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# The Substance of Restructuring

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# The Substance of Restructuring

## **Abstract**

Districts across the country have designed and implemented a variety of "shared governance" structures; the impetus being an alienated teaching force.

## **Disciplines**

Education | Educational Administration and Supervision | Educational Leadership

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# The Substance of Restructuring

By Harris J. Sokoloff

**T**O STRENGTHEN STUDENT LEARNING in grades one and two, teachers and a principal in a Chicago suburb recently decided to group the two grades together. Thus, first grade teachers now teach first and second grade and second grade teachers now teach second and first grade. First and second grade teachers agree that teaching the additional grade has made them better teachers.

Teachers and administrators in elementary and middle schools in a large northern urban school district were disturbed by the high failure rate of their students. Their students seemed to get lost between elementary and middle school. They decided to work together with staff at the local university to develop better communications within and between the schools. They also developed a series of programs to better meet the educational needs of their students.

Administrators and teachers in a suburban school district near Philadelphia have worked with staff from their local university to develop a way to get immediate access to data on student demographics and performance. Rather than use this data to report average performance, they work together to analyze the data, to see what questions it raises about programs they offer. Because the database allows them to go from data to student files, and because they know the students involved, these educators are able to pick out anomalies of student performance. They then work with those students to improve achievement.

These are all examples of "shared decision making," "site-based management" or "shared governance." These terms have all become part of the current movement to "restructure" schools and school districts.

Within this context, "shared decision making" occurs when decisions are made by the people who will be most affected by those decisions or will be responsible for implementing those decisions. This is similar to, yet distinct from, "site-based management," which occurs when a person or group of people in a school are responsible for managing that school. The issue in both prac-

tices revolves around how much responsibility, for what kinds of decisions and who to involve in the process.

The work of site-based management activities and committees is to focus on the core tasks of teaching and learning. That is, the committees or decision-making structures must focus on the conditions of student learning. But this is difficult territory to enter. Just as the mechanisms of "restructuring" require that administrators open their practices to public discussion, the substance of "restructuring" requires that teachers open their teaching practices and content to public review and discussion.

This mutual risk-taking is clear in each of the examples cited above. In each case, administrators were willing to "share" the decision-making, to "share" responsibility for various aspects of management and to "share" the accountability with teachers. But, and this is perhaps more difficult, teachers in each example also

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opened their classroom doors. In doing so, they allowed administrators and other teachers to scrutinize what they teach and how they teach it. For example, the selection and use of instructional tools — computers, videos, videodisc technology — which had once been an individual teacher decision, becomes a topic for critical reflection and discussion. On the other hand, as administrators open their "doors," the ways they use data and how it is interpreted becomes a matter for discussion that now includes the instructional staff.

In the process, the relationships between teachers and administrators change in fundamental ways, in ways that enable each to get more support from, and provide more support to, the other. Those changes are what "restructuring" is all about. And it is in these changes that the richest possibilities for school improvement can be found. ■

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