



# The Way I See It

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## Teacher Centers Don't Have to Be the Edsel of Inservice Education

There are literally thousands of success stories from satisfied customers of teacher centers across the country. Yet many teacher centers are closing their doors, caught in the budget crunch and loss of federal funding.

Why? What has happened to all the excitement teacher centers generated just five years ago? Why haven't more school districts or even the private sector committed the funds to continue these programs that were begun with federal seed money—especially now, when staff renewal is so critical to instructional improvement?

The beginnings of the teacher center movement in this country can be traced to the late 60s and early 70s, when groups of professionals began working together to support an open education philosophy and curriculum. Out of this work evolved a "teacher-centered" approach to inservice. Teacher-centered staff developers advocated more teacher decisions and responsibility for their own professional growth. Emphasis was placed on *personal* as well as professional growth. Individual needs were considered and teachers were believed to be the best judge of their own individual needs.

The teacher-centered inservice planners and the instigators of the federal Teacher Center Program, begun in 1978, were reacting to the strong central office approach to inservice. Typically, that approach relied heavily on institutional mandates and districtwide concerns,<sup>1</sup> and virtually ignored teacher-perceived needs. The federal program sought to put teachers into more direct involvement in determining and conducting their own personal/professional growth experiences.

The sad part is that many leaders of the teacher center movement went too far in the "right direction." They worked a different agenda—one of adversary relationships with the "establish-

ment," the administration. Some very critical factors relating to change processes and long-term development were ignored in the struggle.

### An Opposing Perspective

The teacher-center movement wasn't the only approach to renewal processes in the late 60s and early 70s. The growing need for instructional improvement and reform of programs, curricula, and delivery strategies led to other ideas with strong implications. Out of the literature came some clearly implied "mandates":

1. The school, not the teacher, is the unit for change. School faculties must share their understanding of and commitment to school philosophy, goals, instructional practices, community relations, and student involvement. Centering on individual teacher needs, in absence of an institutional focus, is a fragmented effort that has little effect on school renewal.

2. The principal is the key to instructional improvement. The principal sets the tone for the school's climate, which views staff development as a logical process through which to engage in both school improvement and personal/professional growth.

3. The climate of a healthy school is one in which school improvement is developmental rather than remedial, the staff systematically engages in self-study, and inservice is one means of helping the staff "get where they have mutually agreed to go."

Clearly, program and staff renewal were needed and the total school environment was to be the focus. But many teacher center leaders believed that focus was a "sell out," incompatible with their efforts to put teachers more in control of their own development as professionals. A false dichotomy, school improvement vs. individual growth, was created. This "either/or" notion did a disservice to new staff developers in charge of teacher center programs. Many teacher centers "zeroed in" on the individual teacher and became preoccupied with issues of teacher govern-

ance and control. Rarely did they attempt to work within the system to complement schoolwide or districtwide renewal efforts. Consequently, the district administration did not see the potential of the teacher center for enhancing a comprehensive staff development program.

It is little wonder, then, that having failed to develop a symbiotic relationship with the administration, the teacher center is today at the mercy of financially strapped administrators.

### Trading In the Edsel

Does institutionalization of teacher centers have to be a "sell out"? Not necessarily. Teacher centers can meet school needs *and* serve individual teacher growth needs.

In a school improvement approach to staff development, faculties, through consensus, determine school mission and targets for improvement. Teachers write action plans for implementing the school goals. Within this context individuals make decisions about pursuing personal/professional inservice opportunities. Teacher-centered inservice programs can facilitate and promote this school focus process and also provide the inservice opportunities for individual teachers as they decide what they can contribute to school renewal efforts.

The teacher center as an organizer and deliverer of inservice education need not be an Edsel. We do need to consider what we know about change and school renewal. Teacher centers can be facilitators of change processes. They can provide resources in meeting the mandates for improvement. Staff developers who work in teacher-centered inservice programs can widen the focus. Teachers can still have practical growth opportunities, but within the framework and context of schoolwide improvement goals. **EL**

<sup>1</sup>Sarah D. Caldwell and Jon C. Marshall, "Four Approaches Described, Assessed for Practitioner, Theoretician," *NASSP Bulletin*, February 1982.

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