

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

Photograph by Arthur Fret



The Valley Stream, New York, Central High School District is to all appearances a typical suburban community, but it goes beyond the typical in its approach to staff development and instructional improvement.

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

RESOURCES	FORMAT	CONTENT	TARGET	PROCESS
1. Consultants (Huddle, Joyce, Hyers)	1. Summer workshops (July 10-11 and July 22-26)	1. Curriculum (updating/formatting)	1. District	1. Theory
2. Professional materials (videotapes, books—Cummings, NIE, Hunter)	2. Summer curriculum work (eight projects planned)	2. Learning (brain research, learning styles)	2. Building	2. Demonstration
3. In-house experts (principals, assistant principals, directors)	3. Conference attendance (national, state, regional, local)	3. Teaching (Hunter, Cummings)	3. Department	3. Practice/feedback
4. Networks (ASCD, MSSC, professional associations)	4. Teacher center (memorial, inter-district, inservice interest center)	4. Supervision (Stakowski, Costa, Sergiovanni)	4. Grade/subject	4. Coaching (items 1-4 Bruce Joyce, Beverly Showers)
5. Commercial staff development programs (TESA, Hansen/Silver)	5. Meetings (faculty, district, department)	5. Personal growth and development (stress management)		5. Multiple sessions spaced over time
6. BOCES services	6. Released time (use of substitutes)	6. Technology (computers in education)		
7. Colleges, universities	7. After school	7. Thinking skills (De Bono, Costa, Bloom)		
	8. College courses	8. Experimentation and research		
	9. Superintendent's conference days			
	10. Special projects			
	11. Intervisitations and intravisitations			
	12. X-Days (districtwide meetings for teachers by subject area)			

Fig. 1. Staff Development Matrix

CONDITIONAL KNOWLEDGE					
All Staff			Effective Teaching	Essential Elements	Teaching Strategies
Supervisors			Essential Elements Effective Supervision	Teaching Strategies Effective Supervision	Teaching Strategies Coaching
PROCEDURAL KNOWLEDGE					
All Staff		Effective Teaching	Essential Elements	Teaching Strategies	Teaching Strategies Peer Coaching
Supervisors		Essential Elements Effective Supervision	Effective Supervision Teaching Strategies	Teaching Strategies Coaching	Teaching Strategies Differentiated Supervision
PROPOSITIONAL KNOWLEDGE					
All Staff	Effective Teaching	Essential Elements	Teaching Strategies	Teaching Strategies Peer Coaching	Teaching Strategies Professional Growth Patterns
Supervisors	Essential Elements Effective Supervision	Effective Supervision Teaching Strategies	Teaching Strategies Coaching	Teaching Strategies Differentiated Supervision	Teaching Strategies Effective Staff Development
	1984-1985	1985-1986	1986-1987	1987-1988	1988-1989

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

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 taping/observation 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 taping/observation and positive postconferencing.

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 professionalism of the teaching staff: the board of education and the teachers' association agreed to put in abeyance the contractual requirement that every staff member receive at least one formal evaluation a year, to encourage the risk taking seen as necessary for full implementation of the staff development program. The risk of temporarily suspending evalu-

ations began to pay immediate dividends: teachers became far more willing to try new techniques and to seek and accept constructive feedback from supervisors.

Throughout the 1984-1985 school year our goal continued to be to increase 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-

legal supervisory model designed to improve instruction. We strongly believed that student achievement would increase in direct relationship to staff commitment to improved instructional strategies, and we have since noted improvements in a variety of student achievement indicators monitored by the district. In many instances the increased effectiveness of some of the strategies were noted in both teacher and student comments about the new program.

We developed a matrix detailing the alternatives available to the district and the decisions that needed to be made. This matrix helped us further to concentrate our attention on the issues to be addressed and to reach consensus again among the planning staff as to the direction of the district's program in 1985-1986 (see fig. 2). We considered all alternatives regarding resources available to the district, formats used during the 1984-1985 school year, content to be emphasized, staff to be targeted, and processes to be used. We agreed that our teaching model would be a modification of Madeline Hunter's UCLA design, that supervisory practices would continue to be based heavily on Ernie Stakowski's supportive supervision, that the staff development program would evolve along Bruce Joyce's design, and that evaluations would be suspended for a second year as a sign of the district's commitment to the program. The board of education required only that the district administration be firmly committed to improving instruction through this emerging program and that the state's requirement for a detailed plan to provide a written annual professional performance review for each staff member be in place prior to the 1986-87 school year.

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—an other 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, audiometric 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 intervisitations, to present model lessons, and to use videotaping 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 teachers' association, an overwhelming majority of teachers said that the observation process was of value and that they were using information from the workshops in their classrooms. Over one-third of the teachers felt they were teaching more "effectively."

Looking Ahead with Confidence

As we make plans to continue 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 mentor-internship relationships for new teachers. Recently, the district was one of 29 districts in New York State funded to develop a mentor-intern 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 High School District. □

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