

Jefferson High (B)¹

The Clusters

Betina Jones the Assistant Headmaster of Jefferson High walked slowly down the hall. Too slowly. She had to admit that she did not want to go to this meeting on the cluster plans. Lately it seemed that she did not want to go to any meetings. Though she was an endless optimist at heart, it had become discouraging to watch time and effort go into projects that did not seem to get off the ground and to watch a friend struggle against long odds. What could she, should she say to Angela O'Neil, Headmaster of Jefferson High and her good friend and mentor, the woman who had insisted she be made an Assistant Headmaster and who sang her praises to the central administration. Angela counted on her to voice the truth as she saw it- but what was the truth here? Betina reviewed the events of the last 6 months in her mind looking for clues about how the process of restructuring the school became stalled and about how to get it back on track.

9th Grade Clusters

Jefferson High had one ninth grade cluster in place when Angela and Betina had come to the school. It was generally regarded as a success, although there had never been any effort to collect data about the cluster in order to evaluate its success. The pre-existing cluster was headed by Mrs. Jordan, an experienced teacher with almost 20 years service, who had volunteered to lead the cluster several years before. According to Mrs. Jordan, traditionally students had been deliberately chosen for placement into the cluster. Two kinds of students were assigned- students who excelled academically and students of average ability who were thought to be at risk of dropping out or being distracted by outside forces.

When Angela O'Neil had arrived as Headmaster she announced that all regular-ed students in the 9th grade would be in a cluster and a second cluster headed by Mrs. Shields, an experienced and enthusiastic Jefferson teacher was created. Students were assigned randomly to one or the other cluster.

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This case is intended to serve as a basis for classroom discussion, not to illustrate either effective or ineffective handling of administrative situations.

Of course there had been the usual quota of administrative problems that everyone enjoyed complaining about. Some 10th graders had mistakenly been assigned to the 9th grade clusters. This was in part a pure clerical error, but it uncovered a larger problem. Some of the students were repeating 9th grade classes, in a couple of cases the entire 9th grade curriculum- should they be assigned to a cluster? What about next year, would repeating students stay in their cluster? This would mean they would repeat with the same teacher, not a popular notion with students (or some teachers). Late transfers had also created administrative issues and delayed the final cluster assignment. Students had previously been grouped according to homeroom for class assignments and this was no longer the case, so it was harder to do things like arrange help for students.

Teacher Reactions

The 9th grade cluster process had gone fairly smoothly but there were some subtle grumblings, rarely openly voiced to Angela or Betina. Early in the school year, during a meeting with cluster leaders and senior staff, Mrs. Jordan mentioned that her faculty was disappointed in the quality of the students in the cluster. There seemed to be more discipline problems than they had encountered in the past and these discipline issues seemed to detract from student performance, particularly the performance of academic achievers