

FASTBACK

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Initiating Restructuring at the School Site

Robert J. McCarthy

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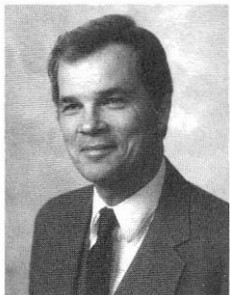
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Initiating Restructuring at the School Site

by
Robert J. McCarthy

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The chapter sponsors this fastback in honor of Dr. Paul Herbert, who served faithfully as president, delegate, and advisor of the chapter and currently serves as area coordinator of Area 70. Under Dr. Herbert's leadership and guidance, this chapter has risen from its humble beginnings in 1988 to become one of the most active and viable chapters in District VII.

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Introduction

As we move into the 1990s, the new buzz words are "restructuring" and "empowerment." But if these endeavors are not to go the way of teaching machines, open schools, and competency-based instruction, an organizational and administrative framework will have to be created that allows, even demands, restructuring and empowerment to occur.

Just as students need a certain amount of structure in their lives to function effectively, so must schools have structure to function effectively. As Eisner points out, "When structure and intentions are in conflict, structure, rather than intentions, is likely to dominate" (1988, p. 26). Thus we need to create structures that will allow intentions to become reality. If we maintain our current organizational and administrative patterns, those intentions will remain merely ideas that will be discussed endlessly at conferences and workshops but will never work their way into the daily operation of the school or the classroom.

In schools across the country, the organizational pattern is basically the same. Teachers operate primarily in isolation from each other. At the secondary level, teachers have their work day divided into 40- to 50-minute periods. Instruction in one class usually does not relate to what is taught in other classes. Similar situations prevail in elementary schools, where most teachers create their own self-imposed schedules and have to work around pull-out programs (physical education,

music, art, etc.). While the literature today is replete with cries for peer coaching and collegial collaboration, the typical school work environment is the antithesis of this. Teachers teach in isolation, plan in isolation, yet complain en masse – and rightly so. Yes, they do express interest in working in a different structure, but that would require changes in their *modus operandi*. It is a Catch-22 situation and a perfect example of closed-system thinking.

We call this the Information Age, but what kind of information are we presenting to students? Much of what goes on in schools is like the CNN World News. We cover the world in 30 minutes and what we get are little pieces of this and chunks of that. Students are inundated with stuff (factoids) but come away lacking stuffing (understanding). We are creating trivial pursuit experts who are incapable of synthesizing data in order to see the big picture. How can we expect students to develop higher-order thinking skills when we fail to ask them to probe, to analyze, to see interconnections between school learning and the world at large?

But the situation is not hopeless. We see some stirrings along this line in the California state curriculum frameworks. We can design a better framework that will allow intentions to become realities. The research has been done. There are enough talented practitioners in the field to make it happen. The remedy is a synthesis of isolated undertakings that have failed in the past, but when put together in an overarching structure will allow staff to transform words into deeds.

First the Foundation

Just as a building requires a solid foundation to sustain the basic structural design, so does a school's instructional program. An appropriate foundation must be laid if we are to create a structure that will support the desired programs. For schools of the 1990s, the minimum design specifications are:

1. Staff deployed into instructional teams,
2. Interdisciplinary approach to the core curriculum,
3. Personalized placement of students,
4. Block scheduling and flexible grouping,
5. Team decision-making,
6. Fostering teacher-team-student relationships, and
7. Instructional support as a community endeavor.

All seven specifications are necessary for the success of the structure's design. Five out of the seven will not suffice. Think of the design as a jewel with seven facets. If one of the facets is flawed, it detracts from the whole; and staff and community will focus on the flaw and the design likely will go down in the record book as another failed project. But with attention to all seven facets, it is possible to create a framework that combines the best thinking on organizational planning over the last two decades, resulting in a plan that makes restructuring and empowerment a reality. Let us now briefly examine each of the seven basic facets of the framework.

