Decision Making: Who Decides, and How?

**Summary of Findings:**

Shared decision making is a strategy associated with school-based management reforms promoted in the 1980s and 90s. Advocates of teacher empowerment and school restructuring urged principals to delegate leadership responsibilities, develop collaborative decision making processes, and share authority. Although the focus of reform has shifted from management processes to accountability for student learning outcomes in the last decade, the expectation that principals will involve others in decision making is still strong and often mandated.

Conley (1991) reported that there is a consensus among researchers regarding the importance of teacher participation in decision making as a way to improve efficiency and organizational effectiveness. However, there is less agreement in the literature about what principals and teachers mean by participation. One end of the continuum defines participation as teachers collaborating with their peers to address instructional problems and other issues at the classroom level. At the other end of the continuum teachers are involved in decision making related to managerial concerns and policy at the school and district levels.

Some benefits of participation cited in the literature include higher quality decisions (because different perspectives are considered), increased job satisfaction and morale, a heightened sense of empowerment, “ownership” of school goals, and improved student performance resulting from better coordination of the work of individual teachers. The time it takes to make group decisions is one downside of participation. Other problems involve group dynamics that can negatively impact the quality of decisions. Examples of these dynamics include such things as “group think” and polarization.

Although group participation in decision making is often beneficial, it is not always practical, nor is it warranted in some situations. Hoy and Tarter (2008) developed a situational model to help administrators decide when to make decisions by themselves and when it is best to involve others in the process. The guidance below draws heavily on their work.

**Should I involve others?**

Generally, if people have a stake in a decision they should be involved in the decision making process in some way. Arguably most decisions in schools ultimately impact everyone but the key here is determining the degree to which teachers and support staff care about the outcome. If they are indifferent, participation is not likely to be beneficial.

Decisions about which security system to purchase for use in the school, or whether the cafeteria will require expansion to accommodate a projected increase in student enrollment are important to a principal but unlikely to generate much interest on the part of teachers. However, cafeteria workers and security staff would probably be concerned about these decisions. If a principal is thinking about making modifications to student attendance procedures, school grading policies, or instructional practices, teachers would be concerned about the outcome but other staff would likely be indifferent.

Another factor to consider is how much other people can contribute to the quality of a decision. An individual or a group with some level of expertise related to the issue or problem being addressed can contribute to analysis and the generation of plausible solutions. People with little knowledge or expertise in the area can be enthusiastic participants but are less likely to make a significant contribution to decision quality.

According to the Hoy-Tarter model, if staff have a stake in the outcome and they have some level of expertise related to the problem at hand, they should be involved in the decision. If staff are indifferent to the outcome and have no expertise in the problem area, the principal should make a unilateral decision. In situations where people are concerned about the outcome of a decision but lack expertise, or have expertise but are indifferent to the outcome, limited participation is appropriate.
To what degree should people be involved?

The extent to which a principal trusts staff members to make decisions that are in the best interest of students is a factor in the degree of participation equation according to Hoy and Tarter. Extensive involvement in the decision making process is warranted when people have a stake in the outcome, can contribute some level of expertise, and they are likely to make decisions that will benefit students. In situations where staff have both a stake and expertise but the principal is concerned about potential benefits to students, involvement should be limited while the principal concentrates on building trust.

If staff have a stake in the outcome of a decision but have little expertise in the problem area, they should be given an opportunity to provide input to the decision while the principal works to increase their knowledge about the problem. Trust is not an issue in these situations because the principal makes the final decision.

There are times when individuals or groups have expert knowledge on a topic but are indifferent to decisions being considered in that problem area. An example might be the technical knowledge about various accounting software options held by teachers in the office technology department that might be helpful to a principal making a decision about which program to purchase for use in managing the high school budget. In this situation, the principal might decide to consult with the teachers, thus providing an opportunity for their limited participation in the decision process.

How should the decision making process be structured?

In situations that call for extensive involvement, principals need to determine if group decisions should be made by consensus or majority vote. There are advantages and disadvantages to both approaches as outlined in this issue of Reform Talk. When limited participation is in order, the principal reserves the right to make the final decision and the participation process is structured so that individuals or groups can provide various degrees of input or consultation.

What about delegation?

Delegating decision making authority to assistants and other staff is common management practice. Since delegation is a form of shared responsibility, principals must still ensure that issues of participation are appropriately addressed. Effective delegation requires that principals make sure assistants know what is expected and desired, have access to information they will need, and have the technical knowledge and interpersonal skills to accomplish the task. Thus, delegation is both a way to increase efficiency (when tasks are relatively straightforward and procedures are known) and a method for personnel development (when situations are more ambiguous).

Online Resources:

The Art of Delegation
This article describes delegation from a personnel development perspective and emphasizes what a manager needs to do to ensure that the person who is asked to assume responsibility for a task is likely to succeed.
http://www.see.ed.ac.uk/~gerard/Management/art5.html

Decision Making for School Leaders
This article from the United Kingdom provides an overview of numerous topics related to decision making in schools.
http://www.longman.co.uk/profdevp/decision.htm

Delegation
This site is a brief management tutorial about delegation that includes a decision tree to help determine if you should delegate at all, and if so, whether to involve an individual or team, and if you should participate in the process.
Empowering Teams for Decision Making
The article (page 45 in this journal issue) provides a current perspective on team decision making where school management is
decentralized.

Group Decision Making
Specific techniques used by groups to make decisions are outlined in this article along with a discussion about the advantages and
disadvantages of group participation in the decision making process.

The Hoy-Tarter Simplified Model
A PowerPoint presentation developed by Wayne Hoy that highlights this approach to the decision making process. (Cancel any
messages requesting user name and password that appear while this file is downloading.)
http://www.coe.ohio-state.edu/whoy/Shared%20Decision%20Making%20model.ppt

Shared Decision Making
This ERIC brief on the topic of shared decision making addresses advantages and disadvantages of this approach, outlines the role
of the principal, and identifies the factors required for successful implementation.

Vroom-Yetton-Jargo Nomative Decision Model
A classic model for decision making using a decision tree to determine the appropriate level of participation is summarized in this
article. This model is more complex than the Hoy and Tarter approach and uses different decision trees based on whether
individuals or groups are involved.
http://faculty.css.edu/dswenson/web/LEAD/vroom-yetton.html

References:
Conley, S. (1991). Review of research on teacher participation in school decision making. Review of research in education 17,


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http://www.principalspartnership.com/

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