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The Challenge of Leadership in Comprehensive High Schools: School Vision and Departmental Divisions

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A persistent dilemma of leadership in high schools is the contrast between reformers' push toward shared school visions and reality's pull from deeply entrenched departmental divisions. Drawing on data from a 5-year, federally funded study of high schools, this article focuses on the perspectives of administrators in three "typical" public comprehensive high schools, each who sees his or her site as what one principal vividly described as a "36-ring circus." The multiple rings, ringleaders, and distinctly different microclimates operating within each school are similar, but each school's strategy is distinctive. One attempted to break departments down, restructuring the school and staff into "learning houses." The second tried breaching barriers with an administrator actively involved in departmental meetings and decisions. The third has started building bridges, supporting strong leadership within departments, while at the same time creating committees, task forces, and exchange programs to span them.

This article examines one of the persistent dilemmas of secondary school leadership: the contrast between the push of reform rhetoric urging a shared school vision and the persistent pull into the reality of deeply entrenched departmental divisions within comprehensive high schools.

The push toward shared vision has been a long-standing ambition of reformers, characterizing much of the rhetoric around instructional leadership, effective schools, and most recently in the United States, school restructuring, shared decision making, and site-based management. Translating that rhetoric into reality, however, has turned out to be a particularly frustrating

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goal for those who work within comprehensive high schools. There, the size of faculties and student bodies, the complex mix of differentiated programs with multiple and sometimes competing purposes, and the deep divisions of the subject departments confound the problems and processes of reform (Firestone & Herriott, 1982; Fullan, 1991; Louis, Marks, & Kruse, 1996; Louis & Miles, 1990; McLaughlin & Talbert, 1993; Powell, Farrar, & Cohen, 1985; Siskin, 1994a; Sizer, 1992).

In earlier work, I have focused on the subject department as context for high school teachers and teaching (Siskin, 1994b). From that perspective, subjects and departments emerged as critical sites for teachers' sense of identity, practice, and professional community, deeply woven into the social, political, and intellectual workings both of the profession and of individual schools (see also McLaughlin & Talbert, 1993; Siskin & Little, 1995). Here I want to explore the departmental structure as a context for high school leadership and as a major complication to some of our notions of leadership, shared vision, consensus, and site-based management.

As in the earlier studies, I rely on data drawn from a 5-year, federally funded study of high schools conducted by the Center for Research on the Context of Secondary School Teaching (CRC). This project, based at Stanford University, joined a number of researchers from different universities to conduct extensive observations, repeated open-ended interviews, and annual surveys in 16 schools: public and private, large and small, urban and suburban, specialized mission schools and the more "typical" comprehensive ones (for fuller discussion of both design and findings, see McLaughlin & Talbert, 1993). Whereas the core focus of the project was on the "bottom-up" perspectives of teachers, the research design and data collection strategies employed a model of embedded contexts (classrooms, departments, schools, districts, sectors, and states). Building administrators, for example, participated in frequent formal interviews and informal conversations throughout the fieldwork, which were transcribed, entered into the collective database, and used to inform analyses of a variety of issues.

In this article, I focus on the perspectives of administrators in three of the "typical" public comprehensive high schools. Rancho is a medium-sized urban school in California, with 85 faculty and a student body diverse in ethnic, economic, and language backgrounds. Oak Valley, also in California, is a very large suburban school, whose 3,000 students and 130 faculty are primarily White. Highlander, a large urban high school in Michigan, has 90 teachers and approximately 2,000 students, 85% of minority backgrounds, primarily African American. Rancho and Oak Valley had new principals as the CRC study began, both White, whereas Highlander's African American

principal had spent 13 years at his post. In all three, as in most high schools, the principals are male (Acker, 1994; Siskin, 1993).

The first section explores the challenges that departmentalized schools present for school leadership and shared visions; the second, the different ways in which these three schools have taken up that challenge.

THE CHALLENGE OF HIGH SCHOOL: "A 36-RING CIRCUS"

Larger and more organizationally complex than the elementary schools from which most of our images of effective schools are drawn (as if the challenge there were not large enough), secondary school faculties and administrators work in what Rancho's principal vividly described as a "36-ring circus." He detailed the rich variety of offerings: the "winning athletics" they offered, "a big cheerleader group," and a new effort that "took the top kids in the school and put them in a program we developed . . . [and] at the same time we had ESL improvement classes for kids reading below the 4th grade level . . . [and] alternative programs for kids who were dropping out." He spoke with pride of the school's accomplishments: "The art department here is extremely strong . . . [the] campus looks good, the kids are very friendly, there isn't a lot of tension here. . . . the PE department is probably one of the best PE departments I've ever seen." "All this stuff in the same school!" he exclaimed; "We run a 36-ring circus." This complex collection of diverse activities and goals may not be the "stuff" of which dreams, or shared visions, are readily made—yet— "all this stuff in the same school" is the stuff with which high school principals typically must deal.

