Taking Risks
to Improve Instruction

Temporarily eliminating teacher evaluations is one of the risks Valley Stream, New York, administrators have taken as part of a long-term staff development effort.

Over the past several years, we have attended workshops, conferences, and lectures that have emphasized linkages among staff development, supportive supervision, the improvement of instruction, and local leadership. But where does a district begin to coordinate such an effort, and how does it proceed? How does a district build commitment? In the Valley Stream, New York, Central High School District, we sought to answer these questions by developing a model for leadership to improve instruction through a long-term staff development and supervisory program.

Valley Stream is in many ways a typical suburban community, with strong support for its schools and comprehensive program offerings for its 3,600 students. Teacher salaries are among the highest in the area, and most students go on to further education. We do, however, have minor concerns related to dropouts and attendance, and enrollments continue to decline. The average staff member, in his or her late forties, is often skeptical of the seemingly endless parade of innovations that have been a regular part of his or her professional history.

Promoting Collegiality, Improving Instruction

In spring 1984 Valley Stream made a commitment to a 5- to 10-year staff development program designed to bring the research about effective teaching to our professional staff and to increase collegiality among teachers, administrators, and supervisors (see fig. 1 for our five-year framework). We determined early that several well-documented obstacles in the district had to be overcome.

First, there was lack of agreement among our staff as to what constitutes effective teaching. Second, the supervisors and administrative staff were not ready to work collegially with teachers to share concerns and model strategies that would increase the probability of improved learning. As a result of these unfavorable attitudes, supervision and staff development efforts had
been inadequate and ineffective. Poor attitudes existed among even talented and dedicated teachers, who expected little from supervisors, administrators, and so-called experts. The district administrators began confronting these difficulties by trying to envision a staff development program that would be meaningful to and accepted by both teachers and supervisors.

Initial planning began with the administrative and supervisory staff, who explored together issues of effective teacher supervision, effective teaching research, and effective staff development programs. Our council of administrators and members of our supervisory staff examined the national reports and available research addressing these issues. Then, at a series of planning meetings and workshops, we discussed and synthesized the information.

Eventually the planning group agreed that our emphasis would be on relating the goal of improving instruction to changes in supervision and staff development. The staff supervision model that evolved was based on recommendations by the RAND Corporation and was influenced by the ideas of Ernie Stakowski, Art Costa, Dick Manatt, Carl Glickman, Thomas Sergiovanni, and Thomas McGreal. An expectation of good teaching similarly took form as teachers and supervisors examined the works of Madeline Hunter, Benjamin Bloom, Carol Cummings, Harvey Silver, David Berliner, and Barak Rosenshine, which became topics of discussion for future district direction. Our model for staff development emerged from the concepts of Bruce Joyce and Beverly Showers. We concentrated on what theory and information might be needed to begin our own program and how we might design ways of demonstrating the skills to be learned. We knew that to be successful our program would not only need to present new ideas about teaching but would also have to provide encouragement, support, and opportunities for teachers to try the new ideas in their classrooms.

Making a Commitment to Supportive Supervision

During summer 1984, all 28 district-level administrative personnel, principals, assistant principals, and district directors attended a two-day workshop on redefining the supervisory role, developing a district philosophy of supportive supervision, identifying skills and training that supervisors would need to fill these new roles, and defining the district's expectations of good teaching.

Following the two-day sessions, district administrators, building administrators, and district supervisors continued to plan and develop presentations, which were used in the staff development program during the school year.
the fall. They emphasized the service aspect of the supervisory and managerial roles, admitting and detailing the risks inherent in a collegial environment. Workshop participants experienced the risks and the feelings of vulnerability that would accompany our commitment to supportive supervision through role-playing and other interactive activities.

Similar workshops on the same themes for building-level supervisors and department heads followed shortly thereafter. Everyone involved attempted, at every opportunity, to model the skills and provide concrete classroom examples and to gain acceptance for the idea of improving instruction through supportive supervision. Supervisors were also introduced to the effective teaching research, and they began to look at content area issues in a more informed way. They also received training in observation techniques, conferencing strategies, and tape-scripting skills. Initial observations and postobservation conferences were conducted among the supervisory staff, and a norm for supervision/observation began to emerge.

