

Democracy and Staff Development: The School Charter

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Forty years ago Bob Schaefer (1967) had it right in *The School as a Center of Inquiry* where he portrayed the school as a place where both students and educators are inquirers, where attention to learning by teachers and administrators has a place side by side with learning by students. There was a strong movement toward team teaching at the time and, where it was practiced, the study of teaching had a prominent place in the work of teachers. The field of staff development as such had not yet appeared, but it was on its way and would replace university courses as the avenue to recertification, opening the way to the development of fresh ways of supporting teachers and administrators.

In this paper and others we are reporting our inquiry into the now large and diverse field of professional development (for the full report, see, Joyce & Calhoun, *Models of Staff Development*, 2009) Four conclusions from our study stand out.

- There is not one process that defines staff development, but a set of families of models that overlap in purpose, but not completely. What will work for your goals is the question to ask, rather than hoping that one model will stand out as the preferred all-purpose approach.
- Teachers and administrators have plenty of learning ability – they can profit from any of the current models, provided those approaches are well-implemented. Virtually everyone is positive about events where there is good content and process. When there is little learning from a strand of staff development, it is because the content is poor, the design is flawed, or the implementation is weak. It is NOT because of problems with the capacity of teachers as learners.
- For their success, all approaches to staff development inevitably depend on the social and organizational characteristics of schools and school districts. In some social climates, all models have a good chance to thrive and good odds for success. In some others, any model will fail.
- The movements toward decentralization have accentuated the importance of building a strong organizational climate in the schools that are being asked to take more responsibility. The core responsibilities are for the health of the environments provided to students and the relationship between school and community.
- Here we concentrate on the improvement of the organizational climate of schools through a procedure that we call, thanks to Carl Glickman, a school charter – the creation of a democratic social system that is a fertile place for teachers minds and skills and, not incidentally, for the educational environment of the students.

Before discussing charters and how to create them, we need to identify the families of models and say a word about the learning capacity of teachers.

Models of Professional Development

We categorized the approaches to staff development into five groups or families that share some processes and whose immediate goals overlap considerably.

Supporting the Individual as an Individual

Although all of staff development intends to result in growth for individual persons, some types focus directly on the individual and provide avenues for people to grow according to their own lights. Vastly underused, this variety has tremendous promise.

An example is the provision of stipends and short leaves that teachers and principals can use to implement projects of their making as individuals. A person can use the opportunity to, say, study a fresh way of teaching writing (or any other curriculum content, for that matter). This category is not a division of labor by a group

or faculty, but is a creation by the individual (see, Joyce, B., Calhoun, E., Carran, N., Simser, J. Rust, D., & Halliburton, Cal. (1966). In Joyce, B. & Calhoun, eds. 1966; Iowa Association of School Boards, 2000,)

Personal/Professional Service

Here some professionals are designated to provide help to other teachers using their developed knowledge and skill. Mentoring and coaching are the chief current forms. In some ways this type of service has evolved from supervision, minus evaluation, but some forms of mentoring and coaching are new on the scene and have marked differences from the supervisory mode. Personal service can be both open-ended or structured. One of our favorite lines from a study of coaching maintains that there are as many types of coaching as there are coaches. We like the finding because we think it is accurate. (see, for example, Sweeney, 2008; Villani, 2002; Smith, T. & Ingersall, R. 2004; National Council of Teachers of English, 2003; Multiple Authors, 2003; Mitchell, D. & Scott-Hendrick, R., 2007; Gallego, M., Zamora-Duran, & Reyes, Elba. (2008); Carnegie Corporation. (2004); Atkinson, M, French, Dan D., & Hastings, M. (2002))

Social Construction of Knowledge and Action

The focus is on the school as an organization, with the development of learning communities and either loosely structured inquiry or disciplined action research as the process. Cooperative/collaborative models can be very open-ended or take the form of disciplined action research. The open-ended are the most practiced at present, but schoolwide action research has a strong history. We are not quite sure what to do with approaches that reach only a small part of the staff – with just one or two study groups operating, the approach feels more like support for individuals than a collaborative staff development initiative. (Bean, Rita & Deford, Diane. (2008); Schmoker, M. (2004); Oja, S.N. & Smulyan, L. (1989); Murphy, Carlene, and Lick, Dale. (2005); Joyce, B., & Wolf, J. M. (1996); Joyce, B. (2004); Hord, S. (2009); Hopkins, D. (1985); Fullan, Michael. (2006); and Atkinson, Mary, French, Dan, & Hastings, Mary.(2002); Calhoun, E. (1994).

