

# The Evolution of Shared Leadership

The Mastery in Learning Project is helping teachers and administrators overcome the isolation of their traditional roles to become professional collaborators.

The structure of schools causes isolation: teachers are isolated in their classrooms; administrators, in their offices. School faculties are often merely collections of individuals who work independently. What would happen if all staff members—teachers, counselors, principals, librarians, and others—engaged in true professional collaboration?

## The Mastery In Learning Project

The Mastery In Learning Project, a five-year school-based improvement effort, is allowing teachers and administrators to explore the benefits of collegiality. The Project is NEA's response to the national outcry for school improvement. The 26 participating schools reflect the demographic and organizational diversity of schools throughout the nation.

The initiators of the project realized the importance of establishing a benchmark against which future changes could be measured. So at the project's inception, in the fall of 1985, they collected information about teachers, principals, and other staff in the participating schools. Several characteristics of those faculties emerged from the data:

- Principals and teachers relied heavily on textbook manuals, mandates from outside the school, directives from supervisors, and advice from others in similar roles. They accepted the status quo and doubted that challenges to it would have much impact.

### The Mastery in Learning Network of the National Education Association

**Ahuimanu Elementary School**  
47-470 Hui Aeko Place  
Kaneohe, HI 96744

**Aire Libre Elementary**  
16428 N. 21st St.  
Phoenix, AZ 85022

**Centennial School**  
P.O. Box 347  
San Luis, CO 81152

**Check Elementary School**  
Route #1  
Check, VA 24072

**Cleveland High School**  
5511-15th Ave. S.  
Seattle, WA 98108

**Clinton Elementary School**  
7927 Fulton  
P.O. Box 40  
Clinton, OH 44215

**Conejo Elementary School**  
280 Conejo School Rd.  
Thousand Oaks, CA 91362

**Diamond Middle School**  
99 Hancock St.  
Lexington, MA 02173

**Gaston Junior High School**  
P.O. Box Drawer J  
Gaston, NC 27832

**Greasewood/Toyey Consolidated School**  
The Navajo Nation  
Ganado, AZ 86505

**Hillside Junior High School**  
2222 Fitzgerald Blvd.  
Simi Valley, CA 92065

**Kimball Elementary School**  
3200 23rd Ave. S.  
Seattle, WA 98144

**Maryvale High School**  
3415 N. 59th Ave.  
Phoenix, AZ 85033

**Mt. Vernon Community Center School**  
2601 Commonwealth Ave.  
Alexandria, VA 22305

**Mynderse Academy**  
105 Troy St.  
Seneca Falls, NY 13148

**Northeast High School**  
3701 Tenton Rd.  
Clarksville, TN 37040

**Orchards Elementary School**  
3429-12th St.  
Lewiston, ID 83501

**Paul Norton Elementary School**  
4485 Greenbrier Dr.  
Bettendorf, IA 52722

**Spring Creek Elementary School**  
1100 Spring Creek Rd.  
Chattanooga, TN 37412

**St. Petersburg High School**  
2501 Fifth Ave. N.  
St. Petersburg, FL 33713

**Stewart Community School**  
1950 Burr Blvd.  
Flint, MI 48503

**Wells Junior High School**  
Route 1, Post Rd.  
Wells, ME 04090

**Westwood School**  
708 Trammell St.  
Dalton, GA 30720

**Whitman Middle School**  
9201-15th Ave., NW  
Seattle, WA 98117

**Wildwood Middle School**  
200 Cleveland St.  
Wildwood, FL 32785

**Willow Creek Junior High School**  
2425 SE 11th Ave.  
Rochester, MN 55904

- Most school staffs considered themselves conservative. They believed that past change efforts had done more harm than good and felt a responsibility to prevent more mistakes in efforts to renew schools.

- Most staff members did not describe themselves as risk takers. They saw their school systems as closed organizations uninterested in input from "low level" staff, organizations that punished those who took risks.

- School staffs accepted, almost unquestioningly, the technologies that control schooling: behavioral objectives, textbooks, and standardized tests.

### **The Program in the Schools**

The faculties in these 26 schools have embarked on an ambitious renewal agenda. They are engaged in researching and implementing a number of site-initiated improvement activities. These range from simple, short-term action programs to highly complex, long-term efforts.

This work helps staff members sharpen their decision-making skills, apply research findings to solve problems, develop new leadership styles, and examine new roles. Each faculty must develop collaborative skills to achieve their major goal: to restructure their school so that their practice is consistent with what is known about teaching and learning.

