

PART 1

The Need to Empower Our Schools

I remember the first time I was called to the principal's office as an adult. The sweaty palms, my mind racing with questions, my heart in my throat. Questions about what I had done to spark a one-on-one meeting taunted me the whole way there, and it wasn't until I sat down in the chair and my principal smiled at me that I actually took a breath. I don't remember now what the conversation was about, probably something about my students, but the experience of being called into an unannounced meeting, of entering into someone else's territory left a deep impression; it left me feeling powerless as I walked into a situation I knew nothing about. It also prompted me to think of what I did to my students whenever I held them back from recess silently admonishing them to stay behind, or asked to speak with them outside of my classroom. How they must have felt their adrenaline spike; how they must have wondered what they had done wrong.

That feeling of powerlessness and that fear of what's to come is a feeling I don't want to give to children or school staff unless it is warranted. Yet, most of our schools are set up with a very clear hierarchy of power. The principal or lead administrator holds most of the control and delegates morsels of it to chosen people, much like in our classrooms where the teacher holds the rein of power and only briefly lets students take control. This type of structure works by feeding itself—all important decisions are made by those in power and one must be given power to have any importance. It

is a structure that has not been questioned for a long time, but I feel it is time. It is time to spread the control, to give schools back to the staff, to give classrooms back to the students, and to empower others.

The empowered school is one where all voices are heard, dissenting opinions are valued, and staff is trusted. The principal is not simply the leader, but a voice in the discussion—just not *THE* voice. Empowered teachers feel they have control over their work environment, that their voice is heard, and that their experience matters. Empowered students know that their opinion matters, that they have control over their learning journey, and that school is worth their time. All of this leads to an environment based on community and trust, where everyone knows they matter. Sound utopian? Perhaps, but it is not. The steps toward a better functioning school are easily started and integrated.

LEADERSHIP REFLECTION

Empowered principals know that to be a true learner, self-reflection is key. After all, one cannot exorcise demons from an environment without knowing first which demons are caused by one's own mind-set or actions. Consequently, questions to ask as you begin this journey to empowerment include:

- Do I feel my staff trust me?
- What stakeholders do I involve in major decisions?
- What is my role in staff collaboration?
- How do I feel about change?

To help with this process, there is a more thorough leadership reflection form posted on our companion website.

DECLARATION OF INTENT

The principal has the opportunity to really come through as a leader when declaring the intent to institute a change in the

school. It is powerful to discuss one's personal journey of change, and if done well, it can set the tone for the rest of staff to embrace the notion of change in their classrooms. It is vital for the staff to know the *why* behind your desire to change, so have an explanation ready—and expect questions: Why is this change necessary? Why is it urgent? Why should staff care? Allow time to question, to discuss, and to invite teachers to start their own self-reflection that can be done individually or in groups (see Part 2). Who is brave enough to share what they need to change within their own classrooms? Assure everyone that this is not just another staff meeting, but rather the start of a journey. Even look at the setup of your meeting: Are all the chairs facing you, or is the arrangement more conducive for a discussion group? Change starts right at this meeting, so the meeting room should signal that. The next chapter discusses how to create a collaborative staff meeting as part of that change.

PLAN OF ACTION

Once the declaration has been made and discussed, it is time to develop a plan of action. You should now have your own personal plan of action, but it is vital for you and all the other staff to develop one for the school.

While you may have your own ideas for how to start the discussion, here are some ideas for you to borrow if you would like to initiate discussions about defining a plan. Ask your staff:

- What does the word *empowered* mean to you?
- What does an empowered teacher look like?
- What does an empowered student look like?
- What is the one thing that this school must change?
- What is the one thing that this principal must change?
- What is the one thing you hope to gain from this change?

Also, plans of action need to be simple. A plan of action should encompass three things: the why (does not need to be written

down), the how, and the when. A great place to start is with no more than five goals and make them specific and attainable. More goals can be added as success is achieved.

Some examples of goals are

- we will use inside experts first to move us forward;
- all voices will be heard and given equal weight when discussing initiatives;
- new initiatives can be proposed by anyone;
- staff members will be trusted to collaborate without agendas or supervision on a regular basis;
- responsibility will be shared and everyone will be expected to step into leadership positions;
- staff meetings will no longer be sit-and-get, but rather professional development opportunities; and
- teachers will be trusted to create their own professional development.

This is really the chance for staff to start to discuss what an empowered school means to them and what it should look like in their school. Because all schools, even within the same district, have their own areas for improvement, it is important that the goals chosen are specific to your school. What are the biggest things that need to be changed and how can they be changed? This should not be a principal-led discussion, but it can be facilitated as one.

IMPLEMENTATION

The ease of this transition is vital. Education as a whole is under immense time pressures, and new initiatives are being forced on us from all angles. This empowerment plan of action cannot be seen as forced or as extra work or it will fail. Therefore, the plan should be determined by all of the stakeholders. By the time the discussion is over, everyone should have an assigned or hopefully chosen

area of responsibility, including the principal. This is the time to discuss what this transformation looks like in your environment. Specifically, if inside experts are used in staff training, then who are these experts, what will they teach, and when will they teach it? If one of the goals is to shift staff meetings from a sit-and-get experience to one that revolves around learning, then what does that look like, what are the expectations, and who is in charge? The actual plan of implementation cannot be determined until the goals are established.