

## AGASSIZ ELEMENTARY SCHOOL<sup>1</sup>

Agassiz Elementary is located at the edges of a sprawling school district in the South. In the 80s the city's schools suffered from a court-ordered desegregation decision that was resisted by local political leaders. In 1988, after six years of "white flight," a new Superintendent began to revitalize the system using a combination of open-enrollment magnet programs, school-based management, and selective relief from prescriptive state curricula, personnel and testing regulations. According to one district administrator, Agassiz was an enthusiastic participants in the effort:

To me [it] is really a showplace of true entrepreneurship, site based management, parent involvement, locational budgeting, children's involvement.

Agassiz is located in a White neighborhood, but attracts minority children because of its reputation as caring but at the cutting edge, particularly in the arts and technology. Both White and African American parents believe that it provides an excellent education for children of all races. For an elementary school, Agassiz is relatively large, with 650 students, 39 full time teachers, 2 full-time administrators, a guidance counselor and a librarian. One third of the students receive federally subsidized lunch.

### **Key Features of Agassiz: Learning From Each Other**

Agassiz, like many forward looking schools, has an array of innovative efforts, ranging from a community Site Council, to targeted programs for students who fall behind. But one of the most obvious features of Agassiz is the level of enthusiasm expressed by teachers about their work, and the degree to which they view the school as more demanding than what would be required in other schools. Teachers voice the sense of pressure and support that is felt from peers:

Nobody is just pulling a paycheck...teachers ...believe [that you should] do your best...learn new ideas...and seek outside views.

Many mention that the sense of being constantly driven to improve means that not all teachers would be happy at Agassiz, and point to the fact that teachers spend a lot of time talking to each other, and helping each other to interpret both ideas and their own instructional practice. Much of this occurs on Saturdays or after school because the schedule does not allow for extensive meeting time during the regular day. One teacher reported how powerful these interpretive experiences could be:

What you're talking about is meeting that starts at 4:15 and finishes at 7:15, so it's a long meeting...We also observe each other teaching through a one-way mirror. I remember the first time it went [poorly], because everybody was afraid to hurt everybody's feelings...I'll never forget when Greta came out of there and said, 'All right, pan me. Tell me so I can grow.' She was the one who turned the tide...we're all at a level where we come out of there saying, 'help me, how can I help this child...'

Teachers also comment on the school's focus on mutual planning for improvement, and on the importance of faculty study groups that are used to air differences as well as to reach agreement.

One teacher notes that team meetings "push us." Another emphasizes that Agassiz's environment is totally different from her previous school, in which differences of opinion were viewed as signs of

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from Louis, K.S., & Kruse, S. (1998). Creating community in reform: Images of organizational learning in urban schools. In K. Leithwood and K.S. Louis (Eds.) *Organizational Learning in Schools*. (pp. 17-46). Lisse, NL: Swets and Zeitlinger.

hostility. Dialogue among teachers has recently moved beyond discussions of coordinated curriculum to fundamental assumptions about teaching and learning.

### **Intellectual Leadership from the Principal**

Everyone agrees that much of the credit for Agassiz's steady devotion to the improvement is the result of the principal's efforts. According to the Mrs. Cole herself, a key to her work is to provide opportunities for open discussion in "safe" conditions where people feel free to take risks, and she emphasizes that "Our trust level has grown...we used to say no to new ideas..." Teachers concur with this observation noting that "If I make a mistake she would never fuss, she would just say let's see we can make it better."

In addition, Cole keeps up-to-date on current issues, although she admits that she has learned a lot from teachers in the building. Her expertise is readily available through informal communication. Cole reminds teachers that the improvement process is a permanent feature of good schools, and that "essential questions" are more important than trivial ones, and she guides teachers to critical discussion:

[At one meeting we asked] 'how long will this take?'' Cole stated 'how long do we have? What are we doing, why are we doing, what can we do to make it better?'

Part of Cole's style is to express her own opinion but not to impose it on others, and teachers describe their sense that the school fosters the norm of continuous discussion, but does not demand closure or conformity:

I think in some schools the principal might say 'this what we're gonna do'... We have the freedom and trust from the principal that allow you to do whichever you choose.

Of course there are limits to this freedom, and Cole is ultimately in charge. All but one of the teachers view her decision-making prerogative as fair.

### **Leadership from Teachers**

While the principal is behind the scenes stimulating discussion, teachers view themselves as the intellectual leaders of the school. Every teacher points to some role that they play in promoting discussion about educational ideas, either internally or with teachers outside the school. Teachers are used to sharing, and see themselves as having a common base of knowledge. For example, curriculum decisions are often made informally, but informal information is shared. Teachers know or find out about new ideas and then try them in the classroom and they keep the school's Curriculum Committee and the Advisory Committee informed. Sometimes the Curriculum Committee will poll teachers and get input about new efforts. Teachers emphasize that their norms lead to high levels of participation and learning:

It's reflective, it's significant... It gives me courage to try ... It makes me curious and whets my appetite about 'hey, if they're doing it, then I should be doing it.'

An experienced teacher, accustomed to using her own reflection as a key to improved practice, remarks on how different her experience is at Agassiz. She describes a K-2 staff meeting that she led, where one teacher presented a lesson plan

... and I said, let's take 5 minutes and reflect on this. And they took off; it wasn't me anymore, it wasn't me imparting information. ...As we played around with different ideas, I felt I was indeed just as much a learner as anything else.

Perhaps as significant is the shift in teachers' sense of themselves as producers of knowledge. This is particularly apparent in their 'Restructuring Roundup' program, which provides a weekend conference environment for other teachers:

All the teachers perform mini sessions...on whatever topic they want to do. We have reading, math, and science. Teachers come in from about four or five states. They pay to attend sessions...If you prefer not do a mini session, then you usually help... Every single teacher has done one.

In fact, Restructuring Roundup has become a major focus for the professional development of individual teachers in Agassiz. While the required preparation is significant, usually involving most preparation periods and weekends during the spring, the sense of reward for individual Agassiz teachers exceeds the effort:

It was giving me confidence about what I've done...the experience makes you more open to what others are doing...

Restructuring Roundup is the clearest example of how teachers view themselves as leaders in education, but there are others as well. For example, a growing number of teachers have expanded their role to include teaching Saturday workshops to lower-income parents to demonstrate family learning activities. For the teachers who have become involved, this effort demands an expanded repertoire of skills, which they have largely acquired from a dedicated colleague.