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CHAPTER 6

Is the School the Unit of Change?

Internal and External Contexts of Restructuring

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This chapter reports a study of a single high school in California, here called Rancho, which back in 1976 began an experiment: a planned change in its organizational and instructional structures. A case study of a single school always raises questions about the possibility, and the advisability, of attempting to generalize; and this story may be particularly suspect, since in one sense, it is a story of a school that might have been—a case of planned change that did not quite turn out the way anyone planned. Moreover, since the experiment began almost 15 years ago, this might be considered ancient history in educational research. But that time span allows for a rare glimpse into longitudinal data, as teachers' remember what was and connect it to the long-term effects (and noneffects) of a planned change effort. Moreover, this effort, and its effects, are particularly salient now, since Rancho's planned change looked very much like what we presently call "restructuring"—a kind of change that educational researchers, policy makers, and practitioners are almost unavoidably entangled with today, when "the political climate has made [it] hard to resist" (Boyd, 1987, p. 94).

Restructuring attempts depend on implicit assumptions about the school as a professional community—one to which increased site-level autonomy could and should be granted and in which shared goals, norms, and objectives can and will be established. These are assumptions that the Rancho case calls into question and that the established literatures on professional and occupational communities take as problematic, for the focus there has been to highlight interdependence and interconnectedness rather than autonomy, and internal divisions and groupings rather than unitary goals. Huberman (1990), for example, directly challenges the restructuring advocates, declaiming that "I would submit that the logic of using the school building as the unit of analysis and intervention, when we are talk-

ing about at least 25–30 teachers and support staff and 500 pupils, is a goofy logic” (p. 32). When we are talking about high schools with even larger staffs and student bodies, his point is particularly apt. An alternative logic, drawing on more complex models of extended and fragmented professional communities, suggests that in examining the case of Rancho, or any attempt to restructure, we need to look not only at the school as unit of change, but also at the external communities of which the local schools are a part and the internal subcommunities that partition local high schools (see, for example, Ball & Bowe, 1991; Little, 1990a, 1990b; McLaughlin, Talbert, & Bascia, 1990; Rosenholtz, 1989; Siskin, 1991, 1994; Van Maanen & Barley, 1984). The strong suggestion emerging from this work is that context matters (McLaughlin et al., 1990) and that relevant contexts may include only portions of a school, with departments being a prime example, or may extend well beyond its boundaries. As Ball and Bowe (1991) found in their study of the recent British reform efforts, the “power” to change what goes on in schools “is strongly circumscribed by the contextual features of institutions over which the State may find that control is both problematic and contradictory” (p. 28). The purpose of this chapter, then, is to look at the case of Rancho’s attempt at school-level restructuring within a context of problematic and often contradictory features of institutions within and surrounding the school.

THE CONTEXT OF RESTRUCTURING

The early 1980s were a difficult time for schools and educators, as claims of crisis and charges of failure were levied from all sides. From the media came headlines such as “Why Public Schools Fail” (1981) and “Help! Teacher Can’t Teach” (1980); from business leaders came demands for “quality control” over products from our schools that left them unable to compete in the international marketplace; from a spate of national reports came titles such as *A Nation at Risk* and the rhetoric of impending doom: “We have been committing an act of unthinking, unilateral educational disarmament” (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983, p. 5); and, finally, from the legislators came a virtual explosion of activity (Kirst, 1983) culminating in over 1,000 pieces of state legislation largely aimed at tightening controls over teachers and teaching (Darling-Hammond & Berry, 1988). By 1983, the year the National Commission on Excellence in Education released *A Nation at Risk*, 38 states had mandated student testing requirements, 35 had launched new curriculum development efforts, and 30 had imposed district- or school-level planning requirements (Education Commission of the States, 1983).

Within a few years, however, a so-called second wave brought to center stage an apparently miraculous intervention, as educational rhetoric moved from *A Nation at Risk* to *A Nation Prepared* (Carnegie Forum on Education and the Economy, 1986). The language of doom escalated to apocalyptic promise as advocates sought to bring us to the dawn of a new era: The state of New York, for example, released its “Compact for Learning” with the opening phrase “As the millenium approaches.” On the same rhetorical level, the Canadian Association for Teacher Education pronounced its 1991 convention “On the threshold of a new age: Restructuring teacher education.” The Nabisco corporation offered \$100,000 to \$250,000 annual grants to what it calls “Next Century Schools”—schools that develop “restructured” structures to include shared commitment by school and community. Such plans for “sustained, wide-ranging change” must “extend beyond traditional concepts or the status quo” because “the next century is just around the corner” (*Fortune*, 1990).

