

# The Collaborative School Takes Shape

In collaborative schools, teachers see each other as resources for professional growth and work with the principal toward the common goal of school improvement.

Consider how the adults in two different kinds of schools interact. In school A, teachers do not discuss with one another their practice of teaching, nor do they help one another to improve their skills. They benefit little from the principal's annual visits to the classrooms to evaluate each by means of the district checklist. When administrators initiate new programs, teachers respond with apathy or are uncooperative. The faculty seldom unites around any effort to improve the school.

In contrast to the isolation and fragmentation that characterize school A, teachers in school B feel they are working toward a common goal of school improvement. Teachers observe each other's teaching and strive to help one another improve. Experienced teachers regularly share with new colleagues the practices that have worked effectively for them.

Asked why they function so well as a team, school B's teachers point to the principal, who provides the practical support they need to work together. And they point to each other as resources for solving problems. They are proud to take part in decision making; they value their control over a portion of the school's instructional budget.

Now, more than ever before, the structure of school A is being criticized. Consequently, in reforming school structures, educators are experimenting with alternatives that accord teachers greater respect as professionals while encouraging them to cooperate with one another and with administrators on school improve-



ment. These new practices and structures—characteristic of school B—all fit in the broad category of the *collaborative school*.

### Elements of the Collaborative School

There is no one model of the collaborative school; collaboration describes a range of practices that can involve a handful of teachers or an entire faculty. Although collaboration can be encouraged by formal programs—organizational development, for instance—it cannot be imposed on a faculty. Collaboration depends on the voluntary effort of educators to improve their schools and their own skills through teamwork.

Because the collaborative school is a composite of beliefs and practices, it is easier to describe than to define. Perhaps the best way to characterize the collaborative school is to list its elements:

- the belief that the quality of education is largely determined by what happens at the school site;
- the conviction that instruction is most effective in a school environment characterized by norms of collegiality and continuous improvement (see Little 1982, Purkey and Smith 1983, Rosenholtz in press);
- the belief that teachers are responsible for the instructional process and accountable for its outcomes;
- the use of a wide range of practices and structures that enable administrators and teachers to work together on school improvement; and

- the involvement of teachers in decisions about school goals and the means for implementing them.

Although a host of other benefits may be expected to derive from collaboration—staff harmony, mutual respect between teachers and administrators, and a professional work environment for teachers—its primary rationale is instructional effectiveness. Its most important dynamic comes from teachers' working together to improve their teaching. The informal and formal interaction about instruction among teachers is what distinguishes the collaborative school from earlier models of democratic management and participative decision making.

### What It Is Not

Some educators, while affirming the above characteristics as desirable for any school, may nonetheless respond negatively to the idea of collaboration. In anticipating objections that may be raised, it is therefore useful to say what the collaborative school is *not*.

*It does not seek discussion for its own sake.* Collaboration, some observers feel, means just a lot of talking that takes teachers away from their tasks. True, participative decision making and collegiality require a certain

investment of time. But the interaction of educators in their schools and the participation of teachers in decision making, while valuable in themselves, contribute to something of even greater value: quality education.

As Rosenholtz (in press) and Little (1982) point out, teacher interactions in themselves bear no relationship to school effectiveness. It is the content of those interactions that determines their value. Rosenholtz, for example, defines *collaboration* as "the extent to which teachers engage in help-related exchange." This definition focuses on the *kinds* of interactions believed to lead to improved teaching and learning. When teachers trade stories about problem students, they enjoy a sense of comradeship; but when they also share teaching practices or critique one another's teaching, they are engaging in activities to improve their work.

*It does not require school administrators to abdicate their authority.* Is the collaborative school a laissez-faire approach to management in which administrators hand over the reins to



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teachers? This concern lies at the root of many objections to collaboration. In actuality, strong leaders are necessary in collaborative schools, where they must halt the spread of isolationism and direct the faculty in establishing new norms of cooperation. As Alfonso and Goldsberry (1982) point out, coordinating professionals in the fluid context of collegial support is a complex task that “cannot be done through generating formal rules, or even standardized procedures.” Consequently, a collaborative school requires a higher calibre of leadership than does a bureaucratic school.

However, principals must be willing to share authority. Teachers will be taking part in such tasks as setting school goals, allocating resources, and overseeing their own professional development. Nevertheless, increased responsibility for teachers need not mean decreased authority for principals. Principals of collaborative schools have often discovered that power shared is power gained: teachers’ respect for them grows.

*It does not reduce teachers’ accountability.* Efforts to give teachers more say in decisions may backfire, some observers fear, when teachers invoke “professionalism” to avoid doing what administrators or the public want

them to do. But, in fact, collaborative norms reinforce traditional methods of accountability by building consensus toward school improvement. Teachers are most likely to respond favorably to the direction of an administrator if these actions conform to the expectations of their colleagues.

In the collaborative school, teachers monitor one another’s performance, set limits on one another’s behavior, and take responsibility for helping their colleagues to improve. These self-policing efforts are a measure of a faculty’s true professionalism.

### The Results of Teamwork

The collaborative school provides a climate and a structure that encourage teachers to work together and with the principal and other administrators toward school improvement and professional growth. In this setting teachers will gain respect as professionals, principals will see their efficacy increase, and all members of the school community will experience the satisfaction of accomplishing important goals through teamwork. □

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