

Site-Based Management at Central-Hower

Schools with questions about shared decision making may find some answers from an Ohio high school's five-year experience with site-based management.

In 1984, the faculty of Central-Hower High School was charged by district administrators with developing a school improvement plan that would involve teachers in decision making. One of eight high schools in the Akron, Ohio, public school system, Central-Hower is an inner-city school whose population during the past five years has declined to about 970 students: approximately 45 percent black, 45 percent white, and 8 percent Asian. About 33 percent of our students participate in the free or reduced price lunch program. Average stanines on the California Achievement Tests are 4-5, but our students' abilities range from the lowest to the highest. While the majority of our students live in our attendance district, about 36 percent have elected to attend Central-Hower in order to pursue courses in vocational and preprofessional programs.

During the past five years, we have struggled with a number of questions about how to do school-based management, three of which we will discuss here: What organizational structures will provide for the broadest participation by staff members? What procedures will ensure responsiveness, fairness, and efficiency? How is the role of the principal affected?

The Faculty Senate

Early in the project, we recognized the need for some kind of representative body to promote participation by our staff. We considered various forums, including "town meeting" sessions, which we concluded would be too time consuming. We finally agreed upon a Faculty Senate, to be composed of the principal and eight members elected from the staff. Our staff is divided into eight groups by related curricular areas, and each group elects

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a member of the Senate for a three-year term. Terms are staggered so that no more than three new members are elected each year.

Although the need for a representative body is readily apparent, the accountability provided by the group structure may not be so obvious. For example, if members of a group are dissatisfied with their representative, Senate procedures provide for a recall election. When members are elected at large to a governing body, however, it is difficult in practice to identify a "culprit." Also, in a traditionally structured school, teachers do not have effective ways to indicate their unhappiness over building-level decisions affecting them. Singly or in groups they can complain to the principal or to each other in the faculty lounge, but if the principal does not follow their advice, they have little recourse, aside from grievance procedures. (While it is true that major issues are subject to contractual agreements, these issues are more likely to be systemwide problems, and the process can take years.)

Our school constitution spells out election procedures, officer responsibilities, and types of committees. In addition, it provides an appeal process

for the principal, who has one vote on the Senate and can be outvoted by the other members. If the principal had the right to veto a Senate decision, many staff members felt, the Senate would have no real power and would become a pointless exercise. During discussions about what would actually happen if there were serious disagreement in the school, a compromise emerged when staff members recognized that someone with higher authority would intervene. So we incorporated into the appeal process the provision that the principal can appeal a Senate decision to the Director of Secondary Curriculum or the Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum and Instruction. We thereby created a natural check on the Senate and the principal. The purists were not fully satisfied, but the process has worked, in the sense that it has not been invoked during its three-year life.

The Senate's main function is to set the educational policy and agenda for the school (in accordance with school board policies). It oversees the work of departments and committees and determines the budget allocations. By working with and through small groups, as well as the faculty at large, the Senate allows a consensus to emerge. Some examples of decisions made during 1988-89 will help clarify these generalities. For example, during the summer, a committee revised the school philosophy and recommended the amended document to the Senate, who arranged for faculty discussions at a staff meeting. At this meeting, the staff voted on the revised document. Another committee, specially appointed for the task, developed a set of five-year goals for 1989/90-1994/95. After Senate deliberations, the goals were presented to and voted on by the staff. On a more practical level, the Senate approves teacher requests for texts and instructional materials, additional staff, equipment, and the like.

The Curriculum Council

At first, we thought the Senate would deal with all curricular issues as its major responsibility. However, the Senate soon discovered how time consuming the combination of curricu-

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lum matters and overall policy implementation is. As a result, we formed the Curriculum Council as a subcommittee of the Senate, to which it reports. (The Senate meets daily, with Senate responsibilities taking the place of supervisory duties.) The Curriculum Council is composed of elected department chairpersons. A Senate member serves as liaison between the Senate and the Council.

Because the Council is new, its functions are still evolving, but some of its activities provide insights into the shape its functions are taking. For example, this is the group that spearheaded the revision of our school philosophy in order to provide a guide for making curriculum decisions. To learn national, state, and local trends, its members heard presentations from curriculum specialists. Further, the Council examined two programs, one which teachers felt should be added and one dropped, and made recommendations to the Senate. The group is also grappling with overall issues such as what a Central-Hower graduate should know.

Yearly Plans and Five-Year Goals

In addition to these two new groups, we have instituted two new procedures that help us to be responsive, fair, and efficient. First, in the spring, each department or committee develops a plan for the following year.

Much like a funding proposal, each plan spells out why something should be done; what the specific objective is; what activities, staff, and money are involved; and what evaluation methods will be used. This written document informs staff members about the plans of other departments and helps all departments set realistic goals.

The second procedure involves developing five-year goals and then tying them to the budget. (This process is based on a plan originated by the Girl Scouts, U.S.A., and is used by many United Way agencies across the nation.) The five-year goals for 1989/90-1994/95 were developed by a faculty committee during a three-day conference that examined local, state, and national trends affecting education, current educational programs, student achievement and needs, and probable funding.

Once the five-year goals have been adopted, we weight them in relation to each other; that is, goal #1 is twice as important as #2, and so on. Then the budget is divided accordingly: here, goal #1 would get twice as much money as #2. Although we have just begun to use this model, we hope it will help us allocate our resources wisely and in accordance with group consensus.

The Principal's Role

Early in the project, many questions arose about the role of the principal. Faculty opinion ranged from maintaining the traditional top-down structure to eventually eliminating the position entirely. However, we now have a new understanding of and appreciation for the principal's role in the successful operation of the school.

At Central-Hower, the principal is responsible for all the usual tasks; however, as a result of shared decision making, his role vis à vis the educational program has changed. Because our faculty has agreed that the educational agenda will be determined by consensus, the principal facilitates the building of that consensus. Thus, he provides information or finds sources of information, serves as a clearinghouse so committees are not working at cross pur-

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poses to each other or systemwide goals, assists staff members in providing for accountability, and encourages staff development and experimentation. These are specific responsibilities related to developing consensus on the instructional program and methods that best serve students.

While these, too, are traditional tasks of the principal, the difference in our setting is that our principal works more indirectly. As he oversees all the work, he is helping others to accomplish it. Sharing decision making may imply that the principal loses authority. However, since the principal's sphere of communication is much greater, our principal's influence has actually increased. After all, when a principal makes a decision alone, he or she is also alone in trying to implement it. By contrast, when the group makes the decision, the group is ready to get to work on it.

From Our Experience to Yours

We do not claim to have figured out all the answers; indeed we recognize that many questions lie ahead. But our rising student achievement scores and our own sense of joy in our accomplishments have us convinced we are heading in a good direction. In a way, of course, every school is unique, but we recognize that Central-Hower is in many ways a "normal" school and has problems similar to other schools. Indeed, it is this very ordinariness that makes Central-Hower's experience with site-based management useful to others. If it works here, it will work elsewhere. And it works here. □

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