

# Collaborative Work

School and community leaders working together not only bring more resources to their problem-solving efforts but develop mutual trust and support that enhance professional development.

The pressure for reform today takes its place in a century-long climate of criticism and proposals for reform (Passow 1984). The criticisms have shifted each decade: from an emphasis on curriculum development and teacher reeducation in the '60s, to a clamor for relevance in the curriculum and a focus on the segregation of minority groups in the '70s, to a return to core require-

ments—more math and science—and an unprecedented critique concerning the quality of teachers and the necessity for making teaching more attractive in the '80s. These shifts in reform raise some perennial tensions, such as providing for excellence and equity, relevance in the curriculum versus a specified set of requirements, and curriculum content and instructional issues.

The rhetoric of the current reform movement, like that of the '60s, is tied not only to problems of curriculum and instruction but to national interests and our position in the world. Twenty years ago it was the Russian Sputnik that shook the nation and its schools and precipitated a focus on math and science. In the '80s it is the dominance of the Japanese over Americans in technological output that has



Photographs by Howard Long

brought once again an increased focus on math and science. Another impetus for this movement comes from growing teacher shortages and a diminishing talent pool of people entering teaching (Schlechty and Vance 1981). Yet despite scores of reports calling for reforms of all kinds, there has been a notable lack of discussion about *how* to make reforms work. (An important exception to this lack, however, is Goodlad's *A Place Called School*.)

### School Improvement Is Complex

We have come to understand that improving schools is a very complicated problem. Some have said that the images we use to think about schools—comparing them to factories or hospitals (Schlechty and Joslin 1984)—have distorted our vision. Others have suggested that we have neglected both the history of the contexts within which schools are embedded and the life histories of the people who inhabit them (Smith et al. 1984). Many of the studies of recent years suggest that the social relations of teachers and principals are characterized by poor communication and isolation. The very people who can help build a professional culture are often adversaries (Barth 1984).

We are just beginning to understand that the process of change in schools is dominated by how ideas are introduced, organized, supported, and implemented. Some research has systematically documented this change process (McLaughlin and Marsh 1979, Huberman and Miles 1984). But our experience in school improvement far outweighs systematic study. While we must look to research where it is available, we must learn from people's experiences with positive improve-



Students in South Bend's PRIMETIME project integrate reading with computer skills.

ment efforts. In many cases we find that change efforts have been successful due to some type of collaborative relations between the participating parties.

### New Understandings of Organizational Life

It is interesting to note that both organizational theorists and educators are writing about the need for a change in how people work with one another. Those who have studied successful organizations have found them to be people-centered—not just by treating people well but by recognizing their central importance in the organization (Kanter 1983). Many of the same words and phrases are used to describe successful organizations and successful schools. Phrases like energizing the grass roots, empowerment, more egalitarian arrangements, more autonomy, more flexibility, better dialogue, stronger interpersonal ties, greater understanding of the culture of the organization; and sensitivity to the effects of collaboration on motivation and experimentation all point to a greater focus on involvement and caring about the people who do the work (Kanter 1983, Clark et al. 1981).

Although the words and phrases describing successful organizations and schools are similar, there are im-

portant differences. Schools are not businesses, and learning cannot be described in product-like terms. But what we are getting is a rediscovery of the fact that social relations have a great deal to do with how people feel about one another, their work commitments, their participation and creativity in their work. Schools where people work together to confront their problems, where teachers have maximum autonomy to do their work but are collectively engaged in dialogue about the central problems of the school, are places that are more likely to be successful for the adults *and* the children.

### Collaboration Rediscovered

Collaborative work is a fresh and promising way of working that is both old and new. It is old because many people have written about and experienced successful cooperative working relationships before (see, for example, Miel et al. 1952, and Corey, 1953) and new because, after several decades of reform effects, we are once again confronting the necessity for working together—researchers and school people, state and local representatives, businesses and schools, foundations and school improvement programs, principals and teachers, universities and teacher organizations, to name a few.

The scope and variety of these collaborative efforts attest to pervasiveness of the collaborative ideal. But little is known about what these collaborations look like, the forms they take, and how they come about.

