

# Introducing Cooperative Learning

Six years' experience with cooperative learning has taught one district some valuable—and surprising—lessons.

The Greenwich, Connecticut, Public Schools have been providing training in cooperative learning to interested staff members since October 1983. Our original training design followed six steps (Ellis 1985):

1. Before asking teachers to commit themselves to an extensive training program, we offered them an overview of the theory and research behind cooperative learning and gave them practical, hands-on experience using the new strategy as well.

2. For those who elected to learn the new strategy, we provided training at regular intervals during the school year, on work time.

3. We ensured that in-school support from at least one peer and one administrator was available for each participant during and after initial training.

4. We provided visible and continuous district-level support (funds, coaching, encouragement) throughout training, implementation, and maintenance of the innovation.

5. As interest grew, we made expanded training opportunities available.

6. We developed training expertise within the school system.

Our six years of experience have taught us how best to follow these steps in practice—and have provided a few surprises.

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## Training and Support

We have found that teachers who elect to become trained in cooperative learning are already convinced of the value of the strategy and wish to jump into practical, how-to sessions immediately. Because we believe teachers should have a good understanding of the theory and research behind cooperative learning, we have not simply dispensed with that part of the training. Instead, we have incorporated that information into experiential sessions that simultaneously teach participants how to use the strategy.

*Training schedules.* During our six years, we have experimented with a variety of training schedules. When training sessions occurred two months apart, the sense of urgency was lost, and teachers put off practicing their new skills until shortly before they were to reconvene with the trainer. Half-days of training did not provide enough hands-on practice to give all participants sufficient confidence to try new skills in their classrooms. Two or three consecutive days of training

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overwhelmed some participants and left them feeling unable to assimilate all the new knowledge.

What has worked best for our initial training in cooperative learning is a total of four full days of released time with sessions occurring three or four weeks apart (Sparks 1983). This schedule provides a manageable "chunk" of new information, allows teachers sufficient time for practice between training sessions, and keeps enthusiasm and momentum high.

*Follow-up support.* While we recommend providing initial training on a particular schedule, our experience with follow-up support suggests that many options can be effective, including:

- half-day released time training sessions throughout the year,
- occasional after-school sharing and problem-solving sessions,
- visits to observe cooperative learning in action in other classrooms,
- a consultant's or colleague's observation of a teacher's use of cooperative learning, with feedback,
- planning or team-teaching a cooperative learning lesson with another teacher,
- access to a notebook of cooperative learning lessons developed by peers,
- paid time (during vacations) to develop cooperative learning lessons collaboratively with a colleague.

Not all participants have used all of

these options; teachers select those that meet their needs or learning styles.

#### Local Support

Our original plan called for local support from two sources: a peer and the principal. Teachers came to the training in pairs or groups, so that each participant had at least one colleague with whom to share plans, problems, and successes. Each training session ended with time for the pairs or trios

to plan how to support each other back at their school. Teachers have told us that working with peers has made a crucial difference in their ability to learn to use cooperative learning.

Principals and central office administrators attended training sessions that described what they should look for when observing cooperative learning lessons, how to provide positive feedback to teachers, and how to model cooperative learning in meetings. They also participated in the

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training sessions for teachers. Not surprisingly, in those schools where principals took an active role in promoting the use of cooperative learning, more teachers acquired the strategy, and more now use it regularly.

#### **District-Level Support**

To provide ongoing district-level support, we have sought to ensure:

- funds for consultants and for released time,
- identification of cooperative learning as an effective teaching practice to be pursued as a board of education priority,

- regular articles in the monthly staff development newsletter highlighting successful uses of cooperative learning,

- participation of central office administrators in training,

- encouragement from central office administrators, both to teachers using cooperative learning and to principals supporting it in their schools,

- use of cooperative learning groups by central office administrators in their own meetings.

What we did not anticipate was the logistical support needed from both

central office and building administrators as people outside the district began to ask to observe cooperative learning in action. During the past four years, we have entertained editors from a variety of publications, teachers and administrators from as far away as Alaska and Arizona, and a videotaping crew from ASCD.

The time required to arrange these visits is justified, however, by the benefits our teachers derive from them. As one teacher observed, "Having visitors really keeps me on my toes and reminds me of all the elements of cooperative learning." And, of course, being complimented by visitors on their use of cooperative learning validates teachers' efforts to incorporate this strategy into their repertoires.

