Small Steps on the Way to Teacher Empowerment

A "slow but sure" approach at Clinton Grove
Elementary in Maryland has helped pave the way
for real teacher empowerment.

Do teachers really want to make their own decisions? Folk wisdom among principals has it that the superstars do indeed want to have an impact on their own professional lives but that average teachers—perhaps 95 percent of the work force—just want someone to tell them what to do. And yet principals and other school system leaders recognize the advantages of school-based decision making. The challenge, then, is to prepare teachers for empowerment.

When Clinton Grove Elementary was selected as a Project 2000 School—one of several schools to initiate a futures-planning, school-based management model within the Prince George's County, Maryland, Public Schools—the foundation had already been laid for a move toward teacher empowerment. By the end of the project's first year, Clinton Grove's management team of representatives from all the teacher teams, the support staff, and the parents had made major decisions about budget and spending, instituted curriculum and instructional changes at the primary level, developed a personnel plan, implemented a staff development program incorporating peer coaching, and much more. Here's how it happened.

The Concept of Group Responsibility

For the last several years, teams of teachers had been making decisions about such routine matters as schedules, supplies, and duties. When I became Clinton Grove's principal, one of my first decisions was to abdicate responsibility for determining if it was too cold for outdoor recess. The teachers could understand my reasoning—it was never too cold for me, an avid

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skier—so we agreed that the person on duty each day would decide. Then there was the matter of schedules: I asked teachers to take recess when their kids needed it. One team experimented with recess before lunch and liked it so much, they've done it that way for five years. I also decided to keep the supply closet open at all times. I reminded people to let the secretary know when supplies of an item were running low so she could

Shared decision making in action can be seen at a meeting of Clinton Grove's School Management Team, made up of the principal and representatives from the school's teacher teams, support staff, and parents.

In a playful yet symbolic gesture, Clinton Grove Elementary staff shared a dinosaur cake at the conclusion of a problem-solving workshop, signifying their intent to let go of old practices and welcome new ideas.

reorder. Once we struggled through the entire Christmas season with an off shade of construction paper—dark green instead of bright green—but we survived.

These simple decision opportunities helped to pave the way for real empowerment. Two cautions, however, are worth noting: (1) it's necessary to move decision making beyond the mundane to the important aspects of teaching and learning and (2) there's a narrow line between empowering teachers and adopting a laissez-faire leadership style. One major difference between the two extremes in styles concerns the idea of *group* responsibility. While the laissez-faire principal merely tells each teacher to do what he or she thinks best, the principal moving toward empowerment charges a group of teachers with coming up with the best decision for all.

Our district's school improvement program had given us a framework for understanding the concept of group responsibility and led to our development of a mission statement. Evaluating decisions against a mission statement guards against the parochialism of individual teacher interests and the danger of making decisions based on the interests of adults rather than of students. The principal's role here is to assist teachers in comparing any proposed action with the statement, as they identify how it supports or deviates from the stated philosophy.

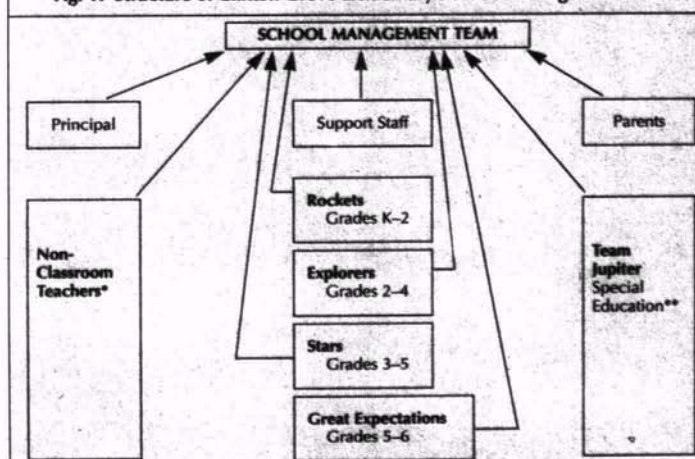Individually and in small groups, we listed all the skills, knowledge, attitudes, and qualities we wanted our "ideal graduate" to possess. From that initial copious list we reduced, refined, and rewrote until we had a simple one-paragraph statement. The process took us almost a year. After getting parents' approval, we had the mission statement printed. We hung framed copies on the wall in every classroom, and the statement prefaced the Parent Handbook. The symbolism of its overriding presence, as much as its meaning, served to bring people together.

