

Lessons From a Journey into Change

Educators who initiated restructuring in Richmond County found that changing the workplace of teachers means changing the workplace of district administrators, too.

The past four years in the Richmond County, Georgia, schools have taught me much as a district staff developer and much about restructuring, which I entered through the back door. These years have been filled with excitement, stimulation, frustration, despair, turbulence, uncertainty, and . . . loneliness. I want to share some of the things I learned and some of the walls I bumped into along the way, in the hopes that others who have experienced what I have will say, "Aha, then, I'm okay after all!" And maybe those who have yet to experience these things will say, "Great, now I know what to expect!"

Augusta, Georgia, the second largest metropolitan area in Georgia, is the center of Richmond County. Its city-county consolidated school district has 54 schools. We have experienced many innovations over the past 10 years; new instructional initiatives are a way of life in our schools. Even so, in 1986 the business community reported that many of our students were not fully prepared to enter the work force, teachers told us that many students were not developing as independent problem solvers and did not take responsibility for their own learning, and administrators expressed concern that teachers lectured too much, relied excessively on ditto sheets and workbooks, and were interested in



staff development only if it meant earning credits to meet requirements.

Opening the Door

In the spring of 1987, the superintendent asked 13 schools to consider becoming involved in a long-term training and development program that would focus on a range of teaching strategies to take teachers beyond direct instruction to engaging students in more intensive learning. We started the program that June with the three schools that seemed to have the highest level of commitment to the idea.

(Murphy et al. 1988). All three faculties agreed to increase the learning of students and to change the workplace of teaching. Each summer we have added schools, until now we work with 12 schools. We will continue to add schools each year.

I thought we had the relatively simple and straightforward task of giving our school faculties the opportunity to learn a range of new teaching strategies and to organize themselves to work together in groups. Working with Bruce Joyce and Beverly Showers, we put into place an ambitious staff development effort that included presentation of theory, demonstrations of teaching models, expectations for practicing the models, peer coaching in the classrooms, and study groups (Joyce et al. 1989).

Now the Richmond County School Improvement Program (more commonly called the Models of Teaching Program) combines four related innovations. First, we organize all teachers into study groups to examine teaching, curriculum, and academic content. Second, we have an instructional council, made up of school administrators and study group leaders, that examines the learning climate of the school and selects areas for improvement. Third, we provide the faculties with more than 100 hours of training in 4 student learn-

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ing models during their first year. Fourth, we train a cadre of teachers to provide service to their colleagues. Throughout the school year the cadre provides follow-up training and support to study groups as teachers learn the skills of shared work.

In 1986 the program's stated intent, "to change the workplace of teaching," was rather vague to me—I thought it meant we were going to change how teachers teach. Since then, that initial perception has undergone several metamorphoses. What began as staff development soon began to influence all aspects of schooling; today we find ourselves taking a closer look at every aspect of operation in the school system. Not only have we changed the workplace of teachers in schools, we are changing the workplace of administrators in the district. Here are some of the lessons we learned along the way.

Tending Resources

During its first four years our "Models of Teaching" (MOT) program has consumed about 40 percent of the state funds allocated to Richmond County for staff development programs. Dur-

ing that time, at least 50 percent of the district's teachers have experienced 50–200 hours of training either as teachers at a MOT school, as members of a team from a school not in the program, or as individuals enrolling in a quarterly course.

The schools are organized into study groups that can also receive training related to other district or school initiatives. Department directors have had to be patient and recognize that the long-term benefits of the MOT program make the wait for more funds for their programs acceptable. Also, schools must wait their turns. The interface of existing district- and school-level programs with the new initiatives needs to be handled in such a way that the faculties of the lesser-involved schools do not feel left out. Thus we have had to temper publicity.

We knew that if the program's successes were overamplified, schools might pressure us to expand the program so fast that we could not effectively accomplish our goal. But we also feared that if schools knew too little about the program's successes, they would demand a reduction in the allocation of resources. Maintaining commitment while not handicapping other people's initiatives has turned out to be quite a balancing act.

I have had to walk a fine line between the temptation to be secretive and the desire to act as a cheerleader for the program.

Maintaining Commitment

We often hear the criticism that ours is a "top-down" program. Huberman and Miles (1986) found in their studies that "administrative decisiveness bordering on coercion, but intelligently and supportively exercised, may be the surest path to significant school improvement." Huberman and Miles further remind us that managers don't execute innovations, teachers do; and if teachers decide not to execute the innovation, managers will find themselves institutionalizing placebos.

I believe it is the responsibility of leaders to make clear what the needs are and then to make options available to staffs who will address those needs. By doing this and getting faculty agree-

ment for implementation, we have gained commitment through "assistance-rich enforcement and tough-minded help."