### Variations of Collaborative Work

Contexts, needs, talents, and commitments differ, but one thing appears to be constant: schools cannot improve without people working together. This is a broader view of collaboration than is usually described but one, I believe, that more accurately states both a value position I hold and the way things are in our field. None of us, no matter what our position, has the answers to the complex problems we face. The more people work together, the more we have the possibility of better understanding these complex problems and acting on them in an atmosphere of trust and mutual respect. We need to understand not only the variety of collaborative activities and arrangements, but what people get from these relationships and what it takes to sustain them.

Collaborations may be small or large, heavily funded or not funded at all; organized within schools by a group of teachers or a principal or encouraged by someone from the district; or they may be organized by a business, foundation, university, or professional association in collaboration with schools.

The forms of collaborative activity are as varied as the numbers and kinds of people involved. They range from two teachers taking each other's class and eventually taking different responsibilities for each other; to school improvement teams or projects within a school or district; to principal and teacher centers; university/school collaborations that include research, inquiry, improvement programs; foundations sponsoring new initiatives and research; statewide improvement efforts consciously attempting to collaborate with local schools; and national groups collaborating to reshape secondary education. What all these new relationships do is encourage a much broader stake in the improvement of schools by a much larger group, and they also provide us with more experience in understanding the variety of ways people can work together.

### PRIMETIME for Students and Teachers

Teachers, principals, and administrators in South Bend, Indiana, are working together to improve the education of young children. Stimulated by Governor Robert Orr's PRIMETIME, a program to lower class size in the primary grades, South Bend educators compiled *PRIMETIME Digest*, a resource and practical guide of "home remedies developed by and for classroom teachers."

Using reading as the core, the *Digest* describes the program for language skill development in the 1st and 2nd grades and shows teachers how to integrate other subject areas, such as health and computer literacy. In addition, a "whole language" approach to science uses children's literature to teach basic science concepts, and school librarians have assisted teachers by providing bibliographies of useful books in school libraries. In a related program, locally developed science and social studies radio lessons teach listening skills along with the content of these two subject areas. Designed for broadcast on the South Bend Schools radio station, the programs key teacher-designed resource sheets to each lesson.

Motivation is high among teachers and administrators because PRIMETIME develops and distributes teacher-made classroom materials that work. As one teacher explains, "Because we want it to work, we are making it work." The result, according to the first year's evaluation, is higher staff morale, higher student achievement, and more attention to learning—and less emphasis on discipline and attendance problems.

"Children," said one teacher, "are the prime consideration—not bus schedules, budgets, or the availability of special resources." PRIMETIME has put professional educators in charge of what they know best: how to teach and how to help children learn. Teachers and administrators who collaborate reap their own benefits. As teachers move from curriculum development to implementation, they enhance and expand their repertoire of professional skills. Observed one teacher, "I feel that I'm a better all-around teacher. And I think my colleagues are better, too. It's working. Keep it going."

By Lynn Miller, assistant superintendent of curriculum, South Bend Community School Corporation, 605 S. Main St., South Bend, IN 46601.

### School Improvement Teams

Watching a meeting of Washington County, Maine's, "Grassroots Movers" is to see collaboration in action. This school improvement team—originally a university professor, two teachers, a curriculum consultant, and a special services coordinator—struggled to find meaning in the somewhat amorphous terms "staff development" and "school improvement." Gradually, they learned to work together to accomplish their mission: promoting local school improvement through a regional staff development communication network.

Group meetings are informal and flexible, but the underlying structure and purpose are apparent. They seem to use their mix of personalities and working styles to advantage: organizer, taskmaster, pragmatist, creative thinker. As one member observed, "There are no slackers on this team, no dead weight. And nobody has an axe to grind." A superintendent who recently joined the team is a part of the group with no less—or more—authority than other members. Group laughter and group respect go hand in hand.

A commonly observed effect in Washington County and among members of the other Maine school improvement teams, has been a deepening understanding of the value and power of collaboration. As one superintendent wryly noted, "I'm astounded that a classroom teacher sometimes comes out with better ideas than mine." For some members of regional teams, such recognition is new, even profound. A teaching principal who came to recognize how "we have stifled the teachers, making decisions for them rather than with them" has since involved his teachers in planning a successful staff development program.

