

Practical Implications for School Leaders

It is not atypical for school leaders to receive (or distribute) only superficial or positive feedback during the course of a school day. Too often, teachers and other staff members are reluctant to share their concerns with their principals for fear of being perceived or labeled as complainers.

Schools are complex social organizations and the opportunity for stakeholders to participate in or contribute to decisions that are relevant to their interests or expertise is essential for organizational success. Inherent in participative decision making is the understanding and recognition that divergent perspectives can and must contribute to the overall quality of decisions and processes (Hoy & Miskel, 2013). School officials should welcome constructive and respectful forms of dissent and, at the same time, begin to challenge and replace negative norms and negative expressions of dissent that diminish enthusiasm and deplete excitement. Teacher empowerment is a strong force to promote more positive forms of dissent in schools.

In Gloucester County Public Schools, we constructed a framework for teacher feedback that solicited articulated dissent regarding recent initiatives and current practices. Principals from each school were invited to recommend teacher representatives to participate in individual roundtable conversations with the assistant superintendent for instruction. He contacted the teachers personally to schedule an interview session at each school and, in an effort to promote more honest feedback, conducted the separate roundtable discussions with teachers at each of their schools without their principals present.

The assistant superintendent and the principals were interested in what was working well, but they also wanted to know what wasn't working and why. Although the conversations centered primarily around district- and school-level initiatives and other implementation effects, teachers were free to raise additional concerns in confidence. Following each school's focus group conversation, the assistant superintendent summarized his notes and sent

them to each group of participants for their feedback and edits. Afterward, more-generalized summaries were shared individually with each principal.

At several schools, including the middle school, the feedback conversation required more time than was originally scheduled, and participants requested an opportunity to continue the dialogue during a second visit. At the middle school in particular, teachers were concerned with a perceived lack of input into the school's instructional schedule, including how intervention time was coordinated and staffed. As a result of those conversations, the middle school principal facilitated planning discussions with teacher leaders and several progressive changes were implemented.

The series of focus group conversations helped the assistant superintendent collect other important information, including common themes of concern that extended across all schools in the division. He shared the common concerns (and praise) with all principals and the superintendent, and several substantive corrections were initiated. Because of the rich information received, as well as the positive feedback from teachers who were appreciative of the opportunity to express their concerns directly to an assistant superintendent, plans are in place to continue the focus conversations at least once each year. In addition, principals have initiated similar school-based communication structures, such as shared-leadership committees, to facilitate feedback and collaborative decision making.

At Northumberland High School in Heathsville, VA, the principal solicits feedback regarding day-to-day school operations from the school-based leadership advisory team, which consists of classroom teachers. Teacher feedback is used to adjust program decisions and eliminate ineffective practices.

Principals who are interested in promoting articulated dissent in their schools as a strategy to reduce the frequency of negative norms and other ineffectual forms of dissent should adhere to the following empowering actions and behaviors:

- Develop a culture of trust and mutual respect by exhibiting leadership behaviors

Gloucester County Public Schools

Gloucester County, VA

Community:

RECEIVED

Total Enrollment:

5,632

Number of Schools:

5 middle schools, 2 middle schools, 1 high school

Demographic:

83% White, 8% Black, 3% Hispanic, 1% Asian, 5% Other; 31% free and reduced-price lunch