

## Principals' Perceptions of Community and Staff Involvement in Shared Decision Making

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*Our study assessed Maine principals' perceptions of the present status of shared decision making in their schools and their view of the ideal level of participation of staff and community members. In addition, principals' ideal level of involvement was examined by gender and grade level. The results show that principals desire greater involvement of both these groups than actually exists.*

Shared decision making has become a major focus of many school restructuring endeavors (Buckley & Westerberg, 1990; Combs, 1989; Kessler, 1992; Lieberman, 1989). State governing bodies and local school boards are advocating shared decision making as a major component of site-based management (Malen, Ogawa, & Kranz, 1992). Maine—a rural state with only one school district considered to be nonrural—is no exception. In 1992, for example, the Maine Coalition for Excellence in Education, a task force of state education, business, legislative and community leaders, recommended significant changes in public education including increased collaboration among teachers, administrators, parents, and community members.

The types and level of involvement of parent and community members in schools have changed over time. Initially, parents were expected to enroll their children in schools, leave educational decisions to the experts, and comply with the those decisions. During the 1960s and early 1970s, the child-rearing environments in economically disadvantaged families resulted in fewer opportunities for children as compared to middle- and upper-class homes (Turnball & Turnball, 1990). Programs such as Head Start offered parent training skills for disadvantaged families and focused on teaching parents to be better teachers of their children. Similar approaches were used in working with families of children with exceptionalities. During this period, parents became more involved and acted as agents for facilitating child progress and achievement. The role of parents in educational decision making was officially established with the Education of the Handicapped Act (EHA) in 1975. This act contains numerous requirements granting

parents of children with disabilities decision-making rights. As a result, the way schools viewed parental involvement dramatically changed.

Appropriate roles for parents and community members have continued to receive attention from school reformers with the advent of site-based management models. Site-based management assumes that the school is the primary decision-making unit, that the addition of participants broadens the base of ownership of changes, and, when successful, results in more collaborative planning and decision making. As school principals accommodate to these changes, staff members, parents, and the community become active partners in defining needs, missions, processes and outcomes (David, 1989).

Development of a shared commitment to core values is often stressed in discussions about leadership for tomorrow's schools. Patterson (1993) identified openness to participation as the first of these values and suggested that organizations must change from valuing employees who listen to what the leader tells them to valuing employees who participate in discussions and decisions affecting them. Principals judged to be effective have been found to share power and responsibility with others (Leithwood & Jantzi, 1990). Participation acknowledges the importance of stake holders being involved in problem solving (Hallinger, Leithwood, & Murphy, 1993). It stands to reason that principals who believe and engage in shared decision making are committed to participation.

There are other factors that may contribute to this value. Loden (1985) stresses that, as compared to the traditional masculine model of leadership, feminine leadership emphasizes shared accountability and cooperation. This type of leader, whether male or female, tends to distribute the leadership function throughout the group or staff. Feminine leaders view themselves at the center rather than the top (Loden, 1985). "Female principals operate in close contact with the teachers, students, and parents of their schools, while male principals spend less time in direct contact with teachers and students" (Lee, Smith, & Cioci, 1993, p. 157).

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Also, according to McGrath, women principals tend to possess more expert teaching information than men because they have more teaching experience (1992).

Another factor is that not all school settings and expectations are the same. Some observed differences are related to grade level. Secondary schools are traditionally structured as if the work can be organized independently into different functions or subjects. As a result, teachers operate in relative isolation from each other, thus minimizing coordination (Mohrman, Lawler, & Mohrman, 1992). The high school staff culture and its relationship to successful implementation of shared decision making has not yet been thoroughly explored (Akin, 1991). At the same time, the middle school philosophy supports collaboration and teaming. "The nature of the middle school teachers' role demands participative leadership" (Lindle, 1992, p. 27). Effective middle schools provide for the transition between elementary and high school education. In order to address these needs, most agree that the total school staff must function as a team (Lyons, 1994). Elementary schools vary from teaching in very isolated classrooms to schools where teacher teams and principals facilitate and support individuals (O'Neil, 1994).

