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School-Based Improvement— Are We Ready?

Administrators can successfully manage the move to site-based improvement if they follow a detailed process designed to guide their efforts.

School-based improvement holds the promise of producing substantial positive change in our schools, yet it is a complex process involving new expectations and roles and the hazards present whenever we alter familiar practices. Being ready for school-based improvement requires a reorientation in the way we think and operate in our schools and at the district level. It means moving many decisions about improvement out of the central office and into the schools. It also means changes in the roles of personnel in the district.

But central office staff often find it difficult to visualize ways to manage site-based improvement without loss of accountability, diminished emphasis on district goals, and loss of consistency throughout the system. We are fairly familiar with how each *school* can develop improvement goals and select improvement programs. We are less clear about what to do about *district goals*; what to require of all schools and what to make optional; what specific procedures to use to develop school-based plans; and how the roles of the board of education and all district personnel will change as the control of resources and decision making moves increasingly to the school.

A Proposed Process

Based on extensive review of policies and procedures and on discussions and interviews with district administrators and staff development personnel in three urban school districts and one suburban district,[1] we have identified some procedures that have promise for managing school-based improvement within a district.

The four districts had several factors in common. First, each superintendent was deeply committed to improving instruction in the schools. Second, each district was moving toward participatory management and decentral-

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ization. For example, a few management decisions had already been decentralized (e.g., schools had some control over personnel changes and over expenditures of the school budget). In addition, funds for staff development in some districts had been decentralized to support school-based improvements and inservice education. And finally, teachers and administrators in the districts increasingly recognized that (1) professional growth and inservice education are important components of any plan to increase effectiveness, and (2) school-based improvements require changes in roles, with accompanying professional development for all district personnel. The presence of these conditions in all four districts made it appropriate for them to begin moving to school-based improvement.

Here, based on our work in these four districts, we propose a five-step process to help central offices manage school-based improvement (see fig. 1).

Board of Education Selects Goal Areas

The process begins when the board of education, with the superintendent's support and assistance, identifies educational problems in the district and subsequently selects improvement

goals. These 10 to 15 specific concerns should be directly related to areas of student achievement where improvements are most needed over the next five years; for example, increasing reading achievement, addressing bilingualism, involving parents in the schools, or increasing faculty morale (conversely, school improvement should not focus, for example, on remodeling facilities).

Board members select these areas from achievement data provided by central administrators and from their own experience. They are careful to identify *district* concerns, recognizing that the degree to which the goals are appropriate for individual schools will vary. The board can either expect each school to target some of these areas as school goals over the next five years or require that all schools deal with at least one or two goals. The intent of these expectations is to allow individual schools to select goals that address the problems in their setting. Even where one or two goal areas are required of all schools, the ways individual schools address them should be decided by each school faculty through participatory decision making.

Central Office Identifies Procedures for Planning
Once the board selects the improvement goals, central office staff identify specific procedures for the schools to use in selecting their own improvement goals and in developing three- to four-year plans for achieving them. Many research-based planning strategies are available, such as the /I/D/E/A/ School Improvement Process, Onward to Excellence, Design for Mastery, Individually Guided Education, and RP-TIM (Wood and Caldwell 1987).

In addition to identifying the process, central office personnel then define the format and expectations for a written plan for improvement, which they will later review and eventually approve. These guidelines specify that each school will show the relationship between the goals and the activities in the plan, indicate how the plan directly relates to the district goal(s), and provide a rationale for why these goals and programs are appropriate for increasing achievement at that particular school.

