

School Improvement Is More than School Improvement

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The Kenmore, New York, school district conducted inservice programs for board of education members, the superintendent, and central office administrators expected to support school-based change.

Education has a long history of major efforts to increase the effectiveness of our programs and instructional practices. The current thrust for school improvement, however, appears to be more on target, differing from past efforts in a number of significant ways (L/D/E/A, 1983; Joyce, 1982). For example:

- The target of change is no longer the district or individual staff member but *the school*.

- The primary means of achieving improvement in student learning is not curriculum development but *staff development* for all professional personnel.

- The source of improvements is not just intuitive judgments about interesting educational practices, but *research on effective schools and effective instructional practices*.

- *Planning* is no longer year to year, responding only to immediate needs and problems, but is *proactive, long range, and systematic*.

Essentials for Successful School Improvement

For school-based improvement to make a real difference, however, we need to realize that while the unit of change in education is the school, schools are not independent of a school system. In most districts, the idea that individual schools would, could, or should make the decisions about improvements is alien. Most board of education members, superintendents, central office personnel, and

principals are not prepared for, nor do they understand their roles in, a school-by-school improvement effort. Our experience in Kenmore, New York, suggests that school improvement requires comprehensive inservice programs for board members and the superintendent, central office staff, and principals in order to prepare these policymaking and leadership groups to support and guide local efforts.

Kenmore's School Improvement Process

The Kenmore schools serve a community of 150,000 that adjoins the City of Buffalo, New York, as a first ring suburb on the north. This district, long known for its academic excellence, has experienced changes quite similar to those of other urban and inner ring suburban school districts. As more blue collar workers have moved into the district, more affluent and professional families have moved out. There are now more families with no children in the schools (70+ percent), and 60 percent fewer students enrolled in the schools than there were 10 years ago. With the closing of 16 schools, there has been a 40 percent cut in the professional staff. Business

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failures and reduced assessments have decreased tax dollars, and school budget increases and bond issues have been defeated.

As one might expect, these conditions resulted in low morale and considerable tension among teachers and administrators. It was at this point that the Kenmore School District hired a new superintendent who was committed to school improvement.

With the assistance of staff members at the Institute for Development of Educational Activities (I/D/E/A), a private nonprofit foundation in Dayton, Ohio, the new superintendent developed a strategy for increasing the effectiveness of the educational programs and practices in each of the 12 schools in his district. At the heart of this plan was the I/D/E/A School Improvement Process, designed to enable teachers, administrators, parents, students, and community representatives to collaboratively identify goals and plans to improve their school, and then systematically implement their plans.

The school improvement process begins with the selection of a School Planning Team. This team—which includes 15 to 20 teachers, parents, community leaders, a central office administrator, the principal, and (for secondary schools) students—is charged with developing a vision of what it wants the school to be like in five years, establishing specific improvement goals and developing plans for implementation. Team members are

also responsible for communicating what they decide and obtaining reactions and additional information from their peers as they move through the planning process.

Once appointed, the planning team meets together on a regular basis and participates in a series of structured experiences that enable them to develop the skills and trust they need to work as an effective decision-making group and to build a tentative vision of what they'd like to see happening in their ideal school. The planning team then meets with five to seven peers (other parents or teachers) to keep them informed of what they are doing and to get reactions or additional data related to their decisions.

Later on, during a two- or three-day retreat, planning team members identify specific goals for improvement and decide which programs and practices they might implement to achieve their goals. Following this goal-setting session, a subgroup of the planning team develops specific one-year and long-term plans for implementing the improvement goals and programs. Their written plan includes details for the first-year inservice program, timelines for implementation, and formative and summative evaluation data. It also includes a strategy for obtaining commitment from the school faculty, central office administrators, and parents. When this design is completed, it is taken back to the planning team for review, revision, and approval.

Christine L. Roberts



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Now team members, in cooperation with the principal and other administrators, begin to implement their strategy to get faculty support for the improvement plan and to initiate inservice training. Since the overall plan usually covers four or five years, each year the planning team examines progress and develops realistic plans for training and implementation for the next year.

Obviously, this systematic change process requires a trained facilitator to guide a school planning team, not only through the planning stage, but through the staff development, implementation, and replanning stages. In Kenmore, each school had two facilitators—a parent and either an administrator or a teacher. These facilitators were trained by two district facilitators who had been trained by the /I/D/E/A/ staff.

Staff Development to Support School Improvement

While the school improvement process certainly enables schools to plan and implement significant changes in current practice, it also decentralizes decision making. It is quite different from the way most school districts operate, where decisions about major improvements and how to implement them are usually made in the central office. Recognizing this, the Kenmore School District saw an additional need for staff development. The board of education needed to understand the school improvement process and its implications for the way they made decisions. The central office administrators needed to understand what the schools were doing with school improvement and the new roles they and the principals would play in this decentralized approach to change. Finally, since the school was viewed as the unit of change and the principal as the key instructional leader, there was a

need for principals to understand the school improvement process and develop the leadership skills necessary to support and guide such a project.

The initial steps included sessions to acquaint building principals and teachers with the school improvement process. These were followed by a two-day workshop where board members, principals, central office administrators, teachers, parents, community representatives, and high school students actually experienced key segments of the /I/D/E/A/ school improvement process.

