

ESTABLISHING AND SUSTAINING A COLLABORATIVE CULTURE

Schools will not be transformed into the learning institutions that will meet the needs of an information society without the leadership of educators – all educators – including parents and community members.

Collaborative culture within school districts is one of two components necessary for successful school restructuring. Collaborative culture is the foundation for transforming schools and the school districts from traditional, hierarchical systems into learning organizations. This will best be achieved by engaging all stakeholder groups in important decisions that impact the system. Successful districts are implementing programs supported by research that also outlines basic practices necessary for becoming a learning organization. These districts establish an inclusive, risk-free collaborative culture within each school, the school district, and the community where dedicated and committed people are willing to share their knowledge, time, and effort.

The other component in essential school restructuring is educational. The Educational component includes both curriculum and competency. The cluster of concepts framed by the term “curriculum” must include alignment, articulation and accountability. The cluster of concepts framed by the term “competency” includes the knowledge, skills, abilities and practices that embrace effective teaching and learning practices meeting the needs of individual student. Both curriculum and competency are critical to improve student outcomes and must not be left behind in the pursuit of a collaborative culture.

Collaborative culture is formed through trust, engagement, productive relationships and commitment. This leads to partnerships, teaming, shared learning, consensus decision-making, and systems thinking. Collaboration allows the organization to implement complex solutions necessary for ever-improving curriculum and competency.

There needs to be a balance between Educational and Collaborative Culture components. These papers, *Establishing and Sustaining a Collaborative Culture* and *Processes for Establishing and Sustaining a Collaborative Culture* focus on the development of schools and school districts as systems. It is this component that is frequently neglected in school reform efforts as

we seek quick, simple strategies to solve complex problems, but a sustainable solution requires as much focus on culture as the educational component. Focusing on collaborative curriculum, competency and collaboration provides the necessary fertile environment for the educational component to take root, thrive, and sustain. The following principles apply to a collaborative culture:

PRINCIPLES OF A COLLABORATIVE CULTURE

- 1. The values and interests of all stakeholders must be acknowledged.**
- 2. The school districts must be perceived by the public as vital institutions. This demands that the district's purpose be understood and its goals be considered worthy.**
- 3. Engagement and consensus decision-making processes are important components for establishing a collaborative culture within a learning organization. Each person's role is important to the system and to the outcome.**
- 4. Employees of the district, leaders of supportive organizations and citizens of the community must be valued and vigorously engaged in meaningful ways.**
- 5. Relationships built on trust are critical to the success of the school district.**
- 6. Organizational foundation criteria include:**
 - A shared purpose
 - Short- and long-term plans with mutually established goals and agreed to strategies to accomplish these goals
 - Ownership through engagement processes and shared responsibility for the implementation of decisions made by consensus
 - Ongoing assessment of programs and processes.

These six principles may be formalized in a philosophical agreement and may become part of the organization’s operational profile (i.e. Baldrige).

FOUNDATION

Strong positive relationships with all stakeholder groups are a basis for transforming the school district from a traditional organization into a learning organization. Relationships built on trust are the glue that holds collaborative efforts together. Taking risks is a part of learning and growing and may in some cases result in some mistakes. However, a strong commitment to the principles of learning communities, as listed above, and a process of reflective learning through dialog will mold mistakes into corrective actions and ultimately success.

Ongoing dialog provides opportunities to test assumptions and to explore learning in creative ways while moving forward in the district’s mission. A shared vision drawn from personal mastery creates a deeper understanding of the purpose of public education within the community. Shared vision is an appreciation of what is important to the future educational lives of the children as well as adults, and it provides energy and rationale for resource allocation to support collaborative work focused upon curriculum and competency. Shared knowledge gained through open, honest communication leads to the understanding of the school and the school district as very complex systems. This understanding creates support for the district’s programs, processes and actions by all stakeholders. This contributes to a more collaborative culture and the success of transforming the district, school and worksite into a learning organization.

STAKEHOLDERS

The critical component for establishing and maintaining a collaborative culture is the way the school district and stakeholder groups are structured and how they approach their relationships with each other. Through this relationship they formally acknowledge that children are the focus of their work and are therefore committed to the children’s educational welfare.

In public schools, **the stakeholders**, depending on the question or issue, include parents, community members, students, the school board and educators.

Educators, depending upon who has applicable information and/or may be affected by the actions, may include classified and certified staff, principals and other administrators.

OPERATIONAL GUIDELINES FOR STAKEHOLDERS:

- Acknowledge that decisions will be child centered and actions will occur through collaboration and consensus
- Develop a shared philosophical agreement based on community values
- Establish guiding principles that focus on student learning, improvement of instruction, a collaborative culture and the provision of adequate resources
- Provide the opportunity for full participation in all decisions that impact the children of the school district
- Develop guidelines as to how decisions will be made
- Establish collaborative working committees made up of the representative groups that operationally use consensus decision-making processes within each level of the school district
- Mutually agree to use an interest-based consensus decision-making process as a vehicle for resolving any major issues prior to making a final determination
- Adopt engagement processes, including a consensus decision-making process, and use these processes as a means of problem resolution, planning and strengthening the relationships among the parties
- Accept responsibility for supporting and implementing the decisions reached through consensus and to assure the actions resulting from these decisions achieve the expected outcome. On the other hand, if decisions don't achieve the expected outcomes, re-evaluate their strategies and learn from their experiences. The parties will apply this learning to future decisions and will continue to make adjustments in the implementation of these decisions until the objective is achieved.
- Honor the roles, responsibilities, and relationships related to or identified in employment contracts and/or employment policies between the board of education and all employee organizations.