Staff Deployed into Instructional Teams

No man is an island – except in our education system. Teachers work in isolation, rarely seeing others teach. Supervisory assistance is minimal and sporadic. Little help from colleagues is expected or requested. The current structure that prevents teachers from working as teams makes it extremely difficult to create an efficient and effective teaching/learning environment. Schools no longer can afford to isolate teachers. As Lee Iacocca said, “If you want to succeed in this business, you all have to operate as a team” (1984, p. 33).

For purposes of restructuring, I have defined an instructional team as two or more teachers working as a cohesive unit, where all the team members have responsibility for the instruction of the same students in several subjects or disciplines. Team members do not all have to teach the same subject or even the same grade. In fact, the traditional departmentalized approach will not work under this structure for reasons that will be discussed later.

However, groups of teachers do not become true teams simply because they have been placed together by administrative fiat. At the very start of the restructuring process, teachers must have a choice in who their teammates will be. Teachers become a team only when they accept a common task and interact successfully to achieve their individual and collective objectives. To be successful, team members must share similar philosophies and must be personally and professionally compatible. A willingness to work together is far more important than arbitrarily trying to balance teaching experience or gender on a team. This obviously calls for individual teachers having a say in selecting those with whom they will be teamed.

A team's effectiveness will depend directly on the quality of its planning sessions. Thus it is imperative that the team have a common planning period and a common work station or area where it can meet daily. The insights shared during planning sessions should give each team member a more comprehensive view of each student. Frequent team evaluations of each student should result in more accurate as-

assessments of both student performance and individual needs. Paramount to success are team planning and team assessment, not team teaching. Team teaching may occur, but it is not a prerequisite for this phase of restructuring.

I have found that teachers working in team settings have higher morale, greater rapport with colleagues, and a heightened sense of professionalism. An *esprit de corps* emerges not only within the team but also throughout the school. The advantages of operating in such a collegial environment are many:

1. The combined thinking of several teachers creates an expanded pool of ideas, enhances individual capacities for handling complex problems, and provides both intellectual stimulation and emotional support. The synergism of talents produces an energy that has a positive impact on the instructional program.
2. The beginning teacher who joins a team has the benefit of support from more experienced teammates.
3. Individual teachers tend to work harder on improving the overall instructional quality of their team.
4. When a team member is absent, other members of the team work closely with the substitute, resulting in less loss of instructional time for students.
5. More and better planning for students occurs as teachers discuss, argue, and reach agreement on behavioral expectations, curriculum emphasis, instructional approaches, and materials.

There will be those who will say that teaming has been tried and it failed. Again, I make the distinction here between team planning and team teaching. Much has transpired in the two decades since team teaching was launched and crashed. Peer coaching and mentor teachers have emerged to provide excellent support for staff. Districts have engaged in extensive professional development programs that have given faculty a far greater opportunity to explore various curricular programs, instructional techniques, learning theories, and decision-

making. Thus, a much better climate exists today for successful teaming.

Interdisciplinary Approach to the Core Curriculum

Results from the National Assessment of Educational Progress in recent years have been anything but encouraging. The NAEP depicts a progressive downward trend in achievement as students mature: 13-year-olds retain less than 9-year-olds, and 17-year-olds retain less than 13-year-olds with respect to the established curriculum (Anrig and LaPointe 1989). It is no coincidence that this decline occurs as students move from elementary school through the increasingly departmentalized middle school and high school.

The crux of the problem is that students simply do not *understand*. Teachers are driven to cover the required content at the expense of comprehension. Quantity prevails over quality. Students seldom have the opportunity to do a multidisciplinary analysis of a single problem. It is no wonder, then, that students today have difficulty deducing, inferring, analyzing, interpreting, applying, and evaluating. If we expect students to develop higher-order, problem-solving capabilities, it is crucial that they learn that problems can be approached from the point of view of several disciplines and that different approaches may produce different solutions.

