



# WCER Highlights

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## Schools need parental involvement



Empowering parents to have some say in their children's education is essential in a democratic society.

Parents' involvement in their children's schools is not always harmonious, nor does it always give parents a substantial voice in policy issues. But a recent study conducted by the Center on Organization and Restructuring of Schools concludes that parental involvement in restructuring schools is helpful, and that in some cases conflict may even be necessary for the school's health and vitality.

When UW–Madison Education Professor Gary Wehlage and doctoral candidate Eric Osthoff analyzed parental involvement in 24 restructuring elementary, middle, and high schools, they found a variety in not only the *amount* of parental participation but also in the *quality* of participation. Of particular interest were schools in which parents were highly involved. In these schools, Wehlage and Osthoff found three kinds of substantial parental participation and decision making:

1. organizational policy (decisions about the school calendar, hiring new staff, and availability of after-school care);
2. pedagogy, curriculum, and assessment (helping create particular courses and new approaches to student assessment); and
3. technical support for school activities (helping teachers with classroom activities, raising funds for the school, or tutoring).

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Some conflict may be necessary for a school's health and vitality, says Wehlage.

Seven of the 24 schools stood apart from the others as having the highest participation, and in all seven schools, parents had either high or medium involvement in pedagogy, curriculum, and assessment, all substantive roles. In general, educators considered a high level of parental involvement a good thing, and parents in these seven

schools had a fairly powerful influence. Six of the seven schools had high parental participation in key organizational decisions.

Parents at only four of the 24 schools studied rated high in providing technical support (e.g., assisting teachers with classroom activities, raising money for the school, chaperoning field trips). Parents had low participation in key organizational decisions in 12 of the schools studied, and 14 schools had low parental involvement in decisions affecting curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment. An absence of high parental involvement in decisions about school organization and pedagogy may have been expected, Wehlage says, but the finding that participation was also low in technical support was somewhat surprising, in view of the commonly held value of parental participation.

In many schools, parents' participation was largely symbolic, rather than substantive, meaning that parents in these schools exercised little if any influence over decisions. In one school, for example, two parents served on a shared decision-making council, but their attendance was sporadic because meetings were held at times inconvenient for them, they received little information from the school about issues, and they had no input into the school's agenda.

Yet Wehlage says symbolic participation was important for some parents when it provided them with an increased sense of ownership of the school and helped them maintain communication with the school. More than two-thirds of the 24 schools studied had either a medium or high level of symbolic parental involvement.

In two case studies summarized here, parents participated at a high level. These two schools are

highlighted because they show how substantial parental involvement can benefit schools and students in different ways, and whether or not that involvement is usually harmonious and pleasant. Lamar School represents an ideal kind of parental participation—parents played a major role in supporting the school's educational program. Parents at Falls River Elementary were also highly involved. They were unhappy with students' low achievement and formed a collective effort to confront the school in a struggle over school policy and practices.

## High participation and harmony: Lamar School

In Lamar Elementary, parents and teachers had a common vision of good teaching practices and the outcomes that children should achieve.

Located in a large Western city, Lamar was a school of choice founded in 1977 by a group of white middle-class parents and a small group of teachers. Lamar was proposed as an integrated school at a time when the district was facing court-ordered desegregation. The founders reserved 60% of the school's enrollment for non-Anglo students. Recent school literature describes student diversity and multicultural awareness as key components of its educational program.

The consensus among teachers and parents over Lamar's vision and practices was important to the life of the school. From its inception as a school of choice, the school was governed by a council of parents and teachers, with parents holding the majority. In addition to governance, parents played a major role in fund raising and providing volunteers to support school activities. Veteran parents offered orientation sessions for new parents about how to participate at Lamar. The principal claimed 100% parent attendance at parent-teacher conferences, possibly an exaggeration, says Wehlage, but teachers testified that the figure might run as high as 90%.

Probably the most important form of parental participation was fund raising. A nonprofit corporation, Friends of Lamar, was organized by parents to raise money to support instructional programs beyond the district's allocations. It was estimated that fund raising contributed about \$85,000 a year to enrichment programs in art, music, and horticulture. These enrichment programs, staffed by full-time aides, were considered especially desirable by parents.

Parents operated "phone trees" to promote volunteering and attendance at school functions, and transportation and child care were provided.



Luncheons were held to “socialize” new parents about the mores of participating in school activities. New parents were routinely introduced at meetings. Special efforts were made to get new parents nominated for committees. Elections to the Board of Governance were based on geographical districts in an effort to ensure that broad representation occurred.