Multiple Rings

The circus image, with its multiple rings and diverse acts performing simultaneously, is an apt one. In the larger rings are the subject departments, which administrators, as in the passage above, talk about as central performers. They are in many ways what the school is known for and how its performance is likely to be judged. In these rings are organized, and tightly bounded, troupes: Each has its own set of members and performs its own distinctive act (a few, like science and agriculture, complete with animals); each operates with its own style and pace. Moreover, each has a portion of the audience focused on only that one activity at any particular time. Each group performs somewhat independently, keeping its attention, and its communications, predominantly contained within its own ring (Hargreaves & MacMillan, 1995; Johnson, 1990; Siskin, 1994b).

Most teachers do tend to stay within those rings—although there are certainly "jugglers" who cross them (Talbert, 1995). Network analyses from the CRC survey, which asked teachers with whom they talked about teaching, showed the pattern graphically (for fuller discussion, see Siskin, 1994b). There the respondents, and the possible responses (the entire staff of the school), were arrayed, by department, along the two axes: Conversational partners within the same department would thus fall close to the diagonal line, and within the outlined borders. Network analyses of the comprehensive high schools—unlike those of the smaller, special mission schools—provided striking visual confirmation of the "rings." Conversations were clustered, and effectively contained, within clearly bounded departmental borders, especially in the academic subjects. Colleagues from the same school but different departments might not ever talk at all, or (as observations documented) even recognize each other by sight (Siskin, 1994b).

Particularly consequential for administrators, each of these departmental rings has its own leader and maintains its own history, traditions, and loyalties. Many of its members were there well before their principals came; many expect to be there well after these principals, and their new ideas, are gone. This creates a dual set of problems for administrators who attempt change efforts: Whereas they may know too little about past practice and existing organizational subcultures, their department chairs and faculties may know them all too well.

This is the situation Oak Valley's new principal confronted when he tried to alter the way faculty were assigned to courses—something the challenged chairs in that school considered an inalienable right of departments. The principal described the problems he was having with one highly resistant department: "Here I come, brand new to the system . . . so I wasn't really aware [of what I was asking]." But becoming aware was hardly sufficient, for as he saw it, "the problem that I have is that these people that have been here for 20 years, and they can continue, and that's life."

That may be life in high schools, but that is not usually the way it is depicted in Ed Admin textbooks. In fact, there has been markedly little focused attention to departments, resistant or otherwise, in the organizational literature on schools, in that on educational leadership or on the principalship. Perhaps this is because many of the writers, themselves university faculty, are likely to take departments for granted, or to see the high school versions of our own organizational divisions as relatively weak. Philip Cusick (1983), in his study of high schools in the 1970s, did try to look for departmental influence but reported that he "just could not find departments doing much

as departments" and that they seemed merely to serve as "labels of administrative convenience" (p. 88). Other writers have withheld talk of such issues more deliberately: Drake and Roe (1986), in one of the standard textbooks for aspiring principals, declare that

> the dichotomy implied in university programs that separate principalship courses into elementary, secondary, and sometimes even middle school, tends to weaken the program and the idea of principalship as a career field. Such separation reinforces the already existing barriers between the elementary and secondary levels. The authors contend that there are common understandings and competencies essential to administering an elementary school, a large comprehensive high school, or a transitional junior high or middle school. (p. v)

Although there may well be much that elementary and secondary principals have, and should have, in common, there are also striking differences. Indeed, Firestone and Herriott (1982), in their studies of 50 elementary and secondary schools, found that high schools were systematically lower in goal agreement and in principals' influence on instruction and management inside classrooms, leading them to conclude that "prescriptions for effective elementary schools don't fit secondary schools."

In the CRC schools, administrators do see departments as doing much and as substantially complicating and mediating their roles. Whereas elementary principals work through teachers to reach classroom practice, high school administrators have to work through departments—or against or around them—to reach teachers. Yet they still see themselves being handed the same prescriptions. Their views of the high school align more with Susan Moore Johnson's (1990) assertion of the "primacy" of high school departments, though they do not always view them in terms of their "potential." As a vice principal explained, "If you've seen high schools, English teachers have their little meeting rooms where they can speak with each other, and Math teachers have their little place where they can speak to each other . . . so that is a problem, and I don't know how you deal with that."