However, creating commitment and maintaining that commitment are two different things that require two different approaches. At the beginning of a program you can generate commitment by vocalizing obvious needs. To maintain that commitment, you must not let anyone forget why you started the program in the first place—you can't let them let go. We have learned that people who are well-informed about the effects of the program hold it in higher esteem than those who either don't have the information or who don't pay attention to the information.

At first, I expected that if the project successfully created study teams, offered training, built a district cadre of trainers, and improved student achievement, such successes would be all that would be necessary to maintain commitment. But in fact, success has given rise to competitive feelings and reduced commitment among some district and school leaders. Huberman and Miles

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(1986) found that demonstrated success, even better pupil performance, does not ensure program continuation. Now I accept that political forces could come together to end our journey into restructuring. However, I choose to be optimistic and trust the good work of many people.

Bumping into Entrenched Practices

At the beginning I didn't fully understand just how much "school improvement" actually means "improving practices" and how frequently that requires personnel to learn to do things better without feeling inadequate or without being blamed for past practices which were, after all, normal ones.

To implement our program, we had to accept much larger amounts of training than we were accustomed to, prepare trainers who were novices at training, learn to work in study groups, lead faculties in new ways, and examine student learning more closely. We didn't realize how irritating the program would be—like a gadfly, lighting on one entrenched practice after another and exposing it to scrutiny. People came to know more about one another as teachers and administrators and, therefore, saw more defects as well as virtues. Sometimes it was easier to fix on problems than to applaud fine performances.

In seeing more of one another's performances, administrators and teachers had to learn to tolerate the process of learning, rather than blame one another for not being perfect. Central office administrators also had to refrain from coming down on the administrators and teachers they were learning more about. As we pushed harder to increase students' learning, some instructional and supervisory personnel felt attacked, responding as if their procedures were being questioned. The superintendent anticipated these problems and did not allow the project to be killed as the proverbial messenger of bad news. He knew that the discovery of problems and the generation of solutions to them was an essential feature of the project.

I understand now the discomforts people can feel in bringing attention

to imperfections identified in restructuring efforts. These leaders need the support of a protective, problem-solving environment. A vigorous approach to problem solving is the single biggest determinant of capacity building; passivity and denial are the enemies of change (Lewis and Miles 1990).

Minimizing Distractions

Anything that interferes with concentration on the purpose and strategy of the change effort dilutes the effectiveness of its proponents. Distractions come in many forms. A particularly vexing one is the emergence of a crisis that diverts the energy of leaders. One summer I was pulled away from the training site for several days to respond to a crisis not directly connected to our work. As a result, I failed to respond promptly to needs that emerged from the groups in training.

Other conflicts emerged as the program occasionally became entangled with district procedures. For example, two teachers from one school were on probationary status while they were being evaluated for tenure. Someone suggested that training them in teaching strategies new to them might jeopardize their evaluation. Someone else suggested that the project should avoid all schools where such teachers are assigned lest there be complaints from those who believe they may be unfairly evaluated when practicing new teaching strategies that the evaluators may not recognize.

Pressure from external agencies (such as the state department of education) and internal groups to implement new programs can also dilute or change the course of a current initiative and affect the allocation of resources. For example, in the spring of 1988 our district decided to undergo elementary self-studies for accreditation by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools. That left the two elementary schools in the first phase of the program to battle on two fronts. Consequently, in the second year of the program, we could not include any elementary schools. So in 1988, our four new schools were all middle schools.

Further, we know that a major threat to institutionalization or to embedding

innovations is competing priorities (Miles 1986). Schools can only cope with a limited number of innovations at any time, given the energy and effort consumed by learning new knowledge and skills. The avalanche of innovations in our district, like those in most large districts, will pose the greatest danger to the long-term success of the Models of Teaching Program.

According to Bruce Joyce (1990), ghosts are the tacit understandings that rationalize organizational inaction. They provide a feeling that mean-

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ingful change is taking place while they preserve the status quo and guard the doors to change. Enemies of change wear false faces; the reasons they give for not changing are myths. The enemy, the real reason for not changing, is a void. When I talk with teachers and leaders, the false faces immediately appear. We, then, need to think of ourselves as ghostbusters. Realizing this now helps me counter resistance more directly and fearlessly.

A continuing communication effort that has helped us focus upon goals, results, timelines, program expansion, and successes may help prevent problems arising from an array of distractors. An awareness of crises, new initi-

atives, and a feel for what is developing within the system are essential to preventing or combating loss of interest and resources.

Facing Limitations

Most medium and large school districts have several layers of administration. The person in charge of staff development is often a department director in the third level of the administrative hierarchy. Immediately above the director is a level of assistant superintendents. The superintendent is, of course, at the top level. In Richmond County, staff development is a department in the personnel division. Many of my counterparts are within instructional divisions or tacked on to curriculum departments. These current organizational placements imply that the staff development function has a narrower scope than the overall health of the organization.

