Part of the
Indicators in Action
Series

SHARED PURPOSE AND RESPONSIBILITY: WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE IN ACTION

At Astra, we believe that strong relationships—what we call Radically Reimagined Relationships—are the foundation of a healthy school culture, engagement, and achievement. In schools that put Radically Reimagined Relationships at the center, we see evidence of five indicators: Culture of Belonging and Well-Being; Dispositions of Humility, Care, and Curiosity; Commitment to Equity and Justice; Agency and Trust; and Shared Purpose and Responsibility.

WHY SHARED PURPOSE AND RESPONSIBILITY?

In several of the schools we've visited, administrators, teachers, support staff, students, and their families have co-created a vision for the school as a way to ensure a shared sense of purpose. This process can be longer and messier than the traditional ways that schools establish a vision and purpose, and it requires school leaders who are comfortable with collaboration and power-sharing. Jim Jensen, principal at the East Lee Campus, an alternative public school serving 103 students in Wyoming, MI, told us, "I don't make the decision--the team makes the decision. The program needs to have sustainability beyond me pushing it."

School leaders like Jensen believe that all staff have valuable knowledge and experience to contribute. We saw wonderful evidence of this belief during a school visit to PS172 in Brooklyn, NY, an elementary school serving a diverse group of 538 learners. Teachers asked for more time to visit one another's classrooms as part of their own professional learning, and school leaders made it happen. Principal Erika Gunderson remarked, "We have so much expertise in the building. We need to take advantage of that and share it."

Research confirms what we've heard from school leaders and staff members during our conversations and school visits: when leaders embrace shared decision making and greater involvement for their staff members, relationships between those individuals improve. What's more, staff members' emotional, intellectual, and behavioral engagement in their work increases.[1]

The natural outgrowth of shared purpose and decision making is shared responsibility, which creates a more durable and responsive school culture. Josh MacLaughlin, a teacher and board member at Academic Arts High School, a public charter serving an alternative school population of 90 students, shared that he used to work at a big district school and noticed a lot of self-interest and lack of accountability among the staff members. He believes that since teachers are highly educated professionals, schools should operate more like a law office or medical practice, as a group of professionals making decisions together and sharing accountability for the outcomes

1 See, for example, Reeve, J. (2015). Giving and summoning autonomy support in hierarchical relationships. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, 9(8), 406-418.)

of those decisions. "This is the future of what needs to happen for education," he told us. "There are no excuses, you have full control, and you have to take full responsibility for it."

Shared purpose and responsibility must extend to students and their families as well. Researchers note that in most school communities, families are engaged in a very limited way. The authors of one study write, "Put bluntly, too many family engagement efforts focus on getting families to help the institution achieve its priorities (or to comply with regulations), rather than on supporting families in working toward shared goals and aspirations for their children."[2] However, when schools move beyond putting on events and open houses that treat parents as visitors or occasional volunteers, we see numerous positive outcomes for students, parents, and the community as a whole.[3]

WHAT DOES THIS LOOK LIKE IN ACTION?

At P.S. 172 in Brooklyn, there is regular, protected time for staff members to collaborate and make decisions about the curriculum and their own professional learning. The NYC Department of Education granted the school a waiver so that it could schedule a 90-minute block of professional learning time at the start of each school day, one day per grade level. (The staff developed a master schedule that places students in specials while their classroom teachers are engaged in these professional learning sessions.) Grade-level teams work with instructional coaches to identify topics and formats for their own professional learning; Rachel, one of the school's special education teachers, told us, "There is great respect here for the amount of time teachers need to spend together. We respect each other as colleagues and are able to ask for what we need." Teams use separate dedicated time to co-create the school's curriculum and revise it annually to meet student needs. "It's a shared document that everyone is responsible for," says Rachel. "If something isn't working, there's not one person who feels their work is being criticized. It was made by all of us."

Teachers also have the opportunity to serve a two-year term on the school's Leadership Team. Per a district mandate, 50% of the Leadership team is comprised of staff members and the remaining half are parents or guardians of students. Principal Erika Gunderson says, "The Leadership Team takes on some of the big questions of the school. What are our goals? What items should be in our comprehensive plan? What are families thinking and feel-

2 Pekel, K., Roehlkepartain, E. C., Syvertsen, A. K., & Scales, P. C. (2015). Don't forget the families: The missing piece in America's effort to help all children succeed. Minneapolis, MN: Search Institute. Retrieved from https://www.searchinstitute.org/downloadable/SearchInstitute-DontForgetFamilies-Report-10-13-2015.pdf.

3 See for example Warren, M. R., Mapp, K. L., & Kuttner, P. J. (2015). From Private Citizens to Public Actors. In M.P. Evans & D.B. Hiatt-Michael (Eds.), *The Power of Community Engagement for Educational Change* (pp 21-40). Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing, Inc.

ing? What needs to be worked on or changed?"

Parents and guardians are also welcomed into the school the last Friday of each month as learning partners in the classrooms. They spend a block of time in the morning collaborating with students in classroom activities; Erika Gunderson told us that staff changed the way they engaged families during these monthly visits in response to feedback from parents that they wanted to be participants, not just observers. After the classroom portion of these well-attended events, the school's parent coordinator welcomes parents and guardians to workshops on a variety of topics, which have included immigration rights and resources, cyber-security, and how to help with math at home.

Students at PS 172 are also engaged in shared purpose and responsibility: the school's Student Equity Committee is a great example of this. The Committee is made up of 20 students in grades 2-5 and meets regularly at lunchtime. The group thinks things through from a student's perspective, asking questions like: Are we welcoming new students well enough? Are there students who feel isolated or alone? The Committee then works with school staff to implement solutions they develop.

Older students at Francis W. Parker Charter Essential School in Devens, MA, exercise real responsibility as well. The school's 395 students in grades 7-12 are surveyed as part of mid-year and end-of-year teacher evaluations, and a student-led Community Congress has a voice in changing school policies, providing feedback on the school's annual budget allocations, and other administrative issues. Additionally, the student-led Justice Committee plays a key role in resolving conflicts, providing mediation, and developing restorative plans after infractions.

The result is a profound sense of investment and shared responsibility among the school's staff and students. Principal Todd Sumner told us, "There's an expectation that adults in school share a commitment to the entire school. When we orient new staff, we share that it means you can't walk by stuff… if I walk by, I can't say 'They're not my problem because they're not my students.' You need to step toward the issue, not away from it. Because this piece is consistent over time, the longer the students are here, the more they own it. The juniors and seniors really are the ones doing most of the tone-setting. They will be as quick as any adult to say 'This doesn't look right.'"

The Teacher-Powered Schools movement is another manifestation of shared purpose, decision making, and responsibility. Avalon School in St. Paul, MN, is an early adopter of the teacher-powered model and has fully embraced shared decision making and shared responsibility. The school, which serves 240 students in grades 6-12, has no principal or director; instead, teachers

accept accountability for school success and control the curriculum, budget, professional development, and personnel decisions.
Those decisions get made at a weekly staff meeting. All staff have gone through facilitation training and use a "Fist to Five" protocol for decisions: 5 and 4 mean strong support; 3 means I'm not overly enthusiastic but I will accept and embrace the decision (no bad-mouthing it later); 2 means I'm not there and need to talk it out more; 1 means no way. Avalon makes decisions by consensus, although consensus can be achieved with a mixture of 3's, 4's, and 5's. Although this process takes time, staff members are committed to the model: retention at the school in a given year is 95-100%, reports Carrie Bakken, a high school advisor and social studies teacher at Avalon.

Avalon exemplifies one model of a teacher-powered school; the organization Teacher-Powered Schools has identified 15 areas of potential autonomy and several different types of structural arrangements to secure these autonomies for teachers. Organizations like the National PTA, the Flamboyan Foundation, Education Reimagined, UP for Learning and others are developing and describing innovative models for family and student engagement in decision making.

QUICK TIPS

1. If you're a school leader, seek out professional learning that will help you develop and implement a distributed leadership model and share power with staff, students, and families.
2. Know that shared purpose and responsibility take time and won't happen incidentally during a traditional school day: consider how you'll carve out dedicated time and space for stakeholders to come together.
3. Families, in particular, deserve some attention, as powerful examples of meaningful family engagement are few and far between. Survey parents and ask your PTA leadership what they'd like to influence and contribute to in your school community.

RESOURCES

Amy Junge: Teacher-Powered Practices: How Teacher Teams Collaboratively Lead and Create Student-Centered Schools. Report from Education Evolving, Fall 2019.

Flamboyan Foundation: Schoolwide Family Engagement Rubric, June 2014.

Helen Beattie: The Teeter-Totter Effect: How to Avoid a Common Pitfall in Learner-Centered Transformation. Article from Education Reimagined, September 2019.

Katrina Schwartz: How Teachers Designed a School Centered on Caring Relationships. Podcast from KQED MindShift, November 2018.

Landon Mascareñaz: Here's Why We Must Open Schools to Authentic Parent Partnership. Article from Education Post, September 2019.

Teacher-Powered Schools: Collaborative Leadership for Thriving Teams: A Guide for Site Administrators, March 2019.

Veronica Crespin-Palmer: How Families Will Transform Our Broken School System. Video from TEDxMileHigh, July 2019.

For additional resources, please visit our Resource Library.

ABOUT ASTRA CENTER FOR INNOVATIVE EDUCATION

The Astra Center for Innovative Education affirms the critical role that relationships play in learning environments. We promote educational models that demonstrate Radically Reimagined Relationships - a commitment to creating and sustaining genuine, thoughtful, and meaningful connections between and among students, staff, and families in an environment of equity and racial justice. Our work centers around researching schools and school models, reporting on the impact of relationship-building, engaging schools and like-minded organizations that share this philosophy, and working directly with schools to build capacity. Learn more about our work at www.astrafoundation.org/center-for-innovative-education.

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On the cover: A staff member and students from the Codman Academy Charter Public School in Dorchester, MA. Photo courtesy of Codman Academy, one of the schools featured in Astra's *Radically Reimagined Relationships* report.

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