Community involvement is closely aligned with the middle school philosophy. "Some would go so far as to say that middle school educators recognized and implemented shared decision making before it became popularized with recent emphasis on quality schools, school improvement, and similar models" (George & Shewey, 1994; p 94). It appears that educators have changed their perception of parent and community involvement. Where it formerly was "we are the experts; leave your children in our hands," it is coming to be, "join us in designing and delivering your children's education."

The purpose of the present study was to determine the extent to which Maine principals perceive current involvement of school staff and community members in decision making, their perceptions of an ideal level of involvement, and whether there are grade level or gender differences in perceived level of current and ideal involvement.

## Method

### *Respondents*

In the Spring of 1993, we sent a survey about the present and ideal involvement in decision making of staff and community members to each school in Maine ( $N = 712$ ); 217 principals responded. The respondents included: 72 senior high principals (15 females [20.8%], 57 males [79.2%]); 31 middle school principals (11 females [35.5%], 20 males [64.5%]); 114 elementary principals (52 females [45.6%], 62 males [54.5%]). This compares to state breakdowns of 15.9% female and 84.1% male high school prin-

cipals and 41.4% female and 58.9% male elementary school principals.

### *Instrument*

The survey was designed to assess decision making in four basic areas: (a) mission, goals, and objectives; (b) curriculum; (c) communication; and (d) students. These areas were selected as ones in which community members and staff would have vested interests. For this study, the items were intended to sample potential areas of shared decision making; they were not meant to be exhaustive. For these types of decisions, we know that teachers desire a high degree of involvement (Conway, 1984; Perry, Brown, & McIntire, 1994). Each of these areas was assessed by two items on the survey. The areas address the functions related to establishing goals at the system and building level; curriculum, including content and assessment; internal and external communication; and student life centered on program of study and assessment of progress. (The survey appears in the appendix.)

## Results

### *Current and Ideal Involvement*

Table 1 presents the mean rating for both current and ideal involvement of staff and community members. Overall, principals perceived their staff as moderately to highly involved in current decision making (with means ranging from 3.73 to 4.65 on a 5-point scale). In general, principals perceived that community members' opinions were sought (means ranged from 2.24 to 3.02), but they were not necessarily involved in current decision making. Differences between current and ideal ratings for staff on all 8 items were statistically significant. Differences between the current and ideal ratings for community involvement were also statistically significant, and the difference between the ideal levels of staff and community were statistically significant in all cases, with staff involvement more desirable.

### *Ideal Involvement by Principal Gender and School Level*

A series of one-way analyses of variance (ANOVA) were conducted to assess gender and school level differences in ideal involvement. Significant grade level effects were evaluated using the Bonferroni post hoc test to assess pairwise differences.

Male and female principals did not differ in their desired level of staff involvement in any of the eight areas, but they did differ in three areas regarding community involvement. Specifically, female principals desired significantly more involvement of community members in the

Table 1  
*Principals' Ratings of Staff and Community Involvement in Decision Making*