Microclimates

How to deal with that problem becomes particularly pressing when administrators, or reformers, try to bring about schoolwide change, to develop a shared vision, or to affect core educational practice (Hannay, 1995; Louis et al., 1996). Michael Fullan (1991), who has written extensively on how to bring about educational change, speaks of "the tough domain of reforming high schools" (p. 100; see also Wilson & Corcoran, 1988). Little

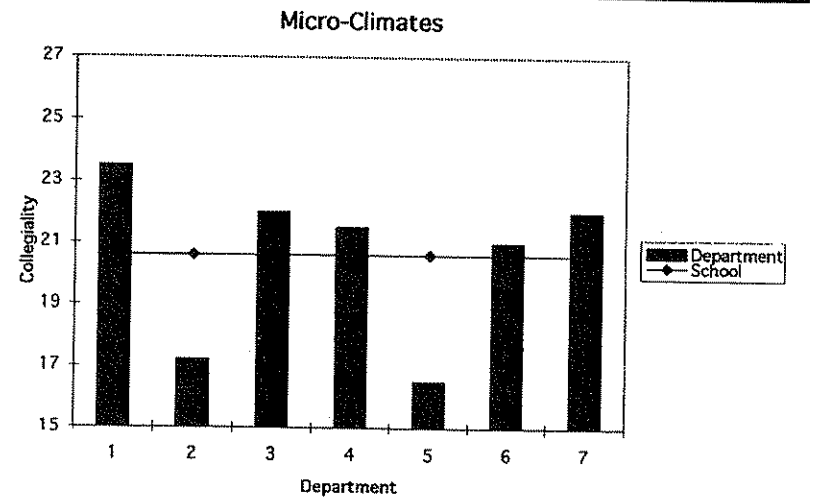

Figure 1: Microclimates

and Bird (1987) suggest that "instructional leadership in secondary schools is the toughest job" (p. 119) and one that many believe an impossible one.

But take, for example, the issue of climate—something we often assume is more readily subject to the influence of school leadership and typically analyze as a school-level characteristic. Yet CRC survey data from Oak Valley, whose 90% response rate showed us that there certainly are some aspects of work in high schools that principals can affect directly, call those assumptions into question. We asked, for example, about collegiality—items such as "teachers in this school are continually learning and seeking new ideas" or "this school seems like a big family; everyone is so close and cordial." And the schools did show systematic and persistent differences in their responses. Oak Valley, a school with a strong and proud professional reputation, scored a 20.6 on the collegiality index, which put it among the top 25% of schools in the National High School and Beyond (1984) data set.

But disaggregating the data, as the CRC team did, to the department level, revealed a pattern of quite diverse microclimates within the site (McLaughlin & Talbert, 1993; Siskin, 1994b).

Indeed, within-school differences were as strong as across-schools ones and covered almost the entire range. The English department measured at the top of the top quartile, whereas two other departments fell into the bottom. Those differences showed up not only in survey responses but also in interview and observation data: Teachers in these different departments

inhabited strikingly different contexts and professional climates. The "schools" they saw themselves working in reflect substantively different sites.

The school-level responses give us a measure of something—and in most cases, we could link it to school-level factors—but it may not be the climate in which these teachers live and work, for what they experience is more likely to be captured at this microclimate level. This means that leadership strategies aimed at the school mean would actually miss almost every department, and almost every teacher, in the school.

Ringleaders

One key factor affecting those microclimates is the leadership of department chairs, and the strong professional climate in Oak Valley's English department is credited consistently to the leadership of its last three chairs (see also Hill, 1995; McCartney & Schrag, 1990). But what chairs do to build such communities, why so few do so, and what role administrators play in their formation remain less than clear. Back in 1934, George Willett found that "few phases of a high school administration are as ambiguous as are matters related to heads of departments. . . . Each school is a law unto itself as to desirable personnel, duties, and authority of the head of a department" (pp. 217-218). Indeed, the role of chair is often less a matter of *school* law than of departmental custom and the idiosyncratic compromises negotiated between individual chairs and their administrators and colleagues.

The ambiguity, however, persists; despite the ensuing standardization of the department as organizational form, and of the particular subjects it contains, there is still tremendous variation in the role of chairs (Adduci, Woods-Houston, & Webb, 1990; Earley & Fletcher-Campbell, 1989; Hannay, 1994; Little, 1990; Siskin, 1991). Some are elected by faculty, some serve at the pleasure of the principal, and some seem to have wandered into the job more or less by accident. Some chairs get a stipend, others a release period, a few both, and a very few get nothing at all. In some schools, chairs serve for a 2- or 3-year term; in others, the position is like a federal judgeship, where people are appointed for life (and administrators wait for death or retirement to create a vacancy). One district in the CRC study eliminated the position altogether (something a number of districts are now trying). Sometimes chairs supervise and evaluate teachers and are officially classified as administrators, but often they are not. When we asked one science chair in the CRC study to describe her responsibilities, she was at first puzzled, and then responded with another question:

> Responsibility in what sense? That it's written down on some sheet that the department chair's responsible for this, or that the department's expecting them to do this? It's not really clear-cut as to what the departmental [chair's] responsibilities are.

As others have observed, this role ambiguity can be a source of stress for department chairs (Adduci et al., 1990; Earley & Fletcher-Campbell, 1989). It is also a source of stress for administrators, for negotiating with chairs, and dealing with these separate enclaves who "have their little place[s] where they can speak to each other" (and often to no one else) is one of the primary challenges high school principals have to deal with. Yet at the same time, they are expected to treat all departments equally; negotiations that deal differentially with different departments—if they are seen at all—are often seen as unfair.

Those leaders and reformers who do want to effect schoolwide change, to confront the challenge of this "tough domain," find an organizational landscape seemingly "balkanized," as Hargreaves and MacMillan (1995) have described it—a collection of nearly independent, and often competing, "baronial fiefdoms" (Ball, 1987). The problem is not simply one of size and scale, though that in itself is daunting in these schools of 1,500 to 3,000 students, 90 to 150 faculty, and what seem like endless miles of classroom corridors. Nor is it a problem that lies solely within schools, for it is not simply the school's organizational chart that constructs these divisions.

Subject Cultures

Rather, the modern organization of disciplinary divisions *is* what we assume knowledge to be, which makes subject departments more powerful than many other organizational subunits or constituent groups (see Louis & Miles, 1990; Talbert, 1995). It is an institutional pattern that underlies the structure of college majors, teacher preparation and certification, even the ways bookstores label their shelves. It underlies not only what teachers teach but also how they go about it, what they understand teaching and learning to be. Susan Stodolsky (1988), for example, has done careful classroom observations of elementary school teachers—revealing that even the same person, in the same room, with the same students behaves quite differently as a teacher of math than as a teacher of social studies. For high school teachers, the subject is not merely an activity, taking part of a day—it is an identity, and it marks whole lives. It tells not only what you teach but also who you are.

These discipline-based differences show up in the varying ways teachers understand—and sometimes undermine—school reform efforts. The data from separate studies, decades and continents apart, show remarkable consistency: Whether we call it detracking, destreaming, or mixed ability-grouping, English teachers accept the reform relatively eagerly, whereas math teachers oppose it intensely—using, in each case, the same rationales and almost the same words (Ball, 1987; Siskin, 1994b; see also Grossman & Stodolsky, 1994; Hannay, 1995; Little, 1995; Loveless, 1994). Centralizing textbook adoption, on the other hand, provokes little resistance from math but serves as a call to arms for English teachers (Siskin, 1994b).

A computer scientist, with an apparent sympathy to the circus rings metaphor, suggests that these specialized ways of thinking and doing would show up even on a hunt for elephants:

> Mathematicians hunt elephants by going to Africa, throwing out everything that is not an elephant, and catching one of whatever is left. . . . Economists don't hunt elephants, but they believe that if elephants are paid enough, they will hunt themselves. . . . Senior managers set broad elephant hunting policy based on the assumption that elephants are just like field mice, but with deeper voices. (Peter Theobald, National Center for Software Technology, Bombay, India, 1991)

These disciplinary modes are brought into schools by teachers who love their subjects, who see themselves as specialists, and who believe that what they teach is central to what students need to know. They are intensified by the height and strength of those "circus rings" within the local arena, the subject departments that represent quite disparate disciplinary cultures, interests, and ideologies (Ball, 1987; Siskin, 1991, 1994b). And they are reinforced by principals who look at the school and see "the Art department," "the PE department," by teachers who see or hear of other acts only rarely, and by chairpersons defending their own territories. Which means that high schools are not just like elementary schools, but with deeper voices—as some senior managers setting educational policy seem to assume.

TAKING ON THE CHALLENGE

It is this dissonance—between the fragmented, departmentalized context of the high school, and the prescriptions for shared vision—which challenges the leaders of secondary schools. It leads the fictionalized Horace, as he calls for "redesigning the American high school," to plaintively plead with his colleagues: "Let's try to get beyond our specific subjects. . . . Is Franklin High the sum of our departmental parts?" (Sizer, 1992, p. 22).

Consistently, across the schools in the CRC study, school administrators did try, at least to some degree, to take on that challenge to develop a coherent whole that would be more than the "sum" of its "departmental parts." But how they approached that challenge varied considerably, for in the absence of standard models or well-developed theories, high school administrators develop their own quite different patterns of practice—with correspondingly different consequences.

In this section, I look more closely at three schools that have developed quite different strategies. Each school and each administrator does, of course, use a wide range of different strategies for different departments or chairs, on different days, or in different situations. Yet there are predominant, distinctive, and observable overarching patterns visible in these schools. In one, the effort has been to *break departments down*, restructuring the school and staff into "learning houses," and eliminating the position of department chair. The second has evolved a strategy of *breaching the barriers*, with a vice principal regularly attending department meetings and actively involved in departmental decisions. The third has started *building bridges*, supporting strong leadership within the departments, but also creating a variety of committees, task forces, and exchange programs that would span them.

Breaking Department Boundaries

Rancho was, when it opened in the 1970s, an innovative high school, supported by a state School Improvement initiative and funding. Its design was embedded in its neighborhood, a largely middle-class enclave at the edge of a city that the planning team had carefully studied, and they opened with optimism about their ability to "do something different." Teachers would be involved in governance, parents in before- and after-school activities, and students in new, less fragmented kinds of learning.

The school took a radical approach to dealing with departmental divisions, restructuring (back before the term became popular) in a deliberate effort to break down those departmental rings. What they called the Rancho Plan configured its faculty and staff into three advisory units, designed to center on students rather than subjects:

> It was designed in order to allow people to meet people outside of their department. It was to get away from The English Department, The Math Department. So people were in units where they were mixed . . . that was the whole idea to have the units: to get away from each department for themselves.

All staff were assigned to these units, with subject areas carefully mixed, and each unit was given its own administrator, counselors, office space and resource materials, and its own set of students. Each was intended to form its own closely knit community, centered on knowing, and advising, the whole child.

In another recounting of how the Rancho Plan came about, what becomes apparent is how tightly this new structure was also tied to issues of control and to the administrators' own personal histories with strong departments:

> We, the three administrators who came here when the school opened, were all strong department chairmen, in their own schools. And I think we all saw the dangers of a school that has a department, for whatever reason, that becomes sort of the tail that wags the dog. You have a department, a very strong English department, your school tends to kind of revolve around English; a good science department with strong people, that tends to dominate. I think that's good in lots of ways, because it does give students a chance to work in a situation that will deliver something good in those areas. But in the long run, I think it's to the detriment of other departments.

And, one might add, to the detriment of administrative control.

It was indeed a brave new vision—the stuff that dreams are made of—and one that was, by all accounts, shared by teachers and administrators alike. But at the time of the CRC study, more than 10 years later, conditions at Rancho had changed.

The second characteristic that clearly distinguishes Rancho is its location within a highly turbulent and invasive environment, one in which little was seen as stable and less as beneficial (Siskin, 1994a). In its brief history, it has gone through a series of difficult labor negotiations, court-ordered busing, a district bankruptcy, what teachers see as seemingly incessant and arbitrary turnover in administrators, a statewide tax revolt and budget shortfall, and a dramatic shift in state curriculum policy that fit Rancho's needs, according to the principal, "like a size six shoe on a size eleven foot." He went on to explain that "there's always some crisis in the district . . . so many things affect my staff; I've tried hard to buffer them from all this."

Although many of the faculty saw the administration's attempts to buffer them as somewhat futile, it appears that this strategy may have had two quite unintended consequences. First, when there is "always some crisis," buffering and coping take an inordinate amount of energy—energy that was siphoned away from efforts to build community within the new units. Instead, departments, which at least had the advantage of being familiar, became the "comfort zone."

Second, this placed the school in a defensive posture of resistance and boundary maintenance, one that, like a fractal design, repeated on larger and smaller scales throughout the system—by administrators within the district, principals in their buildings, faculty within their departments, and in some cases, individual teachers within their classrooms.

There is a siege mentality in such defensive maneuvers, and often a militant celebration over small victories or standoffs, even when the costs are high. And it is the department that teachers most often see as their first line of defense. This was the school where several science teachers told, with apparent relish, the story of how they had stolen into their assigned unit offices and taken their desks:

> And so we just, one at a time, carried our desks over here. And the principal at the time was real upset about it. He didn't say anything to us, but he was real upset about it, the fact that we had left our unit offices and come out here and isolated ourselves.

