

In What Ways Are My Colleagues Ready to Work at a Teacher Led School?

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Research Question:

In what ways are my colleagues prepared to work at a teacher led school?

Rationale:

As Albuquerque Teachers Federation (ATF) Vice President of Membership and Involvement, I attended the Southwest Teacher Union Reform Network (TURN) Conference in Denver, Colorado in April 2016. The focus of the conference was teacher led schools. I was treated to a tour of the Math Science Leadership Academy (MSLA), a fully teacher led school in south Denver. The MSLA is completely managed by teachers, classified staff, parents, and students. There is no principal. I returned to Albuquerque “on fire” with the notion that such a governance model could be employed to help our school district retain teachers (by allowing maximum autonomy) and aid ATF in our fight against bully principals (of which there are many in our district).

Over the years, ATF has negotiated strong Instructional Council (IC) language in our contract with Albuquerque Public Schools (APS) that guarantees all instructional decisions should be made collaboratively at schools by the administrators and elected teachers serving on the IC. Schools with high-functioning IC’s, who make decisions by consensus, tend to have higher morale and higher union density, which I gauge from analyzing teacher turnover from year-to-year. Schools with a tradition of inactive IC’s, and those where the IC is a “tool” of the administrators, tend to have higher turnover and less organization among the staff. Added to this, ATF recently secured language guaranteeing that teachers have the autonomy to use the materials in their classroom that will best help their students reach proficiency in the Common Core Standards.

I have worked at my present school four years. With a lot of emphasis on organizing and some great co-workers, we have built a union density of 80% (up from 48%) in a district where union membership is voluntary. Our Instructional Council is traditionally very high-functioning and teachers are accustomed to having the freedom to make most curricular decisions. Each year, as fed rep (steward), I ask the IC to fill out and discuss our union’s “IC Wellness Checklist”. I also question members represented by the IC as to their satisfaction with representation. Our school staff (including our principal) is deeply committed to allowing teachers to teach the way their students learn best (autonomy in the classroom).

Our district and state suffer from a shortage of competent administrators. School “reform” in our district (as is true at the state and federal levels) has most often been top-down and unsuccessful. These “reforms” (many taken directly from the playbook of the American Legislative Exchange Council) have led to massive teacher turnover and low morale.

Furthermore, three elementary schools in our district were recently targeted for restructuring by the New Mexico Public Education Department (NM PED). In the matter of governance, the most “creative” solution our overlords could muster was to put a “stronger” principal in charge at each school or convert the public school to a charter.

The bolstering of teacher leadership (though only discussed by our union in this situation) was never considered as an option by NM PED.

Over the past couple years, I have continued to study the “teacher-powered” school model and have here sought to develop a tool (my short survey) to begin the conversation of teachers’ willingness to work and contribute to a teacher led school.

Lit. Review

I relied heavily on the works of Kim Farris-Berg and the founders of the Teacher-Powered Schools Initiative. Their website, www.teacher-powered.org, is a treasure trove of information detailing how educators have successfully created, organized, and operated teacher led schools throughout the United States. They have enumerated the steps committees might take in this endeavor and supplied concrete examples of how these steps play out.

A review of my union’s “Guidelines for Instructional Councils” (APS/ATF 2018) revealed the extent to which my school could already be classified as “teacher-powered”. APS teachers, through our IC, have the means to be meaningfully involved in the day-to-day operations at our sites. It is apparent that any conversation about designing a teacher led school needs a starting point. I was unable to find a simple questionnaire that met my need to gauge my co-workers’ attitudes and beliefs about teacher autonomy. Junge and Farris-Berg’s article (2015) on the 15 areas of autonomy that they have identified as key to teacher-powered schools was a perfect starting point. Lori Nazareno’s article (2014) about Denver’s MSLA teacher led school confirmed my own observational insights as to the management of that particular teacher led school.

