n fall 1995, during my first month of a tenured position at Youngstown State University in Ohio, the dean of the College of Education asked me to facilitate a reform project at a nearby Catholic high school. The principal of this high school had asked the dean for help from a professor who could “facilitate a process that would enable the high school faculty to explore different options for school growth and renewal.” As a teacher and a former urban high school principal who was adapting to higher education, I was excited about the opportunity to collaborate with a principal who saw change as a process rather than as an end product.

Crucial Elements of Successful Change
The faculty of Cardinal Mooney High School planned to

A high school faculty not only agreed to implement block scheduling but also envisioned the change as a process of continual improvement. Successful change, they discovered, depends upon the attitudes and the actions of the people involved.

LINDA WESSON with SR. J ANE MARIE KULACZ

All staff members examined their assumptions about teaching and learning in an early stage of the reform process.
implement block scheduling over a four-year period. During this time, faculty members collected data, including meeting minutes, field notes, memos, staff development agendas, individual and group faculty responses, and videotapes of faculty. After analyzing the data, they were able to identify 10 characteristics that aided the block-scheduling implementation. We believe these elements are essential to any successful educational change effort.

1. Recognize That the Principal Is Pivotal. Real change is collaborative and depends upon the honest communication and commitment of stakeholders, and it can only happen in an organization that promotes communication and collaboration based on trust and integrity (Senge 1990). This climate affects all stakeholders—faculty and staff members, students, parents, and community members. The principal must establish this kind of climate for change (NASSP 1996).

Sr. Kudlacz began establishing a collaborative climate when she assumed the principalship at Cardinal Mooney High School. She modeled trust and integrity, and her admonishment to the faculty to engage in a “process that would enable them to explore options for school growth and renewal” empowered the faculty and demonstrated her trust in them and the democratic process.

During the four years that the staff at Cardinal Mooney High School implemented block scheduling, Sr. Kudlacz built a collaborative environment during her interactions with the faculty, the central office staff, the students, and the community. She worked effectively with the superintendent by backing up her position with thorough documentation, and he trusted her judgment and gave her the autonomy to continue. Communication with parents and students was already established, and as the change was implemented, she solicited feedback about the changes from those stakeholders. The data she collected added to the credibility of the project and helped her gain the support of the community and the students.

2. Use Systems Thinking as an Analytical Tool. The principal and I were the holders of the vision and kept the focus on change as renewal. We wanted the faculty to analyze their beliefs and assumptions about teaching and learning and how they affected the present learning environment. To more deeply analyze faculty members’ accepted practices, we used systems thinking, an analytical tool that proposes that each part of a system affects the whole and that all parts of a system are connected and interdependent (Senge 1990). Using systems thinking, one can see both the big picture and the parts that make up the big picture. For example, when examining a discipline policy, one must look at how that policy affects such things as attendance, student learning, and teacher morale; likewise, when examining proficiency testing, one must look at the how proficiency testing connects to student learning, assessment, and curriculum development.

Using systems thinking helped the faculty focus on identifying and defining problems, rather than assigning blame or “fixing” things. The analysis encouraged faculty discussions that eventually centered on beliefs and assumptions about teaching and learning—their own and the school’s collective beliefs and assumptions. The faculty began to grow in their capacity to accept more and different ideas for teaching and learning based on their new insights.

3. Commit Time and Resources. We knew this collaborative process would require additional time for the faculty to interact with one another and explore new ideas. To accommodate their needs, the principal allowed faculty members to purchase, at a per diem rate, additional staff development days beyond the number stipulated in their teacher contracts. The school provided additional funds each year for staff development, resources (books, journals, and videos), and substitute teachers. Throughout the four-year process, teachers visited other schools and attended workshops on topics related to block scheduling. Providing the faculty with adequate time and resources was crucial to the successful implementation of block scheduling.

4. Establish Benchmarks for Quality. The faculty of Cardinal Mooney High School was committed to the school and the students but seemed more comfortable when a model for change was adopted. Sr. Kudlacz decided to align the block scheduling implementation with the goals published in Breaking Ranks: Changing an American Institution (NASSP 1996). Staff development sessions examined the six priorities for school renewal reviewed in Breaking Ranks: curriculum, instructional strategies, school environment, technology, organization and time, and assessment and accountability. Faculty committees in each of these six areas researched their topic and reported their findings and perceptions of best practice to the faculty. As faculty members became informed about a topic, we made more resources available: videos, journal articles, books, workshops, and visits to other sites. Faculty members took increasing responsibility for planning staff development sessions by requesting speakers and videos that had inspired and informed them. They were empowered by this process, and momentum for change grew as they began to realize that they had a great deal of input. The faculty learned that they did not have to operate from a deficiency model of professional development but could instead believe that they were already good and were looking for ways to get better.
5. Envision Faculty as Responsible Decision Makers. Empowering the faculty was a focus from the beginning. In the first session, the faculty members were divided into eight committees made up of junior and senior faculty and were asked to consider and report what they perceived as the school's strengths and weaknesses during the past 25 years. They recorded this data in chronological order on newsprint to provide a visual timeline of the school. This exercise illustrated how events were connected and helped them recognize the individual and collective contributions they had made in the past. It also helped them identify the contributions they wanted to make in the future. The videos of Joel Barker, Peter Senge, and Meg Wheatley were used in follow-up sessions to expand ideas that emerged during this session.

