



# Review

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## *Opportunities and Challenges of School Collaboration*

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Collaborative work organizations and related themes (such as community, cooperation, etc.) have become the focus of both research and practice in education during the past few years. Some may view emphasis on collaboration (or community) in schools as the second stage of the initial “site-based management” movement initiated in the late 1980’s. School organizations have begun expanding their democratic governance emphasis with teacher, parent, and community advisory councils, engaging in partnerships with other human service agencies or businesses, or redesigning educators’ work to add a group or team emphasis.

Most scholars focus on only one particular type of collaborative work arrangement — such as school-business partnerships, industry-education collaboration, regular education-special education collaborations, or even schools as “learning communities.” Further, they approach the study of collaboration from a single conceptual or disciplinary framework or lens. However, because collaboration may increase the complexity of organizing and managing, a single lens, framework, or disciplinary approach is inadequate to understand such complex organizational phenomena. Further, practicing administrators and teachers need to consider multiple factors when building collaborative schools — such as: 1) What organizational structure will enhance collaborative school efforts? 2) What change processes are important in building school collaboration? 3) What are the costs (in effort, energy, time, or other resources) in collaborating with other external agencies? 4) How can teachers’ work be redesigned to enhance collaboration between teachers and what are the outcomes for teachers and students? 5) How can educators (e.g. administrators, teachers, special education teachers, counselors, psychologists) overcome their separate role socializations to build collaborative work relationships within schools? and 6) What are the implications of school collaboration for teaching and learning, school leadership, and lead-

ership preparation?

Thus, a couple of years ago, some of my Utah colleagues and I wrote a book on collaboration which discusses collaboration research and practice from multiple perspectives, each chapter addressing one of the questions identified above from a specific conceptual or disciplinary framework (see Pounder, 1998a). Each chapter author brought his or her professional and scholarly expertise in a particular disciplinary area to the work, including organizational theory (Bob Johnson), organizational change and development (James Barott & Rebecca Raybould), organizational economics (Patrick Galvin), group work design and personnel administration (Diana Pounder), work roles and professional socialization (Ann Weaver Hart), instructional leadership (Karen Evans Stout), leadership and the school principal (Gary Crow), and leadership preparation (Joseph Matthews).

The challenge for me as the book’s editor was to synthesize the themes or issues that seemed to cut across the book’s multiple perspectives and chapter topics. It is these synthesizing issues and dilemmas that I will present here, in part excerpted from the closing chapter of the collaboration book. These dilemmas are framed as collaboration’s “promises versus pitfalls” — or opportunities versus challenges for schools. The synthesizing issues include: 1) the need for change toward more collaborative schools versus the persistence of schools; 2) resource gains versus costs of collaboration; 3) professional interdependence versus professional autonomy or discretion (and the related concepts of independence, privacy, and isolation); 4) shared influence (or leadership) versus shared accountability (or responsibility); and 5) balance of influence versus over-control or under-involvement among collaborative parties.

*The Need for Collaborative Change Versus  
the Persistence of Schools*

There are many reasons that schools may desire or even

need to become more collaborative. Johnson (1998) introduces two commonly touted reasons for increasing collaboration in schools: 1) to increase the democratization of schools; and 2) to enhance school effectiveness and/or productivity. Galvin (1998) discusses historical events and trends that influenced schools to become more collaborative with other agencies. These events included the 1980's calls for reform to address our "failing" education system and a corresponding crisis in America's social services, struggling to effectively meet the growing needs of children and families plagued by poverty, unemployment, violence, homelessness, teen-age pregnancy, and other social welfare problems. Pounder (1998b) argues that increased collaboration among teachers and professional educators can tighten the connection between educators' work and student outcomes, especially increasing educators' comprehensive knowledge and responsibility for students' learning and school experiences. Organizing and designing work around students may increase student learning, achievement, and other valued school outcomes. Correspondingly, students' fractionalized school experience and sense of detachment or alienation from school may be decreased. Also, collaborative work approaches, moreso than in-

