As Cathy, an elementary school principal, strides into her Building Leadership Team meeting at the beginning of the year, there is great anticipation in the room. The teachers present are eager to engage in collaborative decision-making as Cathy described in a letter they received over the summer. Teachers envision, for the first time in their careers, being able to address critical matters of curriculum and instruction that will help students to learn more effectively. No matter how well meaning Cathy may be, however, all in the room are headed for disappointment. Collaborative decision-making around core issues of teaching and learning is extraordinarily difficult to achieve because of perceived accountability pressures, ambivalence among school and district leaders, and a general lack of vital skills required to make collaborative decision-making work. Each of these difficulties has a relatively simple solution, but each requires a change of heart and habits that is challenging to make.

Adoptions of state curriculum standards, implementation of statewide standardized testing, and annual testing requirements in the No-Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) leave superintendents, principals, and teachers fairly breathless as they scramble to insure that schools will measure up. David Tyack (1993) notes that school systems become more centralized under such circumstances. Evidence in my own current research suggests that as accountability pressures have increased, school site discretion has decreased. Apparently, individual schools are not completely trusted to implement teaching and learning solutions that will meet accountability
needs. Yet, urban and suburban districts alike continue to face substantial achievement gaps between minority and majority populations, despite the best efforts of ostensibly wiser heads at the central office.

In the current frenzied environment of accountability it is still common for superintendents and boards to communicate to school site leadership that they should work with multiple constituencies as they run their schools. Why? Because the upper echelon leadership is seeking peace and support at a minimum within each school’s community and hoping for improvements in student achievement that may come about from teachers, parents, and administrators putting their heads together to develop what is best for kids. A dilemma forms as soon as constituencies are considered, however. Residential patterns in nearly any school district determine that the issues and perspectives in one school are likely to differ, sometimes significantly so, from those in another. Thus, superintendents have on the one hand a desire for building leaders to work collaboratively with parents and staff, while on the other hand, accountability pressures make them nervous about schools in the same district doing things differently. The result is a compromise that typically gives school sites discretion over non-instructional issues—and little discretion at that (Beck & Murphy, 1996; Leithwood & Menzies, 1998). Cathy, and other principals like her, find themselves in the unenviable position of working hard at collaborative leadership over issues that are not likely to impact student achievement.

As difficult as it would be to find meaning in working with parents and teachers on issues peripheral to teaching and learning, collaboration is also fraught with execution problems. Site administrators are often unclear about the degree of collaboration that is appropriate for a particular issue or problem. Even if they are skilled at picking issues worthy of collaboration,
they may not know how to address conflict that is the natural result of multiple constituencies with varying and conflicting goals coming together to try to make a decision. If principals and their parents and teachers are not adequately trained in collaborative process, their meetings are not likely to be very productive, even if given the chance to focus on teaching and learning.

Getting unstuck from the dilemma of desiring collaboration among teachers, parents, and principals while fearing standardized test results requires a policy orientation that most school districts appear to lack. School boards and superintendents must first recognize that because schools within their boundaries have differing student populations they have different needs that require different approaches to teaching in learning. In other words, those who drive policy at the district level must not only tolerate differences among schools, they should embrace them. If boards and superintendents cannot come to this view, then they should accept the fact that they have confined their principals to middle management tasks exclusively and stop calling them instructional leaders. If, on the other hand, the powers at the central office want principals to develop innovations in teaching and learning in collaboration with experts (teachers) and clients (parents and students), then they need to hand them curriculum and instruction and say, “Achieve the standards and close the minority/majority achievement gap while you’re at it.”

Just as superintendents demonstrate ambivalence about collaborative decision-making, so do principals. Many are pre-disposed to hold onto decision-making power, relegating their teachers to classroom managers, rather than elevating them into instructional innovator status. The latter is required now more than ever precisely because external accountability demands are greater. At the site level too, the principal must be able to tolerate and embrace differences among teachers so that the school is able to learn what works well and what does not. This should not be confused with an anything-goes atmosphere, however. Rather, principals must lead
and guide teachers through collaborations at the grade and department levels and across grades and departments with a focus on all children at least meeting standards. Preferably, a more collaborative and innovative environment would lead to all children thriving.

Collaborative decision-making skills are crucial if principals are to be successful working with multiple constituencies. Prior to entering into any sort of collaborative process, the principal must be able to discern decisions worthy of collaboration. A simple rule of thumb is to collaborate on issues of teaching and learning because the rest is merely management or something else (Beck & Murphy, 1996; Cuban, 1988). When issues really matter, then conflict is probably healthy. Yet, it frightens people. Mechanisms for working through conflict are well known in the business world (Fisher & Ury, 1991; Jarvis, 1993), but not as commonly understood within education.

Cathy and her teachers would have good reason to feel exhilaration as they begin collaborative decision-making if their context supports it. Cathy needs approval from her board and superintendent to lead the school toward innovations they may not have seen before. In turn, she must give her teachers latitude to develop ideas, try out strategies, and learn from their mistakes while keeping parents informed and involved. If Cathy is a savvy and dedicated instructional leader, well trained in the art of collaboration, then her school will more likely meet state standards and close achievement gaps if teaching and learning prerogatives are not so jealously guarded by the board and superintendent.
References


