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Project Design: Reforming Structure and Process

In six North Carolina schools, teachers and administrators are working together in new ways to improve student learning and enhance teacher professionalism.

"For the first time in my 20-year career, I can influence what happens in school. We are being treated like professionals, and we are making changes that will improve student performance."

"You know how coaches always look for new jobs where salaries are higher. Well, it would take a hell of a lot more than money to get me to leave this school now."

"My greatest fear is that the legislature and policymakers will not give us the time we need to make this reform work. I don't know what we would do if they stopped supporting this project. We just couldn't go back to doing things the way we did them before."

A quiet revolution is under way in six North Carolina public schools whose faculties are involved in Project Design—as the above comments from teachers there attest. On the one hand, Project Design is an innovation: a restructured school substantively different from its previous form and daily operating procedures. On the other hand, it's an innovation process that is developmental, reasonable, professional, and consistent with the nature of educational work.

The Structural Innovation

As an innovation, Project Design consists of multiple changes in the distribution of time, work responsibilities, decision authority, status, students, and resources. To avoid the unconscionable and unproductive strategies of enlarging jobs that are already overtaxed, project participants, consultants, and sponsors built the project around enrichment and job design strategies.

In order to forge *deep* changes in schools, project participants redesigned teacher and administrator roles. To accomplish such a deep structural reform, we recognized that four essen-

Learning to work together with common purpose and trust in each other requires teachers and administrators to examine their bureaucratic rules and develop skills in consensus decision making.

tial administrative elements would need to operate in tandem with the different sets of planned structural changes at each school: school-based management, resource flexibility, accountability modeling, and transformational team leadership. Because each element was in sync with the others, all four practices encouraged and sustained structural changes in the school.

These new ways of working together produced changes in every aspect of school. It was as if the schools had molted, with new relationships, goals, norms, schedules, curriculums, practices, attitudes, and levels of participation and performance emerging from the transformation. Teachers moved from an attitude of "Why bother; its already decided for us" to one of "Given our goals, students, and resources, what's our best course of action?" Administrators changed, too—from concern with "how to maintain control and the status quo" to "how to empower constructive change." For example, teachers in one school scheduled and rescheduled six times during the year to better match student needs and teacher strengths. And administrators there found resources for releasing teachers to plan as teams, to attend professional development activities, and to purchase instructional materials that the teachers deemed requisite.

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The Innovation Process

The process of implementing Project Design was voluntary and developmental. Changing the structure of a school is not like changing a component part on a production line. More complex means are needed to overcome the inertia of a bureaucratic structure that has endured for a century. Therefore, the innovation plan accepted the process nature of change and the centrality of people in any reform effort. Because any reform in a knowledge-driven profession is always in an unfinished state, Project Design was envisioned as a "living reform" that would enable a school's faculty to pursue its own renewal indefinitely.

To encourage the participants to operate effectively in this new setting, we tried to foster strong norms of trust, risk taking, creativity, openness, and sets of reasonable expectations, combined with consistent use of cooperative problem solving, consensus decision making, and process leadership skills. These process basics were reinforced with substantial support from school teams, consultants, and the North Carolina legislature. There was great emphasis on legitimizing the identification of difficulties and problems. For example, we made it okay to say, "This isn't working" or "I don't know exactly how to do this." In concert with that, we used creative problem-solving strategies that de-emphasized evaluation until later in the activity. Then we could go to the legislature with the problems we identified and explain how the schools needed relief from regulation. In addition, project activities were intentionally guarded from public scrutiny to provide the participants a protective atmosphere in which to work.

An Idea Takes Form

The initial impetus for Project Design was the report of the Carnegie Task Force on Teaching. The idea was given form locally by leaders and consultants from the Public School Forum, a nonprofit educational agency. In October 1986, selected district and school administrators, several teachers, and board members from three counties were invited to review the Carnegie Report with a consultant for the Public School Forum and to explore alternative rationales for changing the school structure. They were asked to discuss the substance of the meeting with their colleagues at home and to assess the importance of these problems from the local perspective. When they left the meeting, they had the option of not continuing to participate in further discussions and anticipatory planning.

Eventually, site representatives reported that the problems described in the Carnegie report were not evident in all their districts or sites. However, they concurred that the circumstances of schooling had changed so dramatically as to require changes in schools. Consequently, they established two primary goals, to simultaneously improve (1) student performance and (2) the professional work environment of teachers. Because commitment was essential, only schools where 80 percent of the faculty were supportive would continue with the project. Further, any staff member in the 20 percent who did not wish to participate could transfer without prejudice.

Ultimately, two senior high and four elementary schools decided to continue voluntarily with the project.[1] To date, no staff members have elected to transfer, and many have sought to join the pilot schools. Permanent steering committees consisting of superintendents, other central office personnel, principals, teachers, and board members were established at that time; the committees have continued to participate in centralized planning and development sessions, returning home

to provide local leadership. Eventually this group identified factors that interfered with student learning and teacher professionalism, adopted an instructional leadership role for teaching teams, and renegotiated the distribution of instructional responsibility and authority between administrators and teachers for each school. At each school, the activities were either repeated entirely or reviewed extensively so that staff could validate or revise every critical decision. At follow-up meetings with the steering committees, staff members modified previous plans and decisions based on that input. These scheduled feedback and adjustment sessions were critical ways of tailoring the project for each school.

Although each project school elected to reorganize into instructional teams, the configurations of those teams differed across the sites. Instructional team patterns depended on each faculty's perceptions about student performance problems, their own strengths and weaknesses, the limitations of the physical plant in which they worked, the level of the school, the compatibility of curriculums, and other distinctive circumstances at each school. Identifying these specific beliefs and circumstances, and accommodating to them, were essential processes of the project.