dividual job enhancement, may enrich educators' work and increase involvement across all educators without violating the norms of egalitarianism so prevalent among school professionals. Hart (1998) reinforces the argument that increased collaboration can improve student outcomes and school effectiveness. She reminds us that students' needs are becoming increasingly complex due to greater numbers of culturally diverse and special needs students. This increased complexity necessitates greater collaboration and sharing among education professionals with varied and complementary expertise. Stout (1998) traces the reasoning that collaboration may enhance student learning by changing the instructional process and the way teachers work. However, she points out that research findings largely emphasize the effect of instructional collaboration on teachers' work lives. Only a few recent studies have explored and found favorable relationships between instructional collaboration, teachers' learning and work lives, and enhanced student learning (e.g. Smylie, Lazurus, and Brownlee-Conyers, 1996).

In spite of these and other reasons for schools to become more collaborative, Stout (1998) and Barott et. al. (1998) remind us of the persistence, stability, even inertia of schools. That is, schools are notoriously slow or even resistant to change. Barott and Raybould explain the nature of change, types of change, and the paradoxical relationship between change and persistence. It is this persistence, or inertia, that Stout describes when addressing the stability of instructional methods used in schools for decades. There are many reasons that schools persist in their instructional methods, organizational structure, work roles, and general operating dynamics. The book's authors have addressed some of these reasons, several of which are discussed in greater detail below as key dilemmas for collaborative schools. One such factor that strongly contributes to schools' persistence is the norm of autonomy or independence that runs counter to norms of collaboration (see Johnson, 1998; Barott et. al., 1998; Hart, 1998; Pounder, 1998b; and Stout, 1998). This autonomy or privacy norm is often reinforced by professional train-

ing and socialization (Matthews, 1998; Hart, 1998). Also identified are the dynamics of exchange relationships, including costs (e.g. coordination, communication, monitoring) incurred to collaborate (Galvin, 1998). If collaboration unduly increases organizational costs and complexity, especially in an environment noted for its stimulus overload (Johnson, 1998), educators could be expected to resist collaborative work relationships. Also, because schools have needs to be buffered from their environment, there will always be clear limits to the ways or degree to which schools will collaborate with (or bridge) external agencies or parties (Ogawa, 1996). Further, some types of collaboration may require far-reaching and thorough organizational change. If existing incentives, rewards, and organizational structures run counter to collaborative work dynamics and objectives, schools will persist in their traditional ways of operating.

This tension between needs for collaborative school change and the stability or persistence of schools presents a dilemma for those considering collaborative endeavors. Developing a more collaborative school demands careful negotiation and navigation of the change process and is unlikely to be worth the effort unless the collaborative endeavors are organized around the core technology of schools — the teaching-learning process. Collaboration efforts that are largely symbolic may reflect our democratic ideals but are unlikely to result in substantive improvement in school and student outcomes.

*Resource Gains Versus Costs of Collaboration*

There are a range of benefits and costs associated with collaboration. Many of the benefits could be characterized as resource gains. These gains include resources such as increased expertise, knowledge, and skills available for shared educational problem-solving. Also, the efforts of more personnel, with a greater array of information and perspectives, may be available to address student learning or related concerns. Inter-agency collaboration can also increase fiscal resources available to the cooperating agencies such as shared facilities, equipment, personnel, or other resources. These combined resource gains promise to enhance school effec-

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tiveness.

However, these resource gains may be offset by the costs associated with increased collaboration. These costs include increased time and effort associated with joint planning, communication, coordination, and monitoring of complex collaborative programs and processes. (Galvin, 1998, offers significant detail about the nature of costs associated with collaboration). These costs can contribute to inefficiencies in achieving educational goals and objectives. Inconsistent or inadequate commitment, input, and information among collaborative parties can further compromise the effectiveness and/or efficiency of shared efforts.

