

New Roles for Administrators in Rochester

In discussing their new roles, principals and central office staff often referred to themselves as facilitators and, overall, looked forward to the challenges and rewards of shared governance.

An experiment is in progress in Rochester, New York. The Teachers Association and the school district have agreed on an unusual contract that mandates new roles and responsibilities for classroom teachers as well as new levels of reimbursement. Without a doubt, as teachers are empowered, the administrators who work with them will assume new roles.

In March 1987 I visited Rochester to talk with administrators there about their perceptions of the new contract and how it would affect them. Those three fascinating days provided a glimpse of the way things will be if the Rochester experiment presages a new set of work relationships for educators.

The Context

Rochester is a large urban school district with 44 schools, 2,500 teachers, 500 administrators, and 2,500 civil service employees. Of the 32,000 students in the district, 70 percent are from minority groups. Declining enrollment and test scores are two realities that, in the last 15 years, have led the district to more centralized decision making. More recently, in September 1987, six junior-senior high schools were reorganized: three were converted into secondary schools (grades 9-12) and three into middle schools (grades 6-8).

Thus, at the time of the interviews, the administrators were dealing with two massive changes: middle/high school reorganization and the shared governance contract. In addition, the innovative aspects of the contract had been agreed upon in principle, but specific procedures had not been negotiated.

A Collective Opinion

The 12 administrators I interviewed included 5 in central office positions and 7 school administrators. Ten of the 12 have more than five years of administrative experience each.

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As one would expect, the administrators expressed a range of opinions during the interviews. Many used their experience base to interpret the broad outlines of the published contract and, as a result, concentrated on one or two areas in which they expect their work lives to be different. Thus, the collective opinion of the administrators, represented in the sections that follow, is broader than any individual one.

The major difference that administrators see between the old contract and the new one is a move toward decentralized decision making. Planning teams of teachers and administrators in schools will have the authority to make school-based decisions about teacher selection, goal development, resource allocation, scheduling, and staff development activities. Classroom teachers will have more responsibility for curriculums, student achievement, and the social control of students. Historically, the bulk of these decisions have been made by central office and school administrators.

Only one administrator, an elementary principal, expressed reservations about the new provisions in the contract. He believes that teacher empowerment will "shave away" his power. He regards the contract as "an early retirement incentive." A more typical perception was that of a secondary principal who said, "It's exciting and it's scary. It's too interesting to retire."

Elementary Principals

The two elementary administrators who favor the contract accept the concept of teacher empowerment. One of these principals believes that he will spend more time "persuading on the basis of data." He expects that he will act as the expert in the building planning team, the person who knows and communicates information on laws, regulations, and health and safety considerations. He also expects to provide input on community perceptions.

In addition, he foresees the need to explain the parameters of decisions. For example, the district and the state mandate certain achievement tests at specific grade levels. Similarly, these agencies set attendance targets and express concern about suspension rates. He anticipates the need to explain these givens and the measures used to evaluate them.

On the other hand, this principal indicated that he wants "majority control" on the planning team and intends to "reserve some areas" where he will make decisions. He also hopes that he will continue to evaluate all teachers in his building. He anticipates a problem if lead teachers, those on the highest rung of the career ladder called for in the contract, report to someone outside the building, since this would impede school-based decision making.

For this principal, shared governance via school improvement teams will work well if two constraints are eliminated. The first is a time factor. He believes teachers worry about "losing the class" when they spend a lot of time outside the classroom. As a remedy, he suggests hiring a cadre of substitute teachers to move between classrooms. The second restraining factor is inadequate teacher training in the areas of law, contract administration, personnel, interviewing techniques, planning, decision making, and group development.

However, this principal is looking forward to "the beauty of participation." He said, "If something doesn't work, I can take it back to the team to help me solve the problem. I've made my share of snafus when I decided too quickly, ignored new data, or didn't

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Secondary Principals

With some reservations, all four secondary administrators supported the contract. All told success stories about times when they had involved teachers in decisions; however, two of the four anticipate serious roadblocks to implementation of the contract.

