
Freeing Teachers: The Promise of Teacher Professional Partnerships

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Virtually all of our discussion about improving teaching occurs within the traditional assumption that teachers are employees managed by administrators, rather than professionals in control of their work. Current efforts to train teachers, to improve teacher-practice, to recruit teachers, to retain teachers and to change the way in which teachers are compensated all take place within this boss/worker, master/servant framework. Minds are locked into the notion that if you want to be a teacher you have to be an employee.

This assumption of employment makes the effort at improvement a program of professional development organized by management. This is assumed to be the most effective way to secure the changes in teaching that researchers and policymakers are convinced are now required. Improving teaching is—clearly if implicitly —“something the boss does.”

In all this, the teachers may or may not be consulted. The assumption of employment does not encourage the notion of teachers as leaders. The administrators are the leaders. Nor

does the assumption really allow the notion of teachers as professionals. Teachers may want to think of teaching as a profession. But teachers do not control their work, which is the test of being a professional. Education is not organized on a professional model. Whatever the school, the rule is almost absolute: if you want to be a teacher you have to be an employee.

Within the school building it is the principal who is considered the instructional leader. *Principal* was once an adjective—principal teacher. Today *principal* has become a noun; is an administrator.

Arguably the principal today has no time to be an instructional leader. The old theory hangs on partly because boards guard the area of professional issues jealously as a management right. Boards do not particularly want teachers to be the instructional leaders.

This may not be the best framework to improve teachers and teaching. And we probably are not doing well in our effort to change and improve teaching within the conventional employer/employee framework. We might do better if the assumption of employment were pulled out, and the questions of training, recruitment, retention, practices, professional development, and compensation were rethought on the assumption that teachers could be professionals working in partnerships.

It clearly is possible to organize K-12 education on a professional model. Teachers could have and should have the option to work if they wish—as many architects and engineers and

consultants and accountants and lawyers and doctors do—with colleagues, in a professional group they collectively own, with the administrators working for them.

This might be a better framework to change teaching. In an effort to improve teaching it is probably not smart to leave out the teachers. It would obviously help to be working for improvement in an arrangement that mobilizes the teachers' energies and abilities fully toward the goal . . . that gives teachers a real opportunity to improve what they do and reasons to make these changes in their own interest.

It does appear many teachers would like a professional arrangement. In a survey by Public Agenda early in 2003, two-thirds of the new teachers (fewer than five years' experience) and half the veteran teachers (over twenty years) said they would be somewhat or very interested in working in an arrangement where they could run the school.

The Essentials of the Partnership Arrangement

Having known nothing but the employer/employee arrangement, it's hard to think of teaching arranged in any fundamentally different way. It is always hard to understand what we cannot see. What exactly would this be? How would it work?

The way to see it best is to focus on the essentials rather than on the details. There are real cases of teacher partnerships appearing. But each has worked its own variations on the core

idea. So at this point it is best to focus on that core partnership idea. Here are its basic elements:

- The teachers form a professional organization, using any of the various forms of organization available under state law. It could be a general partnership. It could be – as in the case of the emerging organizations in Minnesota and in Milwaukee—a workers’ cooperative. It could be a non-profit corporation. Perhaps in time there will be a partnership law specifically for teachers, as there is in some states for physicians.
- The partnership means something, as collaborative activity. The relationship among teachers is one of interdependence, collaboration, cocreation, and mutual accountability.”
- The partnership has an agreement with the board of education to organize and run a school, or a department of a school, or a learning program operating district-wide.
- The relationship between board and teachers changes. The current arrangement can fairly be described as one in which we (the board) don’t give you autonomy, and in return you (the teachers) don’t give us accountability. In the agreement with the partnership this reverses—the board grants real autonomy to the partnership; the continuation of the autonomy contingent on the teacher-group meeting the objectives it has agreed it will meet.
- Within their partnership the teachers make the key professional decisions: who is admitted to practice with the partnership, who does what work, how the work is done, what methods and materials are used. They evaluate performance and they may—as in one of the emerging cases—set their own compensation.
- The teachers really are partners. This is not the independent-contractor arrangement. The idea is for teachers to work as a team to educate the students, as they too seldom are able to do today.
- The board does not run the school. The board thinks about policy. Who should we have run the school? What objectives do we want accomplished? How much are we going to pay? How is the job coming? What do we do if it is coming well, or not-coming-well?
- A teacher partnership could form to run a new school, in the charter sector, or department or program in the district sector. Or it could form to run an existing school, department or program—the teachers simply converting their status from employee to partner-owner.
- The partnership arrangement can conceivably be used with any kind of school. It could handle an elementary school or a secondary. The partnership could decide to have a traditional learning program—courses and classes—or a project-based program of learning.

It is, again, the teachers' decision how to meet the objectives set by a school board.

Two Emerging Teacher Partnerships

Two important cases are emerging and developing of teachers forming professional partnerships to run schools. One is in Minnesota; the other in Milwaukee. Both involve whole schools in the charter sector. It is fascinating to watch this evolution and to watch the way an idea spreads.

The EdVisions model

An hour southwest of the Twin Cities in the Minnesota River valley is Henderson, population 910. Just to the right on Main Street is a tan metal building that blends with the lovely warm brick from which most of the old river town is built. The building houses the Minnesota New Country School.

You may have seen this school in *USA Today* or on network television. It was students from New Country who found the deformed frogs. Their discovery of the frogs with extra legs and missing legs quickly became a matter of serious interest within the scientific community. And of course it became an exceptional learning opportunity for the school.

The school was formed in 1993 largely by high school teachers in nearby LeSueur, dissatisfied with the old model of—as one of them said—“kids coming to school to watch teachers work.” They wanted students to feel responsible for their own learning. There was no way they could persuade

the school board to change the existing district high school. Minnesota's chartering law gave them the opportunity to put their idea into practice by creating a different school. The school opened in September 1994 in some old storefronts on Main Street in LeSueur. Later it moved to Henderson, to a new building built for it.

The school is, like all chartered schools in Minnesota, a nonprofit corporation. It has no employees. Its board has only contracts—with the district for some extra-curriculars, with a landlord for space, with a restaurant for lunch, and, for the learning program, with EdVisions, which is the teachers. Legally, EdVisions is a Minnesota Chapter 308 organization, a cooperative.

EdVisions itself has been almost continually evolving. At the start it was one cooperative for one school. Later other sponsors authorized other schools that contracted with EdVisions for its program. At one point EdVisions had planned to become just a service cooperative and to create individual new cooperatives at each school. Today EdVisions is a single entity with about 140 teachers in eleven schools, with authority in practice delegated to the teachers at each school site; each local group making the kinds of decisions Minnesota New Country made when it was EdVisions' only school. (In EdVisions there are now a few administrators.)

Through their partnership, the teachers have created a remarkably innovative school. This secondary school has about 120 students. In regular school they would be in grades seven through twelve. New Country,

though, is basically ungraded. Kids of different ages work together. Each has an adviser. Students choose their advisers and remain with the adviser through their years in the school.

Each adviser has about seventeen students. It doesn't look like a school. There are no corridors; no oak doors with little slit windows. Most students are at work-stations; singly or in pairs. Teachers are at their desks, or with a student at a work-station. It looks much like a newspaper city room or, as a consultant once said, like "a messy Kinko's." The place is orderly, but not still and not quiet. Most people are seated, but some are moving around. It hums with conversations.

The teachers prefer, instead, to share the school's administrative duties. One is lead teacher. One handles accounting. Another is responsible for the computer technology. The few clerical people are also members of the cooperative. The teachers ask the students to help select new teachers. Teachers make their own work-assignments. At New Country they set their own compensation.

The decisions about what the adults get and what the students get is internalized within the teacher professional group. The teachers know that if they scant the students, they will not have students and they'll lose their school. If they scant the teachers, they will not have teachers, so they'll lose their school. As a result the trade-off is made with integrity—something sometimes lacking in the adversary proceeding in the employer/employee arrangement.

The Milwaukee Model

In about 1998, Cris Parr and some other teachers from Milwaukee drove to Minnesota to see the New Country School and EdVisions. They liked what they saw. But the Wisconsin chartering law presented a problem. For teachers in Wisconsin chartered schools to be in the state retirement program, they must be district employees.

Parr discussed this with her father, a longtime AFSCME official, and he asked a labor-lawyer friend how they might get both the professional autonomy to run the chartered school and the opportunity to remain in the state teachers retirement program. Quickly they worked out a variation on the Minnesota model. It involved the teachers keeping their economic life with district employment, the master contract, and union membership, and forming a cooperative as a vehicle to handle their professional life, to run the school.

With this advice and model, a group of parents, teachers, and community members then created I.D.E.A.L—Individualized Developmental Educational Approaches to Learning—a grades-four-through-eight school at the end of the second floor in a wing of a district middle school building in Milwaukee. It opened in 2001, with about 200 students crowded into four rooms. In 2003, a similar group of parents, teachers, and community members founded the Professional Learning Institute (P.L.I.), a secondary school. The Phoenix School, on the north side, uses this model and others using the workers' co-op model are being formed in Milwaukee.

In this arrangement the teachers remain employees of the district. The cooperative can decide how many personnel of what sort to have in the school and—as all Milwaukee schools now may—can decide who comes to teach there. The person holding a position is paid at the rate set in the district master contract. Parr, who has been the union representative at almost every school in which she's worked in her twenty years with Milwaukee Public Schools, was initially the lead teacher for I.D.E.A.L. and now works at P.L.I. The district office handles payroll and other support functions for the schools.

Implications for Key Education Stakeholders

For teachers there are larger roles in the partnership arrangement. If they are handling a whole, discrete school, they have to think about how to handle the duties that are left to the administration or to the district central office in conventional schools. (A partnership handling just, say, the science department of a suburban high school, would not.) This does not mean the teachers have to do the administrative duties themselves. The partnership could, like a law office, employ an administrator and staff. But the teachers will have to decide on one model or the other.

Students are likely to find a different climate in the school, resulting from the changes in the behavior of the adults. Perhaps they'll see a more cohesive and integrated sense of purpose; perhaps more innovative and varied learning opportunities, or more individ-

ual attention. The old "I get paid whether you learn or not" will be gone.

Parents, too, are likely to find themselves more involved. The teachers will quickly realize it is in their interest to have every possible resource helping them with student learning.

The board, even of the chartered school using the partnership model, will see its role change. It will not be an employer, not at least in the Minnesota model.

There are fascinating implications for the teacher unions still unexplored. Clearly they need to think about their members' interest in being able at last to be professionals; to be able to run the school in which they work.

The unions have said they wanted to get their members into professional issues. "If you want to hold teachers accountable, teachers have to be able to run the school," Albert Shanker used to say when president of the American Federation of Teachers. Before, that was not possible. Boards of education protected professional issues as a management right so long as teachers were not accountable, and were backed up in this by legislatures and governors. In Milwaukee where the teachers remain employees and dues-paying members, the union has helped Parr with waivers from the master contract needed to permit her school to exercise the discretion it has and that the partnership requires. Where the teachers do not remain employees, the unions might provide professional development and retirement or other benefits to members of the partnerships.

Finally, teacher-education programs will need to adapt. Professor John Goodlad said in the 1980s, when first encountering the idea: "If this should take hold, almost all of teacher education would have to be rethought." Perhaps it should be. To operate successfully as partners, teachers will need new skills. Perhaps these can be provided better by other professions, which have used the partnership model longer and have long experience with how to manage professional service organizations.

Implications for the Public

We can only speculate about the benefits to the public, but it is reasonable to suggest that within the partnership/ownership framework it will be easier to make the improvements that need to be made in the profession, since teachers will have a new incentives, new reasons, and new opportunities to be a part of the change.

- More young teachers may stay in the profession, stemming the outflow that often occurs after three to five years. This will reduce the costs of recruitment and of training for districts and for the public. With this model, too, there will be new opportunities for growth. A veteran Minnesota elementary school principal used to say his challenge was "to motivate, as much as possible and for as long as possible, people who are in essentially dead-end jobs." That would change. Quite likely a dual structure of leadership will appear, as in other professional groups where

there is both a top professional—a managing general partner, in a law firm, or a chief of the medical staff, in a hospital—and a top administrator. Education has, curiously, operated on the notion that a single individual will be both the top educator and the top manager.

