A CASE OF TEACHER OPPOSITION

TO SCHOOL DISTRICT ASSESSMENT AND EVALUATION POLICY

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Better School District introduced its assessment and evaluation policy and regulations in 2006. Three years later, the Director of Education learned that the policy was not fully implemented in all schools. The main issue was teacher noncompliance with the provision of interventions for students who miss assignments and tests or submit work late. Principals were aware of this issue in their schools yet did not address it. In 2010, the district commenced a review of the policy and developed regulations to support it. When released in 2011, the revised policy met with opposition. This case focuses on the district's process for policy development, teacher engagement in policy development, and the role of principals and other leaders in implementing change.

Case Narrative

Ben Wright, Director of Education for Better School District has learned that the district's assessment and evaluation policy introduced in 2006 has not been fully implemented. This situation was incidentally discovered by the district during consultations for another policy. Specifically, teacher practice related to missed or late assignments and the provision of appropriate interventions for students in these situations had not changed to reflect the 2006 assessment and evaluation policy.

The research indicates that policy implementation can be challenging (Elmore, 2008; Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004; Hannay, Ben Jaafar, & Earl, 2013; OECD,

2005; Spillane, 1994). In their review of the literature, Leithwood et al. (2004) found that when teachers feel that a policy will jeopardize their professional judgement or affect their creativity, they are more likely to resist efforts to accept that policy. In order to understand the implications the policy may have on their practice and their school, teachers and principals need time to discuss the policy and how it can be implemented. They need to become familiar with various aspects of the policy and contextualize it for their own situation. Districts are more likely to have success in implementing a policy which is seen as an attempt to solve an identified problem in student or school performance rather than one viewed as a method for compliance.

Hannay, Ben Jaafar, & Earl (2013) examined district leadership of an amalgamated school district in Ontario. To transform the district into a learning organization that could respond to change, the district leaders used a distributed leadership model and collaborated with teachers and principals. The study demonstrates the effect of engaging with teachers and principals when implementing change.

The research also reports on the important role of principals in implementing policy change (Elmore, 2008; Hopkins & Higham, 2007; Leithwood et al., 2004; Spillane, 2010). While their role is widely recognized, there exists a tension between enabling principals to find solutions and lead school improvement, and the limitations of district accountabilities (Hopkins & Higham, 2007). The time required to fulfil the accountability functions reduces available time for professional dialogue with their teachers.

Better School District

Better School District is a large public district with just over 40,000 students, 120 schools and approximately 3,000 educators (teachers and administrators). Its schools reach

across both urban and rural communities. Programs and services are administered from a centralized headquarters and three regional offices. Better School District was established in 2004 when four smaller school districts were consolidated. Each of the former districts existed for a number of years and had established policies and practices as well as priority areas.

During its first year, Better School District reviewed the policies of the previous districts and found commonalities. One of the first to be reviewed was the assessment and evaluation policy as this area had been identified as a priority. The reasons for which the district made assessment and evaluation a priority include: 1) unsatisfactory student achievement, 2) lack of focus on professional development in assessment, and 3) the practice of allowing a high degree of teacher autonomy in determining student marks.

Teacher practice differed based on beliefs about teaching and learning, and evaluation. For some, a deadline for student work was absolute. If work was not submitted on time, then marks could be deducted for each day it was late or the student could receive a zero mark. Other teachers accepted late submissions from students who generally submitted their work on time. These teachers would take punitive measures for a student who had a habit of late or missed submissions. Other teachers would work with the students to help each complete the required assignments and award marks based on the quality of the work. In other instances, teachers awarded marks for effort, excused students from writing final examinations if their term mark was above a pre-set cut score, and used their professional judgement as part of the evidence of learning to determine if a student received a pass or fail.

It was in this climate of change—a school district in its infancy, teachers and principals adjusting to a move from their small districts to a large district, and the possibility that teacher

and school practices might be challenged—that the 2006 assessment and evaluation policy was released.

Ben's Journey

The policy statements from the former school districts were used as a starting point in the development of the 2006 assessment and evaluation policy. However, the policy extended beyond these policy statements to include statements on missed and late assignments and the use of zero. The policy stated the school must put into place escalating levels of interventions before a teacher could penalize students for late submissions or assign a zero mark for a missed assignment. Schools were given autonomy to develop their own interventions and plans for implementing them. There were a range of possible interventions. On one end, an appropriate intervention might be a student-teacher conference. On the other end of the continuum, the intervention could be the development of an action plan to support the student's learning.

In 2009, the school district initiated a policy development process for homework. This process included consultations with stakeholders, focus group discussions with a sample of students, and a review of the research literature to identify best practices related to homework. During the homework policy consultations, issues related to the 2006 assessment and evaluation policy surfaced. It was learned that schools were non-compliant with respect to the policy on missed and late assignments. Specifically, teachers did not always accept late assignments and there were instances when the teachers deducted marks for late submission. It was also learned that students did receive a zero mark for an assignment not submitted or submitted late. Ben realized that the 2006 assessment and evaluation policy was not consistently implemented, and

that further direction to principals and teachers was warranted. He concluded that it was

necessary to revisit the 2006 assessment and evaluation policy.

Ben met with his program staff[1] to discuss teacher professional development on

assessment and evaluation practices. Since its establishment, the district had given priority to

teacher professional growth in this area. In its first year, the district held a conference on

assessment and evaluation for its teachers and principals. Since then, the program specialists had

conducted various assessment and evaluation initiatives at individual schools and across groups

of schools. They reported that a lot of work had been done on standards-based assessment and

separating student achievement of curriculum outcomes from student behaviours which may

impact learning. The program specialists indicated that teachers' professional learning in

assessment and evaluation was translating into changes in practice.

Ben also met with school principals to discuss issues related to the implementation of

the 2006 assessment and evaluation policy. Principals did report that they were experiencing

some challenges developing the various levels of intervention required for students to complete

their work. They had not previously brought this issue to the attention of district program staff or

to Ben himself. In fact, principals had not identified any issues with the implementation of the

policy. Ben did not meet with any teachers to discuss the policy and their issues. Neither Ben nor

his staff asked teachers the reasons for not implementing the assessment and evaluation policy.

During the 2009–2010 school year, Ben and his staff initiated a review intended to

strengthen the 2006 assessment and evaluation policy. The use of zero for missed and late

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[1] Program staff at Better School District: 1) *Assistant Director (Programs)*, is responsible for all program areas, reports to Ben, and supervises Senior Education Officers and Program Specialists; 2) *Senior Education Officers*, are responsible for program delivery including teacher professional development in a group of schools called "family of schools," and report to Assistant Director (Programs); and 3) *Program Specialists* are responsible for program implementation including teacher professional development, are specialists in a specific content area, and report to Assistant Director (Programs).

assignments was identified as a significant issue. The district felt that this review was building on what was happening in the schools and that teachers were ready to move forward in their practice. The initial meeting was with senior education officers. At this meeting, it became apparent that there was confusion about the policies related to these issues. It was decided that the administration regulations for implementing the 2006 assessment and evaluation policy needed to articulate district expectations and to be specific on procedures.

Ben assigned a program specialist to review assessment and evaluation policies in other jurisdictions and to provide additional professional development on classroom-based assessment practices. Each senior education officer was asked to discuss the policy at their school meetings. Ben asked the Assistant Director (Programs) to draft changes to the 2006 assessment and evaluation policy. Each month the Assistant Director (Programs) met with the senior education officers to discuss the revisions to the 2006 assessment and evaluation policy as they were being made.

The revised version of the 2006 assessment and evaluation policy was over a year in development (Winter 2010–June 2011). During this period, only the senior education officers provided direct input to the Assistant Director (Programs) who was drafting the policy changes. The process was that the senior education officers would discuss the changes to the policy with their schools and report back. There were no consultations with teachers and other stakeholders. Principals and teachers were not asked to submit any feedback during this time. There were no mechanisms set up to for feedback until May 2011. At that time, the revised policy was sent to schools along with feedback forms and schools were asked to review and respond. In June 2011, the revised policy was presented to principals and again they were asked to get feedback from their teachers.

Prior to being sent out for feedback, the revised version of the 2006 assessment and evaluation policy was compared to assessment and evaluation policies in other school districts. Better School District concluded the revised version of the 2006 policy was consistent with policies from other school districts. In addition, the research review on the policies and practices in other jurisdictions was not comprehensive. It provided an overview of what other jurisdictions were doing. It did not include evidence to support the changes in the revised policy.

At the June 2011 meeting, principals were advised that all feedback would be reviewed and, where appropriate, incorporated into the document over the summer. A number of themes emerged from the feedback—balance between prescriptive procedures and professional autonomy, separating academic performance and student behaviours, and the level of detail in the administration regulations. However, the district felt that there was not a large amount of feedback. In general, kindergarten–Grade 6 schools were very supportive. Schools that provided negative feedback were mostly a small group of large urban high schools.