For decades, educators have deplored the growing fragmentation and compartmentalization of knowledge. But existing organizational structures continue to segregate subjects, despite our knowledge that an interdisciplinary approach combined with close correlation in teacher planning results in increased student learning.

As Harris pointed out almost 20 years ago,

Subjects — reading, mathematics, language, and all the rest — are adult constructs. They represent legitimate adult interests, scholarly pursuits, practical specializations. Each is differentiated and isolated from the total world of experience for concentrated adult analysis, study,

and use. For children, however, subjects — subjects of any kind, however conceived — hold no inherent interest, meaning, or use. For them the world has simply not yet so fragmented itself. (1972, p. 420)

In a well-structured interdisciplinary approach to the core curriculum, an instructional team plans and implements the curriculum for students who formerly were assigned to them in self-contained classrooms or within a departmentalized master schedule. By planning and working together closely, the team produces an articulated and integrated instructional program that results in less fragmentation and thus greater student comprehension. Team members make a conscious effort to integrate concepts and materials so that relationships among various subjects may be seen more readily by students.

Let's look at a typical planning session. During a session, staff could agree that one member of the instructional team would introduce the new skill or concept within his or her discipline. Then other members would stress the same skill or concept in their classes. This creates numerous opportunities for transfer of learning. Even if some students do not understand the content from one teacher, the chances for comprehension are increased considerably because other members of the team will use different approaches to the same content.

Personalized Placement of Students

In the restructured school described here, one of the most important administrative functions will be the appropriate placement of each student with an instructional team. Concern for meeting specific student needs must be addressed if teachers and students are to work well together and achieve the desired goals.

Each instructional team will have its own unique characteristics because the individuals on the team are different. Therefore, staff responsible for student scheduling will have to match students with a team by using pertinent data on each student to determine appropriate instructional placement. Information received from the student's

previous teachers can be of considerable assistance in this process. Aside from feedback pertaining to student interests and proficiency in the core curriculum, other areas to be considered in placement should include the student's level of maturity; physical, social, and emotional needs; and learning style.

When an instructional team's natural teaching style is matched with students' natural learning styles, conditions are created for optimal learning. The manner in which student learning styles interact with teacher teaching styles has a significant impact on achievement, self-concept, and motivation. Therefore, it is imperative that relevant data regarding each student, combined with information about the personality and operating styles of each team, be used in placing students with the instructional team that will contribute optimally to their total development.

Block Scheduling and Flexible Grouping

Time in school is highly segmented with little room for flexibility. At the secondary level, the school day typically is divided into six or seven periods of 40 to 50 minutes each. The same basic schedule is followed each day for the entire school year. At the elementary level, the school day is driven by the subjects into which the curriculum is divided. It is rare for the instructional program to be organized on any other basis. What happens in the classroom occurs within strict time slots, not because students want or need them to occur at that time or because the teacher feels it is the most appropriate time to undertake a new activity. Thus the clock controls the teaching/learning process. The teacher is a timekeeper, making sure the schedule is followed.

Although we have long acknowledged that fragmentation of time into segments of equal length is ineffective in terms of both instruction and learning, teachers and administrators have been reluctant to discard the practice. The thinking (or lack thereof) behind the traditional school schedule is that every student must have exactly the same

number of minutes of instruction in each subject as every other child receives. In fact, some state departments of education require districts to file annual reports on the number of minutes of instruction given in designated subjects.

Teachers have long known that the time allotted to a certain activity should be determined by the nature of the activity. Seldom, however, have teachers had the authority to vary the amount of time they need for a particular activity because of the SCHEDULE or because of the need to accommodate various pull-out programs. Decisions made about time obviously have a significant impact on the overall organization of the school and the instructional program. An inflexible schedule forces staff to disregard their best judgments about how time should be used.

