

*Roberta Trachtman and Edward Fauerbach*

## **The Limits of Within-School Governance Reform**

This article examines the experiences of one group of urban teachers and a principal engaged in creating a new shared decision-making school. As an experiment in the redesign of teachers' work, the high school proposed to integrate school-based governance with teacher participatory decision-making.

The creation of a new organization demands enormous resources from the larger system of which it is a part. When the new organization is unlike others in the system, these demands are even greater and resistance from the system can be strong.

### **Introduction**

In 1988, the United Federation of Teachers (the New York City local of the American Federation of Teachers, AFL-CIO, which bargains for New York City's 80,000 teachers and paraprofessionals) met with the then-new chancellor, Richard R. Green, to discuss opening a new kind of school. Eager to demonstrate his support for both teachers on the job and teaching as a career, Dr. Green agreed that a high school for teaching

could signal the city's predominantly minority youth to stay in school and consider teaching as a career. Although Dr. Green's untimely death later that year robbed the school of its most visible, high-ranking supporter, the high school opened on schedule in September 1989.

Located on the fifth floor of an inner-city elementary school, New York City's first high school for students interested in the teaching profession was conceived as a laboratory for new teaching techniques. Innovations included teaching internships, a ninety-minute class period, a principal who also taught, and demonstrations of "best practices" in education. As a "magnet school," the high school also sought to use active recruitment, choice, and selection to promote unity, commitment, student attainment, and decreased pupil attrition. As an experiment in redesigning teachers' work, the high school also proposed to integrate school-based governance with participatory decision-making by teachers.

### **Theoretical Perspectives**

*Site-based Management/Shared Decision-making.* Reformers of the 1980s called for changing schools and changing teachers, reminding us that the work of teachers is often lonely, unsupported, and uncertain. Imitating business efforts to redesign workplaces and involve employees in participatory decision-making, advocates lobbied hard for the expansion of teachers' roles and the creation of collegial work environments. Shared decision-making and site-based management soon replaced other education-reform proposals. For many, they became the *sine qua non* of school restructuring.

Traditionally, however, teachers have had little or no opportunity to participate in decision-making outside the classroom. In contrast to the

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*Roberta Trachtman, who has been a professor at several universities, is an education consultant working directly with teachers, schools, districts, and universities in New York, New Jersey, and around the country.*

*Edward Fauerbach, a special educator in New Jersey's public schools, also serves on the executive board of the Jersey City Education Association and as chair of the Hudson County (N.J.) Professional Development Board.*

rhetoric of teacher participation, many teachers have described their schools as places where principals hold all the organizational power and authority. Like the teachers in Cohn and Kottkamp's work (1993), many report being less satisfied than ever before. Older and more educated than any previous cohort of American teachers, many feel stuck in their jobs, struggling hard to "make do." Cut off from efforts to improve their schools and the quality of education their students receive, many do not believe that their opinions, ideas, and concerns for school improvement are heard, valued, or sought by their principals (Metropolitan Life Survey, 1986; Cohn and Kottkamp, 1986).

*Creation of New Settings.* At the same time that participants were introducing a new governance model, they were engaged in organizational creation. The theoretical literature describing the creation of new settings offers some important lenses through which to examine the invention of this school. First, we know that the creation of new settings challenges participants' sacred beliefs and behaviors that are taken for granted (Sarason, 1972). Second, because new organizations take resources away from existing initiatives, they are watched closely; their visibility and high-profile status raise the stakes by which nonparticipants measure their wins and losses. Third, inventing new roles, developing new relationships, and creating an organizational culture have high costs in time, worry, conflict, and temporary inefficiency (Stinchcombe, 1965). Fourth, new organizations rely heavily on social relations among strangers (Kanter and Stein, 1979). Fifth, a new institution must struggle simultaneously with its own growth and its effects on the rest of the ecosystem to which it belongs (Selznik, 1957).

