

When Teachers Initiate Restructuring

Teachers at Amos Alonzo Stagg High School discovered that creating a climate for change takes as much time and effort as implementing change.

This is a tale of restructuring from a teacher perspective. Many articles and books allude to the importance of teachers in the decision-making process for change, but very little of this literature has been written by teachers. At Amos Alonzo Stagg High School, our restructuring project was conceived and initiated by classroom teachers; and classroom teachers remain the moving force behind the restructuring efforts.

Four years ago a very small group of teachers at Stagg High recognized that the school must make some dramatic changes in curriculum, in governance, and in educational philosophies. In *Megatrends* (1982) John Naisbitt said that we are living in the "time of the parenthesis," a very confused and confusing period between the Industrial Age and the Information Age, a time when great societal changes are forcing reform in every existing institution, especially in education. We decided we had a choice: we could be reactive, dealing with change in the crisis management mode, or we could be proactive—anticipate the changes, and thus be able to control, mitigate, and use change to our advantage.

A Core Group

Recognizing that seizing control of change requires informed decision-making, we organized the core group

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for restructuring—eight teachers and four administrators. During our first semester, we met at a group member's home in the evenings to discuss the literature on restructuring.

Our initial readings focused on teachers' and administrators' roles and expectations in the change process (Lieberman and Miller 1984, Fullan 1982). No change could take place without considering how it would affect those roles. We also became informed about the process of change and the difficulties schools face in implementing change (Sarason 1982, Joyce 1982).

We did not have a clear idea at this point of what we wanted to change, we only knew we needed changes. Our evening discussions allowed us to talk about change in the abstract without

threatening anyone's turf with specific change proposals. The small size of the group also helped us establish new nonhierarchical social norms for professional interaction and discussion of educational issues.

Expanding the Group

The following year, supported by a grant from the Stuart Foundations, we developed a model for teacher participation in decision-making. We expanded the core group to include 25 teachers, counselors, and administrators. This expanded group participated in our readings and discussions on roles, expectations, and change—they became our cadre of on-site "change agents."

For the next year and a half, the new group, called the Instructional Leadership Team, met at least twice a month after school to discuss all our readings on restructuring and transforming schools. We also contracted with consultants for leadership training, conflict resolution, and decision making. We applied to and were accepted by the ASCD Consortium on Restructuring Schools.

Our interaction with other schools in the consortium proved invaluable to our restructuring efforts. But the actual implementation within the district was not without its problems. For one thing, there were undercurrents

of discontent among teachers who felt we were all talk and no action. The "shakers and movers" wanted to start making changes. Although we all felt frustrated at not being able to point to any concrete changes, we also believed that we must first establish a climate for change and then develop the skills necessary to be successful change agents.

So, when (with help from a Stuart Foundations grant) teachers participated in the development of the master schedule and of the site budget, it came as no surprise that these new plans looked no different from previous ones. We selected the master schedule and site budget as areas for shared decision making because they were areas teachers were familiar with—we've always had a master schedule and a budget. Although there are important decisions in building a master schedule, the subcommittee confined itself to the mechanical aspects, such as deciding whether we should schedule 13 instead of 14 sections of U. S. History, based on student preregistration. We felt that we shouldn't attempt radical change at the same time we were trying to learn leadership, conflict resolution, and decision-making skills.

Pitfalls We Encountered

Despite our commitment to the concept, our efforts to implement shared decision making were not always successful. For one thing, the faculty of Stagg High School is older than most high school faculties: 73 percent of us are over 45, while only 7 of us are under 35. When educators, who are not generally risk-takers, get set in their ways, implementing change is made even more difficult.

Sometimes the timelines we received from the central administration were so short that convening the leadership team and forming a consensus was impractical. At other times, the principal felt that the instructional leadership team was usurping his authority, or was reluctant to relinquish the final say on some issue for fear of being held accountable if the team's decisions didn't work out. Teachers who believed they had decision-making

power were sometimes told their input was only advisory. Each of these dilemmas led inevitably to misunderstandings and confrontations.

Because we had no clear focus or game plan, our restructuring was plagued with uncertainties. We wanted to restructure in curriculum and in governance, but the sheer magnitude of the changes we anticipated was daunting. Since the school district's adopted policy is that all high schools in the district will be identical, we were uncertain whether the central administration or the board of education would let us make changes that would make us different from the other high schools.

Communication Snafus

In retrospect, it's clear that we created problems for ourselves by repeatedly excluding or circumventing the central administration, which, according to the local press, did not support site-based decision making. In fact, decision making in this district has become more centralized than at any time in the past—decisions that used to be made at the school site are now being made in the central administration. We believed that if the central administration were aware of our activities, we would be ordered to stop. Nevertheless, the central administration knew we were involved in site-based decision making plans and viewed with suspicion our reluctance to keep them informed.

The principal was caught in the middle. If he supported the central administration, the teachers cried foul and accused him of not buying into shared leadership; if he supported the teachers, the central administration suggested that his faculty was out of control. The irony of the situation is that all of this mutual distrust between the school and the central administration was generated over issues in which no substantive changes had occurred. Had we been more communicative with the central administration, we might have traveled a smoother path.

Then, too, we were often viewed as elitist by faculty members who were not on the instructional leadership team. The department chairs, who had

previously negotiated budget issues with the principal, felt threatened and disenfranchised by the new budget committee. Until we felt adequate in selling the concept of restructuring to others, we tried to keep our activities low profile to avoid threatening the power bases of other teachers. So when colleagues would ask what we did, we would hem and haw and make vague statements and feel foolish. This didn't help us inspire confidence.