	Staff			Community		
	Current <i>M (SD)</i>	Ideal <i>M (SD)</i>	<i>t</i>	Current <i>M (SD)</i>	Ideal <i>M (SD)</i>	<i>t</i>
District education mission	3.80	4.75 <sup>‡</sup> (1.06)	13.20 <sup>†</sup> (.53)	2.95 <sup>†</sup>	4.37 (1.11)	16.4 <sup>†</sup> (.89)
Building education goals/objectives	4.50	4.87 <sup>‡</sup> (.79)	7.43 <sup>†</sup> (.37)	3.00 <sup>†</sup>	4.21 (1.10)	14.6 <sup>†</sup> (.91)
Select specific curriculum content	4.65	4.87 <sup>‡</sup> (.60)	5.36 <sup>†</sup> (.38)	2.48 <sup>†</sup>	3.84 (1.07)	15.6 <sup>†</sup> (1.00)
Select and design assessment tools to evaluate the curriculum	4.30 (.93)	4.85 <sup>‡</sup> (.40)	8.82 <sup>†</sup>	2.00 <sup>†</sup> (1.01)	3.47 (1.07)	17.0 <sup>†</sup>
Establish procedures to adequately involve the community in school issues	3.73 (1.02)	4.64 <sup>‡</sup> (.63)	13.40 <sup>†</sup>	3.02 <sup>†</sup> (1.14)	4.46 (.84)	16.5 <sup>†</sup>
Establish procedures to adequately involve staff and students in school issues	4.13 (.90)	4.88 <sup>‡</sup> (.35)	12.40 <sup>†</sup>	2.66 <sup>†</sup> (1.14)	4.00 (1.09)	14.9 <sup>†</sup>
Decide on methods of assessing students' educational progress	4.51 (.77)	4.90 <sup>‡</sup> (.35)	7.84 <sup>†</sup>	2.24 <sup>†</sup> (1.05)	3.68 (1.03)	17.4 <sup>†</sup>
Decide on programs of study and requirements for students	4.38 (.77)	4.83 <sup>‡</sup> (.43)	8.81 <sup>†</sup>	2.48 <sup>†</sup> (1.04)	4.06 (.98)	19.0 <sup>†</sup>

*Note.* On a scale of 1-5 (1 = not involved at all in decision; 3 = opinions sought but not necessarily involved; 5 = fully involved in decision).

<sup>†</sup>*Ideal* rating was significantly higher than *Current* rating ( $p < .001$ ).

<sup>‡</sup>*Staff* rating was significantly higher than *Community* rating ( $p < .001$ ).

areas of district mission, building level goals, and procedures to involve the community (Tables 2 and 3).

School level differences were found on four items for ideal involvement of staff (Table 3). In each case, elementary principals rated ideal staff involvement higher than their high school level colleagues. The ratings of middle school principals did not significantly differ from either elementary or high school principals. The areas where differences were found included (a) building level goals, (b) selection of curriculum content, (c) procedures for community involvement, and (d) procedures for involving staff and students in school issues. Differences in desired community involvement by school level were found for only one item (Table 3): Elementary principals desired greater community involvement than high school principals on the establishment of procedures to adequately involve staff and students in school issues.

### Summary

Maine principals perceived their staff as moderately to highly involved in current decision making, and their community as informed but not necessarily involved. Principals would like more involvement of both staff and community members for all areas investigated, but they support involvement of staff to a greater extent than community. With some exceptions, principal gender and school level made little difference in desired levels of involvement.

### Discussion

As models evolve for the provision of public education in this country, different role expectations for rural school principals, staff members, and community members in decision making have emerged. The bureaucratic orga-

Table 2  
*Principals' Ratings of Ideal Involvement of Staff by Sex*

	Male ( <i>n</i> = 141) <i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	Female ( <i>n</i> = 74) <i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	<i>F</i> (1, 212)
District education mission	4.70 (.56)	4.82 (.51)	2.48
Building education goals/objectives	4.87 (.38)	4.86 (.38)	0.02
Select specific curriculum content	4.87 (.42)	4.89 (.35)	0.70
Select and design assessment tools to evaluate the curriculum	4.85 (.41)	4.86 (.38)	0.06
Establish procedures to adequately involve the community in school issues	4.58 (.67)	4.73 (.56)	2.77
Establish procedures to adequately involve staff and students in school issues	4.89 (.33)	4.86 (.38)	0.29
Decide on methods of assessing students' educational progress	4.92 (.29)	4.85 (.46)	1.96
Decide on programs of study and requirements for students	4.84 (.40)	4.81 (.49)	0.31

*Note.* On a scale of 1-5 (1 = not involved at all in decision; 3 = opinions sought but not necessarily involved; 5 = fully involved in decision).

nization has been and continues to be the dominant paradigm for school systems. This paradigm places principals in the position of responsibility for managing the day to day operations of schools in which they are responsible for planning, organizing, coordinating, and controlling functions. In other words, principals make the decisions. The results of the current research clearly show that these rural principals would like their role to be one of leadership rather than management.

Rural principals, because their schools tend to be small, already assume a variety of roles including central office responsibilities, supervising nonteaching personnel, and directly handling student discipline. They report spending little time on instructional leadership, although they acknowledge its importance (Perry & Perry, 1991). Since shared decision making takes more time than making decisions as an individual, implementation promises to be problematic, even if, as with instructional leadership, they acknowledge its importance.

The emerging desire for more involvement of staff and community members has a potentially significant impact on how we prepare school leaders. Principals report that they currently perceive their staff as moderately to highly involved in decision making, but desire still greater involvement. A higher level of involvement would change the teacher role from technician to reflective practitioner. These changes would require rural principals to emphasize collaboration among interested parties, facilitate participation, and provide environments where teachers will exercise professional judgment and facilitate meaning-making rather than cause learning. Current and future principals should be prepared to deal with these types of tasks and to have the leadership skills required.

In addition, Maine principals indicated an interest in seeking community opinions on issues related to curriculum and assessing student progress and directly involving community members in decisions related to communication and goal setting. Having the skills required to lead in

Table 3  
*Principals' Ratings of Ideal Involvement of Community by Sex*

	Male ( <i>n</i> = 141) <i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	Female ( <i>n</i> = 74) <i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	<i>F</i> (1, 213)
District education mission	4.23 (.97)	4.57 (.70)	6.87 <sup>‡</sup>
Building education goals/objectives	4.06 (.97)	4.45 (.78)	8.54 <sup>‡</sup>
Select specific curriculum content	3.74 (1.05)	3.95 (.92)	1.93
Select and design assessment tools to evaluate the curriculum	3.38 (1.05)	3.55 (1.11)	1.35
Establish procedures to adequately involve the community in school issues	4.36 (.90)	4.62 (.70)	4.42 <sup>†</sup>
Establish procedures to adequately involve staff and students in school issues	3.89 (1.12)	4.16 (1.05)	2.94
Decide on methods of assessing students' educational progress	3.59 (1.04)	3.78 (1.03)	1.65
Decide on programs of study and requirements for students	3.94 (1.02)	4.22 (.90)	3.83

*Note.* On a scale of 1-5 (1 = not involved at all in decision; 3 = opinions sought but not necessarily involved; 5 = fully involved in decision).

<sup>†</sup>*p* < .05; <sup>‡</sup>*p* < .01.

collaborative settings is only one part of the puzzle. Organizational structures and processes that allow for discretion and influence, not merely dictating what to do and how to do it, must also be in place. This involves accepting the agenda of the school system as a whole over that of individual building level administrators (Brown & McIntire, 1995).

Wheatley (1992) noted that our present concept of organizations is moving away from that which flourished in the age of the bureaucracy to a fluid and organic structure of the boundaryless organization. In preparing school leaders our purpose is to recognize schools as systems that are participatory learning. The results of this research document the desire of principals to change; the challenge that remains is implementation.

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Table 4  
*Principals' Ratings of Ideal Involvement of Staff by School Level*

	Elementary (n = 118) M (SD)	Middle (n = 31) M (SD)	High School (n = 76) M (SD)	F (2, 222)
District education mission	4.80 (.46)	4.84 (.45)	4.63 (.65)	2.91
Building education goals/objectives	4.94 <sup>x</sup> (.24)	4.84 <sup>xy</sup> (.37)	4.78 <sup>y</sup> (.51)	4.76 <sup>†</sup>
Select specific curriculum content	4.94 <sup>x</sup> (.24)	4.87 <sup>xy</sup> (.34)	4.75 <sup>y</sup> (.54)	5.78 <sup>†</sup>
Select and design assessment tools to evaluate the curriculum	4.90 (.30)	4.81 (.54)	4.80 (.46)	1.56
Establish procedures to adequately involve the community in school issues	4.77 <sup>x</sup> (.50)	4.48 <sup>xy</sup> (.68)	4.51 <sup>y</sup> (.74)	5.20 <sup>†</sup>
Establish procedures to adequately involve staff and students in school issues	4.94 <sup>x</sup> (.24)	4.83 <sup>xy</sup> (.46)	4.82 <sup>y</sup> (.42)	3.36 <sup>†</sup>
Decide on methods of assessing students' educational progress	4.93 (.28)	4.77 (.56)	4.91 (.34)	2.50
Decide on programs of study and requirements for students	4.87 (.36)	4.84 (.45)	4.77 (.51)	1.31