Sustained Curricular/Instructional Initiatives

The course and workshop are prominent, where developed ways of teaching or the dissemination of curriculums are the content of formal workshops and courses. Important changes in curriculums and learning one or more new models of teaching require the implementation of strong and well-designed training that cannot be accomplished in the occasional didactic workshop. These models have been examined with more formal research than any other approaches to teacher learning. (see, American Institutes for Research. (1999); Borman, G.D., Slavin, R.E., Cheung, A., Chamberlain, A., Madden, N., & Chambers, B. (2005); Borman, G.D., Slavin, R.E., Cheung, A., Chamberlain, A., Madden, N., & Chambers, B. (2005a); Calhoun, E. (1997); Calhoun, E. (1999); Deshler, D. & Schumaker, J. (2006); Horsley, S. (1990); Joyce, B., & Wolf, J. M. (1996); Joyce, B., Calhoun, E., & Hrycauk, M. (2001); Joyce, B., Calhoun, E., & Hrycauk, M. (2001); & Joyce, B., Calhoun, E., Jutras, J and Newlove K. (2006).

The Menus on the Designated “Professional Development Days”

No treatise on professional development would be complete without contemplating the currently both most criticized and second most common way of organizing people for instruction of various sorts -- the brief workshop, often offered in an array on “staff development days.” As battered as it is, this mode can be made to be really effective for certain purposes, and staff development organizers should not dismiss it out of hand.

However, done right, the little workshops can fuel mentoring, coaching, professional learning communities, assessment, and, linked together, the study of curriculum and instruction.

In all the families, inquiry and self-development are central to high-quality programs. In all of them, the quality of the social system of the school is critical.

The Learning Capacity of Teachers and Other Educators

We are often asked which model of staff development is best. As we indicated earlier, all have been created to stimulate the growth and competence of educators. Where they differ is in terms of the aspects of growth in mind they emphasize and how development is to be achieved. Thus, the important consideration when comparing models is what they are good for, and how their specific objectives and methods fit with your purposes.

Very important is that the research on all of them celebrates the learning capacity of teachers, causing us to proclaim that most educators can profit from each model, provided it is well-executed and its implementation is adequately supported.

The Quality of the Social System of Schools

Ultimately, all approaches to staff development are nested in schools, and schools vary widely in the quality of the nests they provide. Traditionally, and at present, schools have been built around the work of educators as individuals. Privatism is not only the norm, but highly prized. In many schools, classrooms do not welcome observers, whether colleagues or principals or central office coordinators. Time for collaborative work is puny and creates some binds that would be humorous were the issue of lesser importance. As one teacher commented to Bruce recently, “We’d make time to get together if we had the time to decide when to meet.”

The issue we join here is how to make a bunch of lone rangers into a posse whose members can select goals and proceed to try to achieve them. If that is not done, all models of staff development have serious problems. We will use literacy coaches as an example, a mode strongly promoted by the national organizations, most prominent among them the National Council of Teachers of English. In one of the papers on coaching that we read recently, the authors stated that the first task of the coach is to introduce him/her self to the principal. Imagine that! Someone shows up without prior contact with the principal – or the faculty, it turns out, for the next task is to spend time in the faculty room, introducing oneself to the staff.

In a position paper, an exemplary coach is quoted. She says that the coach should be careful not to place her desk near the principal’s office, or she could be mistaken for a member of the administration! Our exemplary coach placed her desk *next to the children’s bathroom*, where she could coach the teachers when they brought the children to the bathroom and collected them after their business was done.

These kinds of actions lead to the kind of article on coaching titled, “Why do the Teachers Hate Me?”

