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ABSTRACT

The Eastern Michigan University (EMU) Collaborative School Improvement Program was established in 1978 within the College of Education's Office of Collaborative Education. The program assists local district personnel with school improvement and staff development activities through training teachers, administrators, board members, and other staff in system-wide change. EMU provides financial and technical assistance to each project site, and a university faculty member is assigned to facilitate each school's change efforts. School faculty members are recognized as equal shareholders in the change process as they collaboratively identify needs that are in alignment with their school building and district improvement plans. This paper discusses assumptions that guide the school improvement process, describes a district-wide model for systemic change piloted in the South Lyon (Michigan) Community School District, outlines a six-step process for systemic change, and examines the value of shared decision making and site-based management. The paper concludes that conditions supportive of substantive change at the building level are more likely to occur when a school district governance structure supports systemic change. (Contains 17 references.) (JDD)

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A University/School Collaboration Model for Systemic Change Through Site-Based Management

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Introduction

The Eastern Michigan University Collaborative School Improvement Program (C-SIP) is one of several programs within the EMU College of Education's Office of Collaborative Education. Established in 1978, C-SIP exemplifies the College's commitment to collaborating with area school districts in local change initiatives. This program assists local district personnel with school improvement and staff development activities through training teachers, administrators, board members, and other staff in system-wide change.

The foundation of the C-SIP structure is collaboration. The university and local school district both assume important roles in ensuring successful implementation of school improvement projects. Faculty members are recognized as equal shareholders in the change process as they collaboratively identify building needs that are in alignment with their school building and district improvement plans.

Eastern Michigan University provides financial and technical assistance to each project site, and a university faculty member is assigned to facilitate each school's change efforts as they implement the C-SIP process. This process builds sufficient building- and district-level strength to sustain continuous school improvement efforts when formal university support is withdrawn at the end of the three-year funding period.

C-SIP Assumptions

Several tenets concerning change form the basis for the C-SIP model. The Collaborative School Improvement Program Handbook (1994) lists the following eleven assumptions that guide the school improvement process:

- Meaningful change occurs as a process, not as an event.
- Individuals behave the way they do because it makes sense to them.

- Individuals who will be affected by decisions must be involved in making them. Shared decision making builds personal ownership and collective commitment.
- The most critical variable in effective teaching and leading is the extent to which one can interact with and release the fullest potential of others.
- Since effective change is a human process involving the individual's thoughts, feelings, and actions, and which can cause disequilibrium, various support systems are necessary.
- While top administrators cannot create effective change by themselves, they can and must be an integral part of the process as they facilitate change .
- Since it cannot be presumed that faculty inherently possess leadership skills, any change model must provide for leadership development.
- Formalized outside intervention is necessary for significant changes to occur in behavior, and continuous communication is essential to incorporate these changes.
- Participants should include discussions of current literature, research and practice in their deliberations.
- While external consultant help is necessary and important, direction for change must come from local sources.
- An organization's fundamental beliefs are the driving forces and the ultimate reason behind every action (pp. 5-6).

School districts selected for C-SIP projects are funded for a period of three years.

The C-SIP staff provides training in the change process for improving instructional outcomes, a university facilitator, an annual grant in the amount of \$3,000 to fund project activities, three annual training and development conferences, access to a library containing materials on school improvement and change activities, and quarterly newsletters highlighting project activities.

The C-SIP District-Wide Model

The Collaborative School Improvement Program was originally founded on the belief that the building is the smallest unit in which educational change can occur. However, recognizing the need to be responsive to federal and state mandates and changing conditions within school governance structures, the C-SIP model is continually evaluated and revised to include the current literature on school restructuring and change.

During the past three years, the C-SIP staff has been piloting a district-wide model for systemic change in the South Lyon (Michigan) Community School District. This model is based upon indicators of organizational effectiveness at the district level. These indicators are: (a) centralization of power within the organization, (b) curriculum alignment with student outcomes, (c) allocation of resources, (d) community involvement, (e) school system climate, (f) focused district vision and mission, (g) the process of communicating internally and externally within the school system, (h) leadership roles of people within the organization, and (i) instructional and methodological approach to teaching.

In experimenting with this emerging model of district-wide systemic change, the C-SIP staff recognize that a supportive climate must first be established at the district level before substantive change can occur within the individual schools. The board of education and central office administrative staff must collaboratively develop district-level policies that encourage building-level restructuring and school improvement activities. Consequently, this pilot has focused on the South Lyon district in its entirety as the "system," rather than upon each individual building within the district.

The Six-Step Process for Systemic Change

While the traditional C-SIP structure includes a research-based six-step process for organizational improvement, this model has been modified for the South Lyon pilot to address those critical elements which are necessary for a district-level systemic change process. The six steps, which are listed below, are subject to further revision as continued experimentation delineates the necessary components of the model.

Step 1: Awareness, Readiness, Commitment. The university facilitator meets with the district superintendent to review relevant research concerning the change process and to explain the C-SIP model. Upon securing the superintendent's commitment to the process, a presentation is made to the local board of education, who vote to enter into the collaborative agreement with the university.