The School Board Based on these awareness sessions, the school board developed an understanding of the process that would be used to help their schools increase their effectiveness. The board then affirmed, in a public meeting, its initial commitment and financial support for the district's school improvement efforts.

This commitment and support has been maintained over the last three years. Progress reports and evaluation data about improvement efforts and related training activities for district administrators have been shared. School board members have actually been part of school planning teams. Four schools have formally presented their five-year plans to board members during a regular school board meeting (several others have done so informally). This involvement and communication with the board has resulted in continued funding of improvement efforts.

Central Office Administrators Most central office staff members were involved in the two-day awareness session and many have also experienced the same training principals received. Under the leadership of the superintendent, central office administrators

have met in monthly inservice sessions to develop communications skills, to build supportive working relationships, and to help each other solve problems encountered in their jobs. In addition, these meetings have been used to help central office administrators understand their roles in facilitating school improvement in each school, and to discuss educational issues and problems affecting the district.

The Principals Early in the district's efforts to move into school improvement, all principals participated in the /I/D/E/A/ principals' inservice program. This program was designed to help build support groups and to develop the problem-solving skills needed to plan and implement improvements in their buildings. After an initial awareness workshop, the principal inservice groups met one day a month during the first year of school improvement to work on planning skills, to help each other solve immediate problems, and to prepare for supporting improvement projects in their individual schools.

During the next stage, principals turned their staff development efforts toward increasing their supervisory skills and focusing on instructional effectiveness. In this inservice, teachers and their principals learned and practiced clinical supervision and examined effective instructional practices related to student achievement.

Assistant principals and a parent in most schools were trained by two central office facilitators to guide their school through the school improvement process. Several principals also participated in this training, and all principals became acquainted with the process through participation on their school planning team.

“Involvement and communication with the board of education resulted in continued funding at a time when the district had other major financial demands.”

Problems Encountered

This comprehensive approach to school-based improvement and staff development is difficult to implement. Over the last three years, those in Kenmore who were involved in guiding the school improvement program had to deal with a number of concerns and problems—which other schools will need to consider as they design their own strategies for introducing and implementing improvement projects. Here are some possible problems:

- Principals may not believe that they and their planning team will be given the autonomy to make decisions about their specific school improvement.

- Teachers and principals may believe school improvement implies that someone has judged them or their actions as inadequate.

- Previous experience in many schools with participatory decision making and community involvement may have promised great success but did not work out. Therefore, talk about involving parents and the community will revive old memories of unsuccessful collaborative efforts.

- There may be general resistance to outside assistance. There may be a feeling that “it’s easy for you to say or

suggest this or that; you don’t have to live with the results.”

- It may be very difficult to get people to dream or think big when they are focused on the immediate problems in their jobs or on whether their jobs will even exist in the near future.

- Because they believe that time spent on developing group and decision-making skills and staff involvement is time wasted, many of the district administrators may want to jump to immediate solutions for immediate problems.

- Some people may spend their time focusing on what could go wrong or explaining why something will not work.

These are problems and concerns common to any change program. They are also the kinds of problems that I/D/E/A/ facilitators are trained to address.

Results in Kenmore

Kenmore Schools are now well into their third year of school-based improvement and can identify a wide range of positive results. Each of the 12 schools in the district has completed their vision and planned improvement projects for their school. These plans include goals and programs for improving classroom discipline, designing and implementing curriculum to promote higher order thinking, improving school climate, introducing early intervention strategies to deal with emotionally disturbed students, involving faculty in solving school problems, increasing student achievement in basic skills, promoting more teacher involvement in staff development, and increasing the use of effective instruction practices.

As the result of these accomplishments, we are beginning to identify indicators that suggest that SIP is successful. The teachers organization has been very supportive of the school improvement project and has even proposed funding some school improvement program activities related to clinical supervision. The board of education has also continued to support the school improvement program at a time when funds to operate the district were in short supply. Public statements and testimonials supporting school improvement are becoming more commonplace among teachers and administrators. And most important, parents, teachers, principals, and the community members are

showing pride in their schools, their programs, and the students in the district.

Essentials for Success

Based on our experiences, we believe the following are essential to a successful school-based improvement program.

- Schools should have a systematic improvement process that involves students, parents, teachers, administrators, and community leaders in selecting goals, planning programs for improvement, and implementing staff training and on-the-job assistance.

- Schools should have trained local facilitators to guide school staff members through the improvement process, and the assistance of an external consultant to train and assist local personnel.

- The principal, as a key leadership person in school improvement, must learn how to facilitate improvement in the school, particularly in the areas of instruction, shared decision making, and managing change.

- If school improvement is to have any real effect on student achievement, it must include provisions for increasing the effectiveness of classroom instruction.

- The school board and superintendent must understand and be committed to school-by-school improvement. They need to demonstrate their commitment by allocating resources for personnel, time, materials, and training, and by developing policies, procedures, and public statements that support improvement efforts.

- The central office administrators must understand and support school-based improvement. This includes learning the roles necessary to support decision making at the school level, rather than at the district level.

A closing thought: if our experience with school improvement has taught us anything, it is that (1) systematic school-based improvement is not only possible but results in significant benefits to students and staff, and (2) school improvement is more than *school* improvement. □

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