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Research in Brief: Shared Decision Making Enhances Instructional Leadership

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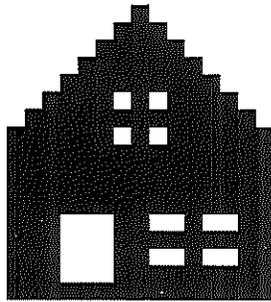


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Instructional leadership can be enhanced by shared decision making, according to a study of middle level administrators.

Research in Brief:

Shared Decision Making Enhances Instructional Leadership

P rincipals are often under pressure to exhibit strong instructional leadership and, at the same time, increase participative decision making (George and Grebing, 1992; Rallis and Highsmith, 1986). Some educators might find these demands overwhelming and even contradictory.

However, a study of three middle school principals revealed a peaceful, practical coexistence between instructional leadership and shared decision making.

The three middle school principals studied were selected by their central offices based on their reputations for instructional leadership. Two urban schools in two different states and one rural school were represented. The enrollments ranged from 460 to 800 students. Two principals were male and one was female.

The principals and teachers from their respective buildings were interviewed about their instructional leadership activities before and after establishment of shared decision making. Faculty, student, and principal activities were also observed to validate the interview data.

Results of the Study

The interviews and follow-up led to the following conclusions about shared decision making and instructional leadership in the middle level schools studied:



The nature of the middle school teachers' role demands participative leadership.

None of the principals believed their work changed significantly with the addition of shared decision making activities. Both teachers and principals suggested that the nature of middle school faculties required principals to be open and participative.

One middle level principal suggested that middle school teachers must be given the freedom to think and be innovative. He said he learned during his first year that he should not be authoritarian in his approach.

By Jane Clark Lindle



In the other two schools, teachers relied on shared decision making to address interdisciplinary instructional matters beyond their departments or teams.

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Rather than feeling overwhelmed by competing demands, these principals found their instructional leadership enhanced by the inclusion of shared decision making in their schools.
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Both groups agree that in the middle school, instructional issues were always a hot topic. Several teachers attributed the focus on instruction to the nature of the team and departmental meetings teachers were familiar with before shared decision making was established.

Teachers indicated that whom they talk with has changed with shared decision making, but that the instructional focus has not. Principals say they continue to interact with the same people, but that shared decision making has increased the opportunities for those people to interact even more.

Enhancing Instructional Leadership

Although case study research is rather specific, it can convey powerful images of what practice is like for certain schools, principals, and teachers.

For the principals and teachers in these case studies, middle schools require a co-mingling of participative and instructional leadership. Rather than feeling overwhelmed by compet-

Another middle level principal said that middle level teachers were "an assertive and influential group" compared to teachers at other levels. Teachers in all three schools agreed with this characterization.

While teachers in these schools proposed that "other principals" might have a hard time with shared decision making, they unanimously endorsed their own principals as being naturally participative. They said they—the teachers—participated willingly and were occasionally surprised at how much time and effort they committed because their principal had been open and supportive.



Communication and decision making in instructionally led middle schools

revolve around instructional issues.

Comments from teachers and principals in all three schools revealed that the decisions they made in their

schools essentially focused on instructional issues. General faculty meetings were limited by union contracts or administrative choice in all three schools.

Communication from principal to teacher was traditionally delivered through team leadership in all three schools.

Although team leadership was the official conduit of information, two of the schools also followed an open meeting policy. Teachers who were not team leaders routinely attended the team meetings based on their interest in agenda items or their concern about other issues.

With the development of shared decision making, open meetings flourished in all three schools. Although agenda items varied, instructional issues dominated the discussions.

In one school, the district mandated the agenda focus on instruction.

ing demands, these principals found their instructional leadership enhanced by the inclusion of shared decision making in their schools.

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Yellow Book Encourages Student Goal Setting

The staff and administration at Washington Park (Pa.) Middle School created the Yellow Book program in 1984 to provide students with structure while teaching them study skills and goal-setting techniques.

Each student is assigned to a small study skills group that meets weekly during the year. School staff members, including teachers and administrators, function as mentors for the group.

Group activities emphasize a 12-step goal-setting process and traditional study skills, coping skills, and student peer coaching. It also addresses the eighth grade students' transition to high school.

On the first day of school, each student receives a copy of *The Yellow Book*, a staff-designed study skills handbook. The book includes pages for recording:

- Goals and strategies
- Grades, grade point averages, and attendance data
- Self-analysis and evaluation

The book also includes a daily class/activity planner/calendar and study tips.

Students set goals for academic achievement, attendance, or social skills that must be met within nine weeks.

According to the ERS School Operations Information Exchange, the program is geared toward students taking charge of their own learning.