Step 2: Collection of Baseline Data. With the assistance of the facilitator, the staff conducts an interactive needs assessment to determine the district's indicators of organizational strength and to determine student achievement baseline data within the district. The staff and the board of education collaboratively determine the successful components for meeting student outcomes.

Step 3: Development and Approval of Education-Based Master Plan for the School District/Community. While this is crucial at all stages in the process, the involvement of the entire school community is critical in the development of the district plan. This strategic planning process must include the following elements:

- District Vision and Mission.
- Outcomes which define the broad based goals of the school district and community.
- Action Plans for the district and individual buildings.
- Budget and finance considerations.
- Evaluation of the progress made by the educational system to meet its goals as a school district system for achieving progress toward district outcome goals.
- The structure for school governance--site-based management/shared decision-making.

The Master Plan includes procedures for establishing site-based management/shared decision-making, which is viewed as a district-wide process that occurs throughout the school system. It is not just a building level process but a commitment to a way of governing the school system.

Step 4: Implementation and Monitoring of Action Plans. At this stage, district-wide Action Plans are developed for implementing district goals and staff members engage in professional development activities that relate to the plan. The facilitator assists the district staff in implementing shared decision making, provides training on consensus building skills, and trains a cadre of district staff members to become trainers of their building staffs.

Step 5: Evaluation. After the Action Plan is implemented, school district profile data are compared with previous profile or baseline data. The project's success is evaluated by the superintendent, board of education and school staff.

Step 6: Reassessment of 3-Year Plan. At the end of each year, the district's progress toward meeting district-wide goals is reassessed, and appropriate modifications to the plan are made to ensure optimum progress.

Structuring Site-Based Management/Shared Decision Making

While the project is not yet completed, the South Lyon/C-SIP pilot is yielding a variety of positive benefits for the South Lyon Community School District. As a result of their discussions concerning the implementation of site-based management, the district has redefined their mission statement and has adopted six guiding principles of educational excellence, personal integrity, effective leadership, continuous improvement, employee involvement, and a partnership between the district and all members of the community.

The district has adopted shared-decision making as their governance structure in their effort to continuously improve student performance. South Lyon Community Schools (1994) have operationally defined this Shared Involvement Process (SIP) as "a process for soliciting, collecting, evaluating, and using information and the expertise of educational partners for the purpose of making and implementing decisions that will improve or enhance student performance" (p. 2). The governance structure consists of a Shared Involvement Process Committee in each building, which consists of the principal, 2-5 teachers (2-3 on elementary committees), 1 support staff, up to 3 parents, and 2

students (on middle and high school committees). The committees are to employ shared decision-making and consensus-building strategies as they conduct their business; they have the authority to make decisions that do not impact other buildings and to expend funds up to the amount of their approved budgets. Emphasizing the commitment to the entire school community, committees are to facilitate the involvement of every staff member and all relevant constituencies in the shared involvement process.

In addition to the building committees, a District-Wide Committee has also been established to address issues that impact the district or more than one building. This committee facilitates communication among the building committees, evaluates and oversees the entire process, and creates ad hoc committees when necessary to address timely issues. Membership of the District SIP consists of: two board members; three parent representatives; an elementary, middle, and high school teacher; one building administrator; the superintendent or designee; two support staff; and two students.

Learning and applying the skills required for functioning within a school system that values shared involvement from every employee in the K-12 organization necessitates a planned staff development program. Therefore, the South Lyon district has committed to training its staff in the skills necessary for structuring collaboration. The outcomes of this staff development are to: (a) train a core group of staff in order to teach the skills required for making shared involvement work in the entire school system, (b) communicate the organizational/structural variables which limit and/or enhance shared involvement as a public school system governance process, and (c) train a core group of staff in specific skills related to teaming, collaboration and consensus. Knowledge, information, and basic understanding about the Shared Involvement Process will be derived from an internal training process which emphasizes experiential learning. A core group of staff will be trained in these skills, then charged with the responsibility for implementing an action plan for training the remaining district staff. The five training days will address the following themes:

Day 1: Communication Skills for Group Interaction

Trust assessment, active listening, communicating and understanding, practical problem solving.

Day 2: Skillbuilding and Consensus

The elements of consensus.

Day 3: Site-Based Management in Context to District Change

Systems change, leadership roles, defining the shared involvement process in South Lyon, issues of turf and responsibility.

Day 4: Experiencing the Challenges of Collaboration

Experiential learning: team-building exercises and debriefing.

Day 5: Training the Trainers

Putting it all together, action plan for training staff, demonstrating skills for collaboration.

Conclusion

As a result of their research with the South Lyon project, the Collaborative School Improvement Program staff is studying a district-wide model for school building and district change. In the 16 years of the program's existence, over 115 schools in 37 southeastern Michigan school districts have received university support in identifying school improvement goals. The success of the systemic change project has encouraged the C-SIP staff to examine the interrelationships of district-wide systemic change and building-level school improvement efforts. Certainly, individual schools can and do initiate change without direct district-level support. However, conditions supportive of substantive change at the building level are more likely to occur when a school district governance structure supports systemic change. Since individual school buildings do not operate independently of the district, the district as a system must establish procedures that facilitate site-based management. The district and the schools will then collaboratively support change initiatives throughout all levels of the school system.

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