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The Select Seminar Process: A Program That Works

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The New York State Leadership in Educational Administration Development Center (LEAD) was funded to develop and operate a technical assistance center to strengthen and enhance school building leadership and management. The central mission of the center is to provide a grassroots forum for the discussion of leadership and management of elementary and secondary school buildings . . . an ongoing conversation among consciously competent principals, teachers, superintendents, college of education faculty, parents, and community groups.

Using these discussions as a starting point the LEAD Center is committed to produce a series of white papers on specific leadership and management issues that affect schools on a daily basis. This article describes that process as it has unfolded over the first one and one half years of the center's operation.

The series of purposeful and informed conversations which are discussed here on a basis on which "grassroots" activities may be established makes this project unique. It is our experience that while such an approach is often suggested it is rarely carried out. It is our hope that the work of the project will inspire its participants to transcend the limits of their collective experience to discover and ex-

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plore clearly new and revolutionary manners of being and behaving.

Building The Case

If restructuring is getting at the disabling practices in school buildings—more specifically those things we do that impede us in terms of accomplishing organizational (school) goals—how best might we recognize what these practices are? It seems logical that teachers and administrators, those most affected by these practices, define these negative structures and offer alternatives or recommendations.

Policy makers must realize that teachers and administrators know better than anyone else what happens in our schools . . . if policy makers help us examine our situation then they serve a useful purpose; if they offer remedies for one situation that negatively affects other areas of the school then they are part of the problem not the solution. . . . What have they been so far?

Marilyn Ferguson, author of *The Aquarian Conspiracy*, advises: "Most problems cannot be solved at the level at which they are framed. They must be reframed and placed in a larger context. Educational leaders need to do more than one thing in order to get one thing done. They need an eye for the whole chess board—a helicopter view of the grand design as well as the details." Only through collegial dialogue are we able to make this point. Open, honest, fair, unbiased dialogue seems to be the key. Schooling is well understood generally but poorly understood in its specifics; practitioners understand the specifics.

John Goodlad in a *Place Called School*, one of the most comprehensive studies of schools ever conducted, said that "to the degree one can generalize from our data, one must conclude that the energy being devoted to eliminating what gets in the way of learning and to creating school climates favorable to learning is miniscule." He goes on to say that, in one of our *Technical Reports* (Morris, 1981), we note the markedly supportive relationship between principals and teachers in the most satisfying schools as contrasted with the tension between principals and teachers in the least satisfying schools.

Goodlad also says that, in another *Technical Report* (Heckman, 1982), interesting differences existed in the culture of the most satisfying schools as compared with the least satisfying. The principals and teachers worked more cohesively as a group in the most satisfying schools and were more likely to address problems transcending the school, not just individual classrooms. As the teachers put it, "we take care of our business." By contrast, the least satisfying schools were wallowing in chronic problems which seemed never to be addressed in any cohesive, productive way. The problems remained chronic, interfering with human relationships and, no doubt, teaching and learning. The most satisfying group of schools tended to be somewhat self-renewing. The least satisfying schools verged on chaos and, indeed, in some cases appeared to be near collapse.

Policy makers lack understanding of individual school cultures, yet continue to recommend a rather limited array of interventions, often having little to do with what makes for a healthy school environment. They continue to assume that schools are businesses, feeling that more input in the form of existing structures such as tighter supervision, longer classes and days, and even more materials will make the difference.

Enlightened practitioners understand that planning and addressing issues that effect the school culture in iso-

lation of input from key players is a sure way to set up failure or, at best limit our changes of attaining excellence.

Thomas J. Sergiovanni, one of the foremost experts on the principalship and motivation to work, said that, "Reflective principals are in charge of their professional practice. They do not passively accept solutions and apply them mechanically. They do not assume that the norm is a one-best-way to practice, and they are suspicious of easy answers to complex questions. They are painfully aware of how context and situations vary, how teachers and students differ in many ways, and how complex school goals and objectives actually are; they recognize that, despite difficulties tailored treatments to problems must be the norm. At the same time, reflective professional practice requires that principals have a healthy respect for, and be well informed about and use, the best available theory and research and accumulated practical wisdom."