Modifying how time is used is essential if the school is to meet student and teacher needs. What is needed is a schedule that calls for large blocks of time that are allocated by instructional teams in ways that work best for their students. Using the standard 45-minute class period as a guide, the primary-level instructional teams might have a series of 90-minute blocks throughout the day to work with their youngsters; intermediate grades might have three 120-minute blocks of time; and middle and high school instructional teams might have three or possibly four hours in a solid block of time to work with their students. Within the allotted blocks of time, each team should have the freedom and support to operate as it determines best to achieve student, team, and school objectives.

Within each team, there could be as many instructional groups as is necessary for effective learning to take place. It is not necessary that each teacher on the team meet with each instructional group daily. The teams and their students should be allowed to operate as mini-schools within the total school. In this way, each team can work within its block of time without interfering with the schedules of other instructional teams.

In order to add variety to the basic operational structure of the school and to accommodate different teaching and learning styles, the sched-

ule might be shifted every 10 weeks or so. For example, an 8:15-to-9:45 block could be switched with a 1:00-to-2:30 block. Since studies have demonstrated that there are indeed "night people," "morning people," and "day people," by periodically moving around blocks of instructional time, both staff and students get to work together during different peak performance periods.

A fundamental principle of scheduling is that the more consecutive minutes of time accorded to a teacher or team for instructional purposes, the more possibilities there are for flexible and creative use of time within the time allocation. Thus with large blocks of time and periodic flip-flopping of these blocks as the only basic scheduling considerations, the school could achieve a high degree of flexibility.

Aside from determining how blocks of time should best be used, instructional teams have the important task of grouping students within the team. When teachers are free to group as they wish, based on assessed pupil needs and readiness, material can be presented in the manner that is appropriate for different students. There are inherent strengths and weaknesses in any grouping philosophy, but students must be grouped in some manner for instructional purposes, so the key question becomes: What method of grouping holds the greatest promise for enhancing the attainment of the team's and the school's objectives?

During planning sessions the instructional team can develop criteria for forming instructional groups. The groups formed should remain together until such time as the students have mastered the specified skills and concepts. When the desired outcome is the development of skills requiring a systematic approach and cumulative learning, or when special needs must be met, then homogeneous grouping is a viable approach. However, when the desired outcome is the development of communications and social skills through working with individuals of different abilities, backgrounds, and interests, then heterogeneous grouping seems to be the likely choice. Based on what individual teachers and teams wish to achieve, groups should be

formed on the basis of a common interest, learning problem, or special need, and then disbanded as soon as the reason for that group has been achieved. Thus, grouping should be a changing and dynamic process, based on readiness, maturity, achievement, and other factors.

Such flexible grouping is possible only when a significant block of time is set aside for each team and its students. The team can then make decisions about grouping configurations as well as the different roles each team member will play. This permits staff to create whatever size and type of group judged appropriate for their instructional purpose. This process is both complex and time-consuming. There must be support from the principal and other administrators if teams are not to become discouraged as they deal initially with many decisions that previously were the prerogative of the school administration.

Decisions about the curriculum, allocation of time, and grouping are inter-related; they cannot be separated if effective teaching/learning is to take place. When instructional teams are given responsibility for these decisions, then they will have the empowerment necessary for the restructured school of the Nineties.

Team Decision-Making

Today it is acknowledged that in school systems, as in business, decision-making is most effective when it is closest to the site where the decisions will be implemented. Thus decisions about instruction should be made by teachers in their instructional teams. Research indicates that teachers who actively participate in making decisions exhibit greater job satisfaction, which in turn leads to greater teacher productivity and increased student learning. Staff must be actively involved in those decisions that directly affect their daily professional activities: assignment to teams, student schedules, grouping of students, use of instructional and noninstructional time, budget development, creation and selection of appropriate curricular pro-

grams, and implementation of instructional strategies to attain district goals.

The building principal must create a climate in which not only the staff but also students have greater responsibility for determining the appropriate use of time and facilities. Just as teachers must be encouraged to excuse certain students from regularly scheduled classes to pursue outside learning activities, students also must feel free to initiate such requests and to assume more responsibility for their learning. By delegating such responsibilities with an appropriate support structure, the principal enables teachers to function as true professionals while at the same time allowing students to become independent learners.

