

# School Improvement Through Staff Development

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Wayne State University has created a six-step model that improves teachers' skills while increasing their feelings of professionalism.

In recent years, great strides have been made in identifying *characteristics* of exemplary schools—those that are most effective in helping students learn (Purkey and Smith, 1982). However, little research has been devoted to *how* schools become more effective. In a review of research on school improvement, MacKenzie (1983) wrote, "the question of what is important in school effectiveness may now be less significant than the question of what can be changed for the least cost and the most results" (p. 14).

Two Michigan schools have had positive experiences during the three years they participated in the Staff Development for School Improvement project. Both schools were highly successful in raising their test scores, and both attributed these improvements to the staff development project. Another positive outcome has been the institutionalization of the process. In both cases, school improvement efforts have continued even though the university assistance has ended.

## The Staff Development for School Improvement Model

In 1981, the College of Education at Wayne State University received a grant from the state of Michigan to initiate a building-level staff development program that would combine the resources of the university with those of the local schools to encourage teacher-directed school improvement. Nineteen elementary and secondary schools began the Staff Development for School Improve-

ment program in 1981; 11 joined in 1982; and six more started in 1983. Participating schools receive approximately \$3,000 during the first year, \$1,500 during the second year, and \$500 during the final year to spend on staff development. The university also provides each school with a facilitator from its staff who guides the school through six steps:

*Step 1. Development of Readiness, Awareness, and Commitment.* To begin the process, the facilitator meets with the principal and staff until they understand the purpose and the steps in the process. After all questions are answered and concerns addressed, the staff votes on whether or not to participate in the process. If 70 percent of staff members indicate a desire to begin the project, a meeting is scheduled to move on to the next step.

*Step 2. Needs Assessment.* The facilitator leads the staff through diagnosis, brainstorming, and prioritizing activities to select a school goal. After consensus is obtained on one or two main goals, five or more planning team members are elected to work on the school's staff development plan for that year.

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**Step 3. Planning.** With extensive guidance from the university facilitator, the staff writes a plan that includes specific objectives related to the goal, activities to be completed, persons responsible for each activity, evaluation plans for each objective, and cost of each activity. The school staff then discusses the plan and approves it. The university project staff also examines the plan and either approves it or suggests modifications.

**Step 4. Implementation.** At this point the plan is carried out and coordinated by committees made up of staff members. Staff development activities usually include school visitations, workshops, classroom observations, student reward systems, committee work on curriculum, conferences, and materials development.

**Step 5. Evaluation.** Formative and summative data are collected by the schools and by an external facilitator to monitor progress toward the school goal.

**Step 6. Reassessment and Continuation.** The facilitator now involves the staff in examining what they have accomplished during the year and what they would like to focus on during the following year. In essence, this is a needs assessment for year two. At this time, one or two members of the planning team are often replaced by other elected staff members so that more teachers have the opportunity to develop their leadership skills. Finally, a new plan is developed for the next year and submitted to the staff and the university for approval. The following year begins with implementation of the new plan.

During the first two years of the process, 82 percent or more of the teachers in each school noted improvements in knowledge, skills, communication, and participation in decision making. The two most commonly mentioned strengths of the program were increased responsibility for the planning of school activities and improved staff morale. Projects were most successful when activities were conducted during released time, when there was little staff turnover, and when district administrators and the principal actively supported the team's leadership role.

### **Holbrook Elementary School**

At Holbrook, a staff of 14 work with approximately 270 black, white, Albanian, and Arab children, 95 percent of whom participate in the government-sponsored free lunch program. The school serves a deteriorating urban neighborhood with high unemployment and many single-parent families.

After 85 percent of the staff voted to participate in the project, the facilitator conducted a needs assessment. The staff chose to review the reading curriculum and investigate instructional methods that would improve student achievement on the Michigan Educational Assessment Test. With the assistance of the university facilitator, the planning team wrote a proposal that incorporated many of the ideas generated by the staff. The plan included three phases: (1) examination of the state assessment objectives and analysis of the reading curriculum, (2) instruction in more effective teaching techniques, and (3) individually designed professional growth activities.

*Sam Winterritz*



The plan was implemented during the second half of the first year and the entire second year of the project (1981-82). Grade-level teams worked during released time to examine the test format and objectives. The teachers performed a task analysis of the six lowest-scoring objectives to determine the exact learnings necessary to accomplish them. Next, the staff received copies of this information and discussed the implications for classroom practice.

Effective teaching techniques were introduced and practiced at monthly sessions after school. Areas of concentration were teaching to the objective, active participation, motivation, practice, and retention. Each method was practiced in the classrooms between sessions and discussed at the next workshop.