Emerging from the fallout is the growing sense that what education and the nation need is a complete restructuring of schools and, even more surprising, that teachers need to be involved in the decision-making process for the effort to work. This is something on which a wide range of reformers, observers, practitioners, and policy makers agree, although—or perhaps because—there is so little agreement on what, specifically, “restructuring” means. Taking its lessons from research on “effective schools” (Purkey & Smith, 1983) and from a generation of change studies that suggest policy makers “cannot mandate what matters” (McLaughlin, 1987, p. 172) and cannot make effective policy without considering the level of the school, this reform attempt seems to have moved beyond those findings to assume that change must occur at the level of the individual school and that the school is therefore the appropriate unit of change. Advocates argue not only for a new structure but also for local schools to have the ability and responsibility to develop, modify, and design the appropriate structure themselves (Schlechty, 1991).

It is this assumption, that the school is the most appropriate unit of change, as well as the apparently underlying assumption, that the school is a discrete and unitary body, that the Rancho case leads us to question. There has been a tendency in the restructuring movement to think we can, and should, consider the school as a unit that is both discrete (as if somehow we could isolate it from the larger communities within which it is inextricably embedded and interconnected) and unitary (as if a common, and commonly shared, goal would override patterns of complex, and sometimes competing, internal divisions).

Rancho, then, serves as a case history of an early attempt at what is now being promoted as restructuring and illustrates the interaction of a

restructuring attempt with external and internal community forces. For, according to a former principal, "Rancho seems to be ahead of its time. It embodied what all the new commission reports recommend." And, since it was "ahead of its time," it allows us to see what time has done to the early visions of what this school could, and should, become.

THE RANCHO PLAN

In 1976 a team of administrators and teachers, selected before the school was even built, were authorized by a supportive district to "be something different" and to develop what resembled a site-based management program. This was a growing community, with a fairly stable middle-class population, and the team spent the first planning year analyzing local student needs, visiting innovative programs, and devising structural alternatives. Although the district relied primarily on local taxes for funding, they obtained extra funds available through a state program for what was then called "school improvement" but that sounds much like the grants currently available for "restructuring"—grants for school sites that would put forward innovative proposals and would include, in some form, community involvement (with community involvement defined to include faculty, staff, student, and parent input in decision making).

After a year of planning, of assessing students and community needs, the team put forward their "Rancho Plan." As one of the original teachers remembers it:

At that time there was a strong message from the district to decentralize. Rancho was supposed to be different. The school improvement council was supposed to be a viable, powerful body. As a teacher I would have input over what happened in the school. We had leadership training, training in conflict resolution, shared decision making. We were on the cutting edge. We could generate our own curriculum to match student needs; we had resources, time, money.

Through the Rancho Plan, they were given free rein to define what they saw as necessary to develop a good school for their particular student body—to design new staffing patterns, curricula, even to be involved in the design of the building itself, through district support and state funding they were given the resources to put their design in place. Both alterations in "rules, roles, and relationships" and attention to desired "results"—the characteristics Corbett (1990) uses to identify restructuring—came into play as the Rancho team created what one participant called "a special vision in terms of educational design."

By all accounts it was an exhilarating period. An administrator recalls it as the "Camelot period where things were possible and funding was possible. A different time." And a former social studies teacher remembers how "I said all these years I've been putting my fingers in curricular dikes. Wouldn't it be grand to build one? Build a program the way it should be?" He likens the feeling of creativity and potential in those first years to "kind of walking with the gods." With this apparently almost euphoric sense of mission, the team began to implement the Rancho Plan.

The vision this team developed called for deliberate restructuring of traditional organizational design, replacing departmental divisions and hierarchical levels with three advisory units. All staff, including administrators, 85 teachers, counselors, and clerical staff, were divided into these units, called "learning houses." Each unit would operate to some degree independently, but all shared the same central function: advising students. Each unit member had a core group of about 20 students to meet with during a once-a-week advisory period and to act as advocate for during the students' entire time in the school. Advisers would be "monitors for success as well as for failure" and would be able to develop the close relationships with their students that traditional high school design makes so difficult. The Rancho design centered around the needs of the students, since, as an English teacher explains, "student needs would drive what the units would produce," but it was also attentive to the needs of staff for collegial relationships, in that the units would provide "a sense of community" that the school as a whole was too large to permit. Other teachers confirm the value of these units to their own needs: "The unit provided a structure for community, a means of support" observes one teacher; "It makes the school smaller and mitigates alienation" notes another.