Central office personnel also identify any requirements for implementing school-based improvement; for example:
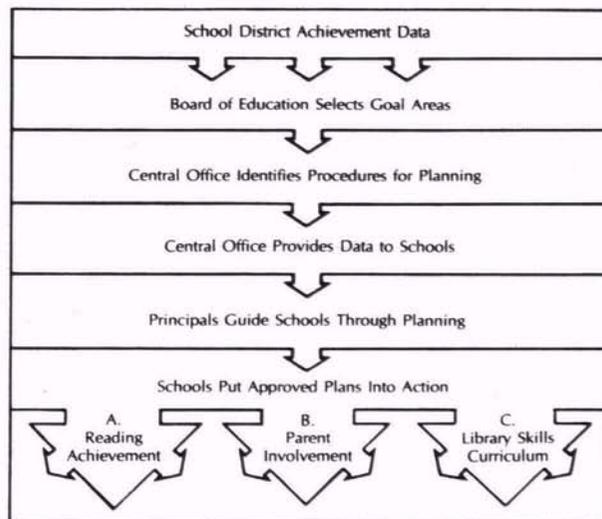
• All principals must receive training in the use of one of the processes for school improvement.

• All schools must show how their improvement goals and programs put research findings related to student achievement into practice.

• The staff development and curriculum development units must support each school's improvement plans.

Large districts could choose to phase schools into school-based improvement over, say, a three-year period, whereby a third of the schools would adopt decentralized procedures each year. As schools became involved in the process, they would examine the district-level long-range goals and select as targets those areas most pertinent to their needs.

Central Office Provides Data to Schools
The central office also provides data to each school about the district's improvement goals and arranges for staff development for teachers and administrators in how to use the information. Because the data available are voluminous, the central office should develop only a profile of the most pertinent data for each school. Staffs in each school then use this information, plus their own data, as the basis for selecting from the district's goals those areas that are most pertinent to their school.

School staffs continue to refer to the database to identify priority problem areas, clarify the nature of improvement and program needs, and justify specific programs and practices they select. The central office and the board of education can also review the database to assess the appropriateness of each school's proposed plan.

Fig. 1. A Process for Managing School-Based Improvement

School District Achievement Data

Board of Education Selects Goal Areas

Central Office Identifies Procedures for Planning

Central Office Provides Data to Schools

Principals Guide Schools Through Planning

Schools Put Approved Plans Into Action

A. Reading Achievement

B. Parent Involvement

C. Library Skills Curriculum

> **Equipped with data and a decision-making process, principals can guide faculty, administration, and parents through a systematic school-based planning process.**

Principal Guides School Through Planning

Equipped with data and a decision-making process, principals can then guide faculty, administration, and parents through a systematic school-based planning process. Each school's faculty members identify their goals and improvement programs and, following guidelines from the central office, subsequently develop their written plan for implementing the changes they have chosen. They write a detailed first-year plan and an overview of their intentions for the next three or four years.

Upon request, central office staff development personnel and curriculum specialists can provide meaningful assistance to the schools, such as information regarding resources and specific staff development programs that can help with detailing the action plan.

As illustrated in Figure 1, for example, a school might have taken a district-level "required" goal for increasing reading achievement and determined, by examining their own achievement data, that their particular need was in fact in the area of reading. Other goals for the school—such as more parent involvement and implementation of a library skills curriculum—could have been derived from analysis of school-level assessments and input.

Schools Put Approved Plans Into Action

Once the schools have completed their improvement plans, central office staff review them to ascertain their harmony with district long-range goals and to determine feasibility of implementation with regard to resources needed. The approval process is negotiated between central office administrators and school principals. Next, the schools put their approved plans into action. As in the example above, the school would then begin activities related to reading, parent involvement, and library skills.

Central office staff then assume a supportive and facilitative role; they also begin monitoring the schools' progress and providing feedback to principals and their staffs and to the board of education.

A New Way of Thinking

The move to school-based improvement necessitates changes in the roles of board members, the superintendent, central office administrators, principals, teachers, and staff development personnel. There are changes in the way these key groups make decisions about change and improvement in the district schools. For many, these changes represent substantial shifts in roles and responsibilities. For example, central office personnel need to focus on monitoring and support; boards need to make sure policies support decentralization and serve as public advocates for school-based decisions; teachers, whose decision-making responsibilities may have rarely extended beyond the classroom, now need to develop a school-wide perspective; and principals are expected to expand leadership and share responsibility for decisions with staff.