Another superintendent observed, "The main impact for me is subtle but important. I've always believed in collaboration and the value of everyone making a contribution, but this experience has burned this into my being. I'm less directive than before. I think I've really backed off. . . . I don't feel so necessary."

School improvement teams in three of Maine's more remote regions, assisted by the Mellon Foundation, are developing a common language about staff development. Although it is premature to judge the full impact of the project, people are thinking in ways they haven't before. Relationships with five of the university campuses have been established. Team members are stimulated and rejuvenated. The results are encouraging.

By Margaret Arbuckle, director, Maine's School Improvement Program, Department of Educational and Cultural Services, Augusta, ME 04333.

## Learning from Action Research

The Scarsdale Teachers' Institute, a 17-year-old center funded by the board of education and teacher contributors, provides inservice education for Scarsdale teachers as part of their negotiated contract. Recently, Scarsdale teachers participating in a Metropolitan School Study Council writing program, associated with Columbia's Teachers College of New York, were asked to share their action research process with colleagues.

Persuaded that the action research model was fruitful and effective, institute leaders identified three areas for study: teachers' use of computers, writing, and supervision. With a \$30 thousand grant from the state, research seminars enrolled school personnel. Working with university faculty, teachers explored action research literature, developed action research designs in each of the three areas, and conducted the research.

In the computer seminar a physics teacher who had never used a computer set up an experiment in wave action, proposing to demonstrate it both mechanically and on the computer. The teacher learned that the mechanical experiment was a more effective teaching tool, but later used the computer to write a program for use by students who missed the mechanical experiment.

A math teacher demonstrated a calculus graphing problem that would have taken days without the computer. The students watched as the graph emerged on a large-screen monitor; in a single class period, calculations came to life. The students applauded.

Action research in writing enabled high school and elementary teachers to collaborate on journal writing, a technique with almost universal applicability, they discovered. Teachers compiled more than 10 different journal-keeping approaches, with lower-level teachers adapting secondary techniques and vice versa. The result was teachers with more sympathy for each other's aims and more awareness of writing instruction across grade levels.

For Judith Schwartz, director of the Scarsdale Teachers' Institute, "Collaboration is fundamental to staff development." She said that the three action research seminars expanded parameters of effective collaboration, providing a context in which teachers, administrators, and university people could work together. "Even more important," she added, "the seminars changed the notion of staff development from doing things to people to *sharing* responsibility for decision making and power."

Schwartz says that the Teachers' Institute has been a collaborative effort from the beginning—supported by and meeting the needs of teachers, administrators, and the board of education. But the action research projects added a new dimension—extending the collaborative enterprise by promoting professional risk-taking and professional growth in a safe environment.

## Case Examples of Collaborative Work

Three examples of collaborative work give us a sense of the breadth and depth of collaborative work currently going on: Maine's statewide school improvement program, a university-school collaboration, and a district-wide group of 1st grade teachers in South Bend, Indiana.

*Maine's School Improvement Program.* Most states have adopted some form of school improvement legislation in response to the enormous number of reports on the need for change. Few have wrestled seriously with the issue of compliance versus assistance (Elmore and McLaughlin 1982) or have grounded their new policies in the real complexities of what we know about schools (Rosenholtz 1985). Maine is an exception. *Written school improvement plans* are an important element of a program that has been in operation for over five years. Although the program was spearheaded by the state department of education, it is school teams that produce the plans. These teams are helped to develop their own capacity to assess local needs and develop the means for implementing necessary changes. (For a detailed discussion of the processes and how they are enacted, see Arbuckle 1985.) The important point is that the state is collaborating with local districts in facilitating both a structure (the collaborative team) and a process (steps leading from the creation of the team through a series of activities leading to implementation of locally designed improvements). The product is the implementation of strategies for making the necessary changes. State department people; the teachers' association; and representatives from school districts including teachers, principals, superintendents, school board members, staff developers, and business form the collaborative team. Maine's collaborative experiences have brought important insights about "real and imagined barriers among people with different roles that diminish as they work together" (Arbuckle 1985) and an increased appreciation for the importance of diversities represented by a broad representative group.