## Research Design

We originally set out to examine the experiences of one group of teachers and their principal engaged in creating a new shared-decision-making school. Four initial research questions guided the study:

- Which decisions are made by teachers alone, by the principal alone, and by both together?
- How do teachers and the principal make decisions in a "restructured" school?
- What new roles are created as teachers and the principal engage in shared decision-making?

- How do teachers and the principal define their relationships over time?

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Although most educational research presents "snapshot" data (Kirst, 1991, p. 28), we believed that we could learn more by studying the school over time. We organized our work in two phases, beginning when the school was two years old and returning two years later, when the school began to prepare to graduate its first class. During both phases, we interviewed participants, sat in on their classes and their meetings, and read through their memos, agendas, position papers, and other relevant documents. Because the study was founded in the experiences and interrelationships of people, we selected a qualitative methodology because it permitted an in-depth and up-close examination of the feelings, meanings, and human relationships of participants (Patton, 1990).<sup>1</sup>

## Findings

At the end of four years participants discovered that shared decision-making (SDM), as a new form of school governance, is complex and often difficult. The short-term costs are high and the long-term profits appear distant. As a method of governance it is highly resource dependent (training for participants, substantial meeting time, support from the district office, teachers and administrators unions, and unusual levels of human commitment) at a time of shrinking resource availability.

SDM requires that participants both within and outside the school change their attitudes and beliefs about their roles, the way schools operate, how decisions are made, and what decisions should be made at the school level. Consequently, realizing the SDM vision requires significant organizational learning and information sharing, activities for which the participants at many school sites are seldom well-prepared.

As the research questions suggest, when we conceived the study our focus was decidedly internal. We soon learned, however, that new school creation and development are influenced by the agendas of neighbor schools, competing

district initiatives, and broader state and national interests. Although many argue that the school is the center of change (e.g., Sirotnik, 1989), our data validate Getzels and Guba's (1957) early explication of the interdependence of the organization and its environment. Thus, in this paper we will focus on the relationship between the school and the larger system of which it is a part.

*A Changed Venue.* In 1989, when the High School for Teaching accepted its first student cohort, the majority of New York City schools offered comprehensive instructional programs for their zoned (or neighborhood) students. Reflecting the city's historic division into five boroughs, all comprehensive high schools were grouped into five domains under the aegis of area superintendents.

In contrast, a smaller subset of schools, called "alternative" schools, was organized around central themes or educational plans. Located throughout the city, these schools had distinct recruiting and selection processes and were overseen by the citywide Superintendent of Alternative Schools. They stood apart from the other, geographically affiliated high schools, representing a distinct unit of the city's high school department.

As part of the alternative superintendency, the High School for Teaching, with its unique mission and new organizational features, posed no serious threat to its peer schools. Within this superintendency, being different was normative, encouraged, and valued. Each alternative high school was far smaller than its comprehensive counterparts; many were either young or brand-new; and all had selected their students and staffs through some process of choice rather than assignment (a factor derided as "creaming" by comprehensive high school participants).

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New organizations need internal and external champions, yet when the High School for Teaching lost its chief and best-positioned ally, Chancellor Green, support for the school waned. By the end of the high school's second year (in

1991), it was transferred from the alternative superintendency into the area superintendency. As a new member of an "old" division, the high school moved from being one of many to being "alone in a crowd."

*A Late Start.* Due to central office administrative delays, the high school did not begin recruiting its first students until spring 1989, one month after almost all the city's middle school students had already received their high school letters of acceptance. During the school's first year, its students posted better attendance records than their peers throughout the city, with about 88 percent attending every day, compared to an average citywide attendance of less than 81 percent (New York City Public Schools, 1990). However, students' passing rates on statewide tests of reading and mathematics competence were lower than results reported for students citywide. In reading, 62.2 percent of the High School for Teaching's students who took this test passed; citywide, 85.9 percent passed. In mathematics, the difference between the two groups was smaller, but the performance of students at the high school was even lower than it had been in reading; only 46.5 percent of the school's students passed the mathematics competence test, compared with 50.1 percent citywide (New York City Public Schools, 1990).