And this was the school where the math chair would not come out from behind his department barricade, even when the principal called a meeting to distribute some unexpected funds: "I told him 'I don't want to come to your meeting; we'll just take what we agreed to' . . . you'd think he would welcome it; there's never enough money, and this was one less voice fighting for it."

That there even was a chair to refuse to attend the meeting is another sign of departmental resistance, and one that came at high cost. When the district "did away with the chairs," many Rancho teachers took the unusual step of voluntarily increasing their own class enrollments, to effectively "buy out" a release period and reinstate the chair. But this meant that these chairs no longer worked—even nominally—for, or as, administrators. Rather, they served as lead teachers, selected and supported by, and owing their allegiance to, their department colleagues. This helped reinforce departmental divisions, and an "us" versus "them" schism between faculty (which included the chairs) and administration.

The actions and reactions at Rancho certainly cannot be ascribed solely to its efforts to break down department walls. But their experience does raise questions about how difficult it may be to sustain direct assaults on departments—and similar stories are beginning to emerge in more recent efforts to carve comprehensive high schools into alternative configurations (Fine, 1994; Little, 1995; Raywid, 1994; Siskin & Little, 1995). Even under more conducive conditions, it may take quite a long time to break down barriers erected over a century of educational history, and reinforced by so

many institutional factors. It may also take extraordinary (though not necessarily additional) support from the outside, the willing commitment of the faculty themselves, and the sustained time, energy, and resources required to build and maintain alternative communities. Otherwise, forceful attacks on departmental borders are likely to end up reforging them, while school visions break apart into protective divisions.

Breaching Barriers

Highlander, in contrast to Rancho, looks like an oasis of stability, for despite its setting within an auto town in Michigan where economic cuts have been at least as severe, and despite district layoffs that had just hit teachers with less than 18 years of seniority, Highlander's anchor roots are deep and its traditions carefully tended. Although it moved into a new building in the 1970s, school history is consistently traced back to its founding in the 1920s. And the principal casts its demographic shift to a primarily African American population not as change, but rather as the continuity of an "underdog" community of factory workers: "And so over the years that has been the history."

The school is distinguished, as its principal proudly related, by his being "only the fifth principal. So you are looking at 61 years, only the fifth principal; that tells you something about Highlander. There is a lot of continuity." He himself has been at the helm for 13 years and works closely with a vice principal who has been at Highlander for 21 years, and a building administrator for 14. Although there are also three assistant principals, it is in the pairing of the principal's and vice principal's roles that Highlander's strategy for dealing with departmental divisions has developed, with its vice principal breaching departmental barriers, reaching directly inside to affect what they do.

Highlander's principal acts, in his words, as "the educational leader of the building." He also spoke of hiring faculty as a crucial aspect of that leadership and took pride in having "had a lot to say" back in the days when hiring was an option. That entailed "pretty much bringing in a whole new math and science department" (including the math chair he brought from his prior school) when Highlander became a district magnet in those subjects. He spoke also of the importance of instructional leadership and of knowing the literature: "That's my job, to make people want to teach, to be a visible leader . . . but." The "but" here is important, for between the spoken theory and the unspoken practice lies a critical dissonance. As he went on to explain, the logistical demands of that model are impossible ones in large high

schools, which researchers and teachers "really don't understand; they will never understand what it takes to run a building."

Instead he turned, in this interview and in practice, to the vice principal, whom he extolled as "an outstanding administrator and one of the best educators in the county." While much of his time and attention went toward "setting the tone" and to external relationships, she was charged with the more domestic details, the "day-to-day operations of the school"—with instruction being a primary responsibility.

Through repeated statements, she emphasized the importance of instruction and the implications for her own role—one in which she blurs the line between teaching and administration:

> I am a teacher. . . . But I've found that administrators, good administrators, have to be teachers first. So I had to really understand that, that one never really leaves the field. If you're going to do the job, you must have instruction as the most important thing that the job calls for. Whether or not you are actually in the classroom or not, you are still very much a part of that.

Being still "a part of" teaching is conveyed through her actions, as well, for she frequently *is* in the classroom.

By all accounts, she remains very much a part of the daily work of teachers: greeting them at the front door in the morning (which, she said, "lets you know what kind of a day you are going to have"); "popping in [to classrooms] just to see"; modeling teaching for those having problems; regularly and actively participating in department meetings; setting the schedule of who will teach what; even "small things, such as getting all of your male department heads to wear ties. That seems like a small thing, but it sets a tone."

As the administration takes on the small things, and becomes actively involved in the routine workings of departments, the divisions between the subject areas remain, and remain quite strong. At Highlander, as at Oak Valley, it was not unusual to find teachers who did not know their colleagues from other departments. But the departments themselves were weaker here, despite the tradition of chair as a permanent appointment. Although departments did not collectively pick up their own desks or push against administrative efforts, they were also less likely to pull together for developing or sharing their work. One teacher who had just received a state award for an innovative curriculum project reported disappointment, but not surprise, that none of his colleagues, even inside his department, were aware of his project. Yet he had not turned to them while he was developing it, nor did he announce the award in his department meeting. The vice principal, however, had given enthusiastic support from the beginning.

This is a strategy that breaches the vertical division separating departments from administration, but it does little to affect the horizontal divisions between departments, which remained firmly in place at Highlander (Siskin, 1994b). Moreover, it is a strategy that depends on a special person, one who risks being overwhelmed and exhausted, and on a close relationship between the two administrators. Perhaps more consequentially for teaching and learning, it risks creating a dependence among faculty, reinforcing what Ann Lieberman has called the "creeping infantilism" of teaching (Lieberman, Saxl, & Miles, 1988). As another teacher commented, somewhat sarcastically, in the metaphor of "the school as a family" (one we heard often at this school), the teachers are likely to be the children. And it is likely to weaken the interdependencies and sense of professional community teachers might otherwise create among themselves.

Building Bridges

Like Rancho, Oak Valley is a relatively new school, this one located in a fast-growing suburban community. For a new principal who, at the time of this study, had just arrived from another California district, it afforded neither the stability nor the established relationships on which Highlander's administrative team could draw. With almost 3,000 students and 130 faculty, this school is so large that the kind of direct administrative control practiced at Highlander would be plainly unworkable. And with its departments housed in separate buildings across an expansive campus, breaking down the barriers through direct attacks, as attempted at Rancho, hardly seems feasible—there are literal, solid walls surrounding these departments, and long open spaces between them. The dominant, though very new, strategy being tried at Oak Valley is an effort to build bridges and allow at least some people a means to cross those open spaces.

A prize-winning band, marching through campus on frequent lunch hours, adds a lively reinforcement to the 36-ring circus image, and the general tone on this campus is more upbeat. Departmental divisions are particularly strong here, where the microclimates show the most extreme contrasts we encountered in the CRC study (McLaughlin & Talbert, 1993; Siskin, 1994b). And many departments are strong in another sense, as well, sending faculty to contribute to state and regional conferences, bringing in innovative programs, and piloting new state curriculum frameworks, with several earning a reputation for professional activity and excellence within their own subject area associations.

Yet the strength of these departmental divisions is clearly seen as a major problem by Oak Valley's new principal, in terms of his getting to know the faculty, of circulating information to and sharing experiences across faculty, and of the kind of curricular integration he hopes for. Moreover, particular departments pose particular problems, for within these "rings," some departments have developed practices—such as the assignment of courses by seniority—which run counter to his own sense of fair play and his vision of school purpose.

What this principal has tried to do is to build bridges: to find individuals among the faculty who hold similar ideas, to feature their acts more prominently, and to encourage teachers, particularly the younger ones, to try out new routines and build new relationships.

He found, for example, an English teacher and a science teacher with similar interests in technology, an area he very much wanted to improve, designated them as co-leaders of the technology task force, and gave them a joint release period—time that they used not only to coordinate and develop what had been quite separate ventures but also to spread them through their respective departments and across the school. Through creating committees, allocating release time for favored projects, and rearranging staff meetings and staff development, he worked to solidify the supports beneath those teachers and departments he saw as moving in the right direction and to create an infrastructure to extend their reach.

When it came time for a staff development day, he discovered he could not logistically bring the whole faculty together (there is no space large enough). Instead, he "set the stage" by setting up period-by-period mini-conferences, where every teacher with that release period came together and

> just talked about integration of skills and cross-curricular content, and it put them together and I separated each of the people by department. I didn't have department [members] together playing a [set] role and I gave them the whole hour. I was trying to set the stage, where my expectations were I wanted them to brainstorm ways they could share cross-curricular areas as well as what they're currently doing. So I had an English teacher talking with a social science teacher talking with a math teacher. What I found substantiated the fact that I have a staff that is dying in communication and dying to be able to have conversations with each other about things that matter, instead of nickel-dime administrative "how many statements do you have?" They were talking about content and the thing that was most interesting, and that I was able to capitalize on the first period, I had a physics teacher, I had a math analysis teacher who were both teaching vectors. Neither of them knew it. And they ended up sharing test questions, they ended up—they had the same kids and they ended sharing questions and they ended up doing some cross-curricular stuff and that was the first phase. Ultimately where I want to see the school is, I guess is more in

> humanities-based schools, where our English teachers talk to social science teachers, maybe even do some type of team-teaching things and do some wild stuff—which isn't wild, it's common sense, but it's wild for this system. So anyway, that was my first time.