In late October 1984 the superintendent met with the entire professional staff, described recent developments, and stated the district’s renewed commitment to service in support of the teaching staff. The superintendent explained the supportive supervisory process and invited the staff to participate in the upcoming staff development programs for improving instruction. Teachers responded positively to the opportunity to receive feedback unencumbered by evaluative overtones in a truly collegial environment. Then district administrators met with teachers’ association representatives and with the board of education to propose an unprecedented strategy: temporarily eliminating evaluative observations in favor of a supportive process that emphasized tape-scripting and positive post-conferencing.

The approval of this plan by all parties and the growing acceptance of the staff development program were followed two months later, in February 1985, by an even stronger commitment to the ideals of the new program. Staff development time for teachers, supervisors, and administrators during 1984-1985 was devoted to examining effective teaching research, to gaining acceptance for a new norm of collegiality, and to addressing local issues related to thinking skills, the nature of student achievement, and testing. At the same time, the supervisory staff was provided both with the training they would need to bring the program to fruition and with opportunities to practice their new skills.

Creating a Comprehensive Plan

By spring 1985 we had created a readiness in the district for a comprehensive plan that would link staff development, supportive supervision, improved instruction, and local leadership. Our plan was to provide a staff development program based on effective teacher research and a col-

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Fig. 2. Five-Year Staff Development Program 1984–1989

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Scheduling Staff Development

We agreed on the importance of involving all staff in the program as soon as possible, but time for staff development became an issue. After considering several alternatives, we determined that as a secondary district (grades 7 through 12), we could free all the teachers of particular departments for entire days, while providing students with alternative activities for the one period of the day when each student was assigned to a teacher scheduled for staff development—another undertaking never before attempted in our district.

Although planning and providing high-quality alternative activities for students was not easy, scheduling the conference days proved to be far more efficient and effective than closing the schools. A sequence of 30 staff development days gave each staff member the opportunity for three full days of involvement in the research-based staff development program. During each staff development day, those students who were affected (one period for each student distributed across the entire daily schedule) listened to speakers, completed writing assignments; participated in audiovisual programs, group guidance sessions, audio and physical testing; and engaged in other alternative activities that would have normally required their absence from class. Considerably less instructional time was lost than if the schools had been closed for an entire day.

Staff development for teachers emphasized topics such as the essential skills of the UCLA model, extending student thinking, questioning skills, overt and covert student participation, and student motivation. District personnel trained in the model developed these sequenced presentations, and supervisory staff members, including the assistant superintendent, principals, assistant principals, and department leaders, presented the sessions. We grouped teachers by their content areas for these presentations so that we could use examples, problems, and situations representative of their disciplines.

The staff development program also continued throughout 1985-1986 for supervisors and administrators (1) to increase their understanding of the concepts and information being presented to teachers; (2) to develop the skills prerequisite to classroom observation and postobservation conferences; and (3) to encourage both supervisors and staff members to schedule intervisitation, to present model lessons, and to use videotape as a feedback mechanism.

Participants evaluated the staff development programs at the end of each session. Ninety-four percent of the staff found the programs to be valuable (81 percent indicated that the programs were "very worthwhile"). In a second survey conducted by the staff development program for future school years, our direction is shifting from providing exclusively what Madeline Hunter calls "propositional knowledge about teaching and learning" to providing procedural knowledge and opportunities for applying previously introduced concepts. We also want to encourage more collegiality through peer coaching and mentorship for new teachers. Recently, the district was one of 29 districts in New York State funded to develop a mentorship program.

The active participation of both teachers and supervisors and the encouragement to experiment with new ideas have rekindled the staff's professional commitment to continued growth. We have recently developed an evaluation model that involves only a portion of the staff in any given year and that supports, encourages, and reinforces the application of the theory and practice of effective teaching stressed in our staff development programs.

There are still risks to be taken and skepticism to overcome, but we are hopeful that our model of staff development and instructional leadership is increasing our chances for success in the Valley Stream Central School District.

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