Study Design

I used my Observation at MSLA (Appendix A) to inform my understanding of the nuts and bolts of how a teacher led school might operate on a daily basis. I did not share this paper with the teachers I surveyed. I employed the knowledge I gained from my observation to assist in the development of a questionnaire (Appendix B), based on the “15 Areas of Autonomy Secured by Teams of Teachers Designing and Running Teacher-Powered Schools” by Amy Junge and Kim Farris-Berg, and designed a survey for my union members as to their attitudes about teacher autonomy and teacher led schools. I made sure to include teachers at various grade-levels with a mix of both general and special education teachers. I administered the survey to educators with broad ranges of experience levels.

Data Analysis

As stated above, I used questions derived from 15 areas identified as key to teacher autonomy by Junge and Farris-Berg. As I analyzed the questionnaire I developed, I grouped the issues covered into 8 overarching categories: Teacher control of pedagogy, scheduling, staffing, evaluation, administrative duties, budgeting, student/community input, and teachers’ willingness to do the work needed to keep a teacher led school functioning.

The results were not shocking given the highly organized nature of our school and its deep tradition of teacher leadership. 94% of those surveyed either agreed or strongly agreed that teachers should have the right to make all pedagogical and professional

development decisions and that teachers should have autonomy in the creation of a school's internal schedule. 92% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that teachers should have input on the hiring and dismissal of staff. Individuals who commented on this point noted that it would be necessary to safeguard against the development of cliques and the possible abuse of the power to dismiss dissenters. 83% of teachers believed that certified staff (with respite from classroom duties) would be able to perform all administrative duties necessary to the function of the school including the design of a budget (already a collaborative function of our IC and principal). I was surprised, however, that my staff was not as certain about teachers ability to evaluate one another with 67% strongly agree/agree, 8% disagree/strongly disagree, and 25% unsure (some noting that they would need to see a model of this method as it has not existed in our district or state). Likewise, respondents were cautious about the level of input that students and community should contribute to curricular decision-making with 67% strongly agree/agree and 33% disagree/strongly disagree. Although our school has a very active parent organization and community, as well as a number of teachers dedicated to student-driven learning, many of the respondents noted that they would need more information about how this would be put into practice. Finally, 100% of respondents said that they would be willing to work at a school where they were required (with some additional compensation) to work beyond the traditional duty day in committees that make important decisions about how our school is run.

Recommendations/Next Steps

I would like to obtain input as to the effectiveness and clarity of the short survey I created. This would aid in constructing an instrument to understand educators' attitudes about working in a teacher led school.

I plan to present the findings above and an updated version of my survey to the ATF Executive Council. If it is the will of the body, I would like to form an exploratory committee to examine teacher interest in self-governance and identify possible sites that could house a fully teacher led school. If this mission were successful, the next steps would be to select a target school, form a committee of interested teachers, and apply for a Teacher-Powered Initiative Grant. Upon the successful completion of the planning stage, our union and teacher leaders would need to meet with and present recommendations to the APS Board of Education and Superintendent. If approved, we would seek a waiver from the NM PED. This last step will actually require a new Governor's Administration because the current governor views public education as an edifice in need of a wrecking ball.

In summary, I feel that the top-down management model of our schools is antiquated and ineffective. The notion that a school only needs a tough principal and a group of teachers willing to follow commands is insulting and demoralizing to dedicated educators. We must support teachers to grow as decision-makers and creators of curricula. Our end goal should always be full democracy in our workplaces.

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Appendix A: OBSERVATIONS FROM DENVER'S MSLA: A TEACHER LED SCHOOL

On Friday, April 15th, I had the privilege to observe the innovative Mathematics and Science Leadership Academy in Denver as an attendee of the Southwest TURN (Teacher Union Reform Network) Spring conference. MSLA is a K-5 public school with open enrollment. Most of the 264 students hail from Southwest Denver, but others come from around the city. 96% of the diverse student body receives free/reduced lunch. 95% of the students are Hispanic. 71% are English Language Learners. 10% receive special education services. The school uses a transitional bilingual model to instruct students in their home language while building English language skills. MSLA accepts all students who apply, only closing enrollment to protect class size, which averages 22 pupils. However, individual teachers sometimes decide to take in more students so that they can teach siblings of past students.