Lamar had high parental involvement, both individual and collective. Collective parent participation was most clearly visible in fund raising, which was pursued vigorously because of the strong belief in the school’s vision and success with children.

### High participation and conflict: Falls River School

Two of the seven “high involvement” schools were characterized by a high degree of conflict between parents and school staff. In these schools parents did not understand, or actually disagreed with, a school’s practices and the vision from which they were derived.

Parental criticism arose at Falls River Elementary over the low level of children’s academic achievement, especially in reading. Parents mounted an effort to make the school more responsive to their concerns about students’ lack of academic success. Osthoff says criticism was aimed particularly at teachers’ use of whole language instruction, and the issue of phonics versus whole language instruction became a focus of controversy. A “reading war” developed between parents who favored phonics and those favoring whole language instruction. The parents eventually asked the school to bring back phonics and to allow parents to choose which method their children would receive.

Parents went on to enlist the help of powerful neighborhood associations to represent racial and ethnic groups in challenging the school. Conflict between the school and the neighborhood associations became acrimonious, and the controversy reached the point that the associations decided to dismiss the principal. In the meantime, the neighborhood associations were trying to gain control of the Parent Teacher Association (PTA) because parents considered control of the PTA a more powerful lever of influence than the single seat on the School Restructuring Committee, the formal body that provided for shared decision making.

A new principal was hired. The parents seemed willing to give the new principal a fresh chance at improving children’s reading, and the

new principal was much more receptive to parents’ concerns about the need to improve reading achievement.

Falls River Elementary is an example of parents trying to hold the school accountable for student achievement. Whatever the merits of their attack on whole language instruction, parents expected the school to respond to their concerns about low student achievement. When it appeared that the principal, a high-profile person in the community, was unresponsive, parents mobilized and exerted their political power.



The issue of phonics versus whole language instruction became a focus of controversy, says Osthoff.

### Empowering parents

The CORS study of 24 restructuring schools indicates that in restructuring schools there can be many different forms of parent participation. Restructuring that included shared decision making may result in parents’ taking an active role in important decisions, but it may not. Some schools and parents were satisfied if parents played a largely symbolic role. Almost all the schools studied encouraged, but with varying degrees of success, individual parental participation to support particular aspects of instruction.

All seven of the “high involvement” schools were schools of choice or magnet schools, which emphasized parental participation and succeeded in building strong bonds with them. But an element of choice and high involvement did not guarantee support for the schools, as seen in the case of Falls River. In this case high parental involvement was a response to low academic achievement, and it focused on language instruction. No shared understanding developed, many parents were unhappy, and bitter disagreement broke out.

At times, Wehlage says, parents can be misguided in their attempts to influence school practices. Still, empowering parents to have some say in the education of their children seems essential in a democratic society. Further, some conflict may be necessary for institutional health and vitality.

For more information, contact Wehlage at (608) 263-4769.

## Excellent teachers rewarded

Excellent teaching consists of much more than surviving many years of classrooms and stacking up lots of continuing education units. But the traditional way of measuring teachers' contributions to their schools has emphasized exactly those two things. With an objective standard of measuring excellence in teaching, however, the best teachers would be empowered, and students would be the big winners.

In a series of meetings spanning two years, 30 representatives from the American Federation of Teachers, the National Education Association, the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, and other groups are hammering out innovative compensation plans to better measure how well teachers advance their school's organizational objectives.

University of Wisconsin–Madison Education Professors Carolyn Kelley and Allan Odden lead the working group. Project Director Kelley explains the need for redesigning teacher compensation. "We need a standard by which excellent teaching can be identified and rewarded, across all grade levels, and in all schools. So our working group is identifying the skills that schools as organizations need." They include producing high levels of student achievement and participating in shared decision making for curriculum, instruction, and school management. Funding for the project is provided by the Pew Charitable Trusts.

### The need

Since the 1950s, various states and school districts have tried to compensate teachers with "merit pay" systems, which have generally proved disappoint-

ing. Merit pay tends to reward individual performance while overlooking, and sometimes discouraging, team or organizational performance, says Kelley. It also tends to create a negative environment in which teachers compete against each other for a limited number of merit awards, rather than creating an opportunity for all teachers to be rewarded for proficiency as measured against an objective set of criteria.

The search for a better method of compensation comes as school reform leads to more high standards/high involvement schools. High standards/high involvement schools strive for high academic achievement for all students, rather than being satisfied with providing a rich curriculum. These schools create intense demands for teachers' professional expertise. Teacher teams, rather than administrators, take on more responsibility for leadership, and teachers assume a variety of new tasks such as counseling and developing curricula and budgets. The teacher's new role is increasingly complex.

Among the ideas being taken from compensation plans in private industry is "skill-based pay," in which workers acquire a set of skills, or skill blocks, that enable them to perform a collection of duties valued by the organization. Examples of skill blocks in schools might include new curriculum content and pedagogical practices, curriculum development, counseling, or budget development. Teachers who demonstrate competence in a particular skill block would receive a salary increase.

Skill-based pay plans are especially appropriate, Kelley says, when an organization wants to motivate its employees to acquire new skills that enable them to contribute more flexibly and

### Some organizations participating in the compensation study



Odden and Kelley seek a standard by which excellent teaching can be identified and rewarded.

American Federation of Teachers  
 National Education Association  
 National Board for Professional Teaching Standards  
 National Association of Secondary School Principals  
 National School Boards Association  
 National Association of Elementary School Principals  
 Council of Great City Schools  
 American Association of School Administrators  
 Council of Chief State School Officers  
 Education Commission of the States  
 National Association of State Boards of Education  
 National Conference of State Legislatures  
 National Governors' Association



While master teachers take on administrative responsibilities, they would remain responsible for the classroom.

broadly to the organization's purpose. In the education world, skill-based compensation can support emerging educational practices such as high standards curriculum frameworks, school-based management, systemic reform, and "houses" within schools, where teachers perform a much wider set of roles. As teachers move through a series of skill blocks, they are assigned combinations of tasks that use many of the skill blocks they have mastered.

Kelley explains that private-sector organizations using skill-based pay develop, on average, about ten skill blocks. Most skill-based pay plans give employees the option of learning all ten blocks, but in practice employees generally choose to master a subset of the skill blocks. Acquiring skill blocks takes a certain amount of money, school resources, and time: a teacher wishing to attain proficiency in a skill block could expect to invest a year or more. Each block will require a combination of on-the-job experience and training, and possibly some formal external education. Depending on the design of the particular program, a teacher might attain somewhere around ten skill blocks over a 10- to 20-year span.

Skill-based pay fits well into the world of education, Kelley says, because skill-based compensation plans can succeed while varying from school to school. Each school specifies different sets of skill blocks that reflect its instructional and organizational design. At the same time, specifying these skill blocks and the skills that comprise them cannot be completely idiosyncratic to a school. Some common skill areas must be kept across schools so that teachers can move between schools when desired. When a teacher moves to another school, the new school would be able to recognize his or her skills and weave them into the school's goals.

Common skill areas might be assessed by an external body, such as a state or national organiza-

tion. The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, for example, is developing assessments to identify expert teachers in specific subject matter and grade level areas. Many states and districts are considering providing additional compensation to National Board-certified teachers.

Compensation reform is already underway in a few places. Allan Odden, Carolyn Kelley, and the team are looking closely at compensation reform in Kentucky, in Douglas County, Colorado, and in Arizona's Flowing Wells District. When Flowing Wells made the transition to a skill-based pay plan, all of its new teachers participated.

Senior teachers, who had more vested in the older compensation system, could opt to participate or to remain in the old system.

The research team wants to take the best of the compensation reforms already in place and develop a plan or a set of principles that's acceptable and applicable across a variety of local contexts. A pilot compensation plan may be implemented in one or more districts within the next two years to provide more information about the design and applicability of skill-based pay to teacher compensation.

## Growing "master" teachers

Too often, teachers feel that rising in their profession requires them to leave the classroom

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## Setting an example

In Douglas County, Colorado, the traditional single-salary schedule has been replaced. Under the new plan, teachers no longer receive salary increases for years accumulated in the district. Instead, teachers rated "proficient" receive an annual increase, and those rated "outstanding" receive an increase and a bonus. Rather than being encouraged to compete against each other for a limited number of merit awards, individual teachers are compensated for performance as measured against an objective set of criteria. In addition, outstanding teacher bonuses and annual proficiency increases are provided to all teachers who meet the performance criteria. One of the criteria assesses teachers' ability to work collaboratively with one another.

Teachers are also compensated for group performance. Under the group performance awards, self-identified groups of teachers may propose projects with specific goals and receive bonuses for achievement of those project goals.

Teachers may also receive additional compensation for earning college credits, or for the demonstration of specific skills identified by the school district. In addition, the district provides each school with \$4.50 per student to be allocated as compensation for specific jobs such as team leader, mentor, coach, or club sponsor.

# Teachers build professional communities

By Sharon Kruse, Karen Seashore Louis and Anthony Bryk

The current school reform movement includes a strong emphasis on the “professionalization” of teachers’ work. Commonly stated themes include the creation of more stringent standards of entry into the teaching field, developing a national licensing system for more advanced teachers, and boosting pay and training opportunities in order to attract and retain skilled, committed practitioners.

While these reforms may be critical, researchers and education reformers shouldn’t focus solely on strategies for the development of individual professionals. Teaching, after all, does not begin and end in the classroom. At a minimum, a teacher’s experiences with other faculty members, as well as with the school’s leaders and organizational structure, will cause smiles or frustration. At maximum, these interactions can have a profound effect on the impact that a teacher has on his or her students.

Researchers and reformers can’t afford to overlook the impact of decisions and actions that teachers, working together in some type of sustained professional contact, take to improve school performance. This collective reflection, development of standards and expectations, and formulation of plans for action are major hallmarks of a well-developed professional community. In schools where professional community is strong, teachers enjoy much greater support from their colleagues and they feel more effective at their jobs.

What are some of the benefits that schools enjoy when they develop strong professional communities, and what conditions and resources make the development of those communities possible? Based on data collected from schools studied by the Center on Organization and Restructuring of Schools, we examine which resources and conditions seemed to be most critical to sparking and sustaining such development. Our analysis centers on the type of professional community that is firmly imbedded in the school—as opposed to communities fostered by professional networks and other organizations beyond the school—and that uses the school’s involvement in reform as the basis for teacher commitment and interaction.

## Empowerment and beyond

The development of professional community in a particular school, or the lack of it, can have implications for other reform efforts. We have seen, for example, that merely granting teachers greater responsibility for

*[Editor’s note: As the work of Allan Odden and Carolyn Kelley (Page 4) aims to provide more meaningful compensation for outstanding work done by our best professional teachers, these researchers delineate the conditions under which the best professional work can be conducted.]*

decisions that affect their jobs, such as school policy and curriculum, doesn’t guarantee that instruction will improve. Study of schools where these powers have been enhanced suggests that these new responsibilities, by themselves, don’t always translate into an increased focus on teacher professional competence. Teachers may resist performing the extra administrative work that empowerment efforts bring. Or they may resist involvement in their school’s decision-making process because their visions of professional conduct don’t include an emphasis on issues of power and control. In such cases, the mechanisms put in place to empower teachers can end up augmenting a principal’s control of the school instead, or the mechanisms fail to focus on essential issues that affect classroom work.

A school-based professional community can offer support and motivation to teachers as they work to overcome the tight resources, isolation, time constraints and other obstacles they commonly encounter in today’s schools. Within a strong professional community, for example, teachers can work collectively to set and enforce standards of instruction and learning. Instead of obeying bureaucratic rules, faculty members act according to teachers’ norms of professional behavior and duty, which have been shown to be far stronger social control mechanisms. There is room within the school structure for principled disagreement and discussion on different issues, which can add to teachers’ professional growth. In schools where professional community is strong, teachers work together more effectively and put more effort into creating and sustaining opportunities for student learning.

## Structural conditions

Several conditions must be met in order for a professional community to develop and grow within a school. These can be grouped in two categories: structural conditions and human/social resources. The necessary structural conditions include:

**Time to meet and talk**—This is essential to building a professional community. There must be a formal process that provides substantial and regularly scheduled blocks of time for educators to conduct an ongoing self-examination and self-renewal. There should be almost daily opportunities for discussion among small groups with common interests, such as academic departments or grade levels, as well as regular meetings among the entire faculty.

**Physical proximity**—Physical isolation can be a real barrier to building professional community, especially in larger schools. In schools where classrooms are close together and “open door” policies are supported, teachers find it easier to work together and to gain new insight into their own practices. In such set-



tings, it's much easier for teachers to continually observe each other and discuss what they see.

**Interdependent teaching roles**—A professional community requires recurring formal situations in which teachers work together. Examples include team teaching and integrated lesson design. The team provides a lasting, substantial structure for sustained communication based in shared goals. As teachers work together, they develop a sense of community and a greater sense of effectiveness.

