

Where teachers rule

A school with no principal? MPS and others are trying it, and some people like what they see

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As a freshman at Vincent High School, Trinisa Johnson didn't even know the name of the principal and would never have considered taking her questions or concerns there.

But as a sophomore last year at Milwaukee's Community High School, Johnson was well-connected to people in high places.

That's largely because Community High lacks a traditional hierarchy. The school is one of a rapidly growing number of so-called "teacher-led" schools that operate without administrators - including principals and assistant principals. The teachers make decisions about the curriculum, the budget and student discipline. They perform peer evaluations of each other. Often, they come to decisions through discussion and debate, taking a vote if a consensus is not reached. The buck stops with them, not in the principal's office.

In Milwaukee, which is a national leader in the movement toward teacher-led schools, there will be at least 14 such programs next year, and that figure does not count private schools.

Appleton will have two teacher-led schools next year. Minnesota, another leader in the movement, has 15 schools where the teachers are part of a workers' cooperative structured much like a law firm, so they not only make most of the decisions related to the school, but also set their own salaries. Education officials and teachers unions in California, Chicago and other places are studying the teacher-led model.

"If it catches on, it could absolutely revolutionize the public system and the bureaucracy surrounding it," said Doug Thomas, executive director of EdVisions Cooperative in Minnesota.

Even staunch supporters of the model concede that it is not for everyone: It requires extra time, will not work if the teachers don't familiarize themselves with the policies, procedures and politics of the district, and can be difficult to adapt to larger schools.

In Milwaukee, not all of the teacher-led schools are structured in the same way. Some schools have a clear "teacher leader" who does most of the administrative tasks but lacks the title and some of the authority of a principal; others are more pure "teacher cooperatives" where the decision-making and administrative tasks are spread out to include all of the teachers more equally; still others are a hybrid.

Olivia Kleser, 15, a classmate of Johnson's last year at Community High School, said she did not know the school was teacher-led until she started there. "But I liked it better," she added. "In my old school, you would be sent to the principal if you had problems with other students or at home, or in general. But my principal hated me."

At Community High, Kleser said, you can always "talk to some other teacher" if you have issues.

'The staff is a unit'

For Roxane Mayeur, one of her teachers, the biggest difference in being at a teacher-led school is that the "sense of hierarchy is eliminated."

"That's a powerful thing," she said. "The students understand that the staff is a unit. There is no playing one teacher off another."

"We don't think administrators are useless or a negative thing," Mayeur added, saying the trend is more about empowering teachers than dissing principals. "It's important that this movement be about teachers having more of a voice."

Pioneering efforts

The first public teacher-led school in the city, the Milwaukee School of Entrepreneurship, began 11 years ago. That school uses more of a "lead teacher" model, where serious issues concerning the budget, discipline or parent concerns are all brought to John Polczynski, the teacher in charge.

Many of the decisions are made by the staff, but in his school's structure, "one person is consistently at the bottom of the funnel or the head of the school," Polczynski said. He said he thinks many schools find that they need someone to be the go-to person on discipline or budget issues.

But in 2001, the IDEAL Charter School, a more pure "teacher cooperative," opened. "We take a lot of pride in the fact that we all have a vote and say in things," said Barbara Ernest, a teacher. "It's a lot of work sometimes, but it's worth it."

Ernest said union officials from New Jersey and school officials from Boston visited IDEAL to see how the teacher cooperative model looks in practice. "This idea has gained a lot of acceptance in recent years," said Jennifer Carter, a teacher.

Although specific tasks at the school might be delegated, everyone has a say in the major issues. "There is one main teacher in charge of the budget, but everybody has input and knowledge about it," Ernest said.

At IDEAL the teachers have many meetings, where they sit in a circle and go around, giving each of the 10 teachers the chance to speak. Usually, the teachers arrive at a decision through discussion. Occasionally, they vote.

One time, the teachers wound up voting to decide what to do with the open position after a technology specialist left the school. They ended up hiring a classroom teacher and a paraprofessional with the extra funds.

Ernest and Carter said their model works because they respect each other, involve the parents, and take time to understand district policies.

For ALAS (Advanced Language and Academic Studies), a charter school that opened last year, becoming a true teacher cooperative is a work in progress, according to Linda Peters, the lead teacher. "We had planned on sharing responsibilities," Peters said. "And while some of that happened, it's still apparent that I'm almost in an administrative role here. . . . I'm like a principal without the money and title. But, yeah, the buck stopped here" with me.

Now that the first year is behind them, the teachers at ALAS plan to divide up responsibilities more evenly. "In a situation like this, you really need to be meeting once a week," Peters said. "I thought it would just happen, but it doesn't. You have to plan for it, and you have to work on it."

A personal approach

Most of the teacher-led schools are small programs chartered by the district. Charter schools are publicly funded, but have more flexibility and autonomy in decision-making. The growth of the teacher-led schools has been fueled by the high school's reform initiative, which calls for the creation of dozens of small, more intimate high schools, many of them designed to personalize education to a greater degree.

"The teachers here, they know the students more than a principal would, so the decisions they make are more catered to the students' needs," said Trinisa Johnson. "They ask each other everything. They all have these meetings in a place they call 'the war room.'"

The teacher-led schools are supported by the MPS administration and the Milwaukee Teachers' Education Association, the local teachers union - as long as they follow the rules laid out in their contracts, which, for instance, detail how the peer evaluation process can be done.

Teachers at teacher-led schools cannot hire and fire people from the district, although they can ask that a teacher be moved to a different school or that an employee be investigated.

Teachers at the schools say the district isn't set up to deal with them in some respects, even though the situation is slowly improving. Meetings for principals - now called "leadership" instead of principal meetings - are often held during the school day, for instance, making it tough for representatives from teacher-led schools to attend since it means leaving their classrooms.

"The district wants them to be administrators, and they want to be teachers," said John Parr, who helped write the bylaws for IDEAL and provides support to teacher-led schools in Milwaukee and elsewhere.

Parr and others said one of the biggest challenges is to prevent teacher burnout. "I don't really take a position one way or the other," said Bob Anderson, the assistant executive director of the teachers union. "But I say, 'How do you do all this work?'"

The payback comes in terms of autonomy and the closeness of the school communities, according to those on the ground level. Said Mayeur: "It's worth it, but the commitment has to be really strong because there is no punching out at 3 p.m."

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