

# A Culture for Change

Gorham School District was underfunded and uninspired. Then, the threat of more budget cuts aroused the community into action. Six years later, the effects of good planning and collaborative decision making have paid off in a revitalized system.

Gorham, Maine, is a fairly typical mixed rural/suburban school district in a rural New England state. Two thousand students attend four elementary schools, one two-year junior high school, and one four-year high school. Our budget is a mix of state and local funds, and our per-pupil expenditure is slightly below the state average. About 60 percent of our high school graduates go on to post-secondary education. We share the state's concerns about dropout rates and gaps between the test scores of college-bound students and those who plan to end their education after graduating from high school.

We are proud of our achievements and excited about our future. We have developed an outstanding parent-volunteer program, and two of our schools have received state restructuring grants. Our teachers have greatly increased their involvement in graduate level programs. They lead staff development activities on a regular basis and participate in grade level as well as systemwide curriculum committees. Elementary school teachers and administrators are working on alternative assessment approaches, including portfolio and computer-enhanced techniques. Our high school faculties are

developing, in cooperation with the University of Southern Maine, an advisor-advisee program which connects us to the Goodlad Network for School Renewal.

These achievements stand in contrast to our situation six years ago, when our district had one of the lowest per-pupil expenditures in the state and had been through repeated budget battles. Teacher salaries were

among the lowest in the area, building maintenance was stalled, and classroom materials were scarce. These conditions had a chilling effect on teacher initiative and morale.

The spark that galvanized community support for school improvement was another threatened cut to our already bare bones budget. Parents marched, voted for pro-school candidates in the town council election, and our budgets began to improve. It is obvious, as we look back, that this was the turning point for the improvements and reforms we have made. Two years later, state mandates for budget increases kept the pressure up, but we had already gained our momentum locally. Our community was convinced that they wanted and deserved better schools. This experience taught us that we can work together toward a common cause, and we have great hope for the future. We also believe, however, that true change occurs over the long term, and we are wary of quick-fix promises. We saw some improvement fairly readily, starting, as we did, from our "lough of despond" of six years ago. But we recognize the difference between doing things better and setting new goals.

**We focus our goal-setting on children's learning. What do we want children to know, and how will we assess that learning?**

## Doing Things Better

As the budget crisis mentioned earlier was reaching its peak, Connie Goldman was hired as the new superintendent. Partly to cope with mounting problems and partly to recognize her status as a first-time superintendent, she decided to use an entry plan (Jentz 1982). Her plan called for goal-setting input from all the groups that make up the system/school committee: teachers, administrators, central office staff, support services personnel, and community members. This kind of collaborative decision making was new to the district, and it quickly became clear that we would need many opportunities to show its effectiveness before it became part of the school culture.

We formed two committees that soon demonstrated how we could do things better. The first committee revamped the existing teacher evaluation policy. Consistent with our interest in developing collaborative structures, we chose an evaluation approach that emphasized goal-setting. We enlisted a broad base of support, including school board members, classroom teachers, administrators, teachers' association representatives, and parents. We gathered sample information, attended workshops, and communicated with the groups we represented. Two years later, when we were finished, we had not only demonstrated how a collaborative process could work but also that it could produce a result that satisfied our constituents. The second committee was an Early Childhood Task Force that included representatives from area nursery schools, the town council, and parents. This group took a hard look at some of our problems, including our large kindergarten pupil-teacher ratio (30 to 1), our high percentage of retention at 1st grade, and an abnormally high primary level special education referral rate. Ultimately, this group made some substantial changes for our primary grades.

A high percentage of our staff gradually became involved in these and other systemwide and building committees. These committees spent a great deal of energy trying to define the problem clearly before simply reaching for the first apparent solu-

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tion. At times the pace has caused us to wonder if we are moving as fast as we should be, but most groups have come to value the time spent in trying to figure out what the real problem is. Many recommendations from these groups have been funded through the budget process or by state grants. Their power lies in the ability to use cooperative planning and communication to get things accomplished.

We found that good planning and collaborative decision making were excellent strategies for making the best possible use of scarce resources. Goal-setting, used by individual classroom teachers as well as school committees and administrative teams, became part of the school culture. With it came opportunities to open up lines of communication. We began to understand the power of being able to explain to others what we wanted to do and what it would take to do it: in spite of notable tax increases, the school board and the community supported our budgets.

### Setting New Goals

With buckets catching leaks in the hallways and teaching materials in scarce supply, teachers had little motivation to use innovative ideas that depended on at least minimal additional resources. But we felt that as they saw the system improving, listening to and incorporating their ideas into concrete changes, they would direct their energies to the examination of classroom practice.

Building and systemwide staff development teams initiated the push

toward examining classroom practice, and they succeeded in forming a partnership with the University of Southern Maine. The gatherings gave teachers the opportunity to discuss their teaching practices with colleagues from our own system and from other systems connected to the partnership. These meetings emphasized the key questions of reflective practice—what am I doing and why am I doing it? While they might feature a speaker or a reading, these meetings always asked teachers what they thought.

The message to teachers was clear: you are professionals working with children and young adults in a learning setting. You see how children go about making sense of the world around them as well as whatever content material they are working with. How does this tacit knowledge contribute to your own day-to-day decision making in the classroom? How do you judge what children are actually learning?