Taking Action

Finally, at the end of the second year of reading and discussing and wallowing around in uncertainty, the instructional leadership team decided, during a stormy weekend meeting, to *do something*. We felt confident in our ability to make change and ready to bring others into the process of improving the school. We asked the entire faculty to participate in the first planning meeting; more than 50 percent attended.

We all brainstormed the school problems that needed attention most urgently, then formed subcommittees to generate solutions to each of them. The faculty decided that the areas most in need of improvement were self-esteem of students and staff, public relations, school maintenance and beautification, and school/business partnerships. It is interesting to note that the faculty did not identify curriculum revision or teaching strategies as areas in urgent need of improvement. Most teachers were not yet ready to address issues that would require examination of teaching style or personal fundamental beliefs about education. But we had to start somewhere.

We found ways to provide released time (a full day) for each subcommittee to spend developing action plans, and we began to implement them as quickly as possible. But the most important thing that occurred in the subcommittees was this: the faculty began to talk about change. Committee members began to plan change, to carry through action plans, and to recognize that change was needed. In short, Stagg High School had established some new social norms and was creating a climate for change.

A Slow-Forming Vision

We deliberately did not begin with a vision, although most restructuring literature advises that the site or district administrator spearheading the change effort—the advice is never directed to teachers—develop a vision and articulate the vision to faculty, students, parents, and community. But, had we started trying to describe our vision of what schools should look like, we would most likely have ended up with a vision that differed very little from our existing vision—we would be looking for better ways to do what we were already doing. Sarason (1982) clearly demonstrates that the “existing regularities” prevent us from seeing the “universe of alternatives.” Radical suggestions for transforming our school would have been rejected out of hand.

During the summer recess, the instructional leadership team read Phillip Schlechty's *Schools for the 21st Century* (1990) and Roland Barth's *Improving Schools from Within* (1990). Both books not only validated many of our struggles of the previous three years, they gave us additional inspiration and galvanized us to move from talk to action.

With this new inspiration, the team brainstormed a detailed school vision as well as a new organizational structure for Stagg High School. The drafts of both the vision and the organizational structure were presented to the entire staff at a faculty meeting. The staff divided into working groups of five to discuss strengths, weaknesses, and omissions in the drafts. The written suggestions for revision were incorporated into the drafts, which were then presented to the student body.

Each classroom held discussions of the strengths, weaknesses, and omissions and made recommendations back to the instructional leadership team for incorporation. The drafts were also presented to the parents and community members of the school site council (a committee composed of school employees, parents, and community members charged with developing and evaluating the school plan) and to members of the business and professional community for their suggestions and revisions. We recog-

nized that if the changes we proposed for Stagg High School seemed too radical and caught the community by surprise, the parents and community—part of what Joyce (1982) calls the “external system”—could effectively block any change.

At the same time, we knew that if we had parent and community support, they would provide powerful leverage with the board of education to allow us to restructure Stagg. Our school vision is based solidly on current educational research, and since the parents and community are an important component of our school vision, it was only good sense to include them as part of the change process. In each case, we incorporated their suggestions into the school vision. By the end of January 1991, we had adopted the new school vision as our guide for restructuring activities.

A Vision Born

Now at last we feel we see the “big picture” and can take on a massive restructuring effort in curriculum, governance, and fundamental belief systems—all at the same time (we don't believe in transforming a school piecemeal). A basic assumption of our vision is that Amos Alonzo Stagg High will be a student-focused school with a reciprocal relationship with the community: the school will provide services to the community, and the community will actively participate in the life of the school. Our vision includes a school-based coordination of social services to our largely disadvantaged, minority, and refugee student population; performance-based assessments and other alternative means of assessing students; new support systems to ensure that all students master the high performance standards of the courses; and finding new ways to celebrate and capitalize on the cultural diversity of our student body while still providing for enculturation.

Our vision also affirms the traditional purposes of schooling: developing basic literacy skills, passing on a common core of knowledge in history and literature that reinforce the values of the nation's founders, developing in students a sense of civic responsibility,

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preparing students to enter postsecondary education and the work force, attending to psychosocial needs of students, and ameliorating the negative effects of dysfunctional homes and communities. To achieve that vision, we must restructure the school day, learn new teaching and assessment strategies, revise the curriculum, and invent new structures to implement our vision.

Making Haste Slowly

In February 1991, Stagg High School held a three-day retreat at the Marconi Conference Center on the beautiful northern California coast. The theme was “Designs for the 21st Century—Implementing the Vision.” Participants included teachers, administrators, classified staff, central office administrators (yes, we've learned to communicate with them), board of education members, parents and community members, and students. Led by our consultant Marian Leibowitz, participants worked in small and large groups to discuss what changes we need to make our vision a reality and what the vision would look like in operation.

Teachers' comments about the conference included these: “The best



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thing that's happened in my 20 years of teaching"; "I'm now a born-again educator"; and "It's the first time I've talked with fellow teachers, classified administrators, parents, and board members as equals." A major task now is to sustain the energy and enthusiasm generated at the retreat and translate them into action.

Have we succeeded in restructuring? We won't know for years. We have gotten through our frustrations with not having a clear idea of where we are headed; but now that we have a direction, we are facing bigger problems. When we were only *talking* about change, we met little resistance from other faculty members, other schools, and the community. Now that people will be required to take action and to change, they will, to various degrees, feel threatened. The problems of implementing change will be magnified because we are not piecemealing our efforts—we will be transforming everywhere simultaneously. Yet we are confident that slowly, relentlessly, we will reach our goals. □

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