It disturbs us that sentiments like these occur in the literature generated by the advocates of coaching and that they appear in publications from the national organizations. What a different entrance for a coach would take place if the faculty, led by the principal and lead teachers, decided they needed and wanted the services of a coach and engaged in a selection process for same *and had agreed to accept the help he or she could give*. A social system where someone is simply assigned to a school and shows up and tries to sell him/her self to the faculty and avoids help by the principal is simply a set of processes that will harbor disaster.

There are examples from the implementation of the other models of staff development – all have the same need for a healthy organizational climate in the schools.

We recommend that school faculties develop and adopt a “Charter” that specifies how the faculty (including the principal) will govern itself. Developing a charter can have a large effect on the social system of the school in such a way that mentoring, coaching, and the development of professional learning communities can flourish.

Let’s look at the process of developing a charter.

Building a Charter

The League of Professional Schools developed, with leadership from Carl Glickman, the concept of a document representing the institutionalization of a democratic process in the organization of the school. Oddly, although schools have principals and staffs, how they are to function in governance is not usually dealt with as the principal and the staff are hired. Therefore, we need to develop understandings about how to make agreements about operating and improving the school, including arrangements for professional learning.

Let’s build a charter beginning on day one of a new school year.

We have a school building in a neighborhood where there are both homes and a couple of streets with stores. The principal and staff are hired by the district central office and, one day, the children are brought to school and registered. The staff comes to the school for an incredibly short period – often only a day or two – before the school opens in the fall. Most likely, textbooks and library books are still being unboxed as the first bike or bus arrives and the first bell rings.

The teachers deploy to their classrooms to greet the children and begin the first day. The principal and school secretary are very busy answering questions, getting bus routes modified, talking to nervous parents, registering late-comers, and ordering supplies for the cafeteria to make up for an earlier snafu in calculations. Because it is a rainy day, the building superintendent is sighted several times crying uncontrollably as the sea of mud from the newly-seeded playground migrates across his freshly-waxed floor.

A few days later, Schooling settles into familiar routines. The books are unpacked and more arrive and the library begins to take shape. Classroom libraries appear and students are taking books home. Parent meetings are held and the parents visit the classrooms. Computers arrive and the teacher work stations are installed with projection capability as well as internet access, email (from school to home if needed), electronic encyclopedias, talking dictionaries, and other necessities. Computers for students to use have not yet arrived and how to deploy them is up in the air. Thankfully, the planners did not generate a computer lab with networked machines.

After about ten days Ms. Alicia Henry, the principal, sends a note to all the teachers that she would like a meeting on September 18, a Thursday, from 3.P.M. to 5 P.M. with refreshments and parents welcome afterwards, to discuss:

1. immediate logistical problems and solve them,
2. the district calendar for the year,
3. a meeting with parents she will hold next week to welcome them and invite questions, types of staff development needed soon (several staff have indicated that computer technology is an area of serious need), and
4. how to organize for ongoing school-improvement-oriented action research, including thinking about having a school steering committee to consider actions and lead them.

As the teachers anticipate the meeting, some voice that they are not sure what action research means, but they are not negative or anxious. They like the idea that Henry will be presiding over a gathering of the parents.

However, Ms. Henry receives a note from the office of the superintendent that district rules stipulate that no school-level meeting can be held before October, and can only be one hour long.

When she contacts the superintendent, he informs her that the rules were made by the board at the request of the previous superintendent. An additional rule is that the school can only have one meeting each month.

She remonstrates, indicating that leadership from her or from teachers would be completely stymied unless they can meet together,

Henry gathers the faculty together for a series of two-a-week brief meetings at noon (apparently legal in the district). Logistics occupy most of the first two meetings. Then, with their assent, she arranges that part of a planning day be given over to a meeting with a district computer technology staff member to assess whether she can provide what they need. In the third meeting she deals with the general school improvement question and suggests that they build a charter – a kind of constitution – saying how they will govern themselves and how they propose to improve the school by increments initially small but eventually of unknown magnitude. They discuss what this might mean and ask her to provide some items that might be included in an agreement.

A week or so later she proposes that the staff first agree that if 80 percent of them approve of a governance structure where:

- They elect a steering committee that includes Alicia. All staff vote, the five teachers receiving the most votes are elected. A new steering committee is elected every two years.
- As an entity, they study ways of making small improvements and how to implement them – including solving small problems as they emerge.
- And they study how to carry on school-wide action research where the health of the school is studied continuously and they make initiatives to improve it as needed.
- And, if a major curricular/instructional change appears to be needed, it can be adopted if an 80 percent majority agree.

