styles of generating change.

Such coercion involves much more than requesting a formal and legitimate vote suggesting a change. It may involve one or another form of peaceful political protest that many people currently define as destructive, such as verbal threats, strikes, boycotts, or other forms of non-compliance with contemporary arrangements. In cases of extreme provocation, or major student confusion and disorganization, coercion may take the form of violence against peers, adults, or school property. All of these dramatic acts destroy adult myths about student contentment and apathy, and can force attention to new educa-

tional structures. In high schools across the nation, new school governance procedures and new curricula, as well as new forms of courtesy between adults and students, have come about largely because schools have been so threatened or disrupted that educators realized a necessity to try to do things differently. In this sense, coercive confrontations from below often have generated attention, collaboration, and even change from above.

In any effort to utilize conflict or develop new political systems, it is absolutely necessary for people to receive adequate training in how to perform new roles in a new structure. No one should become a member of a new decision-making apparatus without some help in preparing for and operating within that apparatus. Training programs are required for administrators, teachers, students, and/or community members who want to rethink, redesign, reallocate, and administer new educational-political systems. Both professional retraining and structural alterations are required for the most satisfactory change in the creation and operation of school power structures.

Risks in Advocating Change

The creation of such changes in school probably will require highly organized, tightly constructed groups of people who can agree on these or similar ideas. One individual cannot create the thrust for change and resist the reaction to it; likewise, a rapidly collected mob or movement may lack the coherence and commonality required for sustained work. A cadre that can cohere in planning and yet prepare to reach out to others for later multiplication of resources seems most appropriate. The role and status of different members in such a cadre probably are less crucial than their position on the issues.

In this context it is important to remember the need for clear thinking about strategies of collaboration with persons of sharply opposing views, interests, and goals. Although collaboration in dialogue and exchange must occur in heterogeneous groups, such dialogue is not the same as planning strategy. Heterogeneous groups planning

strategy must seek compromises in the direction of a common interest; all too often such compromise occurs too early, before separate interests have been fully discovered and developed. Homogeneous groups—by value, race, or role—are required to identify and articulate positions clearly prior to efforts at compromise. Persons in such homogeneous groups should continue to love and respect people with opposing views; but they may not want them included in their strategy planning sessions.

Attempts to suggest the change or violation of educators' norms around professional sanctity and security, the principal's legal responsibilities, and student role demands are likely to create considerable public and professional pressure on the members of this group to change their behavior and to conform to prior standards. Colleagues may snicker, jeer openly, or otherwise try to dissuade cadre members. In some schools teachers in such groups have suffered disciplinary action or have had their contracts terminated; students have discovered notations about political conduct on their record, have faced suspension, or found their own peers deriding the "noncoolness" of trying to change things. Some of these reactions may be especially punitive for students requiring a good record for college or for the immediate job market. School officials may also involve and encourage students' parents to act as a pressure to prevent efforts at serious change.

The ability of such a cadre to resist splintering of an inappropriate character, while at the same time respecting tolerable differences within, will be a crucial issue. Similarly, it will be vital to sustain internal integrity while not alienating non-cadre collaborators or targets of change. In many schools where cadres have worked well internally, they have done so at the cost of productive links to the outside. Although one excellent defense against outside pressure is to wall it off, internal secretiveness and "ingroupness" often alienate persons not in the group. To the extent that this reaction is based on real differences in values or interests it is quite appropriate; it may be a strategic "red herring" and a tactical error if non-cadre

resistance is a reaction to the process of inclusion-exclusion, *per se*.

Any consultant to this group faces similar pressures. He or she typically will be a member of an educational system, probably paid by an arm of a state or federal agency, and also must be concerned about legitimacy within the moderate educational establishment. His or her reputation, career, and income may be threatened severely by counsel to and participation in a highly deviant or disruptive change effort. Thus, the consultant may be inclined to counsel moderation when strategically inappropriate. Just as dangerous, his or her own alienation and needs may cause the counseling of conflict and crisis when it is dysfunctional.

Beyond interpersonal pressures and the invocation of traditional norms, there also are potential legal constraints of which such a cadre ought to be aware. A small group of people meeting to design radical educational change may be seen as a "conspiracy" with the intent to create disruption. They may be charged with contention or disturbing the peace. The adults may be seen as contributing to the delinquency of minors. We know already that many federal research and scholarship agencies have agreed that funds may not be used for persons convicted for participation in some form of education disorder or disruption.

Each of the potential members of such a cadre faces somewhat different pressures. However, all can expect to be pressed not to hang together, not to truly focus on the kinds of serious and dramatic change suggested, and not to take the personal risks discussed here. One of the things group members may do to help each other would be to examine and share the pressures to quit or back off that each of them faces. Time must be built into a cadre's deliberations to allow for the sharing and potential resolution of such feelings.

Only if these tensions are attended to can they be fruitful; otherwise, dysfunctional anxieties and/or righteous indignation may result. Internal cooperation can also be improved by assiduous attention to the dynamics of group and interpersonal processes.

One risk that persons and systems committed to these goals may be able to avoid, however, is the risk of continuing school crisis and disorder. Student requests and demands for involvement and power in school decision making, and educators' resistance and reluctance to meet such demands, represent one of the dynamics of contention in schools across the nation. It often has led to extra-school political protest and confrontation. Thus, it may be politically as well as educationally expedient for structural inventions around new forms of power to be implemented immediately.

People who commit themselves to serious and meaningful change in the political structure of their profession and of our

schools must be prepared to face risks. Or, they must design ways of diminishing the potency of institutional resistance and reprisal. It is clear that many people—change agents and resisters—face risks and threat when they try to improve the quality of life in our schools. Not to improve, and not to advance in the face of risks, will lead to even greater threat and disaster. The absence of imaginative and just change probably will result in more numerous and more extreme short-term crises and the eventual collapse of our public educational system. The renovation and restructuring of systems of power may be one change that holds considerable promise for a more adequate future in our schools. □

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