**Activities with immediate visible results recapture the interest of faculty members in the work and create a sense of accomplishment.**

### **Nine Steps Toward Collegiality**

As these school staffs have worked together during the past two years, they have moved through nine stages in the development of collegiality.

1. *Testing.* The staff determines the strength and sincerity of the desire to change. In each Mastery In Learning school, the entire faculty watched a presentation about the nature of the work and then voted whether to participate (75 percent or more of the staff had to agree).

2. *Exhilaration.* The faculty feel elated to discover that they will be treated as professionals and given the authority and resources needed to improve teaching and learning conditions. Expectations are high; possibilities seem endless.

3. *Commitment.* The faculty commit their energies to solving the schoolwide problems they have identified and to establishing an organizational structure to support that work. At this stage, new leaders emerge, often replacing those who initiated the effort. Many of those who emerged as leaders in Mastery In Learning schools had not been viewed as activists in other school or district endeavors.

4. *Dispiritedness.* When they discover that no one from outside the school is going to provide solutions, the staff becomes dispirited. This generally occurs during the end of the second month of the project, usually in late October (hence, we call it the "Halloween Syndrome"). Some staff members drop out of the project; others confront the obstacles.

5. *Regeneration.* This is a critical phase in the life of a reform effort. At this point, only 20 to 50 percent of the staff remain active workers. They almost begin again: they return to the original findings about the school, talk at length about rekindling commitment and what commitment means, and assess how many other faculty members could be brought into active work. Their determination leads to ownership of the project and internalization of its goals.

6. *Seeking small successes.* The staff acts on a few simple, straightforward ideas: for example, issuing a new policy to govern student behavior in public areas, barring classroom interruptions for a set period each day,

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beautifying an area of the campus (a good way to get students involved), finding ways to increase parent involvement in the life of the school.

Activities such as these—with immediate visible results—recapture the interest of faculty members in the work and create a sense of accomplishment. Those involved use these successes as springboards to more comprehensive projects.

7. *Using research.* At this stage, Mastery In Learning calls for an expansion of the decision-making process: when analyzing problems, faculties examine available options before adopting solutions. They seek relevant research and practical information from many sources: resource specialists at project headquarters, their project consultant, the project's partners in the regional educational laboratories, nearby universities, other schools in the Mastery In Learning network, and their own faculties.

For example, if a faculty wants to foster critical thinking, they examine the range of techniques available to them and the effects and limitations of each. Another faculty might study various discipline plans in order to select or adapt one to suit their school's climate. As teachers become skillful in using resources, they request more specific information and develop clearer definitions of task requirements.

8. *Experimentation.* Together a staff selects and introduces pilot efforts,



assesses their outcomes, and modifies them to achieve more desired outcomes. For example, faculties in the network have learned new ways to schedule students by using block, modular, and constant time frames. After adopting a new system, they examined its effects on student time-on-task and faculty planning time, and then adapted the schedule to increase the gains they sought.

9. *Comprehensiveness.* Staffs move from fragmented efforts to comprehensive school reform. A faculty's readiness for this stage is signaled by increased attention to coordination of its efforts and great interest in making separate activities mutually supporting.

Many of the 26 schools in the project have now moved to this stage. As these faculties have grown more skillful at managing and directing their school improvement efforts, and as they have achieved increasing success, the number of teachers participating in the Mastery In Learning work in each school has grown.

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**Results of the Project**

In many of the Mastery In Learning schools, faculty now view leadership as a shared responsibility that is based on competence as much as on role. Teachers and administrators in these schools have become increasingly aware of the knowledge base that undergirds schooling and are more likely to consider that knowledge base useful in solving persistent problems.

Further, these faculties now see themselves as powerful forces that can affect the quality of their schools. They describe themselves as more action-oriented than they were at the beginning of their work together. They are able to learn from their mistakes and have become advocates of what they believe in.

Perhaps most important, these faculty members are beginning to see their roles differently. They are becoming more collegial: better able to share ideas, to solve problems together, and to contribute to the knowledge base. They are more passionate about the values they hold for their schools. In Mastery In Learning schools, isolation has been replaced by professional collaboration—to the benefit of students, teachers, and the profession. □

**Robert M. McClure** is Director of the Mastery In Learning Project, National Education Association, 1201 16th St., N.W., Washington, DC 20036.

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