

OVERVIEW

RON BRANDT

A CHANGED PROFESSIONAL CULTURE

After three years in a professional development program centered on peer coaching, 350 teachers and 50 administrators in the Palos Hills, Illinois, High School District are pleased. They told an independent evaluator that peer coaching had not only improved their teaching but had increased professional dialogue among teachers, brought greater respect for staff members and courses in other departments, and produced a higher level of trust throughout the school (Garmston and Eblin 1988). David Eblin, Assistant Superintendent, says the project has changed the district's professional culture.

Most teachers practice their craft in isolation from other adults. On the rare occasions when they are observed, it is usually by a supervisor conducting a formal evaluation. The literature describes another version of supervision: conducted solely for professional improvement by well-trained experts who are perceptive, analytical, supportive. Some teachers have experienced that kind of supervision, but most, numerous studies have shown, don't think they have.

The vision of consultation provided to all teachers by a corps of qualified specialists is a worthy goal, but it is not likely to be reached any time soon. Some principals provide skilled supervision, and more can be trained to do so. But with their other duties, principals cannot provide all the collegial support teachers need. That is one of the reasons schools like Palos Hills encourage teachers to coach one another.

But peer coaching represents more than just a way to improve instruction, important as that is. Like mentor teacher programs, school improvement projects, and site-based management, peer coaching is part of a diffuse but vigorous campaign to restructure school organization and decision making. In these endeavors, teachers collaborate with fellow teachers in functions formerly considered the territory of supervisors. Some advocates describe the movement as "teacher empowerment." Ann Lieberman, whom I talked with for this month's conversation, says "empowerment" just means giving teachers a rightful role in decision making—but to uneasy admin-

EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP



Redefining Supervision

Photograph by Dennis Johnson. Design by Al Way. Our thanks to models Al Way, Katherine Koenig, and Jeanne Jackson.

istrators the word has an ominous sound.

What will be the effect on supervisors of these moves to expand teachers' roles? Will they lose influence and eventually become extinct as teachers take on most of their functions? Or will the heightened professionalization of these activities increase the demand for skilled facilitators?

Some supervisors may be skeptical about the value of peer coaching because they know that, especially in difficult situations, good supervision requires training and experience. As one veteran supervisor told me, "I've learned a lot about how to look at teaching by visiting hundreds of classrooms. Quite frankly, I think I'm a lot better at it than most teachers would be." Her position is reinforced by Garrett Mandeville and Janelle Rivers (p. 39), whose evaluation of South Carolina's huge Madeline Hunter project suggests that principals who were expected to provide much of the coaching may not have learned the teaching techniques well enough themselves.

Clearly, coaching can have different purposes, some of which require more expertise than others. Peer coaching does not eliminate the need for other forms of supervision. And the fact is that in most schools peer coaching, staff development, and other elements of a positive professional climate exist mainly because of the continuing efforts of supervisors.

More reassurance for supervisors comes from Vicki Karant (p. 27), who found in a study of three well-established shared governance programs that both teachers and administrators were enthusiastic about them. Capable leaders are not threatened by the struggle to make teaching a more respected and satisfying career. On the contrary, their primary mission is to create and sustain the kind of school culture in which mutual assistance flourishes. □

Reference

- Garmston, R.J., and D.R. Eblin. (Spring 1988). "Visions, Decisions, and Results: Changing School Culture through Staff Development." *Journal of Staff Development* 9, 2: 22-28.

Copyright © 1989 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.