But as middle managers, staff developers can't get where they need to be to impact every level of the organization. As Schlechty (1990) says, "Whoever is assigned the development responsibilities must be empowered, feel empowered, and be perceived to be empowered to speak for the superintendent." To meet all of the needs of the organization, staff development must be viewed as organizational development. This function should be an arm of the superintendent's office.

When a middle manager like me assumes the leadership role for major initiatives, the nature of coordination and negotiation can change. As Fullan (1982) suggests, innovations can dislocate layered administrative relationships. To compound that reality, our project had a bundle of innovations: the teaching strategies were new; long-term training with heavy support and follow-up was new; and the study group structure created new collegial relationships that blurred territorial lines.

Strong support from the superintendent was necessary for us to continue, yet attention from the superintendent was often perceived to be status-giving in its own right. Thus, at the very time when I needed to focus all my energy

on the project, I had to spend energy building up good will by creating richer relationships with school and district leaders. My staff and I had to fight the tendency to become closed and see ourselves as special.

Because changes require so much energy and are likely to create disturbances, a major restructuring effort requires rapid communication with all levels of the hierarchy. The director may need quick access to the superintendent. Major innovative projects cannot be run with the same levels of protocol observance that suffice for maintenance or routine operations. If they are, the initiative and problem-solving energy necessary to operate the project may be thwarted. The superintendent must direct energy toward the restructuring effort until it is accomplished, but do so without disrupting organizational status and protocol, insofar as possible.

Crossing Territorial Lines

When individual schools are restructured, every aspect of the larger organization (the district) is affected in some way. All district administrators

and support services exist to support some function of the schools. Every person in the schools, especially in a large district, relates to a district support service. District personnel found that the changes in the workplace of teaching actually blurred the lines of responsibility in the district workplace. Domains became less clear as we reached greater degrees of collaboration. But changing the workplace of schools means changing the workplace of schooling. Unless collaboration occurs at the district level and is visible to school leaders, school leaders may become discouraged. Joyce (1990) states that restructuring involves a transformation of the roles of all personnel and a reorientation of the norms of the workplace. The workplace is both the district and the school.

When I initiated this effort four years ago, I had not connected the changing of the workplace to the concept of restructuring. At that time I was not well versed in the concept of restructuring. We just stumbled into restructuring, and the challenge now is to see whether it can be sustained. I now believe that it can only be sustained by collaboration at all levels of the organization.

Building Faith

School improvement requires that teachers and administrators believe they can make changes in students' ability to learn. Many, but by no means all, personnel have translated the belief that background is the chief determiner of performance into a belief that they cannot help students become more powerful learners. This belief must change or programs such as ours will not succeed.

But belief systems are tough nuts to crack. We found out just how tough when our project began to show results—increased rates of promotion and fewer discipline problems (Murphy and Sudderth 1990). Many teachers had great difficulty accepting that we had achieved these positive results. Teachers in nearby schools said that we had probably lowered standards to make it look as if we'd made gains in achievement and behavior. Even teachers who had

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personally witnessed improvement in their classrooms had difficulty realizing that improvements had occurred throughout their schools.

Everyone here has become calmer and more objective about the system's accomplishments, but the process—of gaining a feeling of efficacy, taking dignified credit for accomplishments, and developing a comfortably balanced view about what achievements are possible—is one I did not anticipate would be so emotional or so hard to achieve. To build faith, the project director, system level administrators, respected peers, and observers from outside the school system must frequently tell teachers about their successes. A sense of efficacy is at the core of teacher empowerment; it becomes a gratifying side effect of a school improvement program.

Where Are We Now?

Where are we today? Eons away from the spring of 1987. Not only do we have 12 schools organized into study groups to study teaching and learning, but as of October 1990, all principals and district administrators were organized into heterogeneous study groups of 6. The superintendent is in a study group with an elementary principal, a middle school principal, a high school principal, a curriculum coordinator, and a special education consultant. These study groups will meet every other week for this school year to discuss a range of assigned books and articles. They will focus on change, on improving schools from within, on developing collegial relationships, on making the Richmond County schools a community of lifelong learners. That is how far we have come.

Teachers are using a range of strategies to actively involve students in the act of learning. Cooperative learning groups are the norm in many schools. Fewer students are being suspended, and more students are being promoted on merit. More students are reading widely and are writing more frequently. That is how far we have come.

It's okay to let others know we stumbled along the way, that we are not perfect, but are rather normal.

This is not the story of one department in a district; but rather, the journey of an entire district that opened a door. We are still learning. We entered restructuring through one door. That door has opened onto interlocking passageways within the cultures of the schools and the district. Each district, each school, each individual must, in fact, find the door and open the door that feels right in each case. □

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