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Collaboration in Schools: Creating Solutions to Complex Problems

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Abstract

Although the concept of cooperative teams is not a new one, Transformational Leadership is bringing collaboration back to the spotlight in the world of education. In this approach, the principal becomes a facilitator, teachers become professional colleagues, students are motivated by the mere joy of learning, and parents and the local community increase their involvement as stewards, resulting in the involvement of all stakeholders in the complex problem solving issues of the school. Collaboration requires trust and support among these team members and, though it takes time, yields much more effective schools and productive students.

The primary function of a school is improvement of learning by those students entrusted to us. But what are the components of improved learning? How do schools achieve this function when students arrive with significant differences in their foundation? Who decides on the course of action that the school will take to achieve this lofty goal? In traditional educational environments, Transactional Leadership prevails, maintaining the autocratic, directive-oriented approach (Bass, 1990). Here, the primary authority rests with the principal, and teachers perform assigned tasks in exchange for an agreed upon reward such as merit pay for increased performance, positive reinforcement for quality work, etc. In the absence of completion of assignments or lack of compliance with directives, corrective action is taken by the Transactional Leader. This style of leadership fails to create collective vision, fails to instill commitment to change, and ultimately demonstrates a severely limited view of human potential (Friedman, 2004).

Conversely, in Transformational Leadership, emphasis is placed on a collaborative, team concept. In education, this approach involves creating partnerships with students, parents, teachers, administration, and the community. According to Bass (1990), the Transformational Leader cultivates an environment where all stakeholders share purpose and vision, embrace enduring greatness, raise one another to higher levels of motivation and celebrate success (Friedman, 2004). However, without transformation and major systemic changes, these partnerships and teams will be superficial in nature (Sharpe & Templin, 1997), existing only as a requirement by the “powers that be.”

Collaboration shifts the power away from the role of principal as manager found in Transactional Leadership. As he engages in a transformational approach, the central authority is seen as facilitator, educator, and steward. This shift in the structure of the school decreases the competitiveness often seen among faculty as it generates trust, cooperation, and widespread willingness to learn. Teachers become major contributors to the school community, fully aware that their work has value and significance to those outside of the classroom. Leadership is then recognized as residing in many people and shows itself in a number of ways (Walker, 1994). The term “classroom teacher” becomes obsolete as the
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administrator makes the final shift toward viewing educators as professional colleagues.

There is, of course, no legal transfer of responsibility. The principal must maintain his/her role as central authority in order to address accountability needs. This individual, in fact, accepts additional responsibility as autonomy is passed to the teaching staff and they, in turn, embrace the team concept. When improved learning replaces teaching as the central focus, educators must move away from isolated individualism and from carrying out their personal interpretations of standardized curriculum behind closed classroom doors while experiencing little interaction with those who work around them (Steel & Craig, 2006).

According to Wilford (2006), collaboration is a unique arrangement based on “building knowledge through conversation” (p. 15) and one from which cooperation frequently results. However, one must recognize that confrontation is inevitable. When members of the team come together, with varying agendas, different experiences, and unique interpretations of so-called standardized curriculum, disagreements will occur. Though possibly uncomfortable, they are not necessarily bad. On the contrary, asserts Wilford (2006): “Some of the most creative solutions to problems emerge when (participants) feel free and safe enough to share ideas even when others don’t agree” (p.15).

While the art of conversation is the cornerstone of collaboration, it may not be an inherent skill. Professional development for all stakeholders should include active listening, problem solving, and conflict resolution skills in order to ensure a strong foundation for the team. Resources and funds should be directed toward the mission instead of toward individual teachers, and continuing education must be ongoing and supported by all stakeholders. Rewards, too, should be directed toward teams rather than toward individuals, however the system should take into account the makeup/needs of the team (Kezar, 2006).

Collaboration must be founded on trust and respect. This takes time, but if student achievement is the true mission everything will fall into place. When all stakeholders work together to create a positive and caring school community, discussing education goals, ideas, and possibilities, they become a problem-solving entity. Ultimately, a new environment emerges where teachers cooperate with each other, responsibility is shared, and the word empowerment becomes a reality. Peer clinical supervision is an excellent tool for bringing professional educators together to solve real problems. This technique allows each teacher to be viewed as a knowledgeable professional, the one who is in fact the most knowledgeable regarding the types of problems that must be resolved in the school setting (McFaul & Cooper, 1984).

The mission will be the hub of collaboration, forged by the timeless principles that guide the organization. In seeking to identify these principles, each stakeholder becomes a viable, valued part of the team with a respected and significant voice. This mission then becomes the compass of the organization, driving it forward in a positive direction. It is a beacon guiding all activity and reflecting the core purpose of the school (Kezar, 2006).

The mission is brought to life through a vision, or word picture, of the ideal school. The source of this vision is the meshing of students’ needs, parents’ aspirations for their children, teachers’ objectives for their students, and data analysis of the framework and composition of the community. This vision is the
established daily course of every staff member, teacher, student, administrator, and parent as it permeates all aspects of the school. In truly collaborative schools, the vision is adjusted and fine-tuned as aspects of the mission are met (or not), based on ongoing evaluation by the team. Evaluation cannot be overstressed. In order for the collaboration model to be successful, the founding members of the team who have continued interest in the program need to meet regularly to critique and amend the vision.

All aspects of a school need to be adapted to promote a cooperative culture. In addition to relational changes outlined above, structural changes must also take place. These may take the form of shared planning time or peer/team evaluation (Rooney, 2005). Technology can promote collaboration by providing opportunities for both horizontal and vertical flow of information and should be employed regularly. E-mail groups among teams, grade levels, departments, etc. can provide for daily communication. Phone dialing systems, E-mail, and regularly written news letters can keep parents informed of progress.

Benefits of collaboration begin with the fulfillment of the primary function of the school: improved learning by students. This leads to improved schools, which yield more productive students, higher test scores, and a greater rate of matriculation. As teachers are inspired with confidence, they become models for student collaboration. This aspect combats another common problem in which first year teachers become disillusioned from the lack of mentor support leaving them feeling isolated and overwhelmed (McFaul & Cooper, 1984). Increased collaboration, peer supervision, and improved teacher-respect results in yet another benefit, that of increased teacher retention, thus the expansion of total years of combined experience.

Peer evaluation gives teachers ownership in their own improvement and promotes attainment of their ultimate goal of providing the best instruction possible (Ellermeyer, 1992). When teachers experience increased collegiality, their general perception changes and they begin to view themselves as a professional community. These and other advantages result from the synergy created by combined perspectives, experiences, ideas, and personal expertise of those members involved.

Collaboration results when all members of the school take ownership of the mission, values, vision and goals; when they all assume responsibility for the attainment of these areas through cooperation, shared ideas, use of best practices, and celebration of every success (Sanders, 2006). According to Kezar (2006) in the Journal of Higher Education, the rewards are intrinsic in a collaborative school. The atmosphere becomes one wherein students are motivated by the joy of learning, teachers are rewarded by student progress, parents & administrators are supportive and involved stewards, and the local community receives a top quality product in the form of a responsible, capable, civic-minded employee applicant pool, as well as productive and contributing members of society (Norton, 2001).

Collaboration may not solve problems as complex as teaching 40 students in one room or promoting learning in a chaotic, out of control school. Nonetheless, it is a promising approach (Goldstein & Noguera, 2006), and as shown in this paper, yields numerous positive advantages. Perhaps the old adage is true: two heads are better than one, or as Hannah Arendt stated “Excellence occurs in the company of others” (Kezar, 2006, p. 827).
References