In sum, the gains in school effectiveness promised by school collaboration may be compromised by the costs or inefficiencies that can occur with collaboration. Those initiating collaborative programs or functions must give serious consideration to organizing structures and processes that minimize the costs that can kill collaborative efforts. In other words, collaboration leaders must consistently consider how to reduce "hindrance" factors such as unclear goals and expectations, unproductive meetings, complicated communication patterns, complex coordination plans, or excessive paperwork, documentation, or other costly monitoring functions. Leaders must explore ways to capture the rewards of collaborative work without making the work too difficult, time-consuming, or frustrating to accomplish.

#### *Professional Interdependence Versus Professional Autonomy*

An important contextual consideration for school collaboration is the existing culture and norms of schools and education professionals. Particularly prevalent is the norm of professional autonomy or discretion, often associated with professional independence, privacy, or isolation. Although educators and researchers often lament the isolation associated with teaching, professional isolation is only one side of the professional autonomy coin. That is, as much as teachers may embrace collaboration to reduce professional isolation, they also fear the loss of professional discretion, independence, and privacy. Collaboration necessitates a certain professional interdependence in planning, decision-

making, instructional and service delivery, and other important aspects of educators' work.

As introduced earlier, collaboration brings greater professional interdependence among individuals. However, collaboration can allow, encourage, or even necessitate increased autonomy and discretion as a group or collaborative unit. Instructional options, service provisions, or decision influences that are unavailable to educators as individuals may be more commonplace or "do-able" in collaborative work groups. In other words, collaboration may reduce *individual* autonomy (and individual discretion, privacy, and isolation) but increase group autonomy or discretion (Pounder, 1998b).

Educators engaging in school collaboration efforts may initially fail to realize the full potential of collaborative groups to exercise greater freedom, independence, or discretion in their decision-making and choices of action. To attain this group autonomy, members must establish new work paradigms — brainstorm new ways for achieving their instructional and educational objectives. Through new work methods and organizational arrangements, educators may come to appreciate the discretion available to them as group members. Professional interdependence may be appreciated in spite of some reduction of individual independence or privacy. And, the corresponding reduction in feelings of professional isolation would probably be appreciated by most teachers.

#### *Shared Influence Versus Shared Accountability*

Collaborative schools tend to expand decision influence and leadership to teachers and other organizational members, and can also extend influence to others outside the school such as parents, external agency members, or other community participants. The dynamics of shared influence and leadership have been a popular focus of research during the past few years, especially as shared leadership relates to restructured schools (see Crow, 1998, for an extensive discussion of this literature). However, there has been limited discussion of the accountability or responsibility that necessarily must correspond to broadened leadership or influence by teachers and others.

As teachers and other school employees and constituents become involved in collaborative endeavors, it is understandable and desirable that they exercise greater leadership, decision and organizational influence. However, as Crow (1998) and Matthews (1998) suggest, school administrators may feel reluctant to relinquish some of their influence, authority, or control — especially if they must be accountable for the independent decisions and actions of others. That is, if teachers and others are going to expand their influence and leadership through collaborative work, they must also assume responsibility and accountability for their decisions and actions. Collaborative work groups must be willing to answer to parents, school board members, and others for their collective decisions and actions rather than expecting school administrators to take a protective role by supporting their actions under all circumstances.

This is an uncomfortable transition for both collaborative work groups and administrators. Administrators have long been expected to "support" teachers when they face criticism from or conflict with parents, students, board members, or other community groups. For the most part, this support has meant running interference for or protecting a single teacher from criticism or complaint about his/her individual actions in the classroom. However, as collaborative work groups expand their leadership roles, spheres of influence, and range of responsibilities, school administrators may be expected to support decisions over which that they have only minimal knowledge or control. And, teachers may be uncomfortable stepping up to the plate of public scrutiny. However, the dynamics of shared leadership — especially between school administrators and collaborative school groups — cannot be successful if those who make decisions are unwilling to take responsibility or be accountable for those decisions. Increased collaborative leadership and influence *require* increased responsibility and accountability.

#### *Balance of Influence Versus Over-Control or Under-Involvement of Members*

A certain degree of conflict is inherent to collaborative work (see Barott and Raybould, 1998; Crow, 1998; Galvin,

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1998; Hart, 1998). Conflict can occur over a host of issues, including differences in educational philosophies, values, goals, instructional techniques, work priorities, role expectations, etc. However, one area that seems to have particularly strong potential for conflict is the imbalance of inputs and influence by collaborative group members. When there is a reasonable balance of inputs among the participating parties, there is much greater potential for effective problem-solving, decision-making, work effort, and work results; this enhanced group effectiveness tends to correspond with group harmony. However, collaborative groups may include parties who tend to exercise too much control over the group's actions or, conversely, offer little input or support for group activities. "Controlling members" as well as "shirking members" create critical problems for collaborative groups and their work.

There may be many reasons that members engage in either controlling behavior or shirking behavior. A lack of trust may explain some members' behavior (Galvin, 1998; Stout, 1998). When group members do not trust the intentions, competence, or motivations of other members, they may tend to try to control the direction and decisions of the group or they may withdraw from the group to the degree possible. Controlling or shirking behavior may also reflect members' general lack of commitment to change toward a more collaborative school. Whether members behave in an aggressive or passive-aggressive fashion, their intentions may be to resist change and to persist with the current school organization and processes. Either type behavior (controlling or shirking) can threaten the survival and effectiveness of the group, upsetting the balance of inputs among members and potentially alienating other group members.

An imbalance in member involvement and participation in group activities is a touchy interpersonal process to address and remedy. However, failure to openly and directly deal with the problem will only allow the group dynamics to spin more out of balance. Although there is risk involved for a group to openly address any type of interpersonal problem,

feelings of trust and commitment are more likely to increase with candid and open exchanges than with continued unspoken assumptions and attributions. Often a neutral outside party can be helpful in facilitating these types of direct and honest communication.

*Closing Comments*

It is my hope that readers can appreciate the complexity that accompanies school collaboration efforts. Collaborative school architects must consider many factors, starting with the *organizational structure* of schools. How do existing structures enhance or inhibit the likelihood of effective collaboration? For example, do school rewards, incentives, communication networks, and coordination tools facilitate or undermine potential collaborative efforts? How can these and other school structures be modified to be more consistent with the goals of collaboration?

Next, how should the *change process* be approached? Is first order change or second order change more appropriate? What persistence dynamics can be expected, worked with, and worked through as a natural part of the change process? What are the anticipated *costs and benefits* of collaboration? How can organizational structures and group processes be designed to minimize costs in relation to collaboration's benefits or resource gains? To what degree can collaboration among teachers and other school professionals enhance student learning and favorable school experiences? If so, how can *teachers' work be redesigned* to encourage work group effectiveness? What work group structures, processes, and contextual factors can be developed to increase work group effectiveness to best serve the needs of students? Similarly, how can other education or social service agency professionals' work be aligned more closely with teachers' work for the purpose of better serving students? How can these professionals learn to overcome their separate *role socialization* to work effectively together? What are the anticipated effects of school collaboration on *teaching and learning* and *school leadership*? What kinds of *professional preparation and development* are needed to help educators learn to work collaboratively?

The difficulty with implementing any

collaborative effort is that all of these factors must be considered in combination — as interacting factors. These multiple considerations or perspectives do not operate in isolation of one another; a wholistic approach is required. Therein lies the complexity of school collaboration. The salience of one factor relative to another may vary depending on the particular school, collaborative effort, point in time, or key players involved. Thus, few of us would be willing to offer strict formulas for effective collaboration.

However, we do offer two strong and resounding recommendations to those embarking on collaborative school efforts. First, the primary reason that schools should engage in collaborative work is to enhance the benefits and services to students. All other purposes of collaboration are subordinate to that of effectively meeting students' needs. Second, collaborative work structures and processes should be developed around the teaching-learning process. Improved teaching and learning should be the highest priority and focus of collaborative schools.

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