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Sharing Hats

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A New York City school discovers the promises—and the pitfalls—of sharing responsibilities.



Instructional leader, master teacher, content area specialist, staff developer, curriculum expert, community builder, programmer, head of safety and discipline, parent liaison, human resource person, budget maintainer, physical plant manager, and head cheerleader. These are all hats many principals today must wear. The role of the principal has grown so much that it is virtually impossible for one person to handle every facet of the position successfully. As a result, many principals have begun to empower teachers and other staff members to lead within their schools.

But such delegation has its challenges. At Ryan Middle School, our efforts at building teacher leadership have met with great success, but this success has not been entirely problem-free. We've learned that even the best initiatives require constant and consistent reflection if improvement is to continue.

The Need for Change

Ryan Middle School in Fresh Meadows, Queens, New York, is a comprehensive middle school with 1,427 students in grades 6–8. The school has a multicultural population of black, Asian, white, and Hispanic students; 48 percent of the students live below the poverty level, 12 percent are English language learners, and 10 percent are in special education.

Five years ago, Reginald Landeau Jr., fresh out of the first graduating class of New York City's Leadership Academy, became the principal at Ryan, which was at the time the worst school in the city's best district. The dream was to make Ryan into a top-10 middle school. Such improvement would require leadership from the entire staff; not only to move us in the right direction, but also to build a solid foundation for the future.

A Vision for Growth

Building leadership from within takes purpose, vision, and, most of all, buy-in from staff. Organizations that succeed in a time of change seek diversity of employees, ideas, and

experiences while establishing mechanisms for sorting out, reconciling, and acting on new patterns (Fullan, 2001). Collaboration and cooperation of all stakeholders is necessary to create cultural change in schools.

At Ryan, the first order of business was to systematically restructure the school in a way that would benefit everyone. The six-member school cabinet, which consisted of Reginald, Daphne VanDorn and two other assistant principals, and the literacy and mathematics coaches, was too small to tackle all the issues. Even though the principal was accountable for the school's success or failure, he had to release the reins of leadership. Thus, the concept of the sustainable growth team was born.

In *Good to Great* (2001), Jim Collins discusses the necessity of getting the right people involved in improvement efforts before making definite plans: finding the *who* first and then determining the *what*. Collins says that "the right people will be self-motivated by the inner drive to produce the best results and to be part of creating something great" (p. 32). Using this concept as a guide, our cabinet decided to invite two members from each department to share insight into what was really occurring in classrooms and in teachers' minds. Mary Ellen Freeley and other professors at St. John's University agreed to host a retreat with our prospective leaders to discuss ways to build community and improve our learning environment and the quality of instruction in our school.

Teachers Weigh In

At the initial retreat, the teachers began to take the lead in discussing cultural change within the building. In an "Autopsy without Blame" activity (Collins, 2001), participants discussed in small groups the good things about Ryan and things they would change if they were the principal. After the small-group discussions, each person shared with the entire group. One of the ground rules for sharing was "no blame ... just the facts or the feelings."

Teachers said that they wanted opportunities to decide on their own professional development topics, to collaborate with one another, and to observe one another's best practices in the classroom; a protocol to address students' social and personal problems that lead to academic problems; and research into what the best middle schools were doing.

We knew from the honest feedback that we were onto something good. Leaders were emerging from the conversation, and teachers were beginning to take ownership of rectifying identified problems. Some volunteered to design surveys about in-house professional development. Others suggested forming study groups to become knowledgeable about teacher collaboration and teaming. One teacher even volunteered to create a class visitation schedule and a teacher-friendly walk-through plan.

After eight intense hours, we had established the following priorities for the next school year:

- Create a new vision and mission statement.
- Restructure our "academies" (school-based smaller learning communities) into true

thematic-based entities with electives that reflect each academy's theme (Law and Justice, Media Arts, and Scientific Exploration).

- Move 95 percent of teachers into different rooms based on the new academy structure.
- Investigate what the best middle schools are doing.
- Determine our most pressing organizational and instructional needs and create an action plan to reach our goals and objectives.

