

Spring 1996 Newsletter
Professional Development
Volume 4, Number 1



School Group Effectiveness and Productivity

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Organizational development (OD) is a process of planned change designed to help organizations achieve their goals and to operate more effectively (French, Bell, and Zawacki 1989). Schools use organizational consultation less than any other type of organization, despite mounting evidence that OD can be of value in school improvement efforts (Runkel and Schmuck 1987; Wheelan and Conway 1991). Increased collaboration, improved problem solving and decision making, new curricula, and positive changes in student attendance, behavior, and achievement are some of the results reported in the literature.

The term "organization" is typically defined as a cluster of groups (Caplow 1983; Ivancevich and Matteson 1987; Schein 1980). In the majority of school-based OD interventions, groups of faculty, administrators, and community members in various combinations are targeted. School effectiveness depends on their ability to work together cooperatively and productively, and in turn, their group effectiveness is directly related to educational outcomes such as attendance, behavior, achievement, and parental involvement.



The idea that group effectiveness is related to organizational productivity is based on years of research and practice. The development of effective work groups or teams is now understood to be an essential component of organizational success (Peters 1988; Reich 1987; Sundstrom, Demeuse, and Futrell 1990).

While there is strong evidence that faculty group effectiveness is related to organizational productivity, educational researchers have paid little attention to this area of inquiry in their attempts to describe the variables associated with school effectiveness. In fact, a recent meta-analysis of the educational research literature suggested that variables which could be construed as by-products of faculty groups-school culture, collaborative teacher/administrator decision making, and school-wide policy and organization-have little influence on student outcomes, particularly on student learning (Wang, Haertel, and Walberg 1993).

This finding raises a number of questions: Do factors such as team effectiveness and organizational culture, found to be so influential in predicting productivity in other types of organizations, have no influence on school outcomes? Are the goals and organizational characteristics of schools so unique that group and organizational theory, research, and practice are wholly irrelevant? Is productivity in the school environment primarily the result of individual teacher effectiveness, student characteristics, and parental support, as the study suggests? Is it possible that the morale and productivity of the faculty group has no influence on educational outcomes? Is a school such a singular organization that factors that affect all other organizations do not apply to it?

Any teacher, administrator, or involved parent would answer "no" to these questions. In fact, anyone who has sat on a committee that was unable to make decisions, or where turf battles seemed more important than educational goals, would agree that the effectiveness of school groups influences educational outcomes significantly. The following example illustrates some of these points.

A Curriculum Committee

Nine middle-school teachers were assigned to a curriculum committee responsible for creating and implementing an integrative curriculum prototype. After meeting for over a year, the team had managed, with difficulty, to pilot its first integrative unit. However, work on the second unit was not proceeding well. Committee members reported that meetings were fraught with disagreements. An unwillingness to collaborate, ineffectual decision-making procedures, and frequent attacks on the group leader also were reported. The school principal sought consultant services to help the group get back on track.

The consultant employed the Group Development Questionnaire (Wheelan and Hochberger 1996) to assess the committee's functioning. The Group Development Questionnaire (GDQ) is designed to assess the developmental level of work groups.

Research has uncovered considerable evidence that groups go through several phases (Tuckman 1965; Tuckman and Jensen 1977; Wheelan 1990; Wheelan 1994). The first phase is a period of dependency and inclusion. In this phase, group members are concerned with personal safety and need dependable and directive leadership. In the second phase, counter dependency and fight, members of the group begin to challenge the leader's authority and to openly disagree with one another.

If these disagreements are successfully resolved, the group enters the trust and structure phase, which is characterized by increased group cohesion and cooperation. During this phase, members begin to organize and plan ways to achieve their goals and objectives in earnest. A work phase—a period of intense focus on goal achievement—follows. Finally, in groups that are not ongoing, a termination phase occurs (Wheelan 1994).

