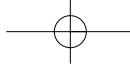


WHAT IS TEACHER PROFESSIONAL PARTNERSHIP?

A recent survey on community input into public schools found that most of the public (two-thirds) reported feeling comfortable leaving decisions to “the professionals.” Just who are the education professionals the public referred to in this survey? Surely the respondents meant to include teachers as well as administrators. And yet, of all groups surveyed—parents, the general public, teachers, administrators and school board members—teachers feel the most ignored. Seventy percent of teachers said they are left out of the decision-making process. They believe that their ideas and concerns are not taken seriously by administrators (Farkas, 2000).

As this survey suggests, the professional role of teachers has become a major educational issue. Teachers increasingly feel frustrated and constrained in their efforts to practice their profession. The typical organizational structure of our school systems contains a rigid hierarchy of roles and decision-making power, with teachers firmly positioned at the bottom of this hierarchy. Very simply, teachers are employees, and like most employees in rigid hierarchical organizations, they have a limited range of decision-making powers.

What if teachers, instead of being employees, owned their own professional partnership? What if teachers formed and ran their own businesses to practice their trade as many lawyers, doctors and accountants



do? What would this “teacher-owner” or “teacher professional partnership” model look like?

WHAT IS TEACHER OWNERSHIP?

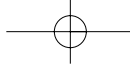
Teacher-ownership breaks through our customary notions about how teaching is practiced. It recognizes that teachers are professionals and ought to have latitude to practice their trade as other professionals do. Lawyers, doctors and accountants form and run their own businesses around their areas of expertise. They hire administrators, if necessary, to run the administrative aspects of the business. In this way, they can spend their time using their expertise to its fullest extent.

In a teacher professional partnership, teachers form their own business to practice the teaching profession. Their “business” is to educate. The responsibility for running the business and for achieving success lies with the partners. A teacher professional partnership could be formed as a non-profit or for-profit enterprise. As subsequent sections of this guide will demonstrate, teacher professional partnerships could be formed using any number of organizational and legal structures, but the end result is always a freestanding, legally constituted business entity.

The formation of a partnership introduces an element of entrepreneurship into how teaching is practiced. But, it need not place monetary gain over the desire to serve, which is a driving motivation of most teachers, just as it can be for people in other professions such as medicine and law. The business requirement to perform well is not inconsistent with the desire to serve and indeed provides an added incentive for quality teacher performance.

HOW DO TEACHERS’ ROLES CHANGE WITH TEACHER-OWNERSHIP?

As owners of a professional partnership, teachers become contractually responsible for the educational services they agree to provide. As a result, they gain control over a variety of decisions that today are typically

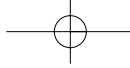
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made by administrators or governing boards. Teacher-owners find themselves with control over and accountability for the design and implementation of the learning program. Teachers with strong ideas about teaching methods or programs have the freedom to develop, implement and improve upon these ideas, subject only to finding some party who wishes to provide that kind of education for the students for whom it is responsible. The professional partnership determines the appropriate fees to set for its services, and then determines how to allocate these fees in a budget among priorities such as member compensation, administrative services, supplies and technology. The partnership takes responsibility for decisions about human resources, such as setting member compensation, and decisions about who may join the partnership and who will be asked to leave. It is also responsible for designing a performance evaluation process and professional development standards.

With teacher-ownership, the partnership becomes directly accountable for learning results and educational outcomes. If learning does not take place to the satisfaction of the clients, parents, and students the practice cannot remain in business. Student learning becomes paramount. As a result, teachers in a professional partnership think in new ways about the introduction and use of technology. Because teachers control the budget and the learning program, and because they are responsible for outcomes, technology becomes a tool to help achieve the bottom line of student learning. Just as the medical profession continually introduces new research and technologies to keep its practices current, teachers who are members of a TPP evaluate the latest techniques for improving learning.

Early evidence from EdVisions Cooperative, a professional partnership formed as a cooperative, suggests that the whole dynamic of teaching and learning changes as noted above. The teachers in schools run by the cooperative have chosen to pay themselves higher than average salaries and the technology budget of the school has also been set higher than average. The learning programs are developed, implemented, and improved by the teachers. Teachers, students and parents form close relationships geared toward learning. Each teacher is expected to develop and implement his or her own professional development plan. Evaluation is by peer review and teachers who have failed to perform have been asked to leave.



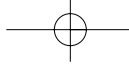
WHY WOULD TEACHERS WANT TO OWN A PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE?

The teaching profession is facing great challenges today in terms of attracting and retaining a sufficient number of high quality teachers, and in finding the time and means for professional development. An estimated 50 percent of new teachers resign from teaching within their first five years. This startling statistic suggests that existing organizational arrangements for teachers simply are not providing them with the opportunity to practice their profession in meaningful or rewarding ways.

The teacher-ownership model changes the dynamic of these concerns by providing teachers with the opportunity to take charge of their professional lives. As members of a TPP, teachers have a greater opportunity to shape and implement a shared educational vision and culture. They gain greater control over daily operations that affect their professional lives and have greater influence over administrative decisions that affect learning outcomes. As partners of a TPP, teachers can create opportunities for more interdependence with other professionals, and they can design more effective means to improve student and parent involvement. Because they are in charge, teachers can experience an expanded sense of creativity, challenge and reward.

Yet, with these benefits come more responsibility and more risk. Greater autonomy is a trade-off for less security, both at a personal level and an organizational level. There is no tenure—no guarantee of a job. Teachers will be required to take greater personal responsibility for student achievement. While the development of a TPP presents teachers with the opportunity to realize some of their long-sought goals, they lose the protection offered by union contracts. At an organizational level, those who do not perform stand to lose their contracts, and, ultimately, their business. It is also important to understand that in a TPP teachers take on responsibilities they do not have as employees, namely, responsibility for administrative decisions such as personnel and budget. Some teachers may prefer not to have such responsibilities.

Forming and running a business entails risks and responsibilities that may not be suited to everybody. As with the decision to start any small business, the decision to form a TPP should be weighed carefully, after



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thoughtful study of what is involved. The remainder of this guide helps illuminate what is involved in running a TPP and highlights some of the major implications that teachers, as well as other organizations, may want to consider as they evaluate the potential, and the potential impact, of TPPs.

