A Rural High School's Collaborative Approach to School Improvement

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This study examines the events and behaviors associated with the improved and sustained student achievement in a rural high school. The rural high school highlighted in this study showed significant improvement and sustained achievement over a three year period as defined in the following areas: (a) test scores, (b) achievement of Adequate Yearly Progress, and (c) attendance and graduation rate. This case study identified various factors associated with the change process, including leadership behaviors, organizational structure, and particular characteristics of the school within its rural context. Qualitative analyses suggest that both organizational practices and instructional leadership behaviors contributed to developing successful collaborative efforts that, in turn, led to improved student achievement. Three essential elements identified for successful collaboration were (a) scheduled time for teacher collaboration; (b) structured and focused collaboration time devoted to improving instruction and student achievement, and; (c) leadership behaviors that focused on student-centered planning and accountability. Relationship and contextual factors associated with rural schools and small communities were identified as advantageous to developing a collaborative process for school improvement.

Introduction

Schools across the nation have been the target of reform for improvement since the innovations of the 1960s and the focus on accountability in the 1970s. Recognized experts in the field of education serve to galvanize the debate around the need for reform and establish substantive areas in which to undertake that reform (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983; National Education Commission of Time and Learning, 1994; the National Association of School Principals, 2004). Murphy, Beck, Crawford, Hodges, and McGaughey (2001) noted that high schools' traditions and practices have outlived their usefulness, further commenting that high schools have not kept pace with their elementary counterparts in preparing students for the future. The National Association of Secondary School Principals (2004) in its monograph on high school reform aptly recognized that "the more they change; the more things seem to remain the same" and further noted of their 1996 reform initiative, "[i]t is not by accident that this report titles itself *Breaking Ranks*" (pp. 4-5).

While few high schools appear to be willing to take the initial risk involved in school reform, even fewer have successfully sustained improved student achievement. Rural high schools in particular face several challenges that affect academic performance including high rates of child poverty (Farmer, et.al., 2006; Huang & Howley, 1991, Johnson & Strange, 2007), limited resources for educational materials and professional development (Hickey & Harris, 2005; Howley & Howley, 2005), an inability to attract and retain highly qualified teachers who have appropriate training and credentials (Arnold, Newman, Gaddy & Dean, 2005; Holloway, 2002; Lowe, 2006) and the combined impact of distance and sparse populations on schools' abilities to staff classes according to student need (Johnson &Strange, 2007; Ramage & Howley, 2005). While each of these problems is formidable, collectively they can significantly constrain the educational achievement of all youth served in such settings and may limit the attainment of even the most promising students.

Organization Development and Transformational Leadership: A Conceptual Framework

From a systems perspective, the dynamics of school improvement are analogous to the processes of Organization

Development (OD). OD is defined as a planned, organization-wide approach to change that is managed from the top for the purpose of improving organizational effectiveness and health (Beckhard, 2006). Schmuck and Runkel (1985) noted that OD in schools is characterized by a sustained effort that focuses on the dynamics of the social system; uses self-study for planned change; centers on improvement in organizational functioning through formal and informal procedures, processes, and norms; and, directly impacts educational issues.

OD as a general approach to change specifically addresses processes and strategies for affecting change, taking the perspective that change is sustained and institutionalized as a result of an organization's internal (rather than external) forces. OD focuses on interpersonal and group interactions within the school's social system and particularly centers on the norms of the organization. Norms, whether formal or informal, are the accepted ways of behaving and involve the roles, structures, and procedures within the organization. OD as a model of change is oriented toward modifying organizational norms.

In order to manage change, schools must diagnose whether or not they are actually doing what they want to be doing and whether their actions match their words. In addition, schools must seek information and resources needed to solve problems. Most importantly, change must be implemented collaboratively.

OD concerns itself with developing an organizational culture where individuals' needs for achievement, friendship, and influences are satisfied through their work. Further, OD depends upon building effective subsystems through

- clarifying communication;

- improving group procedures in meetings;

- establishing goals;

- uncovering and working with conflict;

- solving problems;

- making decisions, and;

- assessing changes (Schmuck & Runkel, 1985).

OD emphasizes the involvement of individuals in these processes and identifies intact groups (subsystems) as the most appropriate focus for developing these capacities.