During the summer, the Assistant Director (Programs) also met with a representative of the teachers' union. The representative identified a number of items which might have implications for teacher workload. Several items with which the teachers disagreed but were not workload related were also noted. For example, teachers did not favour the idea of allowing students to receive the final mark in a comprehensive exam if it was higher than the combined term and exam mark. The district considered the input from the teachers' union in the revisions.

Based on the feedback it received, further revisions were made to the assessment and evaluation policy. However, the revised document was not provided to schools for reaction. Ben and his staff felt that they had to complete the formal review process. The review had occurred over the course of the previous school year and teachers had been provided opportunity to

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respond. They assumed that teachers and principals were ready. Consequently, the revised

assessment and evaluation policy was presented to the school board for approval. Upon receipt

of approval, the district released the revised 2011 version of the assessment and evaluation

policy together with the administrative regulations. Included in these regulations were new

procedures for addressing missed and late assignments and the use of zero. In the revised 2011

policy, the steps and various levels of intervention which are required before a zero grade can be

assigned were clearly outlined.

The teachers' union as well as local media were quick to respond and the public

discourse that ensued was critical of the revised policy. The revised policy was presented as

lowering student responsibility and accountability. Messages such as students no longer have to

complete work to pass were common. Ben was in the media daily responding to these criticisms.

He also had to find a resolution to this confusion and report back to his school board.

Teaching Notes

This case study is intended to illustrate the importance of a careful and well-thought-out

approach to policy development. It demonstrates how an issue can become controversial if

teachers and other stakeholders are not fully engaged in the process. This case study can be used

in graduate classes in educational leadership, administration, and policy; it can also be used as

part of leadership development programs for aspiring and novice administrators. This case study

will be of interest to many educational leaders in various jurisdictions as they engage in a process

to review and modify their own policies and regulations.

Two independent teaching and learning activities based on the case study are presented. The first focuses on the policy development process and the second on district and school leadership. Each can be adapted for a variety of contexts and situations.

Activity 1: Policy Development Process—

What Works and What Does Not Work

The school district did not anticipate any opposition to its 2011 revised assessment and evaluation policy and regulations. Ben's perception was that the process for changing the policy was similar to that used for many other policies. He also thought that the revised policy was essentially the same as the 2006 policy and regulations but with higher level of specificity, for example, inclusion of the steps required in the escalating levels of intervention prior to the use of zero. The teachers had been informed that the steps would be articulated in the revised policy and must be followed.

Notes to Instructor

Ask the students to read the case study in preparation for class.

Activity 1(a). Much has been written about education policy development at the primary/elementary and secondary level, university/college level, and other training organizations. There is a generally accepted process for creating new policy and revising existing policy (Bates, 2007; Delaney, 2002; National School Boards Association, n.d.). The commonalities among the various approaches to policy development include: identifying the issue, gathering relevant information, drafting policy, communicating the policy, revising, adopting, implementing, and evaluating. In the United States, the National School Boards

Association has articulated the steps for policy development to be used by its school districts. The Canadian School Boards Association does not have a similar document but a number of schools boards—for example, Calgary Board of Education and Toronto District School Board— have their own policy development documents.

Ask students to read National School Boards Association (n.d.) and Toronto District School Board (2002) papers in preparation for class. The policy development procedures in these documents can be used for comparison with the process used in this case study. After completing the readings, ask students to discuss as a whole group or in small groups, the following questions:

1. Identify the steps in the policy development process.
2. Which components of the policy development process may have contributed to the final outcome in the case study?
3. How do you decide which steps are essential and which may have less emphasis?
4. What advice would you give to the school district regarding a resolution of the situation? Identify specific actions.

Additional Readings:

- National School Boards Association (n.d.), *Education Leader Toolkit: Policy Development Steps.*
- Toronto District School Board (2002), *Procedure PR501—Policy Development and Management.*

Activity 1(b). In 2005, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) reported on a study it had completed on what governments need to consider when they design and implement teacher policies to improve teaching and learning in schools. One finding indicated that it is more likely for change to be successfully implemented when teachers are actively involved in policy development and implementation.

In this case study, teachers did not comply with the policy in 2006 and resisted it again in 2011. Ask students to work in small groups and discuss the following:

1. OECD (2005) findings;

2. why teachers resist policy initiatives;

3. why the principals did not fully engage;

4. reasons for lack of consultations; and

5. strategies for moving forward.