Not surprisingly, the two schools whose building administrators took the greatest interest in promoting these discussions received the restructuring grants. Elementary schools influenced by the Early Childhood Task Force pushed the boundaries of reflective practice farthest. However, all the schools became involved in a variety of teacher-led staff development activities that flowed from a common assumption: teachers know a good deal about children's learning and are capable of learning a great deal more.

To support teachers' efforts to improve practice, we developed a Schedule C on our salary scale, which pays teachers who take on extra professional duties. We also established a paraprofessional program, which is particularly helpful at the elementary level. We try to use paraprofessionals to release some teachers during the day for committee work. This approach works best, we feel, when paraprofessionals can become part of a differentiated staffing pattern and familiarize themselves with particular classes and teacher goals.

We focus our goal-setting on children's learning. What do we want children to know, and how will we assess that learning? The primary teachers and principals have recently put to-

gether a slide presentation to address such issues. Its suggested goals include helping children understand their own learning and building a metacognitive base as an ongoing part of learning how to learn. This team is looking for computer-assisted technology to capture multimedia records of children's learning.

We use standardized tests at all levels as tools to help us understand what students are learning and not as curriculum guides. We see the information they provide as feedback rather than directives. However, we are aware of the challenge of trying to develop an intellectually rigorous curriculum that is actually learned. What will the push for national and state standards for assessment translate into for classroom teachers? We wonder if the tests will drive what is taught or if the teachers will be able to continue searching for broader understanding of what makes sense in their own classrooms.

### Changing Roles

Developing a districtwide culture for change takes courage, patience, conviction, and vision. Robert Schaefer's 1967 book, *School as a Center of Inquiry*, contains some of our guiding concepts. Schaefer suggests that we are all learners in the school setting and that teachers can be genuine partners in helping to engage children in their own learning. Teachers, particularly at the elementary level, are not usually seen as scholars, but our university partnership indicates our desire to broaden our base of scholarship. Teachers must take leadership in curriculum and develop their confidence as scholars if they are ever to be true partners in education.

However, defining teachers' roles as major partners in decision making raises issues of trust and accountability. These issues make teachers as well as administrators uncomfortable. Suddenly they are responsible for more than ordering textbooks and curriculum guides—they themselves must outline the curriculum! Many teachers are not ready to assume a confident decision-making role in matters of what to teach and how to teach it. Furthermore, openly raising questions of practice means living through a

period of considerable ambiguity. We try to address such problems by acknowledging them and by extending genuine respect toward diverse viewpoints. As we push to understand the implications of operating in a "center of inquiry," we realize that teachers need practice digging into their intuitive experience to try to articulate what they think. We must learn how to build such discussion into the organizational structure of schools, which have not valued it in the past. While exploring these concepts, we change slowly and carefully.

In our efforts to improve classroom learning, we must all participate in the effort to look at issues, respect differences, and come to a workable consensus. For instance, we are currently trying to move from a basal-dominated curriculum to one that incorporates a wider range of materials. Our goal is a curriculum based on cluster concepts and standards rather than lists of materials and activities. In the process, we hope to encourage vigorous discussions about what works and what doesn't. If an approach stands up to rigorous questioning, it will be adopted by others on its merits rather than on the politics of a particular constituency.

Administrators must now be leaders of leaders. They can no longer simply tell others what to do, but they must be able to confront problems clearly and unequivocally. Their roles require "people" skills and the ability to find consensus in a wide range of differing interests. Controversy is healthy when it takes place in the open, in the spirit of trying to define problems and seek genuine solutions. It is very important for the principal to serve as a model for teachers by respecting all opinions while explaining the reasons for what he or she does. This, in turn, will encourage teachers to take a similar stance toward their students.

The principal must bring the staff together with a clearly expressed set of common values. At our present stage of development, some schools are clearer about this than others, but all can discuss at least a central set of commonly held goals. Once this kind of consensus is reached, the principal becomes an agent for confronting problems of practice. He or she must

also be aware that perceptions of the reality of the situation may differ greatly. Confrontation, then, becomes an opportunity for the teachers and administrators to talk about their perceptions. The principal cannot simply be the "fixer," but he or she can be the catalyst for reflective practice. Always the point is to help teachers think about what they are doing and how it affects children's learning.

School board members and the superintendent increasingly advocate communication with the community. When disgruntled parents call them, they appreciate teachers and administrators who are able to explain what they are doing and why they are doing it. When our decision-making processes are effective, the answers to such questions are clear and defensible. But it is important for school boards to recognize that teachers do need space in which to operate. Not all decisions need to be made by committee, and not all complaints indicate a problem. The willingness of school boards to support the kind of risk-taking inherent in the change process is vitally important.

### Focusing on the Possible

All this sounds fairly basic. And, indeed, much school improvement can be traced to organizational common sense. Yet somehow we have a hard time giving up past practices that get in our way. Somehow we develop a kind of system paranoia that says "they won't let me do it," or "I knew things hadn't changed," or "there they go again." If we are to achieve a culture for change, we must focus on the possible. We must also ask ourselves, now that we know we can do this, why not try something *really* difficult? Like making a real difference in all children's learning achievements. Now, at least, we are really trying to do so. □

#### References

- Jentz, B.C. (1982). *Entry*. New York: McGraw Hill.  
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