One principal recognizes that by sharing governance he will have "a lot of colleagues in problem solving." He plans to spend more time "facilitating" decisions and less time "being the only one at fault." He hopes that, with teacher involvement, the principal will enjoy "more support."

Another secondary principal has worked with seven school planning teams in her building for the last two years. She, too, perceives that teacher empowerment requires more facilitation on her part. For her, facilitation means "setting the tone, smoothing things out, communicating with everyone, being accessible to staff, making parents welcome, being visible, and giving the sense that the building is for everyone, kids and teachers."

This principal feels that school-based planning has led to improved teacher morale and that her teachers

believe this is the right way to govern a school. She concludes that teachers work together more in this model and that they are more open with her.

A third secondary principal "agrees with the concept" of shared governance but is concerned because "some teachers don't want to be bothered with thinking about solutions to problems." He feels that many teachers believe that administrators, not teachers, should propose and invest in solutions. His major problem, therefore, will be "how to convince them that they are a vital part of the problem-solving process."

This principal fears most the "home base guidance" provision in the contract, which eliminates the administrative position of dean, or disciplinarian. Instead, middle and high school teachers will assume responsibility for all aspects of the welfare of children in their homerooms. He sees two possible scenarios resulting from the situation: either teachers "will accept these responsibilities and it will work, or they will slow the system down and it will freeze." His role is to monitor carefully to ensure that the latter does not occur.

Several secondary principals expressed concern about changes in two other positions, vice principal and department chair. They think that some vice principals are ill prepared to assume the new role of concentrating solely on instruction. Secondary principals also perceive that the department chair position will be weakened since "the lead teacher sounds suspiciously like it."

Central Office Administrators

The central office administrators in line positions seemed more comfortable with the new contract than those in staff positions, perhaps because their new roles are clearer to them.

One line administrator, who sees the concept of shared governance as "long overdue," stated that "dictatorial decisions produce the first possible solution whereas shared decisions yield the best possible solution." She thinks decentralized decisions will be "more refined and closer to the mark."

This director expects a "blurring of teacher and administrator roles" to the point that administrators will "do more teaching and other things more closely related to instruction." She predicts that administrators will find their work "more rewarding" because administrative work is "public" while teaching occurs in the "relative privacy of a classroom." With shared governance, an administrator can "give up authority, give up stress, and get shared ownership."

Her responsibility is to "have a vision with key elements" and to "work it out." She intends to model cooperative decision making with her principals by fostering roundtable discussions at meetings.

A staff developer indicated that she and her colleagues are "redefining" their functions to support school planning teams. They are identifying cadres of "turnkey trainers" who can

"go out to work with teams." She believes her role is to "develop local capacity."

A curriculum supervisor perceives that decentralization poses new challenges. "Since the school is the unit of responsibility and accountability, people will need more latitude." As a result, he expects that he will need to be more "relational" in order to "forge a consensus" among schools, especially on "core curriculum, standards, and measures" with a "high degree of generality." He expects to "engage teachers in dialogues and solicit their ideas," to encourage "entrepreneurial" activity, and to express "influential authority."

This administrator emphasized that there are many unresolved "subtleties and nuances." He, like others, looks to the board of education and the superintendent to address these in ways that "ensure equity and equivalence."

A Consensual Opinion

The administrators who shared their thoughts with me anticipate that their roles will change substantially as they participate in the Rochester experiment. Authority by influence and persuasion is an integral part of their plan. Many used the term *facilitator* to convey the message that they intend to persuade, explain, assist, convince, monitor, model, develop, redefine, and encourage. In the quest for improved performance, most administrators support teacher involvement in matters that have traditionally been reserved for management; they look forward to a workplace where teachers join them as colleagues in decision making. □

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