

On Teacher Empowerment: A Conversation with Ann Lieberman

Now Executive Director of the Puget Sound Educational Consortium at the University of Washington, Ann Lieberman has spent her career working with teachers. A long-time teacher advocate, she heightens her sensitivity by spending as much time as possible in schools. Here she discusses the positive developments occurring in the profession and the changes needed to nurture them.

Photograph by Davis Freeman

Some people consider you a teacher advocate. Do you see yourself that way?

Yes, in the sense that most of my academic life I have worked primarily with teachers, and this experience has deepened my understanding of teachers' life and work. When you leave teaching, you tend to forget how intense and complex it really is. Even teachers who do something else for a while quickly forget what that dailiness is like. And when the "experts" lose their sensitivity, they begin creating theories about what teaching should be that don't take into consideration what they knew when they were there.

Until a few years ago you chaired the Department of Curriculum and Teaching at Columbia University Teachers College.

And I was also the Executive Secretary of the Metropolitan School Study Council, which was developing new relationships with schools and school districts in New York, New Jersey, and



Connecticut. In that capacity I worked with a couple of projects, with the teachers' union, including one involving the New York City Teacher Center Consortium.

What are you doing now?

I'm a professor at the University of Washington, but my major job is Executive Director of the Puget Sound Educational Consortium, a group of 14 school districts linked to the university. My job is to try to bring about change simultaneously in the College of Education and in the schools. For example, we have a leadership academy, located in one school district, in which about 200 principals from all 14 districts participate every year.

We've just gotten a small grant to create a professional development school, which will have a teacher leader, a principal, and five faculty members, who will work with four middle schools trying to redesign how to bring new teachers into the middle school, and also focus on continuing professional development. At the same time, they'll be trying to create a culture in the school that will help the new teachers think differently about how they teach. The university faculty are rethinking their role too.

My job, then, is to promote collaborative activities that promise to foster fundamental changes in both the schools and the university—changes that are necessary to invigorate our educational system.

To what extent do these changes involve "empowering" teachers?

One strand of activity that has turned out to be very important is what we call teacher leadership. Initially, it was just a group of teachers from the 14 districts who began meeting to talk about the reform movement, their own roles, and what they thought of teacher participation. This grass roots discussion group turned into an action research study mounted by the teachers with support from Pat Wasley, a doctoral student at the university, and me. The teachers ended up writing a report reflecting their struggles with the idea of teacher leadership. They also created a new agenda of their own. For me that's what it's all about: involving people

authentically in dealing with their own professional lives.

That's your definition of teacher empowerment?

Yes. Real participation by teachers reflecting *their* vision of participation. One problem is that the word *empowerment* is very value-laden. Because it has *power* in it, some people jump to the conclusion that it means a takeover: that teachers are now going to tell everybody what to do. I think that's a misunderstanding. It means empowering teachers to participate in group decisions; to have real decision-making roles in the school community, which in most places they don't have now.

Shouldn't it also include certain prerogatives that a member of any profession ought to have: the right to make key decisions affecting one's own work?

Yes, I believe it should. We've had a system in which teachers—and principals as well—have had very few such prerogatives.

You seem most interested, though, not in individual autonomy, but in something broader.

Yes, I want to see a shift toward a kind of collective autonomy. I think that behind the classroom door, a lot

of teachers already have individual autonomy—

Maybe not officially—

But it's there, and we all know it. Without getting into the argument about what's a profession and what's not, the power I see in collective behavior is that when it becomes legitimate for teachers to work together, they not only get a sense of themselves as a group; they begin to help each other solve problems they cannot solve by themselves—and we know that teachers have tremendous problems to solve.

There's growing interest across the country in school-based management, which in some cases includes provisions for parent participation. Do you see a contradiction between empowering the professionals while at the same time providing for more input from parents?

No. I think initially there will be tension, but it's not because parents and community want one thing and teachers want another. It's because until now the system has divided people. Teachers have been in a defensive posture, left to fend for themselves with only their unions supporting them. The parents have been outside saying, "Look, we want something good for our kids—Why aren't they making it?" The tensions come because teachers, insecure in their isolation, are bound to protect what they have. They feel they know best—and parents feel *they* know best—but as teachers struggle together to establish a real trusting relationship, they will be able to be more open with each other *and* with the community. The mechanisms to accomplish this will have to be discovered along the way—and I am sure they will be—as teachers develop collective confidence, knowledge, and experience in working with parents.

What signs are you seeing that may be harbingers of the kinds of changes you say we need?

There is certainly a sense in the land that things have to be different. The reports of the Holmes Group, the Carnegie Commission, and the Education

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Commission of the States all point to that. I know that the rhetoric far outstrips the reality, but without the rhetoric, people don't feel they can do anything substantially different.

The problem is that we want these changes to happen overnight, and it takes time to organize and get people thinking in a different way. My biggest fear is that the political energy won't last long enough to allow the little beginnings popping up everywhere the time they need to grow and mature.