The Staff Development Team

Probably the biggest single step toward preparing teachers for empowerment came through staff development. I had become enthusiastic about TESA (Teacher Expectations and Student Achievement), a structured program incorporating peer observation and coaching; and several system-level staff members had been trained to teach the program, so we started a TESA pilot. The timing couldn't have been worse. By the time everything came together, it was early May! But we went ahead, and although the participants found themselves doing peer observations the last week of school, they became strong proponents of the program.

The next year those five teachers became enthusiastic trainers for the entire staff. To participate, we required that all teachers commit to the idea. A few of us held our breaths while we waited for one painfully shy teacher to agree to take part in a program that would invite others to observe her. But peer pressure won out, and she committed to it. Although the yearlong

Fig. 1. Structure of Clinton Grove Elementary's School Management Team

SCHOOL MANAGEMENT TEAM

Principal

Support Staff

Parents

Non-Classroom Teachers*

Rockets
Grades K–2

Explorers
Grades 2–4

Stars
Grades 3–5

Great Expectations
Grades 5–6

Team Jupiter
Special Education**

*Non-classroom teachers: music, physical education, reading resource, library media specialist.

**Special education: teachers of self-contained classes, resource facilitator, aides, speech/language pathologist.

training didn't always go as smoothly as the pilot, with its high-energy and high-skill volunteers, changes in attitude became apparent within a few months, as teachers realized that coaching was nonthreatening and that their colleagues could actually offer them help. The year ended with the decision to continue peer coaching next year using locally generated topics and group-designed observation and coaching instruments. Interested staff members joined the original core of volunteer TESA trainers, and collectively they became the Staff Development Team.

The School Management Team

Now that teachers were working together more closely, we replaced our loosely coupled grade level teams with six larger, more cohesive teams serving multi-grade groups of children: one primary team (K-2), two for the middle grades (one including some primary students [2–4], one in-cluding some older students [3–5]), one intermediate (5–6), one special education team, and one non-class-room team that included the teacher specialists (see fig. 1, p. 39). Each team then selected a leader, who became that team's representative to our new School Management Team, also composed of the principal, a representative of the support staff, and three parent delegates.

Because the team also functioned as the advisory council required by the local union contract, the members spent some time for the first few months going through the standard gripe sessions such groups often get involved in. Once the team was handed some real information, though, and asked to make a real decision, they quickly moved on. By midyear, team members had lost patience with anyone who brought one of those typical gripe-session issues to the table.

As the group's work proceeded, the need for information became apparent. Principals, especially experienced ones in large school systems, often don't realize the amount of information they hold about the way things are done that is not accessible to teachers. The team was enthusiastic about several sessions they arranged with representatives from various departments. For example, after an instructive talk with the maintenance coordinator for the building, the team addressed several requests directly to that department. Their meeting with the reading supervisor to plan for the hiring of a new reading specialist was also most helpful because it gave them insights into developing an expanded job description for the reading specialist position, and it aided them in the interview process.

During the year, a three-day intensive workshop on problem solving was made available to schools in Project 2000, and the management team decided to take advantage of it. Although it took most of the discretionary money given by the PTA, we sent seven members of the team. Later, by accepting a three-day block of time in June that no one else wanted, we were able to get everyone in a leadership position in the school trained. At the conclusion of the workshop, the training group threw a party for the whole staff featuring a dinosaur cake. Eating the cake symbolized getting rid of all our old, outdated ideas so we could be ready in the fall to start anew.

An Empowered Staff

Now I have taken a new position, and several staff members have transferred. Leaving the school was difficult for me, but I know the power is there to make Clinton Grove the very best. Through shared decision making about simple things, trust-building activities, and development of a unified mission, all these teachers have become superstars who want to control their own professional lives, and they have the skills to do it.□

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