Leadership is an essential component of the OD process. Further, leadership, as opposed to management, is concerned with systemic change involving a shift in culture. Sergiovanni (1996) referred to the ultimate purpose of school leadership as one of transforming the school into a moral community. Sergiovanni (1992) contended that what he termed moral leadership is necessary for sustained, expansive performance in schools. Moral leaders develop schools with shared values and beliefs where teachers work collegially. Others have discussed the concept of transformational leadersip as leadership that transforms or changes an organization. Transformational leadership is generally characterized as engaging leaders and followers in a common purpose (vision) and resulting in higher levels of performance, increased motivation to act for the benefit of the group, and an appreciation of new perspectives (Bass & Avolo, 1994; Burns, 1978). Leithwood (1994) added that transformational leadership develops structures for participative decision making and positively impacts school culture.

The Study

Drawing upon the conceptual framework of OD as planned change for school improvement, this study sought to investigate a rural high school that had purposively developed a plan for school improvement and sustained its efforts. In light of the importance of leadership for such efforts as purported in the scholarly literature centered on transforming organizations, this study focused on the leadership behaviors of the principal and the interactions among leaders and followers that occurred through the school improvement process.

This study was undertaken in order to examine one particular rural high school that showed improved and sustained student achievement over a five year period. This study describes the change process in a rural high school that deliberatively implemented change in the name of school improvement and student.

The rural high school highlighted in this study showed significant improvement as defined in the following areas: (a) pass rates on high school proficiency tests, (b) achievement of Adequate Yearly Progress, and (c) attendance and graduation rates. This case study identified various factors associated with the change process, including leadership behaviors, organizational structure, and particular characteristics of the school within its rural context.

The study of Valley High School (a pseudonym) was guided by the following research questions:

1. What factors were present in this school that led to the school's successfully increasing student achievement?

2. What factors were present in this school that inhibited the change process and how were they overcome?

3. How was the change process structured in terms of leadership, governance, and decision-making?

This study describes the processes of change as the school evolved from one of low student achievement to one of sustained, high student achievement.

Limitations

The conceptual framework defining this study may place limitations on the analyses of data presented here; and, therefore, the study may not fully address all aspects of change in the school and community. The study, by its nature, has the limitation of any case study in that it describes a single example of the phenomenon in this case of school change. However, it does present a story of leadership-followership interactions set within a rural context and describes a process of change that affected subsystems and organizational norms and culture.

Selection of Case

Taylor and Bogdan (1984) advised that "in a case study, an event, situation, or program is selected for investigation on the basis of its potential for offering information or insight that enriches the data base and that may be useful in understanding other similar phenomena." (p.48). Valley High School was chosen because it met the following parameters of interest in this inquiry: It was (a) a high school (b) in a rural setting (c) that had substantially increased student achievement, (d) had sustained high student achievement over three years, and (e) had deliberately implemented change. Thus, the selection of Valley High School represents an instrumental case (Stake, 1995) meeting a specific criterion set, the result of purposeful sampling (Creswell, 1998).

Because we sought a rural high school that had deliberately implemented a change process and that had increased student achievement factors, we solicited self and other nominations through the National Rural Education Association list serve and from selected state departments

of education. From those nominated, Valley High School represented a case that met all the criteria and provided a case of convenience due to its location, a factor reflecting time and money savings in conducting the research.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data for this study were collected from these sources:

1. In-depth interviews conducted with sixteen individuals who participated in the school improvement process. Respondents included the school's principal during the time period under study, the superintendent, ten teachers, two parents, and two students;

2. Documents pertaining to the school improvement process such as newsletters, memos, school improvement plan, and yearly accreditation reports, and;

3. observations at various locations and events including classrooms, staff meetings, and faculty collaborative planning meetings.

Individuals selected to be interviewed represented a cross section of teachers, students, and parents and were identified through documents and other individuals as key players who took part in the school improvement process. Those interviewed included at least one teacher from each major department who was directly involved in the school improvement process, two 12th grade students who had been involved in student council and other leadership positions during their high school careers, and two parents who had been highly involved in the school's booster clubs. All subjects were guaranteed confidentiality with their involvement in the project.

Semi-structured interview protocols were designed for administrators, teachers, parents, and students in order to elicit each group's perspectives on curriculum, instruction, decision making, change process, and stakeholder involvement. Each interview lasted approximately one hour, and all interviews were recorded and transcribed for later coding and interpretation by the researchers.

Researchers spent six days in the school over a 2-month period, in which all 37 classrooms were observed. In addition, observations were conducted of common areas, such as the cafeteria during lunch time and hallways during passing periods. Focused observations of general staff meetings and collaborative teacher planning meetings were also conducted. In making observations, the researchers compiled field notes for later analysis. All data, including interview transcripts, field notes and documents were

subjected to qualitative analysis, which included coding of data for the purposes of categorizing and seeking patterns in the phenomenon.

After initial coding, data from documents, interviews, and field notes were displayed in a time-ordered matrix (Miles & Huberman, 1994) in order to gain an overall understanding of the sequence of events that occurred during a five-year period of change and school improvement. Through additional coding and recoding of data, a conceptually clustered matrix (Miles & Huberman, 1994) was developed in order to offer insight into our three initial research questions. Through constant-comparative analysis of categories, themes, and tentative explanations (Merriam, 1998), a cognitive map was developed that outlined meta-themes related to process, context, and roles.

Valley High School

Valley High School is located in a community situated 15 miles east of the capital of a Western state on a busy state highway. The community served by Valley High School has undergone great growth over the past five years. In this town, retail consists of a new shopping strip mall and one grocery store. The newspaper runs 4,800 copies of its weekly edition. There are many older historic buildings off the main street and on the highway that runs through the middle of town. There is a single traffic light in the town. Although Main Street has quite a few newer buildings, none provide any formal recreation for its high school age children.

Traditionally, this community had been agriculture-based. However, over the past few years it has undergone many changes. Farms and ranches have sold out to housing developments to address the town's substantial population growth. This rural community is fighting to hold on to its unique small-town atmosphere, while at the same time making major changes from an agricultural way of life to becoming a large bedroom community of the state capital.

Valley High School is located about one mile off of the main street and is the hub of this community. It is surrounded by one of the elementary schools and its one feeder school, an intermediate school with grades 5-8. Another elementary school is located four miles east of the main part of town in a residential area. Because of the growth in this vicinity, a third elementary school is being built in a newer residential area located about seven miles east of town.

The high school opened at its present location in 1981. Since that time the school has undergone several expansions to accommodate this fast growing community. These changes included a new culinary building, 16 new classrooms, and an additional gym. Valley High School serves grades 9-12 with a student population of approximately 730, up from 620 in 2001. Valley's student population is primarily Caucasian (79%). Its largest minority group is Hispanic (18%), up from 1% in 2001. Valley is the second largest of the five high schools in this county school district of 2,000 square miles with a student population of approximately 9,000.

Context for Change

In 1997, the state passed an education reform bill promoting accountability and student achievement. Schools were graded as high achieving, adequate, or in need of improvement based on their performance on norm referenced tests. In 2001, the state added the high school proficiency exam, a criterion referenced test. Passing this exam became mandatory for high school graduation in 2003.

In 2001, Valley High School was adequate as measured by the state's guidelines, but just barely. Pass rates on the high school proficiency exam (not yet mandatory) hovered just above 50%. Community members perceived Valley High School as inadequately preparing its students and were concerned about falling behind in light of stricter accountability measures on the horizon. When the school district moved Valley High School's principal to a new school in 2001, the school board sought a principal who would make changes that would effectively address these concerns.

The board hired Ms. Black as the new principal at Valley, promoting her from assistant principal. Black had served as Valley High School's assistant principal for 4 years, and prior to that had served as an administrator in another state. Black replaced Mr. Jones, who was viewed by one teacher as "a manager principal whose number one goal was to make sure that the students picked up trash—very little focus was placed on instructional practices." Another teacher stated, "Mr. Jones was not kid friendly but extremely adept and successful at playing politics at the district level."

To comply with the district's school improvement mandate, Jones went through the process of having a core team write a school improvement plan, but there was no staff consensus, buy-in, or follow through with the plan. According to the chair of the school improvement team, "it was just a document that was written and then stored on the shelf." Jones was the principal at Valley High School for two years, having replaced a man described as "focused" and "hard working" but who angered community members when he fired a popular football coach.

In recalling her transition to the principalship, Black stated, "It took a long time for the healing process to begin and for the staff to start working together as a team for the kids." One teacher noted, "Valley High School was a laughing stock of the state before Ms. Black became principal. She believed in the staff and the school and started us going with a vision for us to be the best. Once we started

in that direction there was no turning back." Black said that she approached school improvement "by starting the process one small step at a time."

Beginning in 2001, teachers became actively engaged in a process of school improvement focused on student achievement. By 2006, Valley High School was deemed "High Achieving" according to the state's rankings, which were then based on mandatory high school proficiency testing in math, writing, and reading.

Valley High School: 2006

This study was conducted in 2006, five years after Black assumed the principalship. Observations conducted during this study indicated that teachers held high expectations for students and that students were generally on-task and focused in the classroom. A 20-year veteran baseball coach commented, "This is due to the visibility of the administration." He noted that the principal was constantly in the classrooms monitoring teacher performance and student behavior. Another teacher stated, "You don't know when Ms. Black will show up. She is everywhere." An analysis of observation data indicated that approximately 70% of teachers were using strategies such as cooperative learning, inquiry based methods, and sheltered instructional techniques for English language learners, while 30% of teachers were using lecture as the primary instructional approach.

In 2006, Valley High School offered a varied curriculum to accommodate students who were either college-bound or employment-bound after graduation. The school offered seven Advanced Placement (AP) classes, with 65 students enrolled in these classes. A modified block schedule was in place, enabling students to earn up to seven credits each semester. One class met every day for 50 minutes, and all other classes met during opposite days, on an A/B schedule. Every class on the A/B schedule met twice a week on the A schedule and twice a week on the B schedule. On Fridays, the A/B schedule was alternated with classes meeting for 90 minutes.

In order to graduate from Valley High School, students were required to pass all three subject areas (writing, reading, and math) on the high school proficiency exam as well as produce and present a portfolio. A student who did not meet all of these requirements received a certificate of attendance rather than a diploma.

Teachers provided students extra assistance outside of class time, setting up individual and small group tutoring sessions during their preparation time, lunch time, and before and after school. Evidenced by the number of teachers observed helping students, there appeared to be a real sense of urgency to ensure students were prepared to pass proficiency exams, and students appeared very focused on the goals of the tutoring sessions.

The Change Process: 2001-2006

The move toward school improvement at Valley High School followed a period of managing the status quo as well as a time of disillusionment. Under the previous principal, school improvement was described as "going through the process of writing [school improvement plans, but] not following through on anything," according to the chair of the School Improvement Team. This period was a stagnant time where no changes were made in school programs or curriculum. In 2000, the school improvement plan focused on such things as buildings and grounds rather than student achievement.

Jones' lack of follow through created a challenging situation for his replacement. As noted by the chair of the School Improvement Planning committee, "It took a tremendous effort for Ms. Black to get teachers to want to be involved once again in the school improvement process. Teachers saw it as a waste of time, fearing that they would do the work all over again and nothing would change." Five teachers interviewed noted that some teachers left because they didn't want to work hard for kids and they had a lack of commitment. Black remarked, "The mistrust from the past administrations caused the staff to not believe in themselves, and the lack of past administrative support made it hard to get buy-in from the teachers." One teacher commented, "Some thought it was hogwash, but those are the same people who do not want to do dance duty or anything extra for our school." Another teacher stated, "Getting all the teachers to buy-in was the hardest part. We had to discuss and talk, and yes, there were people who did not agree with the group, so they left."

An English teacher remarked, "It seems we had a scandal every year at our school." Such turmoil contributed to negative feelings and attitudes. "The scandal either involved a student, a teacher, or an employee. It was not good press for us," Ms. Black remarked. She went on to say, "With the turnover of 18 teachers my first year, it gave me an opportunity to hire a team of teachers committed to our kids."

The band teacher made the comment that "the staff thought the district and the school board would lack the backbone to support the changes being introduced by the new administration and the school improvement team." A young English teacher commented, "This attitude continued as Ms. Black began the process, but this time with a new level of staff collaboration." According to the athletic director at the time, "Collaboration was the element that made the biggest difference in the success and implementation of our school

improvement plan." The time needed for this collaboration was made possible by starting school late one day every other week. This time was in accordance with state law, and the team made sure that they were in compliance with the amount of time required by the state regulations for high school Carnegie units.

This collaborative, staff development time provided a mechanism for Black to involve teachers in the change process at Valley High School. Black noted, "It was because of the time that was given to teachers to talk, reflect, and have input into the coming changes that started to heal the wounds and sores of the past administration." She further explained,

> The importance of the collaboration time was for the purpose of designing essential learnings, writing common assessments, and consensus building. Time also had to be taken to repair the relationships and build the trust within the staff.

According to Valley High School's Improvement Plan, common assessments for each course were to be given at the end of each quarter. Furthermore, each common assessment contained a writing component. At first mandated by Black, common assessments became "just the way we do business at Valley High School" according to the chair of the School Improvement Team. A science teacher noted that "Ms. Black was holding teachers accountable by consistently visiting objectives that were aligned with the state standards and having teachers turn in finals."

This process carried over to state-mandated proficiency exams, and the staff began to adjust the curriculum to teach to areas where students were deficient. For example, when teachers analyzed data from the math proficiency test, they discovered that only about thirty percent of the students were passing the geometry component of the test. As a result of this analysis, teachers made appropriate curriculum changes to address this gap. One teacher said, "Until we looked at the student data on this report we didn't even know that our students were not being taught geometry and/or exposed to the content until after this test was given." Sequence of curriculum and the teaching of this content assisted students in the mastery of the information. A science teacher noted, "It was the process of analyzing data and, more importantly, discussing the data that led to the changes in the math curriculum and instruction."

