

Human Resource Innovation in an Alternative High School

Introduction

In the last fifteen years, the business world has witnessed a growing interest in a variety of human resource innovations as strategies for improving productivity. Employee involvement, self-directed teams, and continuous improvement are organizational practices that typify this trend. Similar ideas have received a great deal of attention in educational circles. This Brief draws on a case study of International High School, an innovative school in New York City, to analyze the effectiveness of human resource strategies in improving student learning and raising teacher productivity. The research, conducted from 1993-1995, is based on interviews with selected school personnel and observations of a variety of teams, meetings and classes. The school in which the research took place caters to recent immigrants to the US who have limited proficiency in English.

Bureaucracy and Education

The structure of American education in the twentieth century has in many ways followed the bureaucratic conventions of industrial organizations. This factory model is associated with a strict separation of design and execution, and a corresponding division between management and labor. Highly specified job distinctions, the division of processes into discrete units, clear lines of authority, and relatively low standards of skill and influence for the majority of employees are characteristic features of this model.

Many proponents of educational reform argue that the effects of hierarchical bureaucratic organizations are especially detrimental in the field of education. Decision-making authority is concentrated with central district boards; most schools are in large buildings in which students remain relatively anonymous; the school day is divided into short time-blocks; students are separated into age and ability groupings; and teachers work alone, spend-

ing most of their time lecturing in front of a class.

The consequences on the teaching profession have been severe. Teaching is regarded to be less professionalized than other occupations with respect to authority, pre-service education, and, ultimately, in terms of the accomplishment of the goals of teaching (Darling-Hammond 1990). Teachers in public schools must usually follow specific guidelines, use mandated textbooks, and cover broad ranges of materials in preparation for standardized tests.

They are called upon to advance the learning of large numbers of students, yet are given inflexible schedules with little time for either individual or group planning. The dependence on predictable routines and standardized procedures greatly limits the autonomy of teachers to improve their instructional and organizational effectiveness. Further, since the only path of occupational mobility for teachers is out of teaching into administration, teachers with greater experience and expertise are not rewarded for innovation, mastery, or improvement (Lortie 1975). As a Carnegie report on high schools notes, "The combination of the self-contained classroom and a heavy teaching schedule gives teachers few opportunities to share common problems or sustain an intellectual life" (Boyer 1983: 158).

Educational Restructuring

To address these problems, many educators have embraced a school reform movement known as educational restructuring (Murphy 1991). This model is characterized by constructivist, "student-centered" pedagogy in which teachers coach individuals and small groups working on activities. School restructuring requires that teachers collaborate on instructional planning and school-wide governance issues as well as in their own professional development. These objectives are accomplished by arranging the school schedule to allow time for teachers to meet with one another. Further, teachers are held more responsible for fewer students over longer periods of time, and in many cases the curriculum is integrated across disciplines so that

students learn broad themes. The qualities associated with this conception of schooling are usually found in smaller schools with some common intellectual direction, for example, schools that use a theme such as science, agriculture, or the arts to orient their curriculum (Little 1982; Sizer 1984; Task Force on Teaching as a Profession 1986; Lieberman 1988; Rosenholtz 1989; Darling-Hammond 1990; Hill, Foster, & Gendler 1990; Johnson 1990; Lieberman 1995).

International High School

International High School in New York City has implemented many of the ideas of the restructuring model. Since its founding in 1985, International has relied on collaborative governance arrangements to design and implement numerous organizational, curricular, and pedagogical innovations, all of which have contributed to a strong community culture and an impressive list of educational accomplishments. The faculty has developed distinctive approaches to language acquisition, small group learning, student and teacher peer review, interdisciplinary team teaching, and career education.

The school was established as a joint collaboration of the NYC Board of Education and the City University of New York on the campus of LaGuardia. It is a member of the NYC alternative high school superintendency and the Center for Collaborative Education, an alternative school network. International was created specifically to serve the needs of recent immigrants. To be admitted to the school, students must have lived in the US less than four years and score at or below the 21st percentile of the English Language Assessment Battery. In the 1994-1995 school year, International enrolled approximately 460 students from over 50 different countries.

Pedagogy

Students spend much of their time working on individual and group activities. Teachers design these activities and work their way around the classroom offering direction and guidance. Early in the school's history, the teachers changed the schedule so that class

periods would be 70 minutes long, thus allowing more time for students to become engaged in their activities. Underlying these instructional practices is the idea that students will benefit from the individual attention of the teacher as well as from their collaboration with other students.

Collaboration and Professional Development

The role of teachers at International and the nature of their jobs is strikingly different from the jobs of their counterparts in conventional schools. The principal and the first staff members reacted to the bureaucratic, rule-bound settings in which they had spent most of their careers by making learning and instruction the central focus of the school. Those who are veterans of teaching at conventional schools appreciate spending less time on paperwork and other requirements, such as lunchroom and hallway supervision, that are seen as interfering with teaching responsibilities.

Instead of relying on outside specialists, the school places a high premium on the expertise of its teachers to conduct their own collaborative professional development. International's teachers usually write their own curricular materials and activity guides, drawing from a wide range of sources. Constructing their own curriculum stimulates teachers' intellectual development, and they can bring their own strengths and interests to bear on the subject matter they teach.

International has centered its instructional program and staff development around small group collaboration. Prior to the 1993-1994 school year, teachers formed their own peer groups to visit one another's classes and share ideas about instruction. These peer support groups became central to the school's educational philosophy. In 1990, several teachers went beyond the peer support group concept and developed an interdisciplinary cluster course. This course, *Motion*, examined the concept of motion from the vantage points of physics, math, English, and physical education. A group of 25 students stayed together all day for 13 weeks working on this theme. According to the

teachers, the format enabled students to pursue their projects more deeply. Teachers also felt that the relevance of math to the hands-on experiments conducted in the physics lab was made more apparent in the *Motion* curriculum. Using this first cluster course as their model, a different group of teachers developed another course, *Beginnings*, which introduced students to their new lives in the US while drawing from biology, math, career education, and English. The teachers noticed a much higher level of student interest, academic learning and collegiality in these classes than in their one-teacher, one-subject courses. School statistics showed higher attendance and pass rates for these courses as well.

Building on the success of these pilot programs, other teachers began to develop their own interdisciplinary classes. Teachers were now not only discussing their individual teaching practices, but actually planning their curricula together and discussing strategies for dealing with individual students. Now that a few teachers were responsible for a student's entire progress, they could develop consistent approaches to dealing with the most troubled students.

Governance

The commitment to student and adult collaborative learning at International has its roots in the experiences teachers had on small governance committees during the school's first five years. Teachers at International have played a major role in determining the direction of the school. The governance framework has evolved each year, and, because of on-going personnel and organizational changes, is still in flux. In recent years, the school's central policy-making body has been the coordinating council, which is composed of two administrators, several teachers (representing the six instructional teams and other units of the school), and two students. The council occasionally forms sub-committees to deal with specific issues and then report back to the council.

A steering committee, composed of two administrators and three elected teachers, handles the day-to-day ad-

ministration of the school. The steering committee is accountable to the coordinating council.

The school's other governing body is the personnel committee. Under the aegis of the personnel committee, new applicants are hired by panels of teachers, staff members are periodically reviewed by committees of their peers, and tenure decisions are made on the basis of these evaluations. The committee also writes personnel policies, which are then approved by the coordinating council, as well as by the faculty as a whole.

Decision-making on the council and on the various teams and committees is by consensus, rather than voting; consensus is defined as the weight of opinion leaning in a direction that "everyone can live with."

Teachers prepare self-evaluations, are evaluated by a committee of their peers, and are observed by administrators in accordance with city policy. The personnel committee may stipulate that an untenured teacher must work with the committee to improve his or her teaching as a condition of continued employment at the school.

The school's administrators are influential participants in policy-making decisions, but they do not have final authority in policy matters. The founding principal contributed to the design of many of the unique features of International High School—content-based language acquisition, teacher decision-making, and instructional teams. Yet in almost every instance, the principal's views have been woven together with other points of view into a final decision, a decision that may be quite different from what any individual originally conceived.

Restructuring International High School

Due to the perceived success of the peer support groups and the first interdisciplinary courses, in September, 1993, International significantly restructured its curriculum around team-taught interdisciplinary courses. As the decision to change the curriculum was not made by administrative fiat, the process of reaching a decision on such a

large issue was facilitated by a well-established committee structure. A curriculum committee coordinated the development of a plan, and concerns were raised in faculty forums and staff development workshops. Months before the end of the 1992-1993 school year, a consensus was reached. Then the faculty began meeting regularly in their interdisciplinary teams to develop course activities.

The entire curriculum has now been converted to 12 interdisciplinary courses taught by teams of 4 to 7 full- and part-time teachers, guidance counselors, and paraprofessionals who work exclusively with one set of students for an entire 13-week quarter. Teacher collaboration and decision-making is thus thoroughly integrated in all aspects of the day-to-day life of the school. All New York City high school graduation requirements are met within this new curriculum.

In addition to *Motion and Beginnings*, interdisciplinary courses include the following themes: *Conflict and Resolution* (American studies, art, career development, and math); *Crime and Punishment* (government and law, world literature and drama, statistics, and college preparation); *The World of Money* (American studies, English, math, and economics); and *American Reality* (native language, human development, and career development).

These teams have a great deal of autonomy in the design and administration of their courses. Teachers determine the schedule, class sizes, and the number of students a teacher will see in a day. The teams usually meet for at least three hours each week to plan their activities, discuss individual students, and plan for the next term. One team spent part of a meeting working on an initiative that would allow students to plan their own end-of-term academic project. Another team discussed ways to strengthen the math component of their theme and revise the requirements of a reading seminar they offer. In a third team, three teachers designed the schedule so that they would have the same free period for additional planning time in order to develop

a brand new component of the theme course.

The school's commitments to career education, internships, and an extensive guidance program are the responsibilities of the instructional teams. The major pedagogical topic during the 1993-1995 school years was assessment. International's teachers have developed numerous assessment tools and approaches that integrate assessment with learning, such as portfolios of written work, performance exhibitions, and other projects that demonstrate mastery of a subject. The school is attempting to build a comprehensive assessment program that will allow it to receive a waiver from certain state-mandated tests and other graduation requirements.

Evaluation

Education at International High is a sharp departure from traditional high schools in the US. How successful has this restructuring been?

International compares favorably to city-wide statistics on student outcomes, especially given the school's population, 75 percent of which is low-income. The city-wide attendance rate for high schools from 1989 to 1993 hovered around 81 percent; at International, during the same period, attendance ranged from 90 to 94 percent. Over 90 percent of International's seniors graduate each year, and over 90 percent of its graduates plan to attend postsecondary institutions. Virtually all of International's students pass the New York State Regents Competency Tests by the time they are seniors.

The NYC Board of Education's Office of Research, Evaluation, and Assessment performed a cohort analysis of the class of 1994 and arrived at the following findings.

- 37% of all NYC "limited English proficient" students graduated in four years.
- 45% of all NYC students graduated in four years.
- 55% of International High School students graduated in four years (Office of Educational Research, 1994).

The school has received an Excellence in English/Language Arts Instruction award from the National Council of Teachers of English, and an Outstanding High School/College Collaboration award from the American Association of Higher Education. In 1992, International received an Academic Excellence grant of \$579,000 over three years from the U.S. Office of Bilingual Education and Minority Language Affairs to create a program that would allow International to support other schools in restructuring efforts.

These results are impressive since the school admits students only if they score in the bottom fifth on the English language acquisition exam. Other than that requirement, the school does not consider academic competence among its admissions criteria. In fact, many of its entering students have had little formal schooling and have difficulty reading their native language.

The positive picture created by the awards and the attendance, dropout, and postsecondary rates is supported by classroom observations, interviews with teachers and students, and observations of team and committee meetings. While conventional schools are hampered by the ambiguity of their goals (Lortie 1975; Rosenholtz 1989; Johnson 1990), International is characterized by a strong sense of direction. Although there is a range of opinions among the staff, virtually all staff members agree with and support the school's pedagogical and organizational philosophy.

Challenges and Difficulties

As one might expect, the centrality of small work groups at International is accompanied by a moderate level of personality and group tensions. Decision-making by consensus means that many decisions are compromises. Moreover, the team structure exposes teachers to the scrutiny of their peers and makes them jointly responsible for the learning that occurs in a given term. Some teachers are uncomfortable with the idea of confronting others about their instructional practice. Finally, the transition to teams has resulted in more work for virtually the entire faculty. Even though they chose

this new structure, many teachers feel overworked.

A different type of issue could present a problem in the future. Some of the teams have developed such solidarity that they may have difficulty coordinating with other teams. Issues of team versus whole-school loyalties have arisen. For example, the personnel committee struggled for months to revise the hiring policies in accordance with the new team structure. Team members wanted a significant role in selecting new team members. But some teachers and administrators feared that teams would choose someone who would serve a narrow function for a given team. They argued that it was in the school's best interest to hire people with diverse skills who could later be transferred to a different team and/or serve on a governing committee. The compromise worked out by the personnel committee was that interview teams would be composed mostly of team members, with at least one experienced interviewer from the rest of the staff.

Job Quality

Researchers have argued that job quality is poor for teachers because they have flat career ladders and little task variety from year to year (Lortie 1975; Boyer 1983). At International, the constantly changing nature of the curriculum means that teachers have many opportunities to vary their work. Moreover, participation in instructional and school-wide decision-making adds a variety of tasks and responsibilities to the pool of teacher activities. Because of the perception in educational circles that International is successful, the school has received funds that enable a few of its senior teachers to train personnel from other schools in its educational approach and methods.

Teachers at International feel that they work longer hours than they did or would at more conventional schools. Most say they work these extra hours as a matter of choice. On the other hand, at least one teacher has protested against the peer pressures to do extra work, arguing that there should be a place in the school for people who do not want to make such sacrifices.

Some of these demands are offset by the many grants that International has received. Although grants bring additional responsibilities, including extensive documentation, they also bring additional resources to the school. The principal estimates that each teacher receives an average of \$2,000 extra each year. Although virtually every teacher receives some funds, teachers say that the extra money is not proportionate to the extra hours that they work. Nonetheless, teacher absenteeism and turnover are low, and there appears to be a widespread sense of job satisfaction. Most of International's teachers seem to be receiving significant intrinsic rewards.

Conclusion

Although these findings are only suggestive, this case study indicates that human resource innovation based on teacher collaboration has the potential to improve the educational process and to significantly change the nature and quality of the teacher's job. The school appears to have improved student attendance and graduation rates. Based on the indications of success, the New York City public school system is setting up two additional schools based on the International model.

In terms of job quality, International teachers agree that, despite the longer hours, they prefer to work under these restructured conditions. Unlike many conventional high schools, International is characterized by a strong sense of direction. Given the nature of the teaching profession, it is understandable that teachers would prefer to work harder in a challenging, effective system than in a less-challenging and less-effective school. The teachers at International believe that their school is an effective educational institution. For that reason, at least so far, the teachers have been willing to make the tradeoff.

— David Jacobson

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