School Learning Climate Improvement: A Case Study

Implementing an improvement process may not have brought about perfection, but it achieved enough changes to make the climate positive, not negative.

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What happens to a school when the staff undertakes a program specifically designed to raise achievement and improve the school learning climate? What kinds of problems are encountered? How does the staff react? Are the successes worth the travail that accompanies change?

In recent years research on school learning climate and student achievement[1] and on exceptionally effective schools for disadvantaged pupils has exploded.[2] From case studies of naturally-occurring exemplary schools, researchers have determined characteristics of effective schools.

But efforts to translate these research findings into programs of action are just beginning. Perhaps the most complete program is the set of inservice modules published as *Creating Effective Schools* by Wilbur Brookover and associates at Michigan State University (see Book Reviews, this issue).[3] The school described in this article was part of the Brookover team's larger project to improve schools in an urban district. Before going further, a point must be made: researchers know more about the characteristics of exemplary schools than about how to change a school to make it more effective. In other words, knowing what "model" effective schools are like is no guarantee that a given school will be able to duplicate that "model" status. However, case studies such as this one increase understanding of change for the practitioner and researcher alike. This integrated, upper elementary school is located in a moderate-sized industrial city in the Midwest. The school district is among the poorest in the state and its overall achievement is low—the primary reason the district sought university assistance.

Not all schools targeted for intervention received the school climate program enthusiastically. Any form of change is a threat to security and arouses anxiety and concern, and this project may have seemed threatening. Its message was clear: Some disadvantaged schools are effective in producing high levels of achievement for almost all students. If these exemplary schools can be effective, so can others. The characteristics of these exemplary schools are described in this program. *If your school adopts these practices and becomes like these other naturally occurring effective schools, your achievement should improve accordingly.*

The message also emphasized that staff members were to take collective responsibility for what happened within the school and not blame the children or their parents for low achievement. Under the circumstances, how did the targeted schools manage to overcome initial reactions against the program?

For this school, the answer was leadership, both formal and informal. The principal strongly believed that all children can learn. For instance, after one year in the building, she had changed a highly ineffective homogeneous classroom grouping system to heterogeneous assignment. Unfortunately, this and other efforts to effect change had produced an adversarial relationship between the principal and staff. Regarding the school climate program, the principal perceived it as a structured, complete plan to accomplish her own goals. But due to the strained relations between the principal and staff,

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some teachers opposed the program because the principal favored it. Faculty cooperation would require informal rather than formal leadership if the school were to participate.

During the presentation program by the Michigan State University consultant, this leadership emerged. Hostile questioning moved from general aspects of the program and effective schools to specific responsibilities required of the teachers, the principal, and the MSU on-site consultant. But, even though several faculty members were interested, there were still skeptics.

That afternoon, the staff met for four hours—without the principal—to discuss the program. When they emerged, they had agreed to a full 90-day trial of the program. At the end of that period, they would review their progress and determine whether to continue. Even the skeptics had been convinced. The informal faculty leadership and the resulting staff commitment were key elements in the success that followed.

The Change Process

Change and conflict frequently occur together. In this case, the principal-staff relations never improved. Yet, despite their conflicts, all participants were committed to the program.

Our first task, we believed, was to address the level of teacher expectations. Many teachers believed that poor or minority children were not able to learn well. In the teachers' lounge talk was often negative as teachers vented their frustrations about children's lack of abilities and behavior problems.

To convert this talk into a more positive vein, we instituted a "climate watcher's" process, by monitoring against negative or stereotypical comments and increasing emphasis on positive discussions about all children's ability to learn. One teacher noted that the level of "frustrated" griping about children was not intentional. Another replied that nevertheless it had cumulative negative effects. Much of the monitoring was informal and humorous, but various faculty members saw a positive change in the tone of the lounge talk with more emphasis on improving achievement for all students.

The climate-watcher's process illustrates the strategy of changing attitudes and practices in the *entire school*. Group norms strongly influence individual behaviors and beliefs. If collective norms are changed, the individual will experience group support for change and will not have to face pressures from the old group norms.

In improving instructional practices, another major problem was how to produce quick results. No matter how committed a staff, a new program with its new instructional strategies produces fatigue and frustration. Evidence of success, however, makes the work seem worthwhile.

For this school, quick success came from academic team games. Each class divided into five teams of approximately equal ability who then worked and studied together in preparation for academic contests in basic skills. Once or twice a month, a grade level tournament was held with all teams competing to show their mastery of curriculum objectives. The room whose teams had the best average was the overall grade winner. In assemblies, teams received trophies in math, reading, and sportsmanship, and some rooms participated in "challenge" matches. Students even skipped recess to practice for upcoming contests.

Impediments and Problems

It is unrealistic to assume that the intervention always went smoothly. One problem was too many meetings; at the beginning, subcommittees addressed a range of problems. But as the tasks were completed, the number of meetings lessened. The staff also became more efficient at working together and sharing materials, strategies, and assignments. The academic contests both required and eased planning for mastery learning techniques and summative testing.

There were also difficulties with workroom space and a common materials file; problems that were never totally resolved. Failure to produce one common accessible file hindered efforts to establish a more effective mastery learning teaching strategy. These structural drawbacks and human frailties are evidence of the extent to which lack of "support" materials, space, or personnel can impede educational progress. In this school, the principal-staff relations worked against resolving these particular problems.

Outcomes and Conclusions

This is a brief sketch of a very complex process. But the feelings of faculty leadership and commitment, changing of group attitudes, amount of work expended, exultations over successes, frustration over work conditions, and the 25–30 percent of the students who seemed not to respond are very real. So too was the positive and overwhelming staff assessment of the program at the 90-day review. Achievement gains were encouraging. Compared to the previous year, gains improved about four to one, enabling the school to move from the bottom of the district to near the middle. Still, overall achievement was lower than the staff wanted. Student behavior, time-on-task, diagnostic testing and reteaching (part of the mastery learning process)—all needed improvement. But the staff members were honest about these needs.

A final sobering note on the difficulty of sustaining change—over the summer, the principal was transferred to another school; the new principal was uninterested in the program. The MSU consultant took on different responsibilities in the district, leaving a void in technical direction and leadership. The district went to half-day sessions for six weeks due to financial exigencies. Several key faculty members received pink slips until the return to full sessions, and the primary informal leader on the staff had an extended illness at the beginning of the year. As a result, the program never again attained the level of commitment and activity of its first year.

Change and improvement are possible. Resistance to change because of insecurity, fear, or even dissension can be overcome. But school improvement programs must ensure continuity and sustained effort over two, three, or more years if the goal of an exemplary school is to be realized.□

References

[1]Lawrence W. Lezotte and others, *School Learning Climate and Student Achievement: A Social Systems Approach to Increased Student Learning* (Tallahassee, Fla.: National Teacher Corps, Florida State University, 1980).

[2]Ronald R. Edmonds, "Some Schools Work and More Can," *Social Policy* 9 (1979), pp. 28–32.

[3]Wilbur B. Brookover and others, *Creating Effective Schools: An Inservice Program for Enhancing School Learning Climate and Achievement* (Holmes Beach, Fla.: Learning Publications, Inc., 1982).