- New compensation arrangements may be more possible. Under the current system, teachers fear leaving the decisions about pay in the hands of administrators who may play favorites. They created unions and worked for collective bargaining to prevent this. Where the decisions are made within the partnership it may be possible to do things that cannot be done in the old framework. Teachers may be willing to reward their colleagues for superior performance, or may be willing to pay what is necessary to attract quality teachers for areas of the curriculum like math or science, where teachers are in short supply.
- The partnership arrangement may improve the ability of public education to adapt in times of fiscal constraint. The teachers will make the decisions and to some degree will probably be able to keep for use in the program what they do not need to spend. (Even in the Milwaukee arrangement they can decide how many positions of what type they wish to have in the school.) This will give them an incentive to introduce methods that make better use of resources: internet technology, for example.

- The project-based learning the EdVisions teachers put into Minnesota New Country School reduces the staffing (compared to the course-and-class model) while individualizing learning for the students. At the same time it may be possible for the teachers to earn more. Where the workers are the owners, powerful incentives exist to introduce technology that will make the work at the same time less difficult and more rewarding. It will be possible for the productivity gains to be captured by the teachers. Think about farming.

We cannot know at this point how the partnership model will evolve. What we can see is that the incentives—the structure opportunity and reward—will be reset into a form that should benefit both teachers and the public, and should encourage both innovation and quality.

Why would a country serious about improving learning and teaching not give this idea a try?

The Role of Policy Leadership

At a minimum, federal, state, and local leadership that sees value in these ideas can use the bully pulpit to bring the idea—and the emerging experience—to the attention of teachers and others.

It will have to be the teachers who actually do it. Partnerships will appear only as groups of teachers decide they would like to practice in this way. If

groups of teachers— new teachers or veterans— come forward, others are unlikely to stand in their way.

The union may be more supportive than is the board—at least for partnerships formed on the Milwaukee model. It may be a harder sell, actually, to the boards of education, unused to the idea of teacher professional autonomy, or to administrators who might see their role threatened. Where there is resistance, policymakers will need to help clear the way for the teachers.

Not much may be required in the way of changes in law. It has been easy for the partnership arrangement to appear in the chartered-school sector. The school is normally a nonprofit corporation, which has broad power to enter into agreements. Teachers need no new authority to organize partnerships or cooperatives.

Introducing the idea into the district sector of public education may be somewhat more difficult. At the moment, the law and the master contracts neither explicitly permit nor prohibit an agreement between a partnership and a board. They simply do not contemplate it. Teachers have always been employees. The idea of contracting has always been the notion of contracting out the present employees' work to others. A different situation exists when it is the present employees proposing simply to convert their relationship with the board from an employee to a partnership arrangement. Some adjustment of law may be required, especially to be sure teachers can remain in the retirement program.

Some adjustment may also be required in states where the law provides for teachers to sit as members of the board of a chartered school. (Initial Minnesota law required teachers to form a majority of the chartered school board.) Teachers on the board of a chartered school should probably be required to abstain from decisions affecting a partnership in which they are members. It may be that as the idea of the partnership develops, the teachers will feel better represented and there will no longer be a need for teachers to serve as members of the board.

Clearly, partnerships need autonomy; broad authority to decide how the job is to be done. State policy leadership will need to be sure its chartering law grants sufficient authority to schools, so the board of the school can pass through this autonomy to the partnership. Similarly, the board of a district will need to give real autonomy to a teacher partnership running a department, or program.

Finally, Minnesota has been giving some thought recently to a new kind of sponsor in the charter sector, which

would specialize in schools created on the partnership model, and which would have the creation of new public schools as its only job.

Conclusion

The partnership arrangement for teachers is not a substitute for the particular changes and improvements that need to be made in teaching. It's not a substitute for training nor a substitute for compensation-reform nor a substitute for efforts at recruitment and retention. It is a new and different framework in which these efforts to change and improve teaching can be carried out. It may simply prove possible to improve both teaching and our national force of teachers more rapidly in the partnership framework than in the employer/employee, boss/worker, framework.

It does appear that quite significant numbers of teachers would themselves like to give this a try. We should, public policy should, give the teachers—and ourselves—this opportunity. ■