Each group may present their discussion points to the class. As the strategies for moving forward are presented, ask students to think about the pros and cons of each.

Activity 1(c). In his paper investigating the relationship between accountability and school leadership, Elmore (2008) states:

> We have known for a very long time, of course, that this "fidelity" or "compliance" model of policy implementation does not work, and never has. Policies "work" not to the degree that they force everyone . . . to do what the policy requires, but rather to the degree that they move . . . in a similar direction. (pp. 40 – 41)

Ask students to discuss, in small groups, how this statement applies to the case study and what approach they would use to implement a similar policy. Each group will present their approach to policy implementation to the other students.

Possible follow-up activities:

1. Review the policy development process used in your school or a selected school.

2. Reflect on your own practice regarding teacher input on sensitive issues and how you obtain teacher support.

Activity 2: Educational Leadership

In this case study, the principal had a pivotal role to play in the implementation of the 2006 assessment and evaluation policy and regulations. The principal was expected to discuss the policy and regulations with teachers, obtain feedback, and hold the teachers accountable. The principals did not identify any issues with the policy until Ben met with them and specifically asked the question.

Hopkins & Higham (2007) define system leaders as follows: "System leaders are those headteachers who are willing to shoulder system-wide roles in order to support the improvement of other schools as well as their own" (p. 147). In their article, they quote John Dunford, General Secretary of the Association of School and College Leaders in England from a 2005 address to the National Conference of the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust (SSAT):

> The greatest challenge on our leadership journey is how we can bring about system improvement. How can we contribute to the raising of standards, not only in our own school, but in others and colleges too? What types of leaders are needed for this task? What style of leadership is required if we are to achieve the sea-change in performance that is demanded of us? (p. 3)

Notes to Instructor

Ask students to read the case study in preparation for class.

Activity 2(a). Ask students to read Hopkins & Higham (2007) in preparation for class. Ask students to move into small groups and discuss the questions posed by Dunford (2005).

Activity 2(b). Ask students to consider Hopkins & Higham's ideas about system leadership. Ask students to work in small groups

- to apply these ideas to the case study,
- to discuss the challenge of the accountability functions required by the district and being a system leader, and

- to identify strategies the principals could have used in the implementation of the 2006 policy.

Each group will present their strategies to the class. When each strategy is presented, ask the other students to evaluate its feasibility.

Additional Reading:

- Hopkins and Higham (2007), "System Leadership: Mapping the Landscape."

Activity 2(c). The Better School District has a *family of schools* model for working with schools and for the provision of teacher professional development. In the case, the district relied on this model for communicating to schools as the policy was being developed and revised. The model was also used as the primary means of receiving feedback and input from teachers. Ask the students to move into small groups and discuss 1) the effectiveness of using the meetings with various families of schools for this purpose (include the pros and cons as well as ways that the strategy could be improved in your discussion); and 2) how the district can use this model to strengthen its leadership capacity.

Activity 2(d). In addition to district leadership, there is a strong literature base on school leadership and its influence on student learning and teacher practice. Distributed leadership has gained momentum over the past decade. Spillane (2010) describes a distributed perspective on leadership as follows: school leadership practice is distributed in the interactions of school leaders, followers, and their situation. It is about leadership practice rather than leaders, leadership roles, or leadership functions and the interaction of leaders, followers, and their situation.

Ask students to read Spillane (2010). Also ask students to read Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, and Wahlstrom (2004), a report based on a review of literature in in the following

areas: the effect of leadership on student learning, the different types of leadership found in the literature, common leadership "best" practices, the essentials for successful leadership, and applying influence on student learning.

Ask students to work in small groups to discuss how distributed leadership practices described in these articles may have facilitated teacher support for the policy. Each group will present their ideas to the class. For each idea presented, the other students can be asked to think about the resources required for implementation.

Additional Readings:

- Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom (2004), *Review of Research: How Leadership Influences Student Learning.*
- Spillane (2010), *Distributed Leadership: What's All the Hoopla?*

Possible follow-up activities:

1. Interview an administrator about his or her experience as a system leader. Develop the questions for your interview using either the framework described by Leithwood et al (2004) or by Spillane (2010).
2. At the next principals' meeting, ask to have a discussion on system leadership placed on a future agenda; initiate that discussion with colleagues.
3. Interview an administrator about how leadership is distributed in his or her school and the effects it has had on student learning.
4. Plan a staff meeting to discuss distributed leadership and how it may be implemented in his or her school.

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