While this is the normal course of group development, groups can get stuck in or revert to earlier developmental stages as a result of internal or external factors that inhibit their progress. Such a state of affairs negatively affects group productivity. From a practical perspective, then, methods are needed to assess the developmental level of groups and generate intervention strategies to facilitate group development. The GDQ is one such method.

The GDQ profile of the curriculum committee suggested that it was stuck in the second phase of group development, counter dependency and fight. Disagreements, negative feelings, lack of support for the leader, and a lack of organization and focus were evident. The group rated its effectiveness at 71 percent out of a possible 100, and rated its productivity 2.2 on a scale of one to four.

Clearly, the dynamics of the group were negatively affecting its ability to generate a quality integrated curriculum. It was equally clear that students were being affected by the delay and would be affected by the fact that the curriculum, should it be developed, would probably not be of high quality.

Using information gained from the assessment, the consultant developed a plan to help the group improve its effectiveness. The plan included educating the members about group development, providing them with information about their current developmental profile, and facilitating a process in which they planned ways to improve the group's functioning. This last step is crucial, since change is accomplished by member efforts, not by outside intervention.

Tips for Improving Group Effectiveness

Even without the help of a consultant, there are many things that school-based groups can do to improve or sustain effectiveness and productivity:

1. **Learn about groups and how they operate.** Group effectiveness is an excellent topic for an in-service session.
2. **Discuss group functioning each time the group meets.** A brief discussion about how the group is functioning should be on the agenda of every meeting.
3. **Ask the group for feedback.** Periodically, ask group members for anonymous written feedback about group functioning and how it can be improved.
4. **Take group member's feedback seriously.** Devote a portion of the next meeting to planning ways to improve the group.
5. **Keep the focus on the group.** The biggest mistake that groups make is to place the blame for group problems on the leader, one member, or a subset of members. If group issues become personal issues, it is difficult to resolve them without the help of a consultant. When individuals feel attacked, counterattacks and cycles of revenge and retribution typically follow.
6. **Keep groups small.** Research suggests that groups of less than ten are more cohesive, organized, and productive. If a large group cannot be reduced in size, design meetings to include time for subgroup discussions. For example, if there are 20 people at a meeting, create five groups of four members each. These subgroups discuss an issue for 20 minutes and report the highlights of their discussion to the entire group. Using this format ensures that everyone contributes to the discussion.
7. **Spend time planning how goals and tasks will be accomplished.** Don't jump too quickly into working on goals and tasks. Groups that spend time planning how they will work together are more productive in the end.
8. **Allow the group enough time to accomplish its goals and tasks.** The time frame should take into consideration the fact that groups need time to develop and coalesce. It takes about six months for groups to mature.
9. **Do not assume that implementing these suggestions is the responsibility of the group's leader.** Group effectiveness is a joint responsibility: every member plays a role in the group's success or failure.
10. **If these suggestions don't improve things, get the help of a good consultant.** Remember, stuck groups are not bad groups and they don't contain bad or incompetent people. If you get stuck in a doorway, sometimes it takes a push from someone else to get unstuck. The same is true for groups.



A Call for Collaboration

The authors are seeking school collaborators for a research project that will explore the relationship between the effectiveness of school groups and educational outcomes. Collaboration might include training a cadre of school-based people in the group assessment and intervention strategies that we use; they, in turn, could provide training and consultation to school groups who request it. Perhaps we can find grant funds to cover the initial costs.

The assessment and intervention data collected will eventually provide a large enough data base to study the relationship between school group effectiveness and educational outcomes in detail. If your school may be interested in collaborating with us, please contact Dr. Susan Wheelan, Temple University, Ritter Annex 447, Philadelphia, PA, 19122; telephone: (215) 848-1678

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RESEARCH/*Practice* is a publication of the Center for Applied Research and Educational Improvement, College of Education, 275 Peik Hall, University of Minnesota, 159 Pillsbury Drive Southeast, Minneapolis, Minnesota 55455-0208 (612) 624-0300.

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