Select Seminar Model

The New York State Leadership in Educational Administration Program in its attempt to provide a grassroots forum for the discussion of leadership and management of elementary and secondary schools is committed to the concept of collaboration by educators at school sites in terms of addressing the complex and challenging issues of practicing professionals.

One of the most successful vehicles used to accomplish this task is the "Select Seminar" process. Results of the select seminars are shared in the form of white papers entitled: *A View From the Inside*. Three white papers have been produced in the one and one half years of existence of the New York LEAD Center. A fourth report is due for publication during the summer of 1989. The reports now available through the New York LEAD Center are: *School Building Leadership and Management*, *Needs of Beginning Principals*, and *Administrative Shortage . . . Real or Perceived*. A *View From the Inside: Addressing the Impediments to Collaboration* will be released this summer.

The Process

The LEAD Center select seminars follow a very simple structure based upon a set of guiding principles:

1. Participants need to commit adequate time—to work, to reflect, and to write.

Most seminars have been conducted for five full days over three months, the first three days spread about two weeks apart over the first two months with the final session being a two-day overnight retreat in the middle to the end of the third month. Other variations have been used.

2. A conducive working environment is very important.

The seminars have been conducted in "protected environments"—away from the work site, in quiet and aesthetically pleasing surroundings with special care being given to the quality of food and refreshments. We believe this clearly is a first step in communicating to participants that the seminar is special and there are high expectations that the deliberations of its members will have an important result.

3. The seminar participants are the experts.

We believe these select seminars have been highly successful in part because of the high degree of personal and professional respect afforded participants and the central belief on which the seminar series was founded: "that consciously competent teachers and administrators are the best arbiters of educational practice." While participants do extensive reading during the seminars, visiting experts and lecturers are not a part of this experience.

4. Roles are "checked at the door."

One's ideas must stand on their own, be debated, accepted, or discarded without reference to one's position, prior experience, or education.

5. Seminars are self-governing entities with organizers serving the group.

After providing the initial structure and on-going logistical support, the governance and direction is handed over to the participants. By the end of the seminar it is fair to say that it is self-governed with the coordinators taking direction from the seminar group.

6. The experience is at least as important as the product.

All seminar participants agree that the process, the experience, is most important; in fact, the report might be quite different if the process had continued over time, this representing but one point in an ongoing process when, although there was much agreement on important issues, there was strong disagreement as well. Even so, the report provides an important documentation of the experience and serves to validate for each of the participants the energy and effort they expended.

Outcomes of the Seminar Process

We believe that the reports provide inspiration and help to those who read them and may assist in a modest way to continue what has become a very important national conversation on schools. We firmly believe such an ongoing conversation can only result in better education for all of our children.

Well documented in the volumes of recent research is the role of the principal in affecting the success of school buildings. Also apparent in this body of research is the need for the principal to be sensitive to educational, economic, and societal wants and needs. The principals' ability to recognize disabling practices, and to invigorate school environments through proven leadership and management are key issues addressed during the seminars. The major theme of the seminar conversations revolves around the pursuit of excellence and goals in a collaborative, cooperative way, that allows educators to tap (perhaps for the first time) the enormous wealth of talent and expertise present in our schools. A major theme of the seminar process is the absolute belief in the necessity of conducting our work in an atmosphere of cooperation and trust, couched in team effort that encourages interaction and shared learning.

Implicit in the discussion of the seminars is a fundamental rethinking of management based on hierarchy in a culture of professionals. School leaders are individuals who can turn challenges into opportunities; who can clarify problems, choices and options; who can build morale and create a vision; who can form coalitions and raise expectations; who can empower others and enhance the possibilities of true professionalism in schools.

The power of the select seminar process is vested in the fact that the content reflects the thoughtful deliberations on current theory and practice addressed by individuals who work in the reality of a school culture on a daily basis.

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