Legislative Endorsement

As steering committees and consultants continued to reflect and plan, they found that many state laws and regulations prohibited the precise changes they were envisioning. Everything was regulated: curriculum, class size, grouping strategies, personnel, texts, teaching strategies, appraisal processes, testing, expenditures for equipment and supplies, staff development, time allocations. Further, these policies were tied to yet another set of constraints: fiscal regulations. Both the policies and the regulations had the effect of choking the very life from any but the most superficial reform activities.

Clearly, the pilot schools needed decision-making latitude, but any request for regulatory relief, "flexibility," would entail additional demands for accountability. Although the group unanimously wanted the right to make professional decisions, and accepted the responsibility of being held accountable for them, they did express reservations about overly simplistic views of accountability. In their view, professionalism required informed judgment about practices and analyses of results, not "certain" outcomes. They wanted to replace the "certain outcomes" model with the "reasonable and informed person" model. This change in the definition of accountability afforded participants enough security to proceed in new directions.

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In addition to greater decision-making latitude, Project Design required a modest amount of new money in order to develop a differentiated pay scale for lead teachers, replace each lead teacher for one-half the day in the classroom, and provide for staff development and released time for other teachers participating in the project reform.

By the end of the year, the steering committee had identified state laws and policies that would obstruct the project and the amount of new money needed to get Project Design under way. They presented the goals, plans, and needs of the project to the North Carolina Legislature—who rose boldly to the challenge, lifting all state laws and regulations at the six sites for two years and appropriating $490,000 per year.

A Living Reform

Following legislative endorsement, each school team (1) developed lead teacher job descriptions and processes for application and selection and (2) studied performance problems in the school as a basis for establishing instructional teams. Because participants were "sailing uncharted waters," each major decision carried a specific future time for review and adjustment. This process of "sunset decision making," used throughout every stage of the project, alleviated participants' concern about being locked into changes that did not work and reinforced the notion of a "living reform."

Lead teachers were selected openly by vote. Any teacher who met the job description criteria could apply. Applicants were interviewed either by the entire teaching staff or by the teams they proposed to lead. Though principals had the authority to intervene, most did not. Once selected, lead teachers helped their teams study the new assignments of responsibility and authority, their students' needs, and their own expectations about each other's roles.

During the first full year of implementation, lead teachers in elementary schools provided leadership directly and quickly. Working collaboratively with their teams, they rescheduled and reassigned both students and teachers, produced new instructional materials, conducted demonstration lessons, coordinated curriculum, planned schoolwide instructional activities, served as peer appraisers and mentors, and devised elaborate intervention and follow-up programs for at-risk children.

At the secondary level, lead teachers performed more like unit managers, facilitating the work of their col-

leagues by managing and providing resources, engaging in test analysis and feedback to the team, and attending to noninstructional responsibilities. As the first year proceeded, secondary teams became more involved with curriculum integration activities, team teaching, limited teacher assignment changes, and the adoption of nontraditional schedules.

With the aid of a consultant, each school established an accountability team, composed of lead teachers, administrators, and one or more teachers from each instructional team. Each school also developed a cause-and-effect accountability model that reflected the staff's own professional beliefs and an action plan for implementing it. One component of each action plan was face-to-face structured interviews, mid-year and end-of-year, by consultants with team teachers, lead teachers, and administrators at each school. We compiled and presented data from these interviews to each accountability team, who then shared the information with instructional team members and developed plans to correct undesirable conditions. Thus, accountability became a "real-time" activity.

Concerns common across sites became grist for centralized meetings, during which teams learned about accountability indicators, revised their models and plans, and helped each other develop corrective strategies.

The Impact of Shared Authority and Responsibility

As teachers, administrators, students, and communities have learned about and from each other, Project Design continues to evolve at each site. Isolation and insulation are relics of the past.

As for results, project evaluations and state accountability indices are exceptionally positive. Student participation and performance are up, dramatically so at several sites. For example, a school in Granville County moved from last to first place in attendance ranking. In addition, teachers and administrators are excited, committed, and challenged by their work. Further, community involvement in and support for all project schools is higher than ever before. Schools have become places where meaningful change and cooperative problem solving and decision making are the norms, and classrooms have developed into "clinics" for improving pupil learning.

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Both the professional and the regulatory communities seem impressed with the results. Project Design teachers and administrators have conducted a statewide conference and are regularly invited to address other professional groups and visit other schools. In one district, 13 new schools have joined the project. The legislature has adopted enabling policy (Senate Bill 2) for other districts who voluntarily pursue a similar brand of structural reform.

Lessons Learned and Relearned

We've learned and relearned important lessons about reform:

- Reform need not be built on deficit perspectives.
- "Standardized reforms" have little place in education.
- Meaningful professional and structural reform is impossible without regulatory relief.
- If teachers and administrators are to resist expectations for immediate results, they need a protected atmosphere in which to develop and test new, complex authority relationships and school practices.
- The flexible use of resources and site accountability are necessary work conditions for professionals.
- Structural reforms that ignore the need to redesign teachers' and administrators' jobs will do little to unleash the expertise of educators or improve school accountability.
- To produce deep and meaningful reform, time must be provided *during normal operating hours* for educators to work collaboratively and effectively as accountable professionals (Improving student performance is not a summer or after-hours' activity).

However, *if* the direction is sound, the possibilities realistic, and the process humane, teachers and administrators will embrace structural reforms with great heart, effort, and energy. We've seen it for ourselves in these six North Carolina schools.□

[1]The six North Carolina schools that are participating in Project Design are: Hazelwood Elementary, Hazelwood; North Stanly High, New London; Norwood Elementary, Norwood; Oakboro Elementary, Oakboro; and South Granville High, Creedmoor.

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