One teacher indicated that "she did not think the test matched the curriculum." This teacher went on to say, "But then, changes were made to align the curriculum. This gave our students a fighting chance to pass--once we aligned what we should have been teaching." One veteran teacher said, "Some of the changes were extremely hard for some of the staff. It was hard to give up some of the things we had

been teaching for years. Those teachers who opted to leave did not want to give up their autonomy."

An English teacher commented, "Every staff member was accountable to Ms. Black for the success of their students." She added that the principal made sure "that all of the curriculum aspects were put in place, spelled out in the School Improvement Plan, and brought to consensus by the staff, as this was the way we do business."

In addition to the work being done on assessments and curriculum alignment, other curricular and schedule changes were instituted. One major change was a modified block schedule, which had the effect of providing students time for additional course work or time to hold after school jobs. According to several teachers, the staff came to a consensus on this schedule in order to allow students to take additional classes, thus giving students more elective options. It was the feeling of one teacher that if the school offered more classes focusing on student interests, students would be more motivated to learn. The chair of the School Improvement Planning committee noted, "If students liked these classes, hopefully it would motivate them to be more successful in the rest of their classes." Other teachers noted that an additional early morning class, "zero period," would permit seniors to complete classes before lunch so that they could maintain an afternoon job in the community.

Through schedule changes, curriculum adjustments, and professional development regarding instructional strategies to meet diverse student needs, Valley was attempting to develop a varied curriculum to accommodate students who were either college-bound or employment-bound after graduation. Advanced Placement classes were added and an expanded honors curriculum was offered. According to Black,

> the number of students taking these classes and the AP exams has increased from four the first year to 65 this past year. Additionally over the five year period, Valley High School increased its AP offerings from one to seven classes.

Changing demographics also influenced curricular changes at Valley. One teacher noted, "The growth in the Hispanic population and the challenge of meeting their needs has been difficult." Another teacher interviewed stated that increasing student enrollment was of concern, and one veteran teacher commented, "However, the types of students moving in were different from the students we were used to teaching. It has taken a while to get them involved in student activities and to be part of the school." For the first time, Valley began to offer classes for English language learners, and teachers learned new instructional strategies to accommodate English language learners in their classrooms.

Process, Context, and Relationships

Three areas of inquiry guided this study: (a) factors that led to increasing student achievement; (b) factors that inhibited change and how they were overcome; and (c) how the change process was structured. A matrix of data from interviews, documents, and field notes was developed to identify specific events and actions that addressed these three areas. Through a series of coding, recoding, and constant comparative analysis, three relevant and interrelated themes emerged, cutting across all three lines of questioning. These were (a) the process of school improvement and change, (b) the context of the change process; and (c) the roles and relationships manifested in the process.

Collaboration: The Heart of the Process

In examining data from interviews, documents, and observations, a consistently emerging theme was the collaborative process that occurred at Valley High School. The process of school improvement and change was driven through collaboration. By providing time for teachers to plan and work together through a shortened school day for students one day every other week, teachers were able to become truly involved in decision making for school improvement.

Upon further analysis, it became apparent that the process of collaboration was very specific. Three principles of collaboration were evident at Valley High School.

1. There was time scheduled for teacher collaboration.

2. Collaboration among teacher planning groups was structured and focused.

3. Leadership ensured that planning was student-centered and that teachers and administrators were held accountable for specific actions.

Teachers overwhelmingly reported the importance of the collaborative time to complete tasks as a staff. Decisions were made through consensus, which ultimately resulted in a shared vision of instruction and curriculum. Organizational aspects of collaboration for teachers included time, structure, and focus. The overarching construct of the collaborative organization was the principal's leadership skills which focused on student centered planning. It was this intersection of leadership skills and organizational management of collaboration that appeared to contribute to student achievement.

Time. Time to collaborate outside of student contact time was consistently discussed by participants in this study.

Black stated, "Time for teacher learning is one of the most important investments a school system can make to maintain and improve quality educational programs." Valley High School accomplished their time management by writing it into their school improvement plan, which was approved by the county school board. Collaborative planning time was built into teachers' schedules every other week by having the students start one and a half hours later every other Friday. If teachers do not have adequate time within the teaching day for meaningful interactions, collaboration is unlikely to occur outside the scheduled workday (Dufour & Eaker, 1998; Roberts & Pruitt, 2003).