MSLA is a teacher led school. There is no principal. Teachers developed this model and spent about a year and a half writing their proposal and negotiating with the Denver Public Schools (DPS). The result was a Memorandum of Understanding establishing the unique governance of the school. The staff also signed a waiver with the State of Colorado so that the school is exempt from a law that states all public schools must be supervised by a principal.

The school governance consists of 4 committees: Leadership, Peer Review and Assistance (PAR), Climate and Culture, and a Data Analysis Team. The staff made the decision to employ two teachers as co-leaders at the school. The co-leads perform the duties usually associated with a principal. They each teach half-time and spend the other half of the day performing office/administrative duties. The co-leads are teachers' peers not supervisors. Teachers at MSLA are compensated on the same pay schedule as other teachers around the district. However, they collaboratively design the budget so that they receive a few extra days for planning and collaboration. The two co-leads have an extended contract to assure that they complete all duties normally conducted by principals.

MSLA teachers are subject to the State of Colorado's prescribed evaluation system. However, in place of a principal acting as the lone evaluator, MSLA teachers commit to participating as both subjects and observers in 3 sets of formal and 3 sets of informal observations. Each observation is conducted by a team consisting of 3 teachers and is focused around peer collaboration and improvement of instruction. The leadership team budgets for substitute coverage for these collaborative observations as well as time for analysis of what worked and areas in need of improvement. Teachers at MSLA sign an agreement to be videotaped for collaboration purposes. The on-site professional development model is very closely based on National Board practices. As per the resolution the school obtained from the Board of Ed., the co-lead teachers

(subject to the same evaluation regimen) sign off on all peer-conducted evaluations.

An integral part of the collaborative governance of the school is a strong Parent Advisory Committee. The PAC has representation on the school's Leadership Committee and parents' suggestions and opinions are a key ingredient in school decisions. Parents serve as volunteers performing duties such as recess supervision, traffic direction, and tutoring in classrooms. On an average day, around 15 parent volunteers work on campus at times of their choosing.

Teacher-student collaboration is vital to the school's success. MSLA has a student council whose recommendations are added to the voices on the Leadership Committee. The student council rotates members every 6 weeks so that a greater variety of opinions are factored into collaborative decision-making. Teachers use 15 minutes instructional time each day to nurture students' leadership skills. The book, *THE LEADER IN ME*, is a guide for these lessons. The last hour of each Wednesday features a period called Passion Areas. Students suggest and vote on topics they want to study, then attend the class of their choice in 6-week cycles. Service learning is a focus of this wildly-popular program.

Parents feel comfortable on campus. They readily approach teachers with concerns about their students' educational needs and behavior issues. Teachers are expected to set norms of behavior in their classrooms and deal with incidents and conflicts. Co-leads can be called in to substitute while a teacher deals with more time-consuming problems. Co-leads reported that teachers almost never refer behavior issues to the office.

The collaborative spirit among teachers, students, and parents spills over to other district relationships. Although co-leads are "on-call" for after-hours emergencies, they reported that this had rarely been an issue. The leadership committee works to build relationships with district security and maintenance and operations staff, based on collaborative decision-making and mutual respect. "What if a water pipe breaks in the middle of the night?" I asked. The answer: "The maintenance staff knows that we support and trust them to do their jobs and they have access to the school." So, no "administrator" was needed to "supervise" repairs. The teachers expressed their deep debt and deference to the secretary and clerk who oversee so much of what goes on at any school. A story that illustrated the prevalence of collaborative decision-making involved the re-direction of a group of boys who had "trashed" the restroom. Their classroom teacher set up a meeting between the boys and the custodian to discuss the impact of their behavior on his job and the climate of the school. Together, the custodian and students worked out a schedule wherein the students would take responsibility for cleaning their mess with assistance from the custodian.

The school has gained in strength and garnered the respect of DPS throughout a succession of superintendents. Teachers reported that the school

routinely comes in “under budget” so that they have more money to spend on classrooms and special events for students. Teachers work together to write grants for their classrooms and school to pay for extra expenses beyond a school’s regular budget. Also, teachers reported that students’ ACCESS language test scores were higher than the district average. Teachers attribute their success to their commitment to educating the whole child. Students receive art instruction twice per week, as well as instruction in music and physical education.

Teacher autonomy is at the heart of MSLA’s success. Teachers are committed to using best practices and inquiry-based learning experiences. However, they are still subject to district-mandated tests and curricula. Illustrative of this was the district’s insistence that MSLA use AVENUES for ESL reading instruction despite the staff’s lack of enthusiasm for the prescribed reading program.

MSLA is a beacon of teacher led school improvement. It thrives in a sprawling district that has succumbed to all of the corporate “reforms” imaginable. All Colorado schools are “schools of choice” with open enrollment, which has engendered a great deal of “White flight” to suburban schools. The district is inundated with for-profit charters and other fads of the day. Within this context, MSLA exists as an example of how public schools (when permitted to deviate from the top-down governance model preferred by administrators and politicians) continue to be the great equalizer of opportunity in the United States.

Dwayne Norris (April 2016)

Appendix B: Teacher Led Schools Survey

This survey is designed to determine faculty attitudes toward a teacher led school model. It is part of my research project for the AFT Teacher Leader Program. All responses are anonymous. I have loosely based this questionnaire on “15 Areas of Autonomy Secured by Teams of Teachers Designing and Running Teacher-Powered Schools” by Amy Junge and Kim Farris-Berg. Finally, I have employed the term “educator” to denote certified and classified staff. This group does not include administrators.

1. Educators at a school site should have the autonomy to make all decisions (based on district and state standards) concerning the adoption of all learning programs and learning materials.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree Don't Know

Comments:

2. Educators at a school site should have the autonomy to make school level policy decisions that influence the day to day operations of the school (within state law), including community engagement, and dress code.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree Don't Know

Comments:

3. Educators at a school site should have the autonomy to decide the annual school calendar, weekly schedule, as well as start times and end times of each day, within state laws and regulations for minimum instructional minutes and days. This includes decisions about how student and teachers' time will be used.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree Don't Know

Comments:

4. Educators at a school site should have the autonomy to choose the hours related to teacher workday (this sometimes requires a waiver of the Negotiated Contract but contractual prep time and duty time should be preserved).

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree Don't Know

Comments:

5. An elected committee of educators at a school site should have the autonomy to hire or recommend transfer of certified and classified team members.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree Don't Know

Comments:

6. An elected committee of educators at a school site should have the autonomy to hire and dismiss school leaders. This includes the ability to choose their leadership positions.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree Don't Know

Comments:

7. Educators at a school site should have the autonomy to decide on the topics, methods, and implementation of all professional development for teachers and other personnel within state laws and regulations.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree Don't Know

Comments:

8. My evaluation would be more meaningful if it were conducted by groups of my peers.

Strongly Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree Don't Know

Comments:

9. I would like to observe my peers as part of an evaluation team and to be evaluated in this manner.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree Don't Know

Comments:

10. Schools can thrive with leadership from their staff who are released from the classroom part-time to perform administrative duties. Principals are not always necessary.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree Don't Know

Comments:

11. Students should be involved in curricular and instructional decision-making.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree Don't Know

Comments:

12. Parents and community members should be involved in curricular and instructional decision-making.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree Don't Know

Comments:

13. Educators at a school site should have the autonomy to decide whether to take, when to take, and how much to count district assessments. This does not include state mandated exams.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree Don't Know

Comments:

14. Educators at a school site should have the autonomy to control all financial decisions.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree Don't Know

Comments:

15. I would be willing to work on a committee that meets before or after the contract day to make important decisions about how our school is run (with some compensation).

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree Don't Know

Comments: