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Educational associations can have a positive impact in school districts

The case of the North Central Association

By Edward Brainard

Each year hundreds of educators are involved in school improvement activities organized in concert with a state committee of an accrediting association. For example, in Colorado alone about 600 educators annually serve schools as members of visiting resource teams. Under the auspices of the Colorado State Committee of the North Central Association (NCA) of Colleges and Schools, these teams are at schools to serve in a helping relationship and to share ideas about improved programs and services for students. In addition, about 2,800 faculty members in schools throughout Colorado are conducting school self-studies each year to analyze the quality of education for their students. These annual efforts represent not only an extensive state-wide self-help program, but wide-ranging program evaluation and school improvement endeavors.

Of interest here, however, are these significant questions: To what extent do self-studies, visiting teams, and follow-up activities of individual schools and districts contribute to the purposes of staff development? And, what are some practical ways in which schools and districts might use these activities to foster staff development programs? It is these questions that this article addresses.

In contrast to in-service and teacher education, staff development is an advancement in the approach to professional development and improvement. The focus of staff

development is on school or institutional, as well as individual improvement. In the field of staff development long-term growth potentials are important. Furthermore, effective staff development means the involvement of a school's faculty, or at least a portion of the staff, on school improvement projects.¹

A school's faculty working together over a period of time on school improvements is a major component of an effective staff development program. In Colorado and elsewhere, the North Central Association exists to provide schools with two services: school improvement-evaluation services and accreditation services. With an interest in these two concepts, the NCA is simply an association of schools that have joined together for the purpose of assisting each other to improve and to maintain basic standards.

It is within the NCA school improvement-evaluation trusts that major staff development components exist. Essentially, there are three aspects of this process. These are:

1. The school's self-study of its services, opportunities, and programs for its students.
2. The opportunity for a school's faculty and community to gain the assistance and perspectives of a visiting resource team of able educators from other schools serving in a helping relationship.
3. School implementation of important ideas and improvements gained through this process.

With special reference to staff development, each of these three phases is discussed below.

School Self-Study.

In their self-study the school completes, over at least a six month period, a substantial assessment of its educational programs and services. Typically, parents and students are also involved. In conducting the self-study, the school's faculty develops recommendations for themselves concerning program improvement and staff development. A variety of different procedures and materials are available to schools for conducting self-studies.

The program developed by the Arvada (Colorado) High School is typical. It illustrates the concept of staff development reported at the outset of this article. A description follows:

Using some different ways of attacking the school self-study, Arvada High School is now in the midst of preparing a school improvement program.

"We feel our approach is unique because we will identify areas in which we will be able to make improvements. We also have a theme for our study: 'School . . . the total learning environment,'" said George Bethel, Principal.

"We're directing all our efforts towards school improvement, but we are picking areas which are important to us, and areas in which it is realistic to believe we can make improvements," Bethel said.

As an example, Bethel said, the Jefferson County curriculum is effectively designed and thoroughly developed, and one which we called good. Therefore, the thrust of his group will be on implementing that curriculum rather than changes in the curriculum itself.

It might also be unrealistic to expect to make changes such as building structure. Accordingly, Bethel said his group hopes to not take time to study

that area of concern.

To kick off their program, Bethel and nine staff members will take one full day for a retreat. Meeting at the home of one of the steering committee members, the group will put its plans into the final stages, dealing with guidelines for involving the community, determining how to best involve the whole staff, and setting time lines and target dates. The group will also consider the composition of the visiting team it will request.

They expect their study to uncover areas of concern in their high school, including organizational climate and social settings.

To assist in its preparations, the group attended the February 8 Colorado NCA workshops sponsored by Jefferson County Public Schools.

Tentative plans call for the Arvada school to use this spring, 1980, semester for a self-study, with the target date for finishing it sometime in June. "We hope for a visiting team to come here in November. That way we can complete the study and hopefully implement suggestions and see some change and improvement by the end of the 1980-81 school year," Bethel said.²

As illustrated above, it is within the self-study phase that extensive opportunities exist for staff leadership. Initially a faculty steering committee is organized to guide a school's self-study. The leadership development opportunities of the committee members and chairperson are extensive. Listed below are some of the leadership responsibilities of the chairperson. The chairperson, working with the principal and the steering committee

- Defines the decision making processes of the committee.
- Determines the method for identifying the members of the committee.
- Assists in the selection of the chairperson of the visiting resource team.
- Serves as a liaison with the principal and the steering committee.

In 1980 the Colorado State Committee of the NCA conducted an "Impact Study" involving each of the 54 middle, junior high, and senior high schools hosting Colorado NCA visiting resource teams from September 1977 through November 1979. In this study a principal and a teacher in each of these schools responded to a series of survey items. Two of the questions and the results regarding school self-studies follow:

Question: How valuable was the most recent self-study to your school?

	Percent
Not valuable	0
Somewhat valuable	15
Valuable	50
Very valuable	35
	100

Question: In regard to the school self-study, how much respect and confidence do you have in its ability to deal with practical school problems?

	Percent
No confidence	0
Some confidence	19
Confidence	62
Great confidence	19
	100

In addition to the traditional approach, other designs are possible for an individual school conducting a self-study. Colorado school districts which have used a K-12 approach in their self-studies include: Greeley, Eaton, Poudre, and Lamar. In addition to program articulation, a unique staff development dimension of this approach concerns the organization of self-study committees of faculty members from several schools. A brief description of this approach follows:

A K-12 self-study is now being conducted in the Greeley Public Schools mathematics program. Greeley mathematics educators headed by Gary Steward and Merle Smith, math coordinators, are conducting the self-study.

Dean Pedersen, Director of Curriculum Services for the Poudre School District, will chair the resource team which will visit the schools April 7-11. Pedersen, who said he views resource team projects as visits, not inspections, said he sees as the real value of the self-study, "the fact that it causes a school district to sit down and really see where it's been and where it's going. I see the self-study as the most valuable aspect of it, with the visiting team providing extra insight," he said.

Adrienne (Dee) Gazewood, math specialist, Northglenn-Thorton School District, will be associate chairperson on the mathematics study.

Virginia Way, on leave from School District 50 in Westminster, while she works on her doctorate, will be chairperson of a science visiting team of 12 at Greeley Public Schools April 21-25.

"I look forward to this study as a highlight of my career," said Way who expects the visiting team to focus on giving staff members feedback on their self-evaluation. Way said this type of K-12 evaluation in science has not been done before, and she sees the similarities between the size and suburban location of her district and those of the Greeley district as helpful during the study.

Greeley science coordinators Jean Krause and Richard Hodge are heading the self-study.³

The various dimensions of a faculty engaging in an examination of its programs for students as well as organizing recommendations for improvements represent a ready-made staff development vehicle. The accomplishment of such an endeavor necessitates the use of varied leadership skills on the part of the faculty and the principal. In districts with organized staff development programs, it is this writer's experience that staff developers, typically, are not involved in assisting schools that are using this process. Assistance to schools conducting self-studies and using the resulting improvement ideas could be a significant aspect of a district's staff development program. Workshops and other learning activities on such aspects as leadership skills for faculty chairpersons and effective processes for developing school improvement ideas through the self-study procedure represent a few of the means through which staff development could be implemented.

Assistance from visiting resource teams.

The service to the school of a visiting resource team represents the second major phase. A visiting committee of educators from other schools reviews the school's assessment of its programs and provides additional ideas in the form of recommendations as well as commendations. The team members consist of colleagues from throughout a state who assist the school in a team relationship by providing low or no cost curriculum improvement ideas.

School idea implementation.

The last phase of implementation, concerns follow-up activities through which the school considers recommendations gained from the school's self-study and the visiting resource team.

The opportunities extended each year to educators throughout Colorado and other states to serve on NCA visiting resource teams represents a district and unique staff development opportunity. Except for this type of endeavor few educators have an opportunity to study (in depth) another school in another district. According to the **1980 Impact Study of the Colorado NCA State Committee**, this staff development opportunity is rated as highly valuable. In this study the principal and a teacher in each of 54 middle, junior high, and senior high schools hosting visiting teams from September 1977 through November 1979 were asked these two questions about serving on a Colorado NCA visiting resource team. The questions and results follow:

Question: Of what value has your participation on a visiting resource team been to your school?

	Percent
Not valuable	0
Somewhat valuable	11
Valuable	37
Highly valuable	52
	100

Question: How would you rate your experience as a visiting resource team member as it relates to your professional growth?

	Percent
Not valuable	0
Somewhat valuable	0
Valuable	29
Highly valuable	71
	100

In the same study, questions were also asked about the value of a visiting resource team to the school hosting the team as an aspect of its school improvement-evaluation program. Two of the questions and results for each follow:

Question: How valuable were the most recent services of the visiting resource team to your school?

	Percent
Not valuable	2
Somewhat valuable	23
Valuable	53
Very valuable	22
	100

Question: In regard to the services of the visiting resource team, how much confidence do you have in its ability to deal with practical school problems?

	Percent
No confidence	2
Some confidence	27
Confidence	59
Great confidence	12
	100

Members of visiting resource teams represent a unique mixture of persons associated with public education. For example, the yearly data collected on Colorado NCA visiting resource teams indicates that about seven of every 10 team members are classroom teachers. The remaining members, approximately 30 percent, represent principals, assistant principals, faculty in higher education, the state education department personnel, school district level educators and administrators, board members of cooperative services, members of boards of education and citizens on committees. In addition, each team consists of persons from a number of different school districts.

Given the above information about visiting resource teams, service on such a group represents a distinct staff development opportunity. An educator with an assigned responsibility for his/her district's staff development program should not overlook the opportunity to include service on visiting resource teams as a formal aspect of the district's professional development endeavor. In addition, the visiting resource team program, which exists in most stages, has possibilities to assist a district in achieving specialized purposes. For example, many districts have curriculum development teams of educators scheduled each summer. Prior to becoming a part of a curriculum writing team, it would be important to encourage members of the curriculum team serve on varied NCA visiting teams to schools in other districts. In data previously reported, such service is valuable for gaining ideas and observing actual curriculum in practice.

Schools can design the type of visiting resource team most needed to enhance their school improvement-evaluation program. At least three types of teams are possible:

- The visiting resource team is the most common design. The essential purpose of this team is that of colleagues helping colleagues through the sharing of practical school improvement ideas. Through this helping relationship, the visiting team shares ideas and practices and provides largely low or no cost school improvement. (Depending on the size of the school, such teams generally consist of from 12 to 22 members.)
- An audit team merely reviews the self-study for completeness and accuracy. (Such teams consist of from four to six members.)
- A recommendations team works with the school in developing plans for achieving many of the priorities and recommendations emerging from the institutional self-study.

Different visitation schedules for teams also exist. Some of the designs that have been used by Colorado schools and districts include the traditional model consisting of about three days; e.g. the visiting resource team is at the school from late afternoon on a Monday through noon on a Thursday. This is the traditional model consisting of about three days.

The latter four examples provide a visiting resource team more time for reflective thinking:

- The team is at the school for one day, another day about a month later, and for approximately two days another month later.
- The team is at the school for about two days and for another 1½ days approximately four months later.
- The team is at the school for about two days and for another 1½ days, two weeks later.
- A small team of from four to six members visits the school periodically over an 18-month period of time.

Another phase of the NCA School Improvement-Evaluation Program is follow-up or implementation. The follow-up phase includes using the ideas, typically in the form of recommendations, gained by a school from its self-study and visiting resource team. Again, a major component of this phase is staff development. Here is a description of a typical program of one school:

The most crucial part of the NCA school improvement-evaluation process, according to Morris Ververs, principal at Big Sandy High School in Simla, is follow-up. It's the stage when the school involved gets the recommendations of the visiting resource team, puts them with the school's own recommendations, and takes action.

At that point, Ververs said, the school doing the study must organize the two sets of recommendations, decide on a plan of action, and then set a timeline for making improvements.

Big Sandy High School, with 108 students in grades 9-12, is now getting ready to implement recommendations gleaned from a self-study that started a year ago. Additionally, the school hosted a visiting resource team in October.

To make sure the school carries through with the improvement process, Ververs said his group is putting all the accepted suggestions on a large master sheet, along with a timeline, names of those responsible for the improvement action, and a check list to keep track of progress. "The master sheet will stay up until the end of the process," Ververs said.

"I've been here through two NCA evaluations," said Ververs. For the most recent study, with the Colorado NCA orientation gained by the school, the process was tailor-made, Ververs said.

"The faculty is enthusiastic," he added. We spent a lot of time on the idea of the resource team helping us to better our program, and the hard work has paid off."

Gary Miller, Superintendent, Manitou Springs District 14, was chairperson of the visiting resource team. Superintendent at Big Sandy School District is Richard Ullom.⁴

In all, activities conducted by schools in relation to accrediting associations can have a positive impact on the advancement of education within a school and school district. These activities can also be a significant aspect of an effective program of staff development.

FOOTNOTES

1. Ann Lieberman and Lynne Miller. **Staff Development: New Demands, New Realities, New Perspectives.** New York: Teachers College, Columbia University, 1979, p. ix.
2. "Retreat will Kick off Arvada Study," **Colorado NCA**, Vol. IV (February 1980), p. 1.
3. "Greeley District Takes on Broad K-12 Studies," **Colorado NCA**, Vol. IV (February 1980), p. 3.
4. "Follow-up is Crucial Principal Notes," **Colorado NCA**, Vol. IV (February 1980), p. 2.