

Site-Based Management: The Realities of Implementation

A Colorado school system that's "been there" offers practical advice for other districts contemplating change.

Site-based management—in any given school and at any given time, principals will define the term quite differently. For one principal, site-based management means release from the constraints the central office placed on him for years. For another, it means that she has the official power to make decisions that affect her school, rather than depending on central administrators to set her course. For others, it means having the freedom to hire the personnel they want while central office continues to make decisions about curriculum, budget, and auxiliary services.

In School District #12, in Adams County, Colorado, our definitions have included all these meanings during our transition from centralized management to site-based management. However, our understanding of site-based management has changed as we have struggled with the concepts and the realities of implementation. Our original conception of site-based management was not what it now is. As we now view it, site-based management means bringing the responsibility for decisions as close as possible to the school. It also means defining how school staffs can work collaboratively to make these decisions

rather than having the principal make all of them. In essence, it means creating ownership for those responsible for carrying out decisions by involving them directly in the decision-making pro-

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cess—and by trusting their abilities and judgments.

Before this definition became practice, however, we realized we needed to establish the underlying conditions necessary for true collaboration in each school. The empowerment of teachers, parents, community members, and principals is contributing to our achievement of seasoned and satisfying site-based management.

In this article we give a brief history of our experience in implementing site-based management. Then, more important, we identify our mistakes and the adjustments we later made to remedy them. Perhaps other school districts can profit from our efforts.

Prologue

In response to the first wave reform reports, the superintendent and the board of education had begun exploring strategies for improving education in our district. Our review of the literature suggested that decentralizing many functions, as was occurring in the private sector, might lead to higher student achievement and increased professionalism of the staff.

We began to look for a process for school improvement that would en-

gage a variety of people in the effort. To this end, a team of central office and school personnel evaluated four models of school improvement. We selected the School Improvement Process, developed by the Institute for the Development of Educational Ideas (I/D/E/A/ 1983), because it involves a broad base of constituents in school improvement and because it is thorough. The I/D/E/A/ School Improvement Process includes needs assessment, vision building, implementation plans, and evaluation.

During fall 1985, I/D/E/A/ consultants began to provide training to voluntary groups from various schools and units in the district. A year later, a representative group of staff and community members, working with the board of education, created the district vision and goal statements that are the necessary parameters for school improvement. We also emphasized shared decision making and the development of local school plans and moved principal evaluation away from management by objectives toward reports of progress on school plans.

In the three years since we began, we have made mistakes. The important lessons we have learned along the way may help other districts as they make the transition to site-based management. (See box for questions to ask before moving to site-based management.)

Defining Terms, or Mistake No. 1

First, we didn't clarify concepts at the outset. The district began its journey toward improving current practices with a stated commitment to decentralization, moved to school improvement, and then on to site-based management. The concepts of school improvement and site-based management quickly became intertwined and indistinguishable.

We knew we wanted to improve the quality of education for our students, increase the sense of professionalism among our staff, and increase community involvement in our schools. However, as our efforts expanded, both district and school personnel were defining *site-based management* as *school improvement*. For some principals, implementing site-based man-

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agement meant forming a school improvement team. These teams were making important decisions about improving the quality of education within schools; for example, in some schools they developed a school vision and goals. However, in most schools, decisions about budgeting, staffing, and use of facilities continued to be made by the principals with little or no input from teachers. In a few schools, principals were mistakenly trying to use the school improvement process as the decision-making forum for all decisions about school management and curriculum. These inconsistencies caused confusion about the district's direction and intent. Neither site-based management nor school improvement was having the impact we had hoped for.

Now, to combat the confusion and lack of clarity surrounding the new practices and concepts, we are taking a number of steps. First, staff in our schools and central office departments are now defining what collaboration means, when it will occur, and how it will be implemented at each school. They are deciding what decision-making structures to use with particular decision areas—how much and what kinds of input are appropriate from staff, community, and parents. Further, each unit and school is expected to develop a decision-making process that will give all its employees and clients a clear sense of how decisions will be made.

Second, district personnel have redefined *school improvement* and *site-based management*. We now consider school improvement as only one of several ways to realize site-based management. Third, the board of education has written comprehensive policies to define participatory decision making and school improvement. And, fourth, the staff development department is providing support to school and department staffs as they collaboratively establish their own visions and practices.

For school districts beginning to implement site-based management, we recommend they clearly define their understanding of the desired end result early in the change process. This single step would have helped us avoid many problems associated with the confusion between site-based management and school improvement.

Defining Roles, or Mistake No. 2

When a district shifts from centralized to site-based management, the roles of central office staff change from those of decision makers to support personnel. But we failed to stipulate how this change would affect central office staff—and to support and model the new role expectations. Consequently, school personnel became responsible for making their own decisions, but central office personnel operated as they always had! District-level administrators had never clearly defined which decisions were the prerogative of the central office and which were to be site-based decisions. For example, because decisions about curriculum, textbooks, food services, and budget allocations were made at both the central office level *and* at the local site, the final decisions were often in conflict.

Because of the lack of training and support for the redefinition of central office roles, many central office administrators actively blocked the practice of school-based decision making. They did not trust the ability of school personnel to make decisions, and they were reluctant to give up their role as innovators and controllers. Now, to resolve some of these problems, district-level administrators are receiving training in participatory decision mak-

Questions Districts Should Ask Before Implementing Site-Based Management

1. What do we mean by *site-based management*?
2. What roles need to be redefined, and how will we provide the necessary training and support?
3. What are the parameters, expectations, or limitations of local site-based decision making?
4. What do we know about the change process, and how does this apply to our situation?
5. To what degree will variations and differences among schools within the district be accommodated?
6. What underlying conditions must be present for site-based management to work? How can we clarify and communicate them?
7. What can we learn from other organizations in the public and private sector about making the transition?

ing. In addition, the superintendent and other key central office administrators are consciously modeling collaborative strategies. They have created the District Coordinating Team, a group of representatives from all divisions who examine ways to involve building-level staff in central office decisions.