The third part of the Holbrook School plan was to provide a small fund to be used for teachers' self-selected professional growth activities—conferences, workshops, seminars, and visitations. Requests to participate in such activities were submitted to the planning team, and teachers were asked to share their new learnings and materials at regularly scheduled meetings.

After examining evaluations from each activity, adjustments were made. During reassessment, the staff chose to use the same three-phase plan to focus on math during the third and final year of the project, 1983-84.

Holbrook was one of the 19 schools in Michigan to be honored for its increased test scores. On the reading portion of the state test, students performing above the average rose from 72 percent in 1981 to 100 percent in 1983. The staff felt that this increase resulted directly from the staff development project—not from other factors. There were no new programs or staff members in Holbrook School during the three years of the project, nor were there significant changes in the makeup of the student population. Other positive outcomes included improved communication among staff members, higher staff morale, and greater interest in trying new teaching techniques.

As a final benefit, the project created a sense of staff ownership of the school and its programs. Although the project has ended, the Holbrook faculty will continue to use the six-step model for school improvement.



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### Orchard Hills Elementary School

The staff of 22 at Orchard Hills School serves approximately 525 students in a Detroit suburb. The school is well maintained and located in an all-white, middle-class neighborhood.

In spring 1981, Orchard Hills was nominated by the superintendent to participate in the staff development program. Major communication problems existed between the principal and the staff, and student achievement was below the district average. After the staff voted to participate in the six-step process, the university facilitator conducted a needs assessment, which resulted in two main goals—improving communication and developing trust among staff members.

Next, the planning team worked with the facilitator to plan activities to meet this goal. Six half-day workshops were conducted, covering team-building, staff development as a problem-solving tool, organizational structure, effective communication, and conflict resolution. Staff evaluations later indicated that these activities had helped build a more cohesive, mutually supportive staff and helped the principal improve his management and communication styles.

At the end of the first year, the staff decided to spend the next two years focusing on improving teacher productivity and student performance on the state assessment test. To reach these goals, committees were formed to (1) revise the school's mission statement, (2) evaluate the currently used multi-basal reading approach, (3)

learn about workshops on effective instruction and teacher expectations, and (4) examine the state test. Four half-day workshops were then devoted to learning about Teacher Expectations and Student Achievement (TESA) and Madeline Hunter's Principles of Effective Instruction. All staff members also worked together to write and modify practice test items for the state test.

As a result of these activities, the staff (1) adopted a new reading series (eliminating the multi-basal approach), (2) revised the kindergarten program, and (3) created a booklet that included practice test items and effective instructional practices for improving student achievement.

In June 1984 Orchard Hills received the district's "Outstanding School" award. Students achieving the reading objectives on the state test increased from 77.6 percent in 1980 to 97.5 percent in 1983. It is possible—but unlikely—that other factors accounted for this dramatic increase. The school staff and community have remained relatively stable over the past few years, and no program changes have occurred other than staff development activities.

Interestingly, the Orchard Hills staff began the six-step process with a great deal of reluctance, due to the communication barriers in the school. After one year in the program, many teachers still resisted the idea; for some of them the workshops on school climate had not yielded a tangible product that they could feel proud of. When the staff began to work together on instructional issues, things began to fall into place. Teachers who had never really known each other were now standing in the corridors discussing committee activities and meeting informally in living rooms and kitchens. With the breakup of old social interaction patterns, staff members created for themselves an atmosphere of collegiality. After three years, the teachers and principal appear to be proud of the visible difference they have made in student learning.

### Why Does This Model Work?

This staff development program is based on the premise that classroom teachers can best address their needs by identifying their own priorities and planning collaboratively to meet those needs. The process, however, does not occur in a vacuum. The university

facilitator plays a crucial role by helping the staff honestly consider school needs, examine the available options for staff development activities to meet those needs, develop a realistic plan, and implement the plan in a timely and integrated manner. Where this assistance has not been provided in a consistent and competent manner, the six-step process has been less effective. This is especially true at the beginning; often external assistance becomes less necessary as resources for guiding the process are developed within the school and district.

Another critical feature of the model is, of course, money. Many project teachers have said that this was the first time they had been given the responsibility to design and implement anything, let alone the money to do it with! The money provision says to teachers, "We believe you can do something important. Go for it!" The most frequent comment teachers make about the program is that it enables them to be involved in school decisions. This involvement is welcomed like a breath of fresh air.

The biggest lesson we can learn from the Staff Development for School Improvement program is that teachers can be a powerful force for school change when they are allowed to participate in rational problem solving and responsible, widely shared decision making. Boyer (1983) has concluded that one of the most powerful forces for the improvement of American education is the development of teachers' skills and feelings of power and professionalism. Staff Development for School Improvement offers a promising process for developing greater excellence in American schools. □

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