This effort to locate, and "capitalize on," the sparks and linkages he can find within the faculty resembles what Little and Bird (1987) found in their study of instructional leadership. There, in what

> one principal described as "buttonholing," leaders find or create arenas of interest and support among a few teachers, with whom they can forge agreements on teaching practices and curriculum. Together, administrators and teachers search for common ground, existing agreements, and potential partners. In so doing, they avoid direct confrontation with immovables while testing the limits and possibilities of an idea. (p. 120)

At Oak Valley, this was a very new strategy, but one showing some positive signs of being able both to bring faculty together around the principal's vision (though not under his control) and to energize new ventures in teaching.

Paradoxically, perhaps, those cross-department ventures were most visible in the strongest departments. Richardson (1973) has suggested that it may well be that the questioning of disciplinary boundaries "must start within the relatively secure framework of a known field of study; for it is from these explorations within the known subject areas that teachers gain confidence to move outward into new territory, and perhaps to question the validity of the partitioning of knowledge as accepted traditionally by the schools" (pp. 74-75). But as Little and Bird (1987) remind us, such a strategy depends on having teachers willing to move outward in desired directions, and it risks leaving others, "the immovables," behind.

To shift the immovables requires a different strategy. By the end of his first year, the principal had identified not only teachers and chairs who were building and encouraging strong professional communities but also some "immovable" chairs and others who had not been able to move their colleagues. Although he could not respond to them individually, he could and did ask for the resignation of all chairs, invoking his right to form a new leadership team. This strategy was not an option at Rancho, where chairs had been eliminated, nor at Highlander, where the position is seen as a tenured one; at Oak Valley, even those chairs who would lose their posts conceded that this was a new principal's "right."

In the principal's search for "potential partners," he invested considerable investment time in talking with and listening to faculty, looking for what he called the "spark plugs" and "catalysts" who might lead their departments—

and removing those he felt stood in the way. That meant that even those chairs who returned to their positions (and many did) now had been "chosen" by this principal. This is, of course, a potentially divisive strategy—one which, as Hargreaves and MacMillan (1995) suggest, risks simply replacing one balkanized structure with a new configuration of "ins" and "outs." In this instance, however, the resentments likely to follow such a move were somewhat alleviated by the opening of a new high school in the district, which offered experienced teachers and chairs a literal way out.

CONCLUSION

For principals, or those involved with schoolwide change efforts, the challenge is finding a way in. Departmental divisions confront reformers with powerful barriers to schoolwide communication and community. They construct multiple "rings" that foster substantively different microclimates, where collegial relationships, even within the same school, can range from collaboration to conflict. As micropolitical units, with leaders whose tenure often outlasts their principals, they gather and dispense resources, make and mediate policies. As institutionalized subjects, they bring in differing disciplinary perspectives and lay claim to expertise and legitimacy that extend well beyond school walls. From the perspective of school leaders charged with effecting a schoolwide vision, as the administrator cited above put it, "that is a problem, and I don't know how you deal with that."

These contrasting cases of how three schools do deal with the challenge raise a set of complex issues: questions of control and conflicting interests; of tenure (and loyalties) among principals and department chairs; of general responsibilities and specialized tasks; and of expertise, legitimacy, and the plausibility of "instructional leadership" at this level. What does "shared vision" mean when there are multiple purposes organized within multiple rings in the same high school? How does one "share" a message across communication divisions that teachers seldom cross? How do teachers' "visions" depend on their disciplinary perspectives? Is instructional leadership in the high school the administrator's job? or the department chairs'? or both? Should administrators attempt to dislodge department chairs (or even department structures) categorically, take over the most critical leadership functions themselves, or locate and launch potential catalysts?

There are no answers to any of these questions here, and no easy prescriptions; each strategy has its own risks, and its own costs. Each arises out of a different context: Rancho's efforts to buffer its core from external forces; Highlander's to maintain tradition and foster improvement; Oak Valley's to

cope with rapid growth. Yet, despite the differences, in each case departments play a central role in what happens inside the schools. And the ways in which school leaders conceptualize the "problem" of departments plays out in how they envision the possibilities of change.

Together they reinforce the caveat that principals, reformers, or leaders who want to make change in high schools have to deal with departments, one way or another. The cases illuminate a persistent, and intricate, dilemma of high schools, and one that we need to look at more closely before we speak of shared visions and site-based management in these 36-ring sites.

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