Participation of the stakeholders in a decision is now a baseline criterion for the acceptance and approval of all site-based decisions. During our periodic review of decisions, "Who has been involved and how?" are the key questions. Further, the superintendent and the board of education have specified that the role of central office personnel is one of support. Building-level and central office personnel are expected to work together in developing school improvement plans and in making decisions affecting them both. We are reestablishing the interconnectedness of all units of the district and affirming each school's or department's secure status as part of a larger organization.

Through a collaborative process, central office staff developed a new resource allocation plan to allow building staff to make budget decisions. This plan permits schools, for example, to select textbooks and instructional materials; previously, decisions about these purchases had been controlled closely by the central office. We are continuing to specify which decisions are whose responsibility. While "site-based management" suggests all decisions will be made at the school, central office must continue to make some decisions to ensure equity, balance, and uniformity. Finally, schools now contract with central office personnel for the services they need. Building personnel first establish their priorities, and central office personnel support their efforts rather than leading or directing the buildings' efforts. Thus, the limited resources available there can be distributed fairly.

Districts considering site-based management should clarify in advance the roles of central office staff and provide the necessary training and support for those new roles. We also urge central office personnel to model the desired

behaviors in their work. Districts should carefully delineate the parameters and conditions for responsibility and authority *before* implementation. Further, they might consider devising a workable system for allocating central office resources. In particular, districts need to be flexible in how to provide resources. If, for example, a subject area specialist is unable to meet the needs of many buildings' priorities, he or she might train a team of resource teachers to assist him or her. In retrospect, we believe that, if we had accomplished these tasks at the beginning, we would have avoided the difficulties of central office blocking.

Providing Training and Support, or Mistake No. 3

Another mistake was our failure to provide training in site-based management for school personnel and to offer the necessary on-site support to principals. Suddenly, teachers used to

working in isolation were being asked to work collaboratively as members of teams to make essential management, curriculum, and staffing decisions. Suddenly, principals accustomed to making decisions alone were being required to share decisions. We had begun with training strictly limited to the L/D/E/A School Improvement Process and had neglected training in the necessary underlying skills for shared decision making.

Now, to rectify these oversights, the district has initiated several efforts. First, the superintendent and the board have appointed an experienced principal knowledgeable about the School Improvement Process as director of school improvement. The director provides one-on-one support for administrators and also facilitates collaboration between the schools and the central office if conflicts arise.

Second, the superintendent has divided district schools into three clusters, based largely on geographic proximity. Principals meet together monthly to share successes, failures, strategies, and frustrations and to work collaboratively to solve common problems. The school improvement team facilitators meet in the same cluster arrangement. These meetings provide the facilitators the support and assistance often lacking in their individual buildings.

Third, the school board encourages and welcomes reports from school improvement teams. These reports serve to recognize school personnel for their efforts, keep the board informed about the direction of each school, and emphasize that schools have great latitude within the basic parameters regarding how to approach site-based management.

Further, the staff development department works with school staffs to

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define *collaboration* and determine what processes to use in making various decisions. The department also conducts workshops for teachers and administrators in facilitation, conflict resolution, communication skills, and participatory decision making. In addition, more staff development is now available upon request to principals and teachers to meet their identified needs in carrying out their visions.

Finally, the district has created a resource guide for school improvement team facilitators that contains ideas and examples for carrying out their plans.

By providing the necessary training and support services to school personnel in the early stages of implementation, other districts may avoid some of the unnecessary frustration that staff in our district experienced.

Managing Change, or Mistake No. 4

Another weakness in our initial efforts was our lack of preparation for the realities of change. Change on a large scale threatens the established order

and comfortable ways of doing things. Few district personnel had in-depth knowledge about the change process, and we did not make training widely available.

When we recognized the seriousness of this oversight, we took steps to remedy it. Now, we first provide training in the change process, drawing heavily on the work of Fullan (1982), Hord and colleagues (1987), and Kanter (1983). Second, we recognize the inevitability of conflict. We've even learned to appreciate conflict as a signal that change is occurring. In departments and schools where conflicts are hampering change, we provide facilitators to assist in resolving them. We also encourage public forums for managing conflict rather than forcing people to resort to hidden agendas and dysfunctional behaviors. School improvement teams, pyramiding teams, and ad hoc committees offer plentiful opportunities for staff to express feelings and opinions without fear of reprisal. We invite participation and collaboration beyond the school improvement process through district

committees, in-school implementation teams, and collegial teams.

If we were to begin the process tomorrow with the benefit of hindsight, we would be more conscious of the impact of change on individuals, and we would offer a wide variety of intervention strategies. We would also have in-house personnel available to assist individuals or groups as conflicts arose. Had these strategies been in place, we would have made the transition to site-based management more smoothly.

Epilogue

Looking back over our experience, we now appreciate the complexity of change. Our process was not as smooth as we had hoped, and we wish we could have avoided the mistakes we made. However, the practices now in place reflect our own beliefs and values about site-based management, and the interventions we initiated along the way to resolve problems have resulted in a management system tailored to the needs of our district, students, staff, and community members. Through collaboration, conflict management, and continual reconceptualization, we are shaping our own version of site-based management. Out of our struggle, we are improving education for our students, increasing professionalism among our staff, and increasing community participation in our schools. □

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Cynthia R. Harrison is Director of Staff Development, **Joellen P. Killian** is Staff Development Trainer, and **James E. Mitchell** is Superintendent, all at Adams County School District (#12), 10604 Grant Dr., Northglenn, CO 80233.



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