Some of the big programs in career ladders, merit pay, and so on are beginning to falter or have been called off already.

I believe the reason is that some of the early models did not consider the delicate nature of the school culture. How do you encourage collaboration while at the same time pitting teachers against each other?

We must learn to use teachers' strengths in a lot of different ways. Most people have strengths in some areas but are not especially good in others. That's legitimate and human, and we have to figure out how to get organizations to allow for that and even nurture it.

You're seeing signs of that happening?

I'm excited by the variety of things being attempted. Several teachers in our teacher leadership project have told me, "This is the first time I've felt really engaged with other teachers. I am using what I know." Now, I call that new behavior. Administrators may say, "It's not so different. We've always had teachers on committees." But it is very different for teachers to be put on committees by administrators, as has been customary, rather than being in control of—and responsible for—the changes they themselves initiate or take on. I think the unions involved in these efforts are seeing these differences too.

That raises an important point. Administrators I've talked with have deep misgivings about the "empowerment" talk. Do you believe some of their concerns are legitimate?

Such as . . . ?

When it becomes legitimate for teachers to work together, they not only get a sense of themselves as a group; they begin to help each other solve problems they cannot solve by themselves.

Well, as you've noted, some of the efforts to improve teacher status are sponsored by teacher unions. These administrators are afraid that any new power will go not to teachers as individuals but to their organizations.

We must remember that for a long time teachers' working conditions and pay were very poor and they had no one representing them. Understandably, unions took a very militant stance and fought for all the basic bread-and-butter issues they should have fought for. But now things seem to be changing. It's a new time; the unions are struggling with a new way of behaving—and everybody else ought to be struggling too, including professors and principals. If the union is not just bargaining for money but is involved in rethinking how the school needs to adapt to change, then it should be encouraged. Knee-jerk opposition is not appropriate. That's not to say that the unions are always right; clearly, there are problems enough to go all the way around.

Another argument I've heard is that teachers don't really want to get involved in a lot of administrative matters. They'd rather have administrators make the tough

decisions, such as who gets "riffed" when there are declining enrollments. Principals claim that some teachers are concerned only with their own classrooms; they won't look at the whole picture, so they can't be depended on to make schoolwide decisions.

Well, I think it's true that most teachers, because they are isolated, are concerned primarily with their own classrooms and their own kids—but that is precisely why it is important to end their isolation. And that in itself takes time and the development of different organizational structures. Working collaboratively requires a new set of skills and attitudes. Ways have to be found to give teachers experience in working together so they can begin to see how other adults can be important to them.

Now, as to how much decision-making teachers want to do, I think that while they are mainly interested in curriculum and instruction—that's the stuff they know and care about—the specifics of running the school will have to be worked out over the long haul as new structures are developed. Good principals and superintendents have always worked closely with teachers; but now we're seeing a re-definition of roles. We can't any longer just make a list of duties: the principal does this, teachers do that. This will take changing behaviors and attitudes on all sides, which is uncomfortable and threatening for all concerned. But because it is difficult doesn't mean it cannot or should not be done.

Another interesting argument is based on the effective schools literature, which is said to prove that good schools have strong principals. This can be interpreted to mean that you won't have an effective school if, for example, it's run by a committee of lead teachers.

I think the "committee of lead teachers" is a caricature. There was one line in the Carnegie Report that has been picked up by a lot of people as though all over the country, "restructuring" means schools run by "committees of teachers." I think it's worth trying, but only as one of many possible models.



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I would just say this about effective schools: one misunderstanding of that literature is the idea that the principal did all these wonderful things without teachers. Teachers have rarely been mentioned in the effective schools literature, even though they are obviously critical to successful schools.

I might add that some things we hear about teacher empowerment seem to make the opposite assumption: that if we empower teachers, the principal disappears. Both of these extremes are false. Differing circumstances call for differing responses. In any case I don't think we should equate "strong" with a patriarchal or an authoritarian model.

So what do you think the principal's role should be in the years ahead?

Principals, like teachers, are individuals with varying strengths and weaknesses and styles, who will play different roles in different contexts. But I see principals spending far more time than is the case today facilitating the work of teams of teachers. I like Phil Schlechty's notion of the principal as "leader of leaders" rather than assuming that one person is in charge who has to make all the tough decisions. It dignifies the idea that in any organization, people have a variety of strengths to be nurtured and that all can be leaders in one way or another.

It is a difficult but exciting time. If we seek to hang on to our personal privileges and old ways of doing things, we will certainly fail. We must have the courage to take the organizational and personal risks that will be necessary to fundamentally improve the education of all our children. □

Ann Lieberman is Executive Director, Puget Sound Educational Consortium, and Professor, University of Washington, College of Education, M215 Miller, DQ-12, Seattle, WA 98195. **Ron Brandt** is ASCD's Executive Editor.

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