On an 80 percent positive vote, this will be their charter.

(You will be pleased to know that our experience is that in most cases more than 80 percent voted for the charter they developed. In many, the provisions were unanimously approved and 90 percent or more was not unusual. We think that a willingness to work democratically lies just beneath the surface of the typical privatistic norms.)

If the staff approves the charter, Ms. Henry will take it to the board of education for their information and, to ask for their approval to have more faculty meetings than the district schools normally have and more days or day-equivalents (three two-hour sessions equalling one day) to work with. The superintendent is supportive.

Note that the proportion 80 percent is used twice, first for the adoption of the charter and second for the adoption of any major school improvement initiative once the charter is in effect.

The Objectives

The primary objectives are to free the staff from the constraints of the norms that depress collective action – not the work rules but the norms of privatism and individualism that dominate the cultures of most schools -- and to liberate them to work together as a professional community whose members feed each other professionally and work together to develop initiatives that benefit all of them.

We believe that the development of a charter is necessary so that the constraints of traditional norms do not prevent progress -- the charter works to bring the entire staff together.

After a time, the board approves Henry's schedule for meetings and, subsequently, will approve her requests to augment the school budget to increase time available for staff development. The development of legitimacy for the charter and understanding by the central office personnel are important. Working through the organization and its rules and norms requires the ability to negotiate. She is sure to apply to grants and anticipates that time spent early on will pay off later as her faculty develops plans that alter normal procedures. One way to look at school improvement initiatives is that improvement in student learning will not take place *unless* procedures, including curriculum and instruction, are altered.

A Note on Leadership

Where a school-wide steering committee is formed, the principal is the *pro tem* chairperson, although leadership relative to various tasks devolves on the several faculty members. And, committees within the school may be given specific responsibilities.

And, all aspects of making a charter work depends heavily on leadership by the principals. In addition to the duty of looking after the learning of the students and the learning environments of the school, they have duties relating to the staff. They are responsible for the professional health of the faculty as a whole and for looking after individuals. For example, they should be prepared to mentor new teachers, to help individuals and groups as they implement new skills, and to find the technical assistance to advance action research and the study of teaching skills. They should be prepared to study the models being used – they and lead teachers need to be prepared to seek training and, then, to lead the faculty. As we discussed earlier in this paper, decentralization continues to make schools the center of governance in education. We believe that school governance should be democratic, partly because it works and partly because it is a central element of our heritage.

By the way, the procedures described above are similar whether in an elementary, middle, or secondary school and in rural or urban settings. At all levels, priority is given to creating an affirmative environment where there is a continuous search for better ways of teaching and, therefore, opportunities for us to explore the rich countryside of educational practice.

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Professional Development in Your School

I need your help as I try to make this session relevant to your situation.

Please take a minute to answer a few questions about mentoring and coaching in your school. If you are a team, you can generate the information together.

If you are not assigned to a school, think about one in your district or area and answer as you believe someone in that setting would do so.

What is your Position? Please circle all that apply.

Principal or

Reading First

Teacher

Other

Assistant Principal

School Coordinator

(please describe)

What Grade Levels Does your School Serve? Please circle

K 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12

MENTORING of New Teachers, where an experienced teacher is assigned to support the new teacher.

Does a mentor support one of your teachers? Yes ___ No ___

Would you like information or discussion about ways of making mentoring work better in your school?

Yes ___ No ___

If so, please suggest content or questions that might be dealt with?

COACHING has several varieties. Please let us know if this one is present in your school.

A literacy coach is assigned who supports the faculty as individuals and as a group. Reading and Writing are the focus.

Yes ____ No ____

If yes, is the coach full-time or part-time in a supportive role in your school?

Full-time ____ Part-time ____

Would you like information or discussion about ways of making the coaching process work better in your school?

Yes ____ No ____

If so, please suggest content or questions that might be dealt with?

FINALLY,

Please comment about professional development in general. Anything that pops into your mind.

Thank you very much.

Bruce