Note. On a scale of 1-5 (1 = not involved at all in decision; 3 = opinions sought but not necessarily involved; 5 = fully involved in decision). Means sharing superscripts do not differ at  $p < .05$  using Bonferroni post-hoc test.

<sup>†</sup> $p < .05$ ; <sup>††</sup> $p < .01$ .

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Table 5  
*Principals' Ratings of Ideal Involvement of Community by School Level*

	Elementary ( <i>n</i> = 118) <i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	Middle ( <i>n</i> = 31) <i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	High School ( <i>n</i> = 76) <i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	<i>F</i> (2, 222)
District education mission	4.39 (.83)	4.61 (.67)	4.22 (1.03)	2.25
Building education goals/objectives	4.29 (.79)	4.32 (.91)	4.04 (1.09)	1.99
Select specific curriculum content	3.93 (.85)	3.87 (.96)	3.68 (1.20)	1.44
Select and design assessment tools to evaluate the curriculum	3.63 (.92)	3.29 (1.10)	3.29 (1.22)	2.86
Establish procedures to adequately involve the community in school issues	4.54 (.71)	4.39 (.88)	4.36 (.98)	1.23
Establish procedures to adequately involve staff and students in school issues	4.13 <sup>a</sup> (1.01)	4.13 <sup>xy</sup> (.94)	3.74 <sup>y</sup> (1.23)	3.31 <sup>†</sup>
Decide on methods of assessing students' educational progress	3.81 (.94)	3.55 (1.09)	3.53 (1.14)	1.88
Decide on programs of study and requirements for students	4.14 (.86)	4.20 (.96)	3.88 (1.13)	2.04

*Note.* On a scale of 1-5 (1 = not involved at all in decision; 3 = opinions sought but not necessarily involved; 5 = fully involved in decision). Means sharing superscripts do not differ at  $p < .05$  using Bonferroni post-hoc test.  
<sup>†</sup> $p < .05$ ; <sup>a</sup> $p < .01$ .

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Appendix

Please respond to items based on your opinion of how you think things are currently and should be in your school/district. Use the following scale to describe degree of involvement on a continuum from “fully involved” to “not involved at all.” For each item, simply circle the number that best describes degree of involvement.

	Opinions Sought But Not Necessarily Involved					Fully Involved In Decisions				
	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
	CURRENT					IDEAL				
<b>I. MISSION, GOALS &amp; OBJECTIVES</b>										
A. District education mission										
1. Staff	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
2. Parents and community	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
B. Building education goals/objectives										
3. Staff	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
4. Parents and community	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
<b>II. CURRICULUM</b>										
A. Select specific curriculum content.										
5. Staff	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
6. Parents and community	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
B. Select and design assessment tools to evaluate the curriculum										
7. Staff	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
8. Parents and community	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
<b>III. COMMUNICATIONS</b>										
A. Establish procedures to adequately involve the community in school issues										
9. Staff	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
10. Parents and community	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
B. Establish procedures to adequately involve the staff and students in school issues										
11. Staff	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
12. Parents and community	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
<b>IV. STUDENTS</b>										
A. Decide on methods of assessing students' educational progress										
13. Staff	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
14. Parents and community	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
B. Decide on programs of study and requirements for students										
15. Staff	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
16. Parents and community	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5