*University-School Collaboration.* Universities are also engaged in a variety of collaborative activities that include working with school people—a different stance than using people

## Guidelines for Collaborative Work

These guidelines suggest how we can take collective responsibility for improving schools. The climate for reform gives us a rare opportunity to change the ways we work that may be both deep and lasting.

- Some type of organizational structure is needed to collaborate.
- A small core of people actually work on the collaboration.
- Time for collaboration needs to be allotted.
- Skillful people working together enhance collaborative work.
- Initially, *activities* propel the collaboration, not goals.
- Large superordinate goals for collaboration become clearer after people have worked together.
- People often underestimate the amount of energy it takes to work with other people.
- Collaboration with schools demands an understanding of schools as complex social organizations shaped by the realities of specific contexts.
- Ambiguity and flexibility more aptly describe collaborations than certainty and rigidity.
- Conflict in collaborative work is inevitable; it has the potential for productive learning.
- People can participate in collaborative work for different reasons, but they should include wanting to do things together.
- Products created by collaborating create an important sense of pride in collaborative work.
- Shared experiences over time build mutual trust, respect, risk-taking, and commitment.

solely as research subjects. Teachers College, Columbia University, has collaborated in a school improvement effort involving school districts from New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut since the early 1940s. The Metropolitan School Study Council (MSSC) has changed directions many times but is still intact, currently representing 46 districts. The collaboration is run by a small executive board of representatives from eight of the districts and a small staff from Teachers College (two professors parttime, a parttime coordinator, and several graduate students). The Teachers College staff and the executive board make decisions about programs and activities. Conferences, workshops, research, writing and computer consortia, and a principals' group provide the activities for the collaborative group. As in the Maine example, this collaboration has a structure for making decisions about what kind of activities to work on together. Working together since 1976, the current group's shared experiences and a continuous struggle to provide interesting formats for school people that connect them to the ideas being worked on in the university, as well as facilitating presenters from the schools themselves, have created a climate of friendship, trust, and flexibility and an increased stance of mutual risk and mutual trust. Not all activities have been successful, but many have. This group has learned that collaboration of this type can serve as yet another meeting ground for ideas and support and a context for understanding and sharing different worlds (Lieberman 1985).

**South Bend Community School Corporation.** From a need to reduce class size in the 1st grade, teachers in South Bend were asked to volunteer to work on a team to address the problem. When teachers met with the assistant superintendent for instruction, they decided to tackle the larger problem of language arts and reading on grade level. A major concern was to document and improve common practices being used across classes. The teachers pooled their craft knowledge and resources to create a digest of those practices. Peer observations as well as monitoring and evaluating by both teachers and principals provided data for a refined version of the curriculum. The significance of this collaboration of teachers with district office facilitation is that, rather than addressing a mandate to change the curricu-

lum, a voluntary team worked together, gathered information, developed materials, and gained opportunities to both reflect on and become more articulate about their own practices. As a result, teachers not only improved their practices but created a curriculum that included the richness of their craft knowledge. Principals and teachers learned the curriculum together, which provided yet another form of collaboration that ensured teachers would be supported in implementing the redesigned curriculum. This kind of collaborative work enhances teacher professionalism and provides the kind of involvement that teachers rightfully feel should be their contribution to the reform movement (*New York Times* 1985).

These examples are not meant to describe collaborative work through rose-colored glasses. There are many problems and tensions. Those who have been involved in collaborative work know that while the idea of collaboration is very attractive, the reality is far more difficult and complex (Oakes et al. 1984).

Groups of people who work together need not only good ideas, but enough time together to strip away the stereotypes held by people in different positions doing different kinds of work. People don't just naturally work together. Most of us have learned to be more protective than reflective, more understanding of people like us than of those who are different, more comfortable in our own context than someone else's. It is easier to place blame on "them" than to take some responsibility for being open to seeing the world as someone else sees it. But from those who have practiced and written about collaborative work, we can better understand its pitfalls, misconceptions, and conflicts. (See, for example, Oakes et al. 1985, Little 1984, Lieberman 1985, Weick 1979.)

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- Ann Lieberman** is professor and chair, Department of Curriculum and Teaching, Box 110, Teachers College, Columbia University, New York, NY 10027.

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