The staff who were chosen for this school, and who chose to come to Rancho, were by all accounts a special group of people—on a number of dimensions. They were strong academically. They were also, as one teacher remembers, "leaders, opinion setters." Another describes them as "the risk takers. It was a very innovative school; it was going to try to set a brand new trend in education." Yet another describes them as "boat rockers" and "rebels" among other, more graphic terms ("shit disturbers"), adding that their former schools were at least as happy to be rid of them as Rancho was to welcome them. They either came in as, or were quickly converted to, advocates for the special mission of caring for students. Their commitment to the students, and to a caring relationship with them, appears at times extraordinary. One teacher recalls how she had a problem with one student:

It was about five years ago. She was being abused, and I said "Why don't you come home, you know, feel that you can stay at my house if it gets

really bad . . .” That night there was the daughter, there was the mother, and there was the son. They moved in. Of course, I allowed it to happen, but they moved in. They stayed with me so long [about 6 weeks] that I was afraid that I was going to have to buy a six-foot Christmas tree.

Yet even with the extraordinary staff selected by and committed to the Rancho vision, even with the extra resources and the support to “be different,” there was an awareness of the difficulties inherent in what they were trying to do—for the Rancho Plan was a deliberate challenge to what Sarason (1971) has called the “regularities” of schooling. Of particular concern was the potency of the traditional departmentalized boundaries, which the new structure set out deliberately to break down. Like Sizer (1984), these planners cast the departmentalized structure of the high school as a villain, fragmenting the school for teachers and learning for the students. Their Rancho Plan would “get away from” that divisive structure:

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.

The administrators who were coming into the school all saw strong departments as a threat to what they wanted to accomplish. One explains that “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.” For these administrators, the units were a way of avoiding the fragmentation, and the competition, that they had seen in their own experience:

The units were really a way of having teachers structured in a nondepartmental fashion. And the thing they had in common was being advisers, and the focus was the role of the adviser. And the idea was that you would force teachers, because of the set that you would put them in, you would force them to really look at the total student. And to look at the educational experience from an organizational point of view. And so when you talk about organizational changes, or thrust, or looking at a new magnet focus, or trying to decide how to realign advisory, you do it through that arena. Now there are still some things that you can discuss in your department. The department focus is fairly narrow, isn't it? It has

been. They tend to look at English as the only thing that is of concern. And you know, perhaps that's the way it should be. You need to have some of that kind of an ethnocentric way of looking at it. But we wanted for each teacher to play both of those roles. To also look at the school as a whole, just as an administrator does, or a counselor. Most teachers don't have that experience in high school.

Yet the Rancho staff recognized that factors both external (in the expectations of the wider community) and internal (in the orientation of subject-specialist teachers) would push and pull on the unit structure. For these teachers refer repeatedly to their sense of belonging to the wider, subject-based community and the pull that community exerts: to science teachers' need “to go to science conferences and things like that”; to their friendships with teachers from within their fields but outside the school; to the demands of subject-based exams such as the College Boards and Advanced Placement tests; and to the feedback of returning students who reported on their performance in the subject in college. One of the original English teachers remembers the pull “from outside—colleges, district mandates,” observing almost wistfully that Rancho was “intended to be interdisciplinary” but “the secondary school was simply too entrenched in their [traditional] structure, particularly in terms of curriculum,” so that “everyone was willing, there was extra money to make it work, but the plan just didn't materialize.” They tried a variety of experiments but they “couldn't resist the weight”; it was just “too much to take on.”

Nor was the pressure coming exclusively from external sources, for the teachers themselves, by their training, interests, and experience, were well entrenched in the traditional departmental divisions. The vice-principal commented on the push from inside—from the strength of the individual teacher's orientation to subject:

We had representatives from the units, that were elected by their constituents; they were to kind of represent the student and the school as a whole. And of course, none of that is that clean . . . no teacher is ever going to think about his role as an adviser and forget that he's a social studies teacher. But it's interesting, when people are given roles, they tend to somewhat fulfill those roles. I think that kind of happened.

From inside and outside, then, from the very beginning, the Rancho staff recognized the potency of curricular categories and subject-matter orientation that would challenge their efforts; for even in a brand new high school, with a new vision, “none of it is that clean.”

