Voluntary Collegial Support Groups for Teachers

Teachers at a Calgary, Alberta, high school are pooling their talents and expertise within peer support groups to aid one another's professional growth.

Not only do participants in the Henry Wise Wood Development Program receive lessons on school growth models and leadership theories, but also moral support in planning their own professional growth.

As teachers, we invest much time, effort, and care to ensure that the right climate for growth exists in our classrooms, and that is as it should be. But it is equally important to make a similar investment in our own personal and professional growth.

The Effective Schools/Professional Development Committee of Henry Wise Wood High School in Calgary, Canada, faced the challenge of planning professional development activities for a highly trained and competent group of 93 teachers responsible for the instruction of 1,700 students. Made up of nine volunteers representing Administration, Guidance, and the Academic departments, the committee was also responsible for implementing an Effective Schools program.

In looking at professional development for our staff, we realized that while we would never think of presenting random, disconnected lessons to our students, that was precisely what we were doing in our staff development activities. The three professional days per year mandated by the Calgary Board of Education were often exciting, informative breaks in the routine of teaching; but the information they imparted was seldom directly or permanently applied to our classrooms. After much discussion and with feedback from the staff, we resolved that we needed a plan that would provide focus for both our personal and professional growth and would use our resources as a staff.

Principles of Professional Growth
Our committee established five principles that delineate our beliefs about professional growth:

1. Teachers benefit from individual, small-group, and large-group professional development activities, so each must be encouraged in the school.
2. Professional development is most effective when undertaken voluntarily by individuals.
3. Growth activities should build upon the strengths, interests, and talents of each teacher and must be relevant.
4. Professional development activities can stimulate awareness in teachers of their level of skill development, leading to celebration as well as growth.
5. Growth can be enhanced through a collegial support system that values growth activities, provides moral support, and facilitates small groups.

If the teachers at Wise Wood were truly going to make use of their talents and expertise, we had to find a way to tap the collective resources of the staff. Collegial support groups seemed to be the answer.

Details of the Program
We presented the Professional Development Program to the staff at the beginning of the 1986 school term, proposing it as a one-year pilot organized with a maximum of 30 participants divided into groups of 8 to 10 teachers. The groups would meet regularly throughout the year. Their primary role would be to provide a climate of mutual trust, respect, and support for teachers engaged in growth activities. Their content would be shaped by teachers' individual needs and would use group members' skills and talents while identifying new areas for development. We emphasized that all participants would be vital members of the group, valued as

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After evaluation and refinement, we said the program would be offered again in the following year. The principal, along with another committee member, would co-facilitate each group. In this way, trained facilitators would be available in subsequent years if staff demand necessitated a greater number of groups.

The positive response from the staff exceeded even our optimistic expectations. Within a few days, 30 teachers had volunteered. Groups were formed based on availability for meeting at designated times once a month. Each group consisted of teachers with a wide range of subject specialization and teaching experience, as well as department heads and administrators. Since teachers bought into time slots rather than friendship or department affiliations, the composition of the groups was quite mixed; and many people did not know one another well.

An essential part of the collegial support groups is a group member handbook we call "The Binder." This handbook includes an overview of and introduction to the Professional Development Program; a personal profile section to record data related to individual teaching careers; a professional growth section to be developed by participants according to their needs; a section for reflections, notes, and jottings; and a file section for useful articles, letters of reference, career documents, and so on. The Binder is an organizational tool as well as a diary of an individual teacher's quest. By recording professional growth within the pages of a book, we hoped to emphasize its importance.

Phases of Implementation

Our Professional Development Program was implemented in three phases.

Phase I entailed a full day of "start-up" activities—team building, self-assessment, introducing process skills, and developing the concept of individual growth and teaching improvement plans. We were fortunate to secure funding to cover substitutes for the

whole group so that activities could be held off campus at the nearby area office. Teachers' reactions to the session were overwhelmingly positive, and there was significant bonding of group members.

During *Phase II* participants met monthly for a minimum of three hours. Skills and processes such as brainstorming, problem solving, and providing feedback to colleagues developed during the initial phase were reinforced; each group formed a unique identity.

The four facilitators of the groups met before each set of sessions to discuss the development of the groups, assess group member needs and interests, and plan the agenda. Although general planning and objectives for the three groups were basically the same, facilitators were free to modify the proceedings according to the needs and personality of the groups, each of which developed a character of its own. One group, for example, tended to prefer quite practical discussions of problems or events within the school while other groups focused more upon philosophy or theory.

Each session began with refreshments contributed by a group member—we discovered many excellent cooks among our colleagues—and with a brief social interlude. A warm-up or focusing activity designed to help us get to know one another bet-

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Each session in Phase II consisted of (1) the presentation of a new concept or theory that applied to the group's work, and (2) an activity that facilitated each individual's planning for personal and professional growth. For example, one session presented an explanation of the Sergiovanni Leadership Model. After a discussion of the implications of the model, teachers worked in groups to explore the applications of the model to their own classrooms and to the school as a whole, and to examine their own strengths and areas in which they desired growth. Each session concluded with processing the day's activities and writing in Reflective Journals contained within the Binders.

As the year proceeded, group members were exposed to self-assessment strategies, theoretical material about the nature of leadership, and a model for school growth. Each teacher also created a professional growth plan, implemented it, and shared results with the group. Sharing successes as well as problems became a standard activity as members encouraged and reinforced one another's growth.

The sessions afforded teachers the opportunity to report to their groups about something exciting they had read, a conference they had attended, or a classroom discovery they had made. As relationships strengthened, interaction among group members in other settings increased. Small, casual collections of group members could be found in the staff room over coffee pursuing a line of thought opened up at "Group."

Phase III of the program was the wrap-up session—a time for sharing successes and joining together in celebration. Each participant assessed his or her involvement in the program and completed an evaluation to be used in refining the program.

Where Do We Go from Here?
Informal and written evaluations of the program's pilot year indicated enthusiasm for collegial support groups. Participants were positive about the theoretical material presented, the chance to air problems with colleagues, and the encouragement the program gave them for setting and achieving professional goals. Many felt more time was needed to pursue important issues. Much remains to be done in rewriting and polishing the program next year; there are many questions to be resolved. We are, however, convinced of the value of the collegial support group as a vehicle for professional growth within our school.

As we gain in understanding the complex process of learning and the teaching strategies that bring it about, we may become discouraged by the magnitude of our task. But there is hope in the potential within ourselves. In organizing to tap our own resources, we may help to overcome the problems plaguing our schools. Nothing in a school is more powerful than teachers who have achieved agreement on what is truly important. We have found the collegial support model an effective vehicle for bringing about that agreement.□

Mary Paquette is Chairperson of the Effective Schools/Professional Development Committee and Head of the English Dept. of Henry Wise Wood High School, 910–75 Ave., S.W., Calgary, Alberta T2V OS6.