All of the staff development sessions included such activities as group discussions, peer reviews, panel discussions, and role playing. The sessions were recorded, and Sr. Kudlacz and I always considered the feedback and experiences from the previous session when planning the next session.

6. Plan Staff Development Around Faculty Readiness. A collaborative process requires a great deal of honest dialogue. The principal and I debriefed at least once after each session, and we met at least twice before each session to analyze what the faculty needed in the upcoming session. We let the process evolve according to the feedback we were getting from the faculty and each other. This part of the process meant that faculty members, the principal, and I had to reflect and talk to one another honestly, honoring one another and ourselves, trusting the process as it developed, and believing in power thorough others, not power over others.

7. Create a Democratic Process. Sr. Kudlacz and I modeled democratic behavior when we identified dilemmas and respected multiple perspectives on them from faculty members. We formed committees of five to seven faculty members to discuss problems and come up with solutions that worked for them. These committees reviewed data, reported findings, discussed the issues, and entertained motions on how to proceed. The goal of the committees was to hear and record each faculty member's perspective and make decisions by consensus. We found that the faculty needed guidelines on what it meant to work this way, so the principal taught committee leaders how to conduct a democratic committee meeting. Because many faculty members were experimenting with group work in their classes and because there was a high level of respect among faculty members, they easily adopted this structure.

8. Coordinate Process and Content. Throughout the four-year block-scheduling implementation, we built the capacity to examine our assumptions about teaching and learning and also our capacity to see things in at least five domains: empowerment, risk-taking ability, ownership of change, student learning, and systemic renewal and continual improvement. The domains proved to be interdependent. The knowledge and the skills that teachers acquired in each domain complemented the proficiencies they acquired from their study of the other domains. At first, faculty learning centered on the personal issues of the faculty (empowerment) and then proceeded to issues that encompassed more variables (systemic renewal and continual improvement). Sr. Kudlacz and I balanced the group's need to go forward with its need to move laterally. The success of this cyclical process depended on the quality of the faculty interaction during each session and the honest feedback from faculty members between sessions, as well as the constancy of purpose that the principal and I brought to the process.

9. Provide a Nonthreatening Learning Environment. Because true change can only take place in a climate that promotes communication and collaboration based on trust and integrity, providing a nonthreatening environment was essential to the success of this project. Without an environment in which we could all communicate with one another, the project would have failed. We used the following means to develop an environment in which faculty could trust and communicate honestly:
   - Establish that respect for one another’s opinion or position is the norm
   - Provide a comfortable physical setting in which to meet
   - Celebrate when milestones are met

Small groups of staff members learned to use a democratic process that heard and recorded each member’s perspective during committee meetings.
• Build staff development sessions around individual and group peer-presentations
• Begin each session with an activity and a self-reflection from a faculty member
• Provide refreshments and catered lunches.

10. Mentor New Teachers into the Process. Because this has been a multiyear process, the addition of new faculty members at the beginning of each school year presented a particular challenge. It was necessary to incorporate new staff members into the process quickly so they felt enough ownership in the process not to impede its progress or dampen the enthusiasm of those who had been participants since its inception. Each year, we reviewed the history of the block-scheduling implementation with new teachers prior to the start of the year’s staff development activities. We made available all the resources we used over the previous years as well as the summaries of previous work. As staff development activities began, teacher groups were carefully constructed so that new staff members worked with experienced staff members who had a good understanding of and a positive attitude about the process. In addition, each new teacher was appointed a mentor teacher whose responsibilities included helping the new teacher understand how the change process was affecting teaching at Cardinal Mooney.

Change As a Way of Seeing
Seeing the possibilities inherent in change is a mindset. Throughout the four-year project, the following questions were posited by the reading, the videos, and the group interactions: “Why do you think that?” “What do we need to know more about and why?” “How do we want to accomplish this?” As we sought answers to these kinds of questions, the faculty probed more deeply into why change had or had not taken place in the past and what change would and would not mean to the future. As time went on, increasing numbers of the faculty embraced the possibilities of change and were able to examine the assumptions that prevented them from being open to the possibilities that the change presented.

This is the first year of block scheduling in the high school. Faculty members from other schools have visited Cardinal Mooney to find out how they have managed to have so much success with the transition from traditional to block scheduling. Because of the interactive professional culture that took shape during this four-year change process, faculty members are developing a viable continual improvement plan that focuses on different options for school growth and renewal.

References

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