**Communication structures**—The development of a professional community requires structures and opportunities that encourage an exchange of ideas, both within and across such organizational units as teams, grade levels and subject departments. Regular meetings or an electronic mail system, for example, can provide a network for the exchange of ideas on instruction, curriculum, assessment and other professional issues.

**Teacher empowerment and school autonomy**—Strong professional communities require high levels of teacher autonomy. Teachers with more discretion to make decisions regarding their work feel more responsible for how well their students learn. The flexibility allows them to respond to the specific needs they see. Instead of being guided by rules, they are guided by the norms and beliefs of the professional community.

## Social and human resources

As important as they are, structural conditions aren't enough by themselves. Social and human resources also enhance professional community. They include:

**Openness to improvement**—There must be support within the school for teachers who want to take risks and try new techniques and ideas. Otherwise, professional community will not occur. Teachers must feel they are supported in their efforts to learn more about their profession and to make decisions based on that new knowledge.

**Trust and respect**—Teachers must feel they are honored for their expertise—within the school as well as within the district, the parent community and other significant groups. Respect, trust and a shared sense of loyalty build professional commitment and the kind of cooperation required for collaboration and shared decision making.

**Cognitive and skill base**—Professional community is based on effective teaching, which in turn is based on an expertise in the knowledge and skills of teaching. Structures such as peer counseling, along with help from external sources, can spread that expertise among faculty members, and can thereby help marginal or ineffective teachers improve.

**Supportive leadership**—Whether a school is led by a principal or a site-based team, that leadership must be a prime "keeper" of the school's vision. Leadership needs to keep the school focused on professional community. Communications from the school's



**Building and maintaining professional communities requires mechanisms for passing along the school's vision to new teachers.**

leadership will set the tone for the school. For example, if a principal contacts the faculty only on matters of organizational procedure, teachers will see these as the school's major concern and may give less attention to teaching and learning.

**Socialization**—Building and maintaining professional community requires that, as schools recruit and socialize new teachers, there are mechanisms for passing along the school's vision to the newcomers. Staff must impart a sense that new teachers are an important and productive part of a meaningful collective. School culture must encourage some behaviors and discourage others, in a daily process aimed at working toward the school mission.

## Structure or human resources: What's more important?

Our research suggests that human resources—such as openness to improvement, trust and respect, teachers having knowledge and skills, supportive leadership and socialization—are more critical to the development of professional community than structural conditions.

Structural conditions—including time to meet and talk, physical proximity, interdependent teaching roles, communication structures and teacher empowerment—are important, to be sure. But if a school lacks the social and human resources to make use of those structural conditions, it's unlikely that a strong professional community can develop.

This finding adds weight to the argument that the structural elements of restructuring have received too much emphasis in many reform proposals, while the need to improve the culture, climate and interpersonal relationships in schools have received too little attention. This points to a missing element in the movement toward systemwide education reform and

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## WCER HIGHLIGHTS STAFF

Director Andrew Porter  
Editor Paul Baker  
Editorial Consultant Deborah Stewart  
Artist Nancy Rinehart  
Office of University Publications

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### Compensation *continued from page 5*

and become administrators, so that students lose some of their best and brightest teachers. The new compensation model will make it financially attractive for teachers to stay in the classroom over the course of their careers, and to become "master" teachers. While "master" teachers may take on additional leadership responsibilities, they would remain responsible for the classroom.

Teacher organizations endorse the idea of rewarding teachers for developing their skills and becoming better teachers, as long as the assessment is objective. With an objective standard of measuring excellence in teaching, the best teachers will be empowered, and students will be the big winners. Odden and Kelley are helping to move schools toward that next stage of development.

For more information, contact Kelley at (608) 263–3614.

### Teachers' community *continued from page 7*

increased professionalization of teaching: the development of schools as healthy, professionally sustaining environments in which teachers are encouraged to do their best job.

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*Sharon Kruse is completing her doctorate in educational policy and administration at the University of Minnesota. She works on longitudinal case studies of school restructuring and teachers' work for the Center on Organization and Restructuring of Schools. Karen Seashore Louis chairs the Department of Educational Policy and Administration at the University of Minnesota. She is the principal investigator for the professional life of teachers division of the Center's school restructuring study. Anthony Bryk is a professor of education at the University of Chicago. He is a principal investigator with the Center's school restructuring study.*

For more information, contact the Center at (608) 263–1757.

Wisconsin Center for Education Research  
School of Education  
University of Wisconsin–Madison  
1025 West Johnson Street  
Madison, WI 53706

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