Structure and focus. Valley High School's collaboration time focused on clear specific objectives to be accomplished at each meeting. The principal provided the structure and established goals and objectives to be accomplished during each collaborative meeting. Staff was given an agenda at each collaboration time and held accountable for the completion of all tasks; they kept a written notebook that was handed into the administration. Teachers were confident that the document would be reviewed. Collaboration time was used to facilitate instructional effectiveness; all discussions were centered on student achievement.

One teacher noted, "We always had a goal to achieve during the time we collaborated. Sometimes it took us a long time to achieve resolution, because we always had to talk things out." When staff began meeting, they first identified essential outcomes. Later they wrote common assessments to be given in each content area of the curriculum. Using the designated outcomes, they analyzed student data and compared instructional strategies in order to achieve these designated outcomes.

The result was a change in teachers' instruction which was also directly connected to staff development efforts of the school improvement plan. The pattern of change followed the dimensions that Evans (1996) described:

1. Unfreezing—Persuading teachers change is necessary and reducing the fear of trying.

2. Making change meaningful—Moving teachers from a sense of loss to commitment.

3. Moving from old competence to new competence—Teachers developed new beliefs and ways of thinking.

4. Moving from confusion to coherence—Structures, functions, and roles were realized.

5. Moving from conflict to consensus—ventually there was broad support for change.

Leadership for student-centered planning. As stated by one teacher, "Ms. Black was definitely responsible for getting us organized and following through by her leadership skills." Research supports the notion that the principal has to be seen as an instructional leader at the school site and is key to the change process (Murphy and Hallinger, 1992). This study showed that the principal manifested her leadership in the school improvement process by establishing structured, focused teacher collaboration time and by monitoring adult behaviors.

It is important to note that teacher collaboration time was focused on instruction. Schmoker (1999) stated, "If we consistently analyze what we do and adjust to get better, we will improve" (p. 56). Through initial leadership from the principal, expectations for the purpose and eventual outcome of collaboration were established. The principal at Valley High School expected teachers to work together in focused ways and she expected outcomes from the process. She followed through—monitoring teacher behaviors related to these outcomes – which was later carried on by teachers themselves. One teacher commented, "We were always talking about teaching not only in collaboration but all of the time. Our focus was on our students and their achievement."

A model for integrating leadership and management for effective collaboration. Several studies have focused exclusively on high performing schools that echo the theme of teamwork and collaboration and point to evidence of strong leadership as a necessary precursor for creating a shared vision and purpose (e.g. Leithwood, Aitken & Jantzi, 2006; Schmoker, 2001; Senge, Cambron-McCabe, Lucas, Smith, Dutton, & Kleiner, 2000). A collaborative professional culture develops when teachers and administrators share a common vision about what constitutes effective teaching and learning, and willingly share responsibility for decisions about school goals and pedagogy in order to achieve that vision. Emerging themes from this study suggest a model for an integrated approach to instructional leadership combining organizational management and leadership skills. This model provides a framework from which to test and conceptualize future research on educational leadership, and it suggests a way to organize conceptual knowledge and skill development for educational leadership preparation programs.

The teacher collaboration process at Valley High School was defined by (a) how it was organized and (b) specific behaviors of the principal. Organizational components included providing time for teacher collaboration and focusing and structuring that time on planning for student achievement. Specific principal behaviors included (a) strategies for building consensus; (b) communicating high expectations for professionalism; (c) exacting accountability from teachers' professional decisions; and (d) maintaining a sense of empathy and humanism with staff.

The principal as the instructional leader consistently behaved in a way that promoted collaboration and teacher leadership. Through this process, teachers clearly defined their tasks as (a) developing essential outcomes, (b) aligning the curriculum, (c) developing common assessments, and (d) gathering student work and analyzing these data. These tasks were accomplished through a process of "teacher to teacher" dialogue and provided a framework for peer accountability and follow-through that eventually resulted in increased student achievement.

Attempts to improve learning opportunities in the classroom appeared after a collaborative professional culture had developed among school staff members. There appeared to be a conscious shift away from a staff that acted as a loose collection of individuals responsible for isolated classrooms toward a staff that acted as a team of professionals.

Collaboration cannot remedy all school problems, but consistent collaboration among teachers has great potential for addressing the demand for fundamental change in schools as well as creating a positive climate in which students will be academically successful. Collaboration is a construct that holds great potential for the study of school improvement. Successful school improvement necessitates an arrangement within the school setting that requires teachers to plan together, allows time for collaborative planning, and fosters teacher involvement in decision-making. Both novices and experienced teachers benefit from collaborative relationships. This study found that this skilled principal led her school in collecting, interpreting, and using data to assess student achievement and encouraged teachers to determine the factors that affected specific outcomes.