For teams to function professionally, they need a suitable environment within which to work. Each team must have a planning room as a base for operating as a unit. Space can always be found within a school if team planning is truly a top priority. In the new structure called for by this model, small rooms in various sections of a building can be used as team-planning rooms. A normal-size classroom also can serve as a planning room for two or three teams. Since different teams have different blocks of time when they are teaching and planning, it is possible for two or three teams on different schedules to occupy the same room for planning purposes without interfering with each other. To create the needed professional climate, all planning rooms should be equipped with a desk, chair, and file cabinet for each team member. One or more telephones should be available. Staff also should be free to decorate these rooms as they wish to reflect their personalities.

Team decision-making activities should include at least the following:

1. Planning and coordinating the constantly shifting schedules of all students and teachers on the team;
2. Assuming responsibility for the manner in which district-adopted curricular programs shall be implemented;

3. Coordinating instructional materials from different disciplines to facilitate an interdisciplinary approach to skill development and concept mastery;
4. Selecting objectives, content, learning activities, modes of instruction, and media to be used;
5. Developing procedures for the continuing evaluation of each student's progress;
6. Grouping students for different instructional purposes;
7. Recommending budget for supplies, materials, equipment, and personnel;
8. Hiring new team members and other personnel; and
9. Organizing classroom and space allocation.

Those factors that directly affect the performance of teachers — time, space, materials, students, and fellow teachers — should be controlled by them. Giving decision-making responsibilities in these areas creates a professional climate that empowers teachers. And once imbued with this new sense of freedom and responsibility, teachers will feel truly valued, causing them to renew their commitment to this noblest of professions.

Fostering Teacher-Team-Student Relationships

Much professional literature stresses the importance of individual differences among students, but not nearly enough attention has been given to the fact that teachers also differ in their capabilities, personalities, and interests. These differences must be taken into account when setting up instructional teams so that caring and productive relationships can be developed. When instructional teams are initially formed, team members should determine collaboratively how they are going to work together and what their procedures and work relationships will be.

At the outset, team members need to share their concerns with each other. By addressing important personal and professional issues, the team will work more effectively as a unit, have fewer interpersonal problems, and be more productive. For this to occur, it will require concerted leadership from the school administration. It will require setting aside both time and money to support staff-development programs specifically designed to address these new areas of responsibility. And these staff-development programs must be planned cooperatively with the teachers they are intended to serve.

Either the principal or the school's leadership team should meet regularly with the instructional teams. In initial sessions, the principal should ask team members to explore their beliefs, values, and priorities. Further discussions should focus on what the research has revealed in terms of child growth, development, motivation, and

learning. This focus on the learning/instructional process can help to bond the members of the team.

In their daily planning meetings, the teams can work out the practical aspects of their work and develop the procedures for working with the students assigned to them. For example, agreement on behavioral expectations for students can establish consistency within the team and thus eliminate many of the conditions that contribute to student discipline problems.

As instructional teams become more comfortable with their decision-making activities, a sense of camaraderie will evolve that will be contagious to students as well. If one member of a team departs and the team is involved in hiring a replacement, the new member selected by colleagues will feel valued; and the team will feel a commitment to helping the new member succeed.

The artificial barriers that traditionally have separated teachers and students can be addressed in the restructuring design. One of the reasons why there are not close relationships between teachers and students is that there is not enough time to develop them. One way to address this issue is for students to remain with their instructional teams for more than one year. Having students work with the same teachers for two or even three years can result in more effective use of instructional time. Consider how much time at the start of each school year teachers devote to explaining their rules and regulations to their new students. If teachers have developed positive relationships with students in previous years, then we might anticipate a gain in instructional time of anywhere from four to six weeks in each subsequent year. If at the secondary level members of instructional teams are also the homeroom teachers of their students, another opportunity is created for solidifying teacher/student relationships.