STRIFE, STRESS, CHAOS

In the beginning, despite the push and pull of subject-specific pressures, the teachers, and the units, did “tend to somewhat fulfill these roles.” The organizational chart of the school listed the names of all staff members in three columns, one for each unit. Within each column were groupings of “learning areas”—such as Communication or Cultural Skills—with departmental affiliation reduced to a parenthetical abbreviation. The unit offices, where teachers had their desks, began to fill with the trappings to make them more attractive and more of a home base—coffee makers, a microwave, a comfortable couch, posters and pictures. Although they were not designed to be thematically distinct, each unit began to take on a distinct identity, a personality of its own: “Unit 3 is argumentative; unit 1 has strong personalities; unit 2 is the good guys . . . [we] find it easy to make decisions, we get along” reported a perhaps somewhat biased member of unit 2.

Following quickly on the heels of the Camelot era, however, came a series of unforeseen and unforeseeable events, which created a period teachers characterize as one of “strife, stress, chaos.” Even a site-based management school is embedded within the context of the larger educational community, and actions taken by the district, state, and even the courts played a critical role in shaping events at Rancho. A vice-principal recalls her experience vividly, characterizing the “contingency universe” within which a school operates:

We had a year to plan this school. Then we had what we call the “We Agree” with the staff, commitments, and then moved from there. And the structure was that every four years you recommit . . . kind of a fine-tuning thing . . . that was nice, because we were a SIP [School Improvement Program] school, and we could use SIP days [for staff development], and then the board took those away, and said no, we do not want to have students that are not going to school, we want them in school for longer hours. And that was devastating. So, but that was only one thing. It was sort of like a contingency universe. You touch this one little thing there [that] didn’t seem in and of itself all that significant, but it really had a rippling effect to all kinds of things.

I can tell you, in the time that I was an administrator here we went through such horrendous . . . we went through a strike, we went through Proposition 13, we went through a reconfiguration of the total secondary program from a three-year high school to a four-year high school. In the meantime, after Proposition 13, we went from a six-period school day to a five-period day. Then we phased in, and this was all because of the bank-

ruptcy, we went back to a six-period day for ninth and tenth graders only. This all during the time that I was a curriculum VP here. Learning how to do this was really traumatic. But it just shows you, boy, I’ll tell you, you survive and kids still learn, and things still go on.

In this swirl of activity, three sets of events stand out as critical to the functioning of the Rancho design—events that altered the financial, the demographic, and the curricular makeup of the school.

Proposition 13 and Financial Change

First, and almost immediately, came financial challenges. Proposition 13, the California taxpayer revolt, sharply curtailed local authority’s capacity to raise taxes and dramatically increased the dependence of school districts on state aid. In the next few years, the district would lay off more than 500 teachers, cut the high school day to five periods, and eliminate support positions, such as counselors and department chairs, the former of which had been crucial to the Rancho design. Without this support, the teachers found themselves on overload, as “they changed the names but the work remained.”

When the state, itself facing fiscal shortfalls, decided that districts with declining enrollments would receive no increases in aid, the district situation worsened. As relations between the school and the district grew increasingly tense, and strikes became a regular occurrence, the board closed 17 schools and moved the ninth graders into what had been 10–12 high schools. This reconfiguration brought into Rancho a new group of teachers who were neither selected for nor committed to the advisory program, at a time when the school no longer had the resources of counseling staff or in-service time to prepare them. At the same time, in response to the board’s decisions to defer agreed-upon pay raises and to continue to lay off large numbers of staff, the teachers began what would become a persistent tradition of “work-to-rule” practice, refusing to perform any but contractually specified tasks—a hardship in any school, but particularly in one that depended on a model of participatory decision making and extracurricular advising. Department meetings, unit meetings, curriculum development, work on developing a new peer observation program—all came to screeching halt, since all such activities are dependent on teachers taking on more than they are obligated or paid to do. As one Rancho teacher put it, “We aren’t going to kill ourselves when we don’t feel there is any payoff there.” Another noted that the problem “shows up in class. Teachers say they are not working as hard; they pretend to be working. They’re unhappy; their hearts are not in their work.”

Desegregation and Demographic Change

The second major challenge to the Rancho Plan came from a court-ordered desegregation plan, which dramatically changed the student body, dispersing the neighborhood students whose needs the plan had been designed to serve and bringing in new students with new sets of problems. As one teacher said, "We've gone from being a school that was very, very middle-class and upper-middle class to a wide range of students and all the problems they bring." And students brought these problems from longer distances: The districtwide magnet program meant students came from diverse and distant neighborhoods. For a school structured around community input and involvement, this made getting parents into the building almost impossible; and the busing schedule made altogether impossible the extra contact, the before- and after-school conferences with teachers, which had been a cornerstone of the program. Teachers felt that the court-ordered solution ignored the realities of their lives and those of their students: "The court monitor should ride the bus for one solid month, every day, to see what it's really like for these kids, and to be subjected to the same gang aspects on the same bus, and to be subject to the insults and the inconvenience."

With the arrival of these new students, many of whom did not speak English, teachers found themselves having to develop new skills to teach new assignments, such as ESL classes and transition classes; although they wanted to maintain the school goals of personalization and caring, they were not always sure how to do so. In addition, district support was often absent, since the staff development days and support staff had been lost to the budget cuts, or in some instances devastatingly present, but dissonant with the school goals—as when the district brought in a consultant to work with teachers around an adopted transition program. A frustrated teacher recounted how one day a student (unsure of what a word in the story had meant) had asked a question, so the teacher turned to the class to see if anyone else could provide the answer. The consultant, who happened to be in the room, later "just got all over my case and said 'never have another student answer another student's question . . . don't take time with her, she's just sidetracking you; you've got to keep this pace up.' It was just awful." What was now being defined as "sidetracking" was what the teachers had seen as central to the personalized mission of the school: responsiveness to the individual needs of a student.

Standardized Access and Curricular Changes

In another move, which made the district's presence devastatingly felt, the central office responded to the desegregation order by moving to standard-

ize curriculum to assure the monitors that all students had an equal opportunity to learn. From the superintendent's perspective, this was essential: There was "no choice. We need to be consistent. We have to standardize access and curriculum. It is not a matter of philosophy; it is a matter of necessity. Suddenly, people at the district level are working on aligning, standardizing, and so forth. Teachers resent this." The teachers at Rancho clearly did resent this, for it undermined the essence of what they thought their school was all about and removed the sense of control over decisions critical to their work:

You had staff input, shared decision making; you felt like you had control of your fate. When they centralized they took away the control of the school; they made edicts outside the school. It just goes on and on and you felt totally helpless. . . . As the board became more and more conservative and started to become centralized, it started reviewing some of [the principal's] decisions. And once you did that he had to take the responsibility for our decisions and he started overriding decisions that the School Improvement Council made, or not using the SIC as a vehicle.

Also undermining the teachers' sense of control were the effects of the first wave of educational reform, as the state omnibus education bill began to hit the classrooms in a series of "framework" guidelines covering texts, content, and teaching techniques, as well as tests to monitor their adoption. While this bill was adopted back in 1983, it had taken several years for the actual guidelines to reach the schools. Increasingly, then, curricular decisions were seen as centralized, standardized, and distanced from the classroom and the school decision-making structures.

This list may seem like an extraordinary litany of disasters and may call into question what this case can possibly have to do with other attempts at restructuring—for how could such a bizarre confluence of crises ever be repeated? But even a quick look at recent events suggests that the Rancho case may not be unique, as the educational system struggles, "despite trends toward increasing centralization," with "a fairly extensive movement toward site-based management" amidst the added stress of fiscal crises (Sergiovanni, Burlingame, Coombs, & Thurston, 1992, p. 26). The San Francisco schools, as they move to embrace "restructuring," face growing state and district budget deficits, while the centralized California frameworks are still coming down the system and the new tests coming up. In New York City, where there has been a strong push for restructuring and site-based management, the system is confronting fiscal crises strong enough to keep a presidential contender out of the race, while the Regents Board is redesigning and tightening curricular requirements at the state

level. And, across the country, while teachers are concerned with the need to reconfigure programs to meet the challenges of changing neighborhoods and of changing needs of diverse groups of students, there is increasing talk and active research on the feasibility of a uniform national test. Such contextual features surely present current reformers with "problematic and contradictory" issues of control (Ball & Bowe, 1991).

REASSERTION OF DEPARTMENTAL COMMUNITIES

Whether or why restructuring attempts are likely to face formidable external challenges is not, however, central to this present inquiry. Rather, my thesis is that in *making the school the unit of change* these efforts risk neglecting both external and internal contextual features that may play critical roles in the outcome. The Rancho case demonstrates how—under conditions of stress from the external educational community—even a group of teachers dedicated to restructuring design, convinced of the need to overcome departmental fragmentation and divisiveness, committed to extraordinary ways to the needs of students, and willing to take extraordinary means to address those needs, ultimately retreated into the traditional departmental divisions that they had originally defined as part of the problem.

Over time, the departmental boundaries at Rancho have been reasserted. The members of each subject area have retreated into the familiar territory of the department, and within each have developed distinctive norms, values, and relationships to sustain themselves. The internal pull toward the department is strong; one of the chairs notes that even administrators tend to gravitate toward their former subject areas: "More attention is given to that department. I'm sure it's because it's their comfort zone; it's where they feel most comfortable" and with the other areas they "feel like they're out of their league. I don't mean that as a put-down; I just mean that's the way it is." Under the stressful conditions, Rancho teachers needed to find a "comfort zone."

Science was the first to go, breaking off even before the state guidelines hit. Despite the initial aim of breaking down departmental divisions and scattering teachers across the units, the science classes remained architecturally clustered around the water and gas lines of their labs. Built as spokes around a central common hub, without walls, this classroom structure meant that science teachers early and inevitably became closely connected. They could see and hear what was going on in one another's classes and found it necessary to coordinate planning, so that one class would not

be taking a test while the group next door was listening to a clearly audible lecture.

Although all teachers were assigned originally to desks in the unit offices, the science teachers found themselves as connected to their lab stations as the gas lines were: "In science, and I would think in classes like home economics and shop, activity-oriented classes, it's impossible. You can't do your preparation away from your materials. You cannot do that from a unit office. It's impossible."

Several members told, with relish, the story of how they came into the unit offices early on and moved their desks (all are men): "You can't do your preparation away from your materials. 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." They literally picked up and left the unit offices, and they now report that they have little reason to venture out from their stronghold.

When they do venture out of their stronghold, it is with collective strength and purpose. With their close contact and early frustration with the "they" that could not understand their needs and had provided them with inappropriate conditions and materials, the science teachers quickly coalesced into a distinct and distinctive subgroup; a social studies teacher explained that "they were nicknamed, at one time, the swarm." They found that as a group, as a "swarm" of science teachers, they were able to make demands on the system. The principal describes how "science is very independent and good, but they complain the most. I like them. They've filed a lot of grievances."

The particular architectural arrangements of the labs created another set of constraints for the science teachers, for not only were the gas lines fixed, so too were the numbers of stations at which students could work. This became an issue when district budget cutting took away the release time for department chairs, making it difficult to accomplish what had been their routine responsibilities: "They change the name, but the person still gets to do all the work." In most departments, however, teachers negotiated to increase the size of their own classes, thereby relieving the chair of one class assignment. But, because there are only a limited number of stations in each lab, the science teachers did not have this option. Their alternative was to share the work. They divided most of the administrative responsibilities among four teachers, but much of the decision making has involved the whole department and has continued the centripetal force pulling department members together into a collective group.

The collective strength of the department also served as a base for political action—several of the science teachers are or have been active as union representatives, and one described how the fears of administrative retaliation for union activism are lessened because of the privileged status of science teachers, since “to an extent the science teachers are an endangered species.” An active union member, who is not in science, commented on the disproportionate representation of science teachers in union activities, saying that “there’s something about mathematicians and scientists when they get this social conscience that seems to say ‘I know how to do this.’” One new teacher described how he was rapidly socialized into the shared political, as well as professional, values of this department: “The science department is very strong in the union,” and eating lunch together “they’d talk about problems . . . and the more I found out the angrier I got” until he also became a union representative, despite the countervailing forces of his low status as a new teacher and high demands as a new father.

While science may provide the most dramatic examples of a department as a distinct community within Rancho, these teachers are far from alone in their departmental solidarity. The math teachers, for example, work together closely around curricular and instructional matters. As one describes it, “We do, as a department, plan what needs to be covered in a year, and we have what’s called readiness tests” to determine who can go on to the next level, and supplemental materials “the department put together before I came here, and we’ve all agreed to use that in addition to the textbook.” A number of teachers report sitting in on one another’s classes to learn how the material is taught before they take on that course themselves. One tells how he sat in on a calculus class “even though I had to give up my own prep[aration] time to do it” and of how another teacher, who was assigned pre-algebra, which “she had never taught before, she came into my class every day; she gave up her prep [time] everyday . . . and would be two days behind me and just follow what I did. That seemed to help her.”

In this department, teachers are tightly tied by the strength of their common assumptions and also by the length of their shared experience—several of the leaders have been teaching together since the late 1960s, and they have “brought [the others] in” from other schools. But rather than acting as a “swarm” that directs activity outward to school and district politics, the math department seems to observers to have retreated inward—to where they can count on a common understanding largely absent in the wider community. “It is an unhappy feeling, is it not?” observes one teacher from his vantage point outside the department, later referring to the department attitude as “this sort of inward withdrawal . . . it’s the same

syndrome of always fighting the last war sort of thing.” As a group, they have refused to participate in a number of school activities, ranging from the first-year interviews for this study to a recent meeting called when the principal found he had additional monies to distribute: “I [the chair] 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.” While the principal hardly welcomed their nonparticipation, he found few ways that year to address the math department’s siege strategy.

The sense of embattlement is very strong here, for in the recent movements to district standardization and state guidelines, the math department both has the most to lose and is the most likely to lose. Within the department, teachers share a set of assumptions about testing, placement, and tracking that are seen as essential to their own success and that of their students. Outside the department, these assumptions not only are not shared but are actively opposed by school, district, and state officials. “We think there are three levels of kids in this school below algebra 1, and most people don’t want to believe that” said one math teacher, and to the math department the difference in these levels is obvious. But, he continued, “The movers and shakers in the educational business, at least in this district, want to deny [that]. . . . Folks that are saying that don’t know; they just don’t know. They’re just on a political kind of trip.” The decision to eliminate tracking has significant consequences to the math teachers, who have to deal with what they see as wrongly placed students: “They’re just going to have a miserable year and fail, and I’ll have a miserable year, the kids that are O.K. will have a miserable year; everything’s miserable because . . . folks won’t admit that they should be more attentive to where they put kids.” From this perspective, the decision clearly has important consequences, but from outside the shared understanding of the math department, the situation looks quite different and is seen in more humorous light. One teacher from another department described “this convoluted little policy they had where there were 9,000 ways one got into mathematics. There was pre-algebra, pre-pre-algebra, pre-pre-pre-algebra, and things like that.” The math teachers have largely given up trying to convince such an unresponsive audience; they can only retreat into their own territory and hope to wait out the opposition.

In English, the anger over recent changes is least obvious, and the retreat into departmental boundaries seems least deliberate—it just seems to have happened. A science teacher characterized this department as having only two or three activists around any issue; for the rest, “whatever happens, happens.” But while they have not actively rebelled like the science department or withdrawn like the math department, what they have

done is to congregate quietly within the unit to which their chair is assigned. When the administrators realized that this unit had a disproportionate number of English teachers (teachers had been given some choice of membership), they changed the official assignments, but the teachers have crept back, unofficially and quietly.

For the English teachers, the importance of the departmental community is described not in technical or political terms, but in social terms of friendship, of individual rather than group-subject identification. Often it is not directly stated at all, but comes out almost parenthetically; when asked about who her colleagues would be, one began, "Peggy, who's one of the other English teachers, and Denise, who's next door who's another English teacher . . . ; Nira is also an English teacher . . . we were young, bright, and eager English teachers together more years ago than we want to admit." Another echoed this same theme, with the personal identifications first, and the professional or pedagogical connections almost as afterthoughts: "Most of the time I spend with two other English teachers . . . then outside of school I have a lot of friends, who are also English teachers . . . with the teachers here I would say it's mostly social . . . although we do talk some about teaching, but the two I'm best friends with don't teach anything remotely like what I'm teaching . . . although [we] did at one time collaborate." Many of these English teachers mourn the decline of the unit structure, like the chair who observed, "You lose the sense of the whole [now] . . . we work more in isolation from one another; I miss it." Yet to collaborate, to socialize, or simply to commiserate, they turn almost inevitably toward their subject-matter colleagues, unintentionally contributing to the demise of the unit structure and the reassertion of the departmental one.

DEPARTMENT AS COMMUNITY

These stories of demise and reassertion can lead us toward an alternative logic for restructuring. As one teacher put it, "It's really strange to see us turning around and heading back, given all that we've been through. And you see all these national publications coming out and everything, saying where we should be, and we were there." For the faculty at Rancho, as at many schools, are experienced not only in teaching but also in weathering reforms (Louis & Miles, 1990). As veterans in both areas, they have good reason to raise questions about the substance of these new efforts at restructuring and about the sustained commitment necessary to see them through. In particular, they raise two sets of concerns about viewing the school as the unit of change.

First, they remind us that, while restructuring advocates may have moved to agreement on taking the school as the "focus of change" (Goodlad, 1991), we need to keep a watchful eye on the rest of the system and become mindful of how that context matters (McLaughlin et al., 1990). Rancho's story provides an instructive example of how schools and their staffs operate within a "contingency universe" wherein events outside their borders, and beyond their control, have profound consequences. State budget changes, new tests or curriculum guidelines, the election of new officials—all can disrupt even the best-laid local plans. As Darling-Hammond (1992) has argued, for restructuring to "make these changes last," we need complementary policy development and political support to accompany the current emphasis on professional development (p. 17). When these three components do not move in concert, they often conflict—leaving schools such as Rancho and their staffs in untenable positions.

