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TEACHER PARTICIPATION IN DECISION MAKING

Introduction

Decision making is a fundamental process in any organization. The importance of decision making in educational organizations has been recognized as a key function required by administrators (Dawson, 1984). In schools where a clear commitment to student learning is apparent, more teacher participatory decision making is crucial to the overall effective operation of the school (Ward, 1985).

Current debate on educational reform includes many proposals to deviate from traditional models of decision making to those involving increasing amounts of teacher participation in making decisions and extending their involvement in the overall decision process in order to make school policy and management more responsive to societal needs (Boston, 1991). This increased support for participatory management comes from a nation's attention on education, coupled with the current push for accountability and the increased pressure on administrators to run effective schools.

With this increased interest in empowerment through greater participation in decision making it is important to recognize: (1) the need for site-based management; (2) the role of the principals in establishing an effective decision making team; (3) the components of effective participatory management systems;

(4) the benefits of shared decision making; (5) the anticipated problems shared decision making poses on policy making.

The Principal's role in school leadership for shared decision making

To convert public educational institutions into excellent schools, Ward (1985) concurs with other researchers that instead of supervising teachers to death, schools should understand that the entire system benefits when people exert substantial control over their work environment. Schools must accept and favor a participatory style that affords decision making and work. To cooperate well the parts of this complex system must work in concert. Such harmony is exceedingly difficult to bring about without participation by all actors.

Rice (1987) explained putting decision making power as close to the point of delivery as possible makes implementation of those decisions not only possible, but successful. Supported by innovative management theories, schools need to be autonomous and have their own personalized school culture and decision making process. Empowering teachers with more decision making authority requires that a crucial mass of teachers be willing to spend extra time and energy on the process.

Both administrators and teachers agree that teachers should have greater participation in decision making, but the groups differ between their perception of what is and what ought to be (Chamberlain, 1975; Schneider, 1984). According to other researchers the mid-management levels of administration must assess teachers' actual and desired levels of personal involvement in the decision making process. It appears that both groups have a need to fully understand and be in common agreement of their present level of involvement and what it ought to be in the participatory level of decision making. A great many educators either aren't aware of the research in the field, or they have no idea how to go about becoming part of it. As Goodlad (1984) said, instead of working for change, we have deliberately designed a system that will maintain the status quo. Therefore, a

change in attitudes and perceptions of what participatory management can do for the schools is needed.

Quality leadership by principals at the building level is necessary for effective staff participation in decision making. As many experience the shared decision making process for the first time it can be threatening to staff members. The principal should make sure that teachers and staff feel comfortable by providing an open, trusting school climate (Dawson, 1984). In schools where several different interest groups and functions exist, the principal ensures that everyone understands that the shared decision making process is designed to improve the school's needs by working collaboratively.

The principal must be prepared and encouraged to exert leadership on instructional issues. The mission and goals for the school must be the foremost priority for all participants in the decision making process and it is the principal's duty to make them known.

Principals can be a powerful force for school change when they are flexible enough to allow teachers to take part in rational-problem solving and responsible, widely shared decision making. The allocation of time as evidence of administrator commitment will encourage teachers to initiate and continue their involvement in the process. No longer should teachers have to become principals to influence policy. They now have the opportunity to work with administrators as partners and to share power (Maeroff, 1988).

According to research (Hall, 1986; Short and Greer, 1989) common components for a successful team decision management approach include: (1) two or more people work together on a management activity with a common mission or goal; (2) the team consists of representatives of important sub-systems in the organization who work together on a common goal; (3) general input into administrative policy decisions are provided; (4) teams are comprised of a small

number of individuals, teachers, administrators and community representatives who have different backgrounds, skills and knowledge who work together toward a specific goal; (5) participative management involves employees in the decision making process which affects their working conditions; (6) individuals who are affected by the decision have input and involvement in the process of making decisions and therefore have a feeling of ownership in the decision process.

When anticipating the long-term benefits of a participatory decision making program one can expect to see teacher moral and support improve. As a result, there will be a more cohesive school-wide focus on education and student learning (Wallace, 1990). Accountability will focus on building level staff instead of the wider district level approach. Teachers, other staff members, parents and citizens will be more involved in the schools. Improved communication skills will emerge between administrators, teachers, parents, community members, and students. New teacher leaders will emerge throughout the school and the overall climate within the school will improve. In addition, schools will become more efficient and productive, in part because staff, students and community members help to identify ways of financial waste and improve the delivery of services. The students learn and the overall effectiveness of the institution goes up (Philips, 1989).

Staff involvement in the decision making policy offers school boards and other educational authorities an opportunity to create a professional school environment where decisions are based on what best serves the learning needs of pupils. These empowered individuals will participate in decisions in such areas as school climate, student attendance, discipline, school resources, teaching methods and strategies, staff development, and goal setting (Dawson, 1984).

The literature also notes that districts wanting to initiate a shared decision making approach at the building level must anticipate some difficulties.

Implementation of any program or process can not be accomplished without foresight of problems. How can these barriers be overcome? Principals, teachers and others involved must realize that the amount of cooperation and power sharing required could make school-based management unworkable. A basic starting point might be to identify and openly discuss diverse issues and be open and honest with each other. Developing a high level of trust and keeping communication lines open are essential elements faced by the participants (Ward, 1985).

In determining accountability with shared decision making the current measures of student and school progress are not precise enough. A systematic review of current evaluation procedures must be investigated and new methods designed and implemented early. Conservativeness of educators and political and economic forces must be considered as forces that work both for and against implementing this new approach. The lines between the authority (principal) and responsibility of supervisors and employees are blurry and must be cleared. Participants can engage in exercises that illuminate the specific problems with past roles and use this information to pose alternative ways in which to use the new shared decision making model (Phillips, 1989).

First time participants in this process should also have in mind the following: (1) Anticipate the slowness of the decision making process and how it frustrates participants. Try to include teachers where they show interest and not boredom and remind them that change is an ongoing process and immediate results are not going to occur.

(2) Plans for initial and follow-up training and support of district, training, new budgeting practices, time for full implementation, access to information, and open communication are areas to remember as participatory decision making is implemented. The central office officials (i.e., Ministry of Education) must

support and trust school principals and teachers in making the decisions for their buildings. School boards and administrators must focus on performance level and not on the actual procedures.

(3) Participation in and contribution to the process of decision making are an indispensable condition of participatory management. Teachers must go beyond the traditional role of classroom instructor. They must expand their role to include curriculum development, teacher evaluation, school improvement, leadership, and research. All of these areas are crucial to the participatory decision making process. Teachers are not autonomous beings isolated to classrooms anymore (Rosenholtz, 1989). They are creative professionals who know what they are doing and why they are doing it.

Conclusion

If shared decision making is to lead to greater professionalism, researchers must carefully document the process and studies must relate processes to outcomes. If participative decision making is to be successfully implemented, a wide range of policy changes will need to occur. Reframing of the traditional roles of the administrator and teachers within a given building, the placement of decision making authorities within the school and the involvement of school constituencies in all aspects of life must happen.

With changing to a more global society the whole world is faced with restructuring education to meet the needs of its citizenry in the future. Researchers spent much time and effort in the literature trying to tell the educational community about substantial reasons and positive benefits for implementing a participatory decision making approach on the school campuses.

Much agreement is offered to the fact that teachers can take a larger role in the overall success of the school when they commit to being active participants in

the decision making process. Teachers need to feel they have more to offer to the school than just teaching autonomously within their classroom. Schools must understand that the entire system will benefit when teachers play an active role in controlling their work environment. Everyone must be provided as much recent research as possible before implementation can be achieved successfully. At the same time, specific training should be provided as well.

At the present time teachers and administrators are ill-prepared to tackle changing school and societal policies. Preparation for the decision making processes must begin at the highest level of education. Teachers and administrators must learn both the theoretical and practical implications of shared decision making. As a consequence, in the future the overall career expectations for teachers and administrators will change once they know what their professional obligations will be prior to entering the school buildings. Little documentation was found to substantiate the role of colleges' in preparing these professionals for decision making. However, it could be assumed that a great deal of such training could be offered during the college years of a future teacher.

There is much consensus regarding the long-range benefits of participatory decision making as outlined in the literature. However, there were not many documented examples of school district decision making programs at the building level. It seemed as though the changes are slow in coming and its evidence is apparent through the trickling of information through the literature.

Recent calls to increase the autonomy and professionalism of teachers in the United States have remained only recommendations. Research has demonstrated that teachers who serve only as instructors simply go through the motions, do not participate in decisions and hold no stock in improving the educational system. Talk is cheap and currently the verbal views for shared decision making are inviting, but not enough data is available to indicate that it is

panacea for the improvement of public education. Only time, resources, participatory involvement, and support from all participants will determine the effectiveness of Teacher Participatory Decision Making.