Assigning students for two or more years to the same instructional team will provide a variety of benefits for the students. When trying to decide what programs will best meet the needs of a student, the team's collective judgement can be brought to bear on decisions regard-

ing the educational, social, emotional, and physical needs of the student. Also, teachers working within the framework of instructional teams can more readily adapt to the needs of an individual student or a group of students during the course of the year than can the individual teacher working in the rigid framework of the self-contained or the departmentalized classroom. And strong relationships with students will result when great care is exercised in placing each student with the most appropriate instructional team. When we take the learning styles of students and the teaching styles of staff into account when assigning students to instructional teams, there is an additional opportunity for developing strong relationships that will benefit the professional staff as well as the students.

Instructional Support as a Community Endeavor

For the proposed restructured framework to be successful, there must be conscious, overt support from many segments of the community. The school cannot carry the burden alone. First, there must be strong support from the board of education, the superintendent, and the central office staff, particularly the instructional division. Without support from these groups, the restructuring effort will be little more than a passing fad. With both moral and financial support, however, a positive message is sent to all segments of the school community that the restructured school will enable staff to provide students with the programs they truly need to prosper in the 21st century.

For the new design to be successful, parents must support it. However, that support need not take the form of direct parent involvement in school activities. For many communities, direct parent involvement is simply not feasible. With the growing number of single-parent families and families with both parents working, it is almost impossible for them to find time in the day to come to the school to help. Rather than asking the parents to come to the schools, schools must go out to parents.

By going out to the public, playing a more active role in community and recreational organizations, church groups, social clubs, the chamber of commerce, and business and industry, school personnel can indicate what the school is doing and respond to the questions

or concerns that parents and the public will have. Members of instructional teams and administrative staff can arrange to be invited to community organizations and have a place on their agenda to explain what they are proposing to do and why. There is still a place for open houses and performances at school; but by meeting in the workplace, at community centers, etc., staff can solicit the essential community support necessary for the new program's success.

To secure parental backing, the instructional teams should send home easy-to-understand descriptions of the core instructional program along with suggestions for reasonable activities parents can undertake to assist their children's learning. I stress reasonable because frequently what schools ask of parents is unreasonable, especially after both parents have put in a full work day. One example of what schools can do is sponsoring family math and reading programs so parents can help their children and themselves.

Members of primary-level instructional teams should meet with community child-care providers to let them know the structure of the new program and the interdisciplinary approach employed. They need to visit the child-care centers periodically so that youngsters there can become acquainted with the wonderful teachers they will be working with in the not-too-distant future. Encouraging classroom teachers and school principals, rather than central office staff, to serve as liaisons with business, industry, and the professions can spread the word further and secure much-needed support. Rather than everybody coming to the school, school personnel must be willing to go out to the community with the message.

Wrapping It Up

Modifying just one element in an organizational structure usually yields only minimal gains. For significant results to be achieved, the basic structure of an organization must be changed. It is not enough simply to deploy staff into instructional teams. Such a change must be supported by a core curriculum, student placement and grouping procedures, and instructional time allocations that are all deliberately designed to achieve common objectives. Board policies and administrative decisions need to support the restructuring design. And district office staff must see that what is proposed is consistent with the current research.

When the staff is deployed into instructional teams and use an interdisciplinary core curriculum, there will be a true restructuring of our schools. To be successful, instructional teams will have to be empowered with significant decision-making responsibilities, especially in the areas of time allocation and student placement. There need to be good working relationships among teachers within teams and supportive relationships between teams and their students.

Student placements must be personalized so that learning styles are matched with teaching styles. This can create a climate for bonding that will raise the performance level of both students and staff. The school will then have a professional work environment that unleashes the creative talents of staff to develop programs that have a significant impact on student learning and that produce results the community can understand and support. Results, not rhetoric, will ultimately determine the fate of the restructuring and empowerment endeavors.

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