#### **Expanded Opportunities for Training**

When we began this project, we planned to offer training each year for three years, assuming that by then we would have reached everyone who was interested. Our biggest surprise has been the very gradual but continuous development of interest in cooperative learning among our staff members—so that we are still providing the basic training course seven years later!

A number of events have stimulated this interest, particularly the calls from researchers in many disciplines for the use of teaching strategies that promote

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## New Videos: ASCD's Cooperative Learning Series

Developed in consultation with Robert Slavin, Roger Johnson, David Johnson, and Britt Vasquez, this five-tape comprehensive training program is intended for school faculties interested in implementing a successful cooperative learning program. Tapes 1-4 address the need for cooperation in the workplace, the basic elements of a successful program, the skills teachers and students need to thrive in a cooperatively structured classroom, and three generic models developed by Robert Slavin. Tape 5 is a complete lesson taught with cooperative learning (without narration). Available from ASCD in early 1990.

students' active engagement in their learning. For example, the new standards from the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics specifically advocate putting students into groups to do mathematics. Accordingly, five math teachers at Greenwich High School requested a training program in cooperative learning for the 1988-89 school year and persuaded most of their colleagues in the math department to join them.

Many teaching strategies designed to improve students' abilities to read and write—such as writing workshop, readers' workshop, or reciprocal teaching—also emphasize the importance of having students work together. As our teachers receive training in these strategies, those who have not studied cooperative learning recognize the need to participate in that training as well.

Finally, our transition to a middle school model has sparked interest in cooperative learning among former junior high teachers who see value in both the academic and the social skills that cooperative learning promotes. Moreover, our 7th grade interdisciplinary units are built on the concept of "interdependence"; several call for students to work in cooperative groups and to analyze both their effectiveness at working collaboratively and

the advantages they derive from solving problems together.

### In-District Expertise

While we had always planned to develop our own cooperative learning trainers, one pleasant surprise has been the emergence of leadership in some teachers who had not previously sought that role. Because we provide a variety of leadership opportunities (including facilitating sharing sessions, publishing lesson plans, and running workshops), many teachers have been able to earn recognition for their successes with cooperative learning. Some have elected to attend the Johnsons' Leadership Training Course and now provide week-long summer training sessions for the State of Connecticut as well as shorter sessions for schools in Greenwich and other districts.

### Another Surprise

Initially we had been prepared for parental concern about cooperative learning. When a few parents questioned whether learning to cooperate

would render their children unable to compete in the real world, we provided two evening workshops on cooperative learning for parents, explaining the importance of cooperative skills in the workplace and the need for students to acquire those skills in school.

Much to our surprise, six years later parental concern has surfaced again. (This time the questions tend to be, "Shouldn't the teacher be doing more teaching?" "How can my child learn from the other students?") Some parents of gifted children express fear that their youngsters will be held back by slower students in their groups. So once again we are providing a series of meetings for parents—with the advantage now of being able to use the ASCD videotapes about cooperative learning, two of which were made in our classrooms (see "New Cooperative Learning Videotape").

### The Most Important Lesson

The most important lesson we have learned over these six years is that cooperative learning is a valuable teaching strategy that more than repays teachers for the time and effort they must invest in learning to use it. The benefits for students, both academically and socially, can be great. We hope other educators will learn from our experiences and make their own implementations of cooperative learning even more effective than ours has been. □

#### References

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### Tips on Implementing Cooperative Learning

Our major discoveries from our long-term investment in cooperative learning are simple:

- Once the idea takes hold, teachers want practical, how-to instruction. They prefer theory and research to be built into the hands-on sessions, not imposed up front.
- Teachers need regular released-time training and continued follow-up support if they are to acquire and use this complex new teaching strategy.
- The more follow-up support teachers have, the more they use the new techniques.
- Success can lead to fame, which can lead to lots of visitors. Arranging for visitors takes time, but the gains in teacher self-confidence and commitment to the new strategy are worth the time spent.
- "Stars" will emerge where you may not expect them.
- Voluntary change can take twice as long as you think it will—or more.
- Parents need training, too.

—Susan S. Ellis

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