The Rural Context: The Factor of Size

Other significant themes that arose in this study were the characteristics of small schools and the closeness of a rural community. Students talked about the importance of knowing their peers since the third grade and how they looked out for one another. Parents described the importance of "keeping a watchful eye out on all of the kids," and how they had known families of their children's friends for over 30 years. Parents were always willing to help one another. Most families at Valley High School had known one another since elementary school. Parents talked about how many times they had been to others' homes over the past few years. One student commented, "The importance of being in a small school is that you know everybody, and know who to go to if you need help." Parents who were interviewed noted the importance of the small school atmosphere and how the

school was small enough that the teachers and kids know everybody. A veteran science teacher commented, "We're still small enough where we can make a difference."

This culture of "watching out for others" was evident throughout the interviews and observations. During one observation, the school secretary was heard telling a student, "Don't worry. Here's some lunch money. Your mom can pay me back next time I see her." The principal observed, "This is a true family atmosphere. We have our families at home *and* at school and all of the kids know that."

Because of the small school size and the rural context of the community, relationships were developed and fostered among staff and students. Relationship building was not only evident, but was apparently intentional. Nine of the teachers interviewed discussed the importance of student and teacher relationships. Parents concurred, as evidenced by such comments as, "There is truly a caring attitude at our school toward our kids." This caring attitude emerged from all the interviews. "Our teachers not only teach with passion, but they bend over backwards for kids," stated one teacher. A student remarked, "My teachers care about me." Another student went on to tell about "a time she saw a teacher cry about a kid." The most veteran teacher on staff stated, "It is common to see teachers give up their own time to help kids."

The chair of the School Improvement Planning committee commented,

> Our freshmen academy and transition program came into light due to the fact that many teachers know the importance of having a positive relationship with kids. We wanted to catch these kids while they are still freshmen to increase their chance for student success. We have built these relationships.

In 2003, according to the accountability report, approximately 20 percent of the students were failing as freshmen. In 2006, the school had no freshmen failing. A freshmen transition class was credited for this change. The class was described by one teacher as an opportunity to provide a "coaching relationship with the students." Through this class, each teacher was responsible for a group of freshmen. Teachers monitored their assigned students' progress, checked on students weekly, and became these students' advocates. They also used upper classmen to mentor freshmen. Student mentors were chosen based on their leadership and/or changes they had made in their own lives at Valley High School.

The freshmen transition program was established through the school improvement process and staff was given the option of participating or not. If they participated they were taken off the duty schedule at lunch, so they could meet with their group during this time. Students who were mentors had to apply and meet all criteria before they could be part of this program. If they did not stay in good standing or did not present a positive role model, they were removed as a mentor. One senior who was interviewed said, "My student mentor made a big impact on me as a freshman." Even as a senior, ready to graduate, she still talks about the first year of the program and the relationship between students and teachers.

Roles and Relationships

Valley High School's climb to success was not immediate. There were factors that inhibited progress and contributed to the slow process of change. For example, teachers reported that it took some time to get everyone on board due to the fact that the previous principal had not followed through on many academic decisions. Another factor was the high number of teachers who purportedly left because they did not buy into the concept or did not want to work hard and focus on students. These negative influences, however, were mitigated by the group processes implemented by Black, who required all to be involved in consensus decision making where all were asked to justify their opinions. As Stogdill (1974) noted, leadership is the process of influencing the activities of an organized group toward goal setting and achievement.

Chance (1992) explained, "The visionary leader engages others in the process by actively involving them in decision-making, problem solving, and goal shaping" (p. 101). It was evident that the principal understood the importance of a shared vision, as she involved her staff in all aspects of student curriculum matters. At Valley High School, the staff explicitly and implicitly supported the goals. The principal and staff modeled high standards and together created a learning community that supported experimentation and valued teachers' efforts to improve. Perez, Wood, and Jacquez (1999) noted that the principal must encourage and support new approaches and innovations that leave room for errors without the fear of being reprimanded. According to the teachers interviewed in this study, Black created an environment and learning atmosphere at the school where teachers were not afraid to try new ideas and learn from each other to develop a new program.

Principal Black could be characterized as a change agent, because she initiated the action, listened to the input, and established the expectations for her staff in collaboration. She then followed up on the implementation of all decisions made by the group. Through her leadership, she prepared her staff to be open to new ideas and to try new things. Fullan and Hargreaves (1991) warned against principals moving too quickly to create change, "failing to appreciate that even small changes can transgress sacred

elements of the school culture" (p. 85). Black took her time in the collaboration process, and this study showed that she went slow enough to give the staff time to buy-in and re-examine items if necessary.

