

Advancing Toward Shared Decision Making

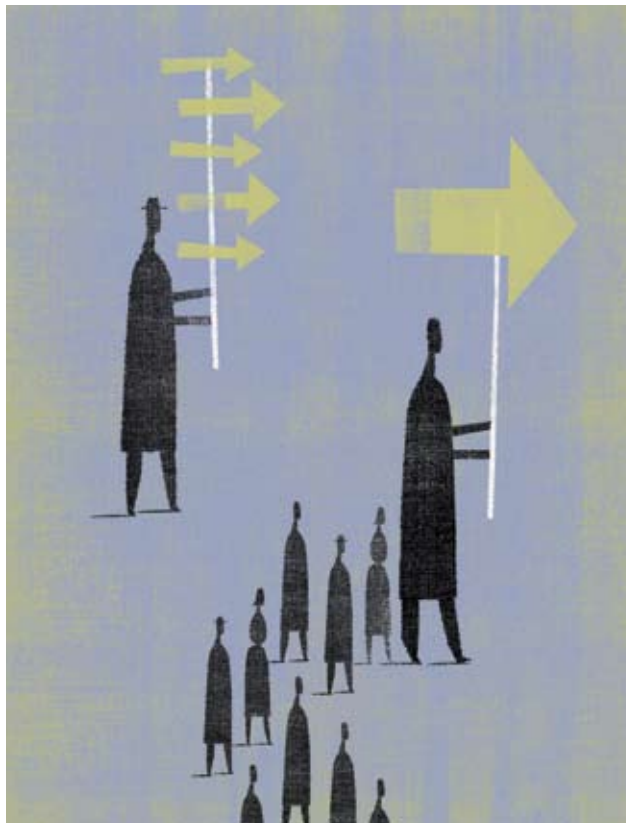
By LISA MULLER AND JUDI THORN

In May 2004, a group of 25 teachers at Jenks (OK) High School received an invitation that requested their presence at the Summer 2004 Advance. Although many organizations hold retreats for their employees, the administrators wanted to send a different message: we're not retreating; we're advancing!

Like many states, Oklahoma suffered a school budget crisis during the 2002–03 school year, which resulted in cuts in custodial services, supplies, substitute teachers, and travel for students and staff members. Some administrative and teaching positions were also eliminated, which led to larger class sizes. By summer 2004, teacher morale needed attention.

Keeping in mind that principals' leadership styles (transformational or transactional) and decision-making strategies (participative versus autocratic) affect teacher job satisfaction (Bogler, 2001), the administrative team designed a series of activities to give teachers the opportunity to offer feedback, share their ideas, and propose solutions for the challenges facing the school.

During the Summer 2004 Advance, teachers used school data to address such questions as, How can we achieve consistency in our grading? and How can we increase participation in AP and pre-AP courses by students from under-represented groups? To make recommendations for grading consistency, for example, teachers examined grade distribution, extra-credit policies, final exam weights, and grading formulas. Before addressing the AP and pre-AP course enrollment question, teachers examined the enrollment figures for the past three years.



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PREVIEW

Daylong sessions allow teachers at Jenks (OK) High School to share their ideas and propose solutions to the challenges facing their school.

In collaborative leadership sessions, teachers address a variety of issues that affect school climate, teacher morale, and student achievement.

Quick implementation of some policies, procedures, and programs improved teacher morale and school climate.

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JENKS HIGH SCHOOL

Location
Jenks, OK

Grades
10–12

Enrollment
2,183

Community
Suburban

Demographics
75% White, 9% American Indian, 6% Black, 6% Hispanic, 4% Asian; 12% free and reduced-price lunch

Administrative Team
1 principal and 4 assistant principals

Faculty
142 certified teachers

Staff
39 noncertified personnel

Another meaningful activity was conducted during lunch. The tables were covered with butcher paper and teachers were given crayons and asked to create a list of current issues by writing down their concerns, comments, complaints, and suggestions as they enjoyed the food and camaraderie. After lunch, the tablecloths were collected, and the teachers' concerns were grouped into four categories to be further addressed by small groups during the afternoon session:

- Policies and procedures
- Administrative support
- Teacher time
- Communication.

Demonstrated Commitment

Once the advance ended, the administrative team faced a serious challenge: they understood the importance of demonstrating their commitment to making changes and wanted to implement both long-term policies and a quick show of support. Following the advance, the administrators reviewed and addressed the teachers' suggestions and made a number of substantive changes, most notably the addition of collaboration time for teachers during the school day, the development of common final exams for core subject areas, the use of the AP Potential system for recruiting students for AP classes, a streamlining of the procedures for handling tardies, and the addition of social events and teacher-recognition opportunities. Although some of these steps may seem small to those who are not immediately associated with the school, they enabled teachers to see direct results from the time they spent at the summer advance.

To ensure that teachers felt the difference as soon as they returned after the summer break, the principals took advantage of a tradition to show their appreciation for teachers. Jenks had used yearlong themes for several years to encourage staff members and students to achieve their personal best. The theme for the 2004–05 school year was “Go for the Gold,” playing off

the 2004 summer Olympics. To introduce the theme to teachers and to set a positive attitude for the year, the school held a medal ceremony. Each department came to the stage as principals introduced and awarded a gold medal to each “gold medal teacher.” A presentation on the summer's advance and the changes planned on the basis of the teachers' recommendations followed the medal ceremony. Later that week, the principals hosted a cookout for all staff members and their families. An e-mail from one of the veteran teachers best sums up the reaction of faculty members:

I want to say thank you for all the incredible work the 5 of you did to make the first days of this school year upbeat and encouraging ones for the high school teachers.... The fact that you asked us last spring how you could make things better puts you in a special class of administrators. From the talks you all gave to the t-shirts to the gold medals to the cook-out on Friday, it is evident that you listened and are trying to do all you can possibly do to show us that you are committed to supporting us.

The increased level of trust generated by these efforts was obvious throughout the year, even when challenging situations arose. This improvement in the trust level between administrators and teachers is significant in light of research by Tschannen-Moran (2001), which indicates that trust between the administrators and school personnel correlates to higher organizational citizenship behavior. Teachers with high levels of organizational citizenship behavior take it upon themselves to volunteer creative and innovative solutions, sponsor cocurricular activities, and stay after school to assist students—in other words, to become the type of teachers who make a difference for students (DiPaola, 2005).

Quality Tools

The staff advance has now become an annual tradition at Jenks. Because Jenks Public Schools—a 2005 Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award recipient—is committed to the use of quality tools for decision making, the principals incorporated the strategies as they planned the 2005 and 2006 sessions. Topics for the 2005 and 2006 sessions included ensuring academic success for all students, revising the school's seminar class and career action planning (CAP) program, and discussing matters of concern brought forward by teachers. The tools for discussion included the fishbone diagram, brainstorming, the plan-do-study-act (PDSA) model, and the Pareto process.

Examples of how data and quality tools were used can be seen in two discussions. Jenks is fortunate to have a long history of academic success. Some recent changes in demographics at the elementary level, however, indicate that now is the time to consider whether current practices will be sufficient to continue this success. The teachers were given data on free and reduced-price lunch rates, poverty rates, ethnic makeup of various grade levels, failure rates, and mobility rates. The teachers met in small groups that had been designed to provide a mix of teaching assignments and experience levels to explore the issue. They completed a fishbone diagram with the leading question being, How can we ensure academic success for all students? Key areas for consideration that emerged included making changes in teaching methods and assessment techniques, addressing students' social concerns, continuing district vertical alignment efforts, and developing programs to provide tutoring and increase family involvement with the school. This activity culminated with each small group sharing their ideas with the entire group.

Another discussion was about fine-tuning the seminar class and the CAP program, which have been in place for seven years. Seminar classes meet for one class period a week, and the time is used for club meetings, assemblies, tutoring or study time, and once a month for CAP. CAP is designed to provide information about high school enrollment, the college application program, and career options and culminates with enrollment conferences in which the CAP adviser, the student, and the parent develop schedules for the upcoming school year. Every student is assigned to a seminar class that remains with the same teacher throughout the students' three years at the high school.

The teachers unanimously agree that the CAP conferences are a strength of the program, but several recently had expressed concerns about the CAP curriculum and the seminar



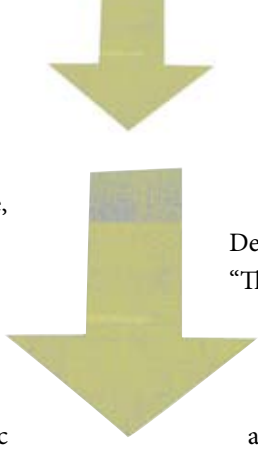
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Teachers share their concerns and work collaboratively to find solutions.

class. To clarify the concerns surrounding CAP and to gather suggestions for improvement, teachers were asked to share their concerns in their small groups. Each teacher wrote down at least one concern about the seminar class or CAP on an index card, and a recorder listed the issues on a flip chart. Once all the issues had been listed, the groups used the Pareto process and five-three-one voting to group the issues into prioritized categories. Teachers rated an issue a five if it was a major concern, a three if it was a moderate concern, and a one if it was a minor concern. Following this process, four categories rose to the top for further consideration, and teachers were given the opportunity to shift groups and choose one of the identified areas for which they would like to create an action plan.

The small groups were asked to use the PDSA diagram to create an action plan to address their concern. A strength of the PDSA process is the requirement that teachers consider both what needs to be done and how what is done will be measured to determine whether the changes have been successful. The teachers identified a number of new procedures that could make the seminars and the CAP program more effective and also suggested revisions to the current curriculum. In addition, they proposed ideas for creating a sense of identity for individual seminars and for making the seminar class more personal for students.

In addition to the predetermined topics, the working lunch during which teachers record their issues, concerns, and suggestions on butcher paper tablecloths has remained a high-



light of each summer advance. After the first advance, however, the principals developed a new process to more fully explore the concerns raised. Following lunch, the tablecloths are collected and concerns are categorized into various areas and written on flip charts. The teachers are then asked to participate in a “carousel” activity. After reading the topic on their table, the teachers write down their concerns about the topic on yellow sticky notes. Then as music plays, the teachers rotate to the other tables, adding their concerns to the notes for each of the topics.

When the teachers have finished this part of the activity, a spokesperson for each table shares the concerns surrounding each issue. The teachers then repeat the activity to record suggestions for how to address the concerns on green sticky notes. Finally, the teachers are asked to return to their original table and subject the suggestions for their issue to the PAL (practical, affordable, legal) test. To conclude the process, the teachers share all the solutions that have passed the PAL test. At the end of the activity, the administrative team not only has a clear idea of the teachers’ concerns but also a number of suggestions for addressing them.

Mike Leavitt (2005), the secretary of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, writes, “There is a time in the life of every problem when it is big enough to see and small enough to solve.” Through shared decision making, the Jenks administrators trust that they and their teachers will always be better able to see and seize opportunities to solve problems while they are manageable. Following each summer advance, the principals face another challenge: ensuring that the most recent advance bears as much positive fruit for change the first one. Developing a climate of collaborative leadership is never easy, but the team is committed to continuing these efforts toward shared decision making. **PL**

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