Second, as either restructuring efforts or the "rippling effects" of this contingency universe come into large comprehensive high schools, they meet the complex structural and cultural divisions of subject departments, where school visions are reinterpreted in sometimes diverging and conflicting ways, and where specialist teachers grapple with their own subject-specific contingencies (Siskin, 1994).

Departments are, as the Rancho English teachers suggest, a likely site for personal connections that support and sustain individuals, "comfort zones," which may unobtrusively encourage professional development or simply afford a sympathetic ear. They are a site for professional identity among faculty who have chosen and studied their particular subjects, belong to subject associations, and work within a single content area—and where, as the administrator above observed, a teacher is unlikely to "forget that he's a social studies teacher." Departments provide, as the math teachers' experience attests, a mechanism for getting specialized work accomplished—and an arena for having it valued. And, as the ripples of external events touch only one department (as with new curriculum guidelines), or have differential effects (increased class size), this sense of specialization is further reinforced. Departments can serve, as science teachers demonstrate, as a base for political action, for pulling in resources and for pushing agendas. Under increasing pressures for change but contracting resources, these micropolitical coalitions are likely to become particularly visible (Ball & Bowe, 1991). Supported by the external pulls of the larger educational community and the internal push of their own members, subject departments remain a likely site for clearly defined and potent subcommunities—even within a high school whose philosophical and organizational arrangements are designed to break them down.

This is not to suggest that departmental divisions are inevitable, but

rather that they are remarkably resilient, even when deliberately targeted for extinction, and that they pose a particular challenge to restructuring efforts. Nor is it to suggest that departments are the only sites around which distinctive communities can form, but rather that the conditions within schools and the pressures from without make them highly likely sites. Understanding that there are likely, resilient, and consequential professional communities within high schools can further educators' attempts to analyze or to reform them.

We need to recognize the problematic nature of viewing the school—or at least the high school—as the unit of change. What Rancho provides is an example of planned change, of the contingency universes that result from the school's embeddedness in the larger, turbulent community of educational policymakers, and of the power and resilience of departmental boundaries in defining subunits within the high school. The Rancho Plan is not an example of failed change—for many of its original features are retained, are purposeful, and remain important to the staff—but of the changing nature of change efforts as they are implemented and interpreted in the internal and external contexts of multiple communities over time.

NOTE

1. Teachers and administrators at Rancho were interviewed, observed, and surveyed over a three-year period (1988–1991) during which they participated in a study conducted by the Center for Research on the Context of Secondary School Teaching, Stanford University. Research for that project, from which this chapter is drawn, was supported by funds from the U.S. Department of Education Office of Educational Research and Improvement.

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CHAPTER 7

The Empowerment Movement

Genuine Collegiality or Yet Another Hierarchy?

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As with any initiative in education, this decade already has its share of school reform analysts who speculate about the flurry of rhetoric and activity related to current reform efforts (Cuban, 1990; Gibbonney, 1991; Sarason, 1990). They share the hope that we can better understand why reforms return at various times in our history, yet seldom substantially alter the regularities of schooling. Cuban (1990) tells us that “the existing tools of understanding are no more than inadequate metaphors that pinch-hit for hard thinking. We can do better by gathering data on particular reforms and tracing their life history in particular classrooms, schools, districts, and regions” (pp. 11–12). “Empowerment” is one such metaphor. It has spawned a substantial movement in educational policy and practice, yet the term itself becomes problematic as it is used in the various school reform scenarios and texts. Within the “empowerment movement” a kind of illusion is created. There is a tacit understanding of what the term *empowerment* means and how it can be played out in the realities of school life. In the name of empowerment, imperatives are offered, programs are put into place, and people’s lives are affected by the multiple understandings of what the word means. In the following pages¹ we attempt to characterize the empowerment movement, briefly mentioning various “empowerment” initiatives such as career ladders, site-based management, differentiated staffing, mentor programs, and lead teachers. The focus of our study is on the Lead Teacher Program in Pennsylvania. We describe the consequences of the program through the voices of participants themselves. We conclude with a discussion of observations and obstacles as lessons learned from these participants as well as our attempt to recover a deeper understanding of empowerment as a primary condition of educational life.