In addition, the principal kept teachers informed weekly through e-mail, held teachers accountable for their groups' decisions, focused teacher tasks such as aligning curriculum, and reviewed assessment results with her faculty. Leithwood and Riehl (2003) stressed that leaders do not merely impose goals on followers, but work with others to create a shared sense of purpose and direction. In public education, goals are centered on student learning, including both the development of academic knowledge and skills, and the learning of important values and dispositions. The shift to instructional leadership means that school leaders become actively involved in leading the instructional programs and focusing staff on student outcomes. Black was knowledgeable about curriculum and instruction and was able to intervene directly with teachers in making instructional improvements. She was viewed as the catalyst for change and the key figure in successful implementation.

This study showed that to have this kind of impact, principals must define their jobs as helping to create a professional learning community in which teachers can continually collaborate and learn how to become more effective. Principals must recognize that this task demands a conscious direction and orchestration to move staff toward continuous learning.

An ultimate outcome of the collaboration process at Valley High School was a climate of trust. Teachers and other stakeholders repeatedly commented that the principal truly cared about them as teachers. One parent commented, "Her [Principal Black's] door was always open and she checked on my children when I was in the hospital." Cunningham and Gresso (1993) stated "Trust allows a rich culture to develop, and allows individuals to achieve their full potential" (p. 121). They noted that trust allows relationships to grow to a point where people feel free to take chances because the idea of fear and/or isolation is minimized. Teachers interviewed in this study indicated that Black treated each person the same and held her staff accountable regardless of whether they were a first year teacher or a 25-year veteran.

Implications for Rural Schools

This study suggests that both organizational practices and instructional leadership behaviors are necessary to develop successful collaborative efforts that lead to improved student achievement. Furthermore, data from this study indicate that there are specific requisite elements for both organization and instructional leadership and specific ways in which these elements interface.

Underlying, or perhaps juxtaposed to, organizational restructuring and focus on instruction was the development of a caring community where trust among teachers, parents, and students was evident. The rural roots of this community certainly provided a tradition for this type of close-knit, "family" atmosphere, but the fact that the school was rural certainly did not ensure that such trust would prevail. It required the leadership of a principal willing to embrace teachers and teachers willing to reach out to students in order for this to occur. As Bryk and Schneider (2002) noted in their research on school trust, the responsibility falls on those with more authority to initiate actions that reduce the sense of vulnerability of those with less power. For example,

> Any actions taken by the principal that reduce teachers' sense of vulnerability are . . . highly salient. Establishing inclusive procedures for decision making affords teachers real opportunities to raise issues and be heard. When such routines are implemented effectively, teachers come to understand that they have a meaningful voice in influencing important decisions that affect their lives. (p. 29)

By the same token Bryk and Schneider noted that "the growth of trust [between teachers and students] depends primarily on teachers' initiatives" (p. 32). They added that by high school, "peer influences and student norms are quite powerful, and these forces must be engaged directly by any school reform effort" (p. 32).

While the fact that Valley High School was rural did not, in and of itself, ensure a community where trust and collaboration prevailed, rural schools do have some natural advantages for building community and collaborating on school improvement.

- *Small populations and dense relationship networks*. It is easier to build trust and collaboration among a few than among many. Rural schools, with generally small populations, can more readily involve all students and most stakeholders. A key ingredient in developing trust and collaboration, and ultimately social capital, is that individuals interact with other individuals in a variety of ways. In rural communities, students not only interact at school but also engage in the same after-school and community activities, such as basketball games, county fairs, or community holiday events. Many community events are centered

on school activities. In addition, parents interact with one another in a limited number of venues. Many parents are connected through a common work place, church, or social organizations. Thus, students, parents, and other stakeholders "know" one another beyond school.

- *Knowledge of community resources*. Because rural communities are small and stakeholders (teachers, students, parents, community members) are connected in various ways, rural schools are better positioned to be knowledgeable of various local resources that could be helpful in developing school programs and curricula for improving student achievement.

- *Common values and interests*. While not always apparent, rural communities, more likely than not, share common values and a sense of community. This does not mean that everyone agrees or that there are not factions within a community. Even though people in small communities may not share Sun-Tzu's military strategy of keeping one's friends close and enemies closer, people in small, rural communities do tend to know or know about those who don't subscribe to their own philosophy. With some concerted work by school leaders, various factions in small communities are more likely to find common ground than those in large, urban areas.

The contexts of rural, small schools provide advantages for building trust and developing a collaborative approach to school improvement that makes sense to those in the community and to which teachers, students, parents, and others can become committed.

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