The roles of these decision-making groups (listed in the accompanying boxes) are based upon our research in the four case study districts noted earlier (Wood et al. 1984, Wood et al. 1987, Wood and Caldwell 1987).

Roles for School Board Members

Members of the board of education:
- establish and revise current policies to promote and support effective decision making and improvement of programs and practices in district schools;
- identify improvement goals to address major educational problems affecting the district;
- identify any improvement goals that all schools must address;
- establish a climate supportive of school-based improvement;
- establish performance expectations for central administration that support school-based improvement;
- monitor progress toward achieving the district's goals;
- allocate funds to support the achievement of the district's improvement goals;
- serve as public advocates for both the school improvement process and the effort to achieve the district's improvement goals.

Roles for Central Office Personnel

Central office administrators (the district management team):
- translate board policy and priority goals for improvement into short- and long-range district plans for implementation;
- provide data related to the district's major problems and goal areas identified by the board;
- provide and manage district resources to support school instructional improvement plans;
- approve and monitor school instructional improvement plans;
- evaluate all aspects of the district improvement operation;
- provide staff development to accomplish desired goals and objectives of approved school improvement plans;
- model, in all aspects of their operations, the behaviors expected of principals and their school-based improvement teams.

Several actions are necessary to accommodate these changes in roles and responsibilities. The following suggestions are meant merely to be a starting point for discussions as the possibility of decentralization is examined.

First, the superintendent, central office personnel, board, school administrators, and faculty representatives must clarify their vision for implementing decentralization and participatory management.

Second, a systematic professional growth program should be developed to prepare the administrative team (central office and school administrators) and teachers to work together more effectively and to develop the skills and understandings needed to carry out the new roles in the decentralized management of school improvement.

Third, the superintendent, with the administrative team and the board of education, should revise policies and practices to support school-based improvement and appropriate differences among schools.

Fourth, an inservice program for the board of education is necessary to prepare members for their new roles in school-based improvement.

Fifth, the professional growth program for principals should focus on school-based improvement and management, including training in one school improvement process.

If we really expect school-based improvement, clearly we need major changes in how we operate. The process described here oversimplifies a complex set of decisions and interactions. It does, however, provide a framework for how central offices can begin the process and how schools can follow through. Only those districts that are willing to rethink the way they do things will be able to make this difficult transition. We believe their results will be worth their efforts.□

Roles for Principals

Principals:
● ensure the positive climate necessary for gaining commitment to school improvement decisions;
● involve their staffs and those clientele served by the school in developing goals and program plans for improvement;
● ensure that staff development programs designed for their staffs are related to their school improvement goals;
● participate in staff development with their faculties;
● ensure that the design of the school improvement plan addresses the major educational problems in their schools;
● implement and evaluate school instructional improvement with their planning teams.

Roles for Teachers

Teachers:
● work collaboratively with the principal, central office staff, and representative parents (and in high schools, students) to consider district and school priorities and to select goals to achieve over the next four or five years;
● help identify the programs and practices necessary to achieve their school goals;
● assist in the implementation of these programs and practices by participating in staff development designed to help them achieve their goals;
● conduct inservice for their peers;
● help collect and interpret evaluation data related to their improvement goals;
● assist the principal in managing the resources to assure their improvement plans are successful.

Roles for Staff Development Personnel

Staff development personnel:
● assist principals and school faculties in developing improvement plans;
● collect and coordinate inservice needs from teachers, school planning teams, principals, and district-level administrators to support each school's improvement plan;
● work with principals to plan and manage inservice training for their school staffs related to assessed needs;
● work with central office administrators to plan and manage training for principals, district-level personnel, and the board;
● train district trainers and coaches to support staff development plans;
● assist in the evaluation of school-based inservice training;
● design and deliver new teacher and principal staff development programs;
● identify and keep school faculties aware of trends, programs, and research related to student achievement (Wood et al. 1984).

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1. Denver (Colorado) Public Schools, Ft. Worth (Texas) Independent School District, St. Paul (Minnesota) Independent School District, and Webster Groves (Missouri) School District.

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