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Faculty Consensus Leads to Creative Solutions

Kathryn Brooks

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The answers to many of the problems facing schools today "are in the minds of the teachers. Half our solutions are in their minds but they have to come out through open dialogue," says Gary Kruse, principal of Evans Middle School in Ottumwa, Iowa. When faced with leading a middle school that had a history of low reading scores on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS), Mr. Kruse turned to the people who knew the students and the school climate best--the teachers.

The teachers faced a formidable task. They had to create a viable plan for raising ITBS reading scores in a school district with nearly half of the student population receiving free or reduced price lunches during a time when the school district did not have the financial means to provide any additional funds for program implementation. In addition, Kruse told them that they had to come to 100% consensus on the solution. Consensus was a requirement of the process because Kruse wanted all teachers to truly implement the program. Not all teachers had to believe that the proposed plan was the best solution, but they all had to agree that they would willingly implement the new program.

"I have a really neat staff. They are willing to try things. If they have the availability to sit down and discuss an issue and propose a solution, they'll do it. But that takes a lot of courage. I mean, because you have to put yourself out there," Kruse said. "If we could provide staff with the time to identify problems and come up with solutions, that's what we should do."

Students attending Evans Middle School are in the seventh and eighth grades. Each grade level has three interdisciplinary teams. Seventh grade students have a reading class as a part of their core curriculum, but eighth grade students have not had a reading class in the past. Kruse called upon the teachers to create a program that would improve the eighth grade students' reading skills without additional expenditures.

The teachers extensively discussed and debated about what the school can do to help the students read better. They decided that all eighth grade teachers would give up one content area section and devote the extra period to teaching a reading class. Professional development days would focus on reading instruction, and each team would decide how it was going to implement the program.

Although a majority of the faculty wanted to go forward with the new reading program, a few dissented. They were concerned because the new plan required them to give up one period of teaching their content class. Furthermore, their class sizes would be bigger, and they would have to prepare the extra reading class. In order to encourage all faculty to share their ideas and concerns, Kruse provided an atmosphere to facilitate open dialogue. He wanted to address concerns as they arose rather than allowing them to develop into an undercurrent of negativity. He encouraged teachers to express their concerns throughout the decision-making process. He also provided a means for teachers hesitant to express their real feelings regarding the change process. Teachers could confidentially share their feelings with interdisciplinary team leaders and members of the principal's advisory council who would in turn share their feelings with Mr. Kruse. During the second year of implementing the reading program, NCA evaluators visited Evans Middle School. The faculty at Evans established improving reading achievement as one of its goals for the NCA accreditation process, so the NCA evaluators observed the new program. The evaluators helped the school to improve the program plan by suggesting strategies for facilitating change, sustaining change, and collecting and using data to make the reading program more effective.

In reflecting upon the critical elements of the change process in his school, Mr. Kruse identified three key elements. (1) The most important component was that two-way communication between the administration and the faculty provided for honest discussion of ideas and concerns. Everyone had a role in shaping the reading classes and their implementation. Supporters heard and affirmed the concerns of the dissenters. As Kruse explains, "I think the biggest influence was putting it [the issue of the low ITBS reading scores] out on the table and then letting everyone go after it and chew on it. It got to a point during the year when we were talking about implementation; and I didn't have consensus, but all staff members got their voice on the table, even the resisters." (2) In addition, the insistence on consensus before moving forward with implementing the reading classes in the eighth grade forced the staff to create a plan than everyone would agree to implement. (3) Finally, the staff development workshops on reading instruction helped the faculty to build capacity to teach reading.

As Mr. Kruse walks through Evans Middle School, he sees children carrying books from class to class, several students in the school media center checking books out, children at the end of class periods eagerly reading novels, and students choosing to read during their personal social time in the cafeteria at lunch. Although the school has not yet received the results of the ITBS that the students took in the fall, Kruse knows that real change is taking place. For the first time, he sees concrete evidence of teachers and students excited by reading. He smiles as he feels a sense of satisfaction in what a caring, reflective staff can accomplish when given the freedom and responsibility to do what they do best--reaching and teaching their children.

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