ENGAGEMENT PROCESSES THAT SUPPORT A COLLABORATIVE CULTURE

Today's educators have more and more responsibility that goes beyond the classroom. Engagement processes are the important tools needed to make the use of time more efficient resulting in more educationally advantageous programs. These engagement processes provide the tools necessary for building the learning organization and transforming schools so that they will meet the needs of today's children so they will learn to operate and live in a democratic society.

While seemingly time-intensive to implement, processes resulting in full engagement of stakeholders yield better decisions. When implemented, there are fewer false starts and failures, making more efficient use of time, resources and engendering good will. It is this good will that is most difficult to quantify, and impossible to replenish. The desire and will of stakeholders to remain engaged is the most limited resource of all, and cannot be squandered on false starts.

The Interest-Based Consensus-Building Process is a fundamental decision-making process that can be used at every level of the school district. The Interest-Based Consensus-Building Process may be used for problem solving, long-term planning and negotiations. It is a means of making consensus decisions in a collaborative manner. An Interest-Based Consensus-Building Process is based on the principles of focusing on issues, not personalities, using data and reason rather than power to make decisions, and focusing on interests, not positions. It emphasizes respect for the individual and his or her knowledge, skills, abilities, roles, and responsibly within the system. Everyone is valued.

To assure this process is used effectively, participants should be trained on dialog, relationship building and the steps and required behaviors of the Interest-Based Consensus-Building Process.

(See paper on Processes for Establishing and Sustaining a Collaborative Culture.)

Other examples of engagement processes that will lead to a collaborative culture include:

- **Appreciative Inquiry Summit**
- **The Future Search, Building Common Ground Conference**

- **School-Community Visions**
- **Focus Groups**
- **Essential Conversations and Dialog.**

When engagement processes are being considered, the following questions should be explored.

1. What issue, concern or goal will be addressed?
2. What processes can provide the best vehicles for engagement?
3. Who should be involved?
4. Who will extend the invitation?
5. How will the district, school or organization encourage participation in the engagement process?
6. Will each person be willing to share the work?
7. Will each participant commit to participate in the process?
8. Will each participant accept ownership and be responsible for implementation of consensus decisions once an agreement is reached?

SUSTAINING A COLLABORATIVE CULTURE

How do organizations sustain a collaborative culture? This question was asked recently of participants who were representatives of all major public education stakeholders from several school districts attending a conference sponsored by The Collaborative Leadership Trust*. These districts are currently engaged in practices of creating and maintaining a collaborative culture. Here are the responses:

There is a need

- To continually live the principles of a collaborative culture
- To continue to build collaborative relationships
- To valued relationships throughout the system
- To appreciate that relationships are dynamic and not static
- To have effective and strong leadership for all stakeholder groups
- To assure all representatives from all levels of the district feel as though they are valued members of a team
- To have the right people as participants. Current stakeholders have a responsibility to select or elect leaders who will be advocates for collaboration throughout the system.

- To assure that new leaders at the table are trained in teaming and engagement processes
- To ask the right questions and listen to all stakeholders
- To enlist the services of those who are fundamentally committed to collaboration and the Interest Based Strategy process
- To engage new members in the culture before they take office
- To train everyone in Interest-Based Strategies and provide them with the opportunity to participate in consensus decision making
- To have regular communication – person to person whenever possible
- To invite and fully engage community leaders and parents in meaningful dialog about kids and their schools
- To celebrate our successes and show our appreciation to those who are committed to this hard but exciting work.

BUILDING A MORE COLLABORATIVE LEADERSHIP BASE

The same participants were asked how they build a more collaborative leadership base. Following small groups discussions, here are the responses.

- All representatives of all stakeholder groups need to be valued and know that they are valued.
- Build leadership through sharing of core values.
- Look for peer group leaders, invite them and involve them.
- Actions begin with conversation; the questions may be as important as the answers.
- Start with small groups and build commonality.
- Everyone is a leader. Include those who are genuinely interested and will commit to action, but keep the invitation open to all.
- Stakeholder leaders have the responsibility for recruiting and training their replacements.
- Collaborative leadership is critical among school leaders including the school board, superintendent, association and principals.
- Focus on student achievement and student success.
- Relationships are critical to the success of a collaborative culture.
- Dialog, time and commitment are important for building trust.
- Be culturally driven – daily.

- Establish a model procedure for leveling the decision-making process and for maintaining a collaborative culture.
- A compact, or compact of trust, will build an understanding of the structure and goals of a collaborative culture.
- Transparency – let others know what is happening, inform them of decisions that are being made and extend the invitation for implementation to others.

***The Collaborative Leadership Trust is a national organization of representatives of public school stakeholders who support school districts in establishing and sustaining a collaborative culture.**

SUMMARY

Public schools and the communities they serve need to transform their school districts from traditional, hierarchical systems into learning organizations through creating and maintaining a collaborative culture.

The foundation for this change is the way the school district:

- is structured as an learning organization
- communicates and operates
- how stakeholder groups approach their relationships with each other and
- how decisions are made.

Lastly, and most importantly, districts, schools and stakeholders must formally acknowledge that children are valued in their community and in this nation and that children are critical to the future success of our democratic society.

School Districts with a collaborative culture form learning organizations. As learning organizations they will meet the challenges of making each classroom in each school in each district a more effective learning environment for all children. It is the path that leads to greater support for excellence in learning at every level of public education.

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