Data from a longitudinal study of the first student cohort (Trachtman and Simpson, 1994) suggested that few of the original students were interested in becoming teachers. Given this reported student lack of interest in the school's purpose, the delayed recruitment process probably affected the school's success negatively in its early years.

*The Administrators Union Resists.* From the high school's conception to its implementation, the school administrators union, the Council for Supervisors and Administrators, resisted its design. Opposition centered on the high school's explicit shared-decision-making governance model, an organizational design that had not yet emerged as a statewide mandate. (Years later this model became part of New York State's Compact for Learning.) The administrators union repeatedly criticized the school's decision to replace the role of high school assistant principal with two teachers who would serve as "operations managers."

Although the high school opened with operations managers, the union refused to recognize this new title or its quasi-administrative status.

Union members claimed the high school's governance model violated the contractual agreement it held with the school district. Further, union leaders suggested that the school violated state law as well. In response to the threat posed by the school's new governance model, the union filed a formal grievance and demanded the appointment of an assistant principal for the school. During the school's fourth year, an assistant principal was duly added to the organization chart. The high school accepted its new administrator and continued on with its work.

*The Teachers Union Weighs In.* As a restructured school type, the high school needed to recruit staff members who would be willing and able to think differently about their own and their students' roles. In 1989, the designers knew that implementing the school's espoused vision was a task only for the truly committed. They reasoned that demands on staff time and energy would grow enormously as participants tried to re-create their practices and their beliefs. Yet as the high school personnel committee met to recruit new members, the teachers union demanded that the school open its doors to "union transfers." At a critical moment in the school's development, the union promoted equality rather than equity.

As teacher transferees entered an organization filled with "true believers," predictable conflict ensued. These conflicts regularly distracted the organization from its goals.

## Implications

*Organizational Tokens.* In many ways the High School for Teaching suffered from being an "organizational token," in the vein of Rosabeth Moss Kanter's description (1978) of individuals as tokens—individuals who feel they must choose between trying to limit their visibility and taking advantage of their publicity. If they choose invisibility, the organization overlooks their achievements; if they take advantage of their specialness, they can be labeled as troublemakers (Kanter, 1978).

Alone in a crowd of large, comprehensive high schools, the High School for Teaching seemed to challenge its dominant peers' structures and purposes. Consequently, the presence of the high school within the established area superintendency served to underline rather than undermine the majority culture (see Hughes cited by Kanter, 1978). Like majority individuals within an organization, the principals of the

majority schools clung to each other as they sought to limit the power and presence of the outsider school. It is even possible that the lack of central support for the high school's unique features was part of a broader strategy to keep a "token" from succeeding. As Sarason (1972) reasoned, when resources are scarce, difference and newness become more suspect and dominants gain at the expense of tokens. Simply stated, in a zero-sum world, one organization's loss is the other's gain.

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*A Camouflage Strategy.* Although the effects of organizational tokenism challenged the high school's vision, we believe that the "re-dressed" school has new opportunities. Since the High School for Teaching has had to adopt some of the same features as its peer schools, it has become less visible and has posed fewer challenges to others. Out of the spotlight's glare, and no longer a target, the high school has turned to the task of improving its educational program. Given the more widespread adoption of shared decision-making (SDM) as a governance mode, the high school no longer stands alone; as one of many New York City SDM schools, participants can turn to other schools for support and collegiality. No longer alone, the high school is free to stumble, to take risks, and to succeed.

## A Final Reflection

The story of the High School for Teaching seems to provide some support for those who argue for educational change through the creation of schools outside the system. Despite the widespread rhetoric of school-based management and site control, the system remains more powerful than any of its parts.

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### Note

1. For a complete discussion of the methodology see Edward Fauerbach, *The Impact of Shared Decision-Making on Teachers and the Principal in a Magnet High School*. Doctoral Dissertation, Fordham University, New York.