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# A Lab School Explores Self-Governance

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*At UCLA's restructured laboratory school, teachers now share ownership of decisions at every level of the elementary school's operation.*

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Changing circumstances often necessitate restructuring, and our school was no exception. For many years our laboratory school, operated by UCLA's Graduate School of Education, enjoyed stability. In 1982, however, Principal Madeline Hunter and several other prominent faculty went on to other endeavors. The school's new director, Richard C. Williams, had been a professor at UCLA's Graduate School of Education, where his interest had been in school policy and administration. His views of school organization emphasized participatory management and decision making by those closest to the policy's implementation.

Bringing a shared on-site management structure to Corinne A. Seeds University Elementary School (UES) was possible because the school enjoys relative autonomy and is not part of any school district. Williams began by meeting with teachers and staff to design a new decision-making structure for the school. He made suggestions and devoted himself to organizing the school environment to advance the changes the faculty wanted to make — never imposing his own opinions. Over several years, a bottom-up structure emerged, with decision-making power firmly invested in the hands of UES teachers. Today, teachers at UES practice in an environment that respects their knowledge and expertise, permits them to

develop programs, and honors the professional decisions they make.

### **Our Basic Governance Unit**

The school's basic governance unit is the teachers of each level: Early Childhood (ages 4-6); Lower (ages 6-8); Middle (ages 8-10); and Upper (ages 10-12). Each level has 120 students, 4 classrooms, and 2 three-teacher teams. The Middle and Early Childhood levels are exceptions. Middle has 1 team of 6 teachers, and Early Childhood has 5 classrooms, with 1 teacher and 1 full-time aide for each classroom. (In addition, a half-time Early Childhood teacher "roves," freeing up the other teachers for planning, governance, staff development, and other work.)

The teams in each level operate semi-autonomously. They decide, for example, what programs to teach, how to spend their budget, what form parent contacts should take, and what sorts of field trips, ceremonies, and events their classes will participate in each year.

### **Advocacy Groups Plan Curriculum**

Rather than have each individual teacher or team plan its own curriculum, we set up advocacy groups, composed of an administrator and one teacher from each level with expertise or personal interest in certain curricular areas. Advocacy members develop schoolwide curriculums for science, visual arts, discursive arts, and mathematics.

Drawing from one another's skills and interests, teacher-advocates write curriculum units, plan the purchase of materials, and coordinate the curriculum in their subject areas across the school. By attending outside conferences, they also extend their knowledge and sharpen skills in their

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disciplines, eventually sharing their expertise with surrounding districts.

Cross-school advocacy groups enable teachers to contextualize and evaluate their programs with help from teachers working in other levels. In this way, they plan and assess their programs holistically, taking into account the ongoing learning experiences of all students.

Team advocates are released from the classroom for meetings three to seven days a year, depending on the needs of the advocacy. A "newer" advocacy demands more time and work than an "older" one. At first, teachers learn subject matter. Later, as they fine-tune the curriculum, their work becomes more sophisticated.

Over the summer, teacher-advocates are paid to write curriculum units. Each advocate then serves as a resource for his or her level. Thus, instead of every teacher needing to become an expert in every subject, teachers rely on one another's special knowledge and talents.

### **A Formal Decision-Making Body**

Teachers make most of the decisions directly affecting their students, but certain schoolwide decisions still remain. How are these made within the constraints imposed by the larger

goals of the organization? In order to influence policy decisions—such as appropriate reporting procedures, the details of the annual calendar, or whether there should be a class in spoken Spanish for teachers—we've established a formalized decision-making body.

The Administrative Research Group of UES — ARGUE — is made up of the school's director, principal, assistant principal, and one teacher chosen and empowered on certain issues to make decisions for the level. Occasionally a teacher postpones a vote in ARGUE in order to discuss the question with teachers at their level. All advocacy recommendations pass through ARGUE for approval and dissemination.

ARGUE doesn't initiate many decisions; instead, levels, advocacies, and sometimes parents bring issues that affect the entire school to the decision-making group. For example, if the Science Advocacy wants this year's mask parade to have an environmental theme or if parents want to stage a graduation program, ARGUE facilitates the debate.

### **The Role of Administrators**

Of course, when decision making is distributed across a school, the role of administrators changes drastically. No longer is the principal a lone authority figure. At UES, Principal Hal Hyman and Assistant Principal Amie Watson concentrate on supervisory and evaluative functions.

The administrator's role also shifts to one of facilitating and monitoring. Minimizing distractions and other obstacles so that decision-making groups can meet and keep on track becomes a key function. An administrator might, for example, take a leading role in organizing a new advo-

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cacy. Or, if a political event in the community demoralizes or distracts an advocacy, the administrator might spend time encouraging or reinforcing the group's members. An administrator might also smooth the way by providing resources or materials or by ensuring that maintenance staff provide wires and pulleys for a curriculum prepared by the Science Advocacy.

Administrators also become advocates for the children, overseeing all the teachers' decisions with that in mind. For example, the teachers might ask the principal to introduce his perspective on a troubling issue. Sometimes he works with the teachers to develop and examine other options. For example, once teachers planned a field trip with little advance notice to parents, and the principal felt that the children wouldn't be prepared. He met with the level teachers, presented alternatives, and asked for their suggestions. As a result, the teachers decided to postpone the trip two additional days. Clearly, this is not an organizational structure for administrators who need to make all decisions and have everything their way.

Nevertheless, the principal still maintains overall authority by providing a global, schoolwide perspective. He retains the traditional powers of a principal. For example, if

the level teams make a decision he wouldn't have made, the principal then must determine if the decision would harm the children and the school's program or whether to give the teachers the go-ahead with their decision.

### Annual Retreats for Staff Unity

With decision making diffused throughout the school, how does UES maintain unity of purpose? Each year, the entire staff attends a two-day retreat in the mountains or desert. The purpose is to build — and renew commitment to — the shared goals and philosophy at the school as the context in which decision making takes place.

The retreat, meticulously planned by a group of teachers and administrators, is also an opportunity for teachers to reconnect by engaging in small group discussion, listening to speakers, and participating in workshops. Each year, the meeting adds a layer of common understanding, with new teachers brought up to speed on previous years' accomplishments by their colleagues. One year, we used games to reach agreement on goals for child growth and development. Another year, staff attended a presentation on students' cultural differences before participating in a retreat devoted to promoting understanding of cultural diversity.

The shared goals developed at the retreats provide a basis for working out differences that crop up during the year. For example, should administrators disagree with a team's decision, they can refer to the common mission, and say, "Let's take a look at what's best for the kids." Teachers in turn might end up by agreeing with the administrators — or persuading them that the original decision better fits the school's goals.

### Questions of Time and Money

Obviously, two key ingredients are necessary for restructuring a school for bottom-up decision making: time and money. Level teams, advocacies, and the formalized top-down decision-making body (ARGUE) need both time to meet and funds. Meeting time should be outside the regular school day — not at 3:30, when everyone is tired.

Even in these budget-tight times, money to fund the work of these decision-making bodies is not as hard to find as one might think. Once a restructuring plan exists, schools can look for combinations of district and parental support, as well as state teacher grants.

At UES, we've created time for the necessary meetings and work by including 20 "intermission" or pupil-free days in the school calendar. Many public school districts allow "minimum days," which schools can use for the necessary meetings. At UES we also have differentiated staffing — six teachers assigned to four classes — which frees up teachers on a rotating basis. Also, administrators and other staff members (for example, the school nurse, the psychologist) plan activities for the entire school — a musical or dance performance, a play, or literature reading — which free up teachers an additional four half-days per year.

### Small Steps First

Teacher empowerment has become a nationwide rallying cry. Many people are looking for ways to restructure schools in a way that will improve both teachers' work lives and children's education. They would like to dissipate traditional hierarchies of authority to empower the school community as a whole and create a

collegial atmosphere.

Based on our experience in trying to create such a structure, we would counsel other schools with a similar goal to start slowly. Begin the advocacies one at a time, no more than one per year. Look at teacher empowerment as a process, not a product. Set up and nurture the structures, allowing them to evolve over time.

UES teachers do not operate with unbounded freedom. They must abide by certain assumptions and constraints determined by ARGUE, the administrators, and the shared philosophy elaborated at the annual

retreats. Overall, however, the structure we have developed has brought liberating results for teachers.

Jan Cohn, who has taught at the school for 20 years, has seen the evolution of the present decision-making model. She said it has enhanced her work life immeasurably.

"When you make a decision that directly affects your work, it positively influences you in several ways," said Cohn. "You are very invested in the outcome, and you put out high energy to make that outcome successful. You also have a vision about how a successful process and product should

look. So as things began to go awry, you sense the need to intervene and can begin to remedy things early on."

"Having the power and backing to do this," concluded Cohn, "certainly increases your sense of professionalism." □

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