Teachers as Leaders

The retreat participants, who became our new sustainable growth team, returned to their departments and shared the positive experience they had, focusing on the opportunity to truly be part of the decision-making process. The school administrators and professors from St. John's University trained the team members, now full-fledged teacher leaders, in best practices for leadership. These newly minted leaders began to address the school's needs.

Feeling empowered to rally the masses, the sustainable growth team began to do the work spoken about during the retreat. They formed study groups to address teaching practices and strategize on how to deal with problematic adolescents, they surveyed staff members to ascertain what they were interested in learning, and they formed a team to create an action plan for changing the physical environment of the academies. An all-inclusive group of more than 60 Ryan staff members gathered at St. John's University to investigate and discuss best practices in top U.S. middle schools.

The team began meeting twice a month to discuss the work. To keep the discussion solution oriented, team members agreed to discuss the problem under consideration for two minutes only before getting into solution mode. Topics included professional development needs, looking at student work to improve pedagogy, team building, action research, and integrating technology into the curriculum.

Each department had at least two teacher leaders, and departments subject to high-stakes testing appointed teacher leaders on each grade level to address both common and grade-specific concerns. These teacher leaders represented their department at sustainable growth team meetings, met with their department to gather information, conveyed information to the sustainable growth team, participated in ad hoc committees to address specific needs, and reported decisions made at the sustainable growth team meetings to their departments.

Department-level study groups discussed a variety of topics. These included creating a standards-based curriculum aligned to the New York State assessments, pre- and post-testing analysis, data-driven instruction, differentiated instruction, and working with students with special needs. On the basis of their learning, groups made recommendations to the principal and assistant principals, most of which were approved. The teacher leaders delivered professional development to the rest of the staff on approved topics. Because teachers were the ones initiating and providing most of the professional development, the information was well received and implemented.

Making Progress

The team continued to meet twice a month and congregate at least twice a year for retreats. Progress was evident in the school culture. Departments held weekly planning meetings to share instructional practices, academies met monthly to discuss improvements, teachers gathered after school to discuss pedagogy and student issues, and more informal collaboration began to occur outside these meetings. Professional learning communities on English language learners, team teaching, and professional development formed; and an interdisciplinary group partnered with St. John's University to obtain state accreditation in Gifted Education. In all efforts, teacher-led professional development became standard practice.

Our progress also began to show in student test scores. New York State standardized test scores in English Language Arts rose from 53 percent at or above grade-level in 2005 to 86 percent in 2009. Scores in Mathematics rose from 60 percent at or above grade-level in 2005 to 95 percent in 2009.

Reevaluating the Journey

Despite our successes, we discovered in year four that the sustainable growth team was not a perfect solution to our school's problems. In fact, some of the members were creating more problems than they were solving.

First of all, over the years we had been adding members to the team to address identified areas of concern. Because we were determined to make the team inclusive rather than exclusive, we had become so large that we could never reach consensus.

Second, some staff members who were not part of the team perceived the teacher leaders as "the chosen ones" rather than as "workhorses pulling the cart." Some team members were starting to appear arrogant because they had the ear of the principal. Team members also became committed to their own agendas instead of an overall vision for the school.

We knew that we needed to continue with shared leadership and creating leaders from within, but our current approach wasn't working. A new focus and structure were necessary. We decided to create new committees with specific focuses for improvement. In this new structure, not all team members would be invited back to serve. Others would be asked to take on new responsibilities that better suited the school's current needs and their own areas of professional growth.

Beginning in 2009, the sustainable growth team became six smaller committees: curriculum committee, data team, inquiry/action research team, student conferencing committee, technology team, and active learning committee. We discontinued the original sustainable growth team with a celebration of our collective triumphs.

New Beginnings

With every ending, there is opportunity for a new beginning. The demise of our sustainable growth team was not an occasion for regret; rather, it was a commemoration of our hard work and a stepping stone to our next accomplishment. In a sense, we are still living with the sustainable growth that arose from the original team of teacher leaders.

At Ryan, building internal shared leadership led to a cooperative environment that most educators strive for. By removing some of his hats, our principal has become better able to think about the school globally while developing the professional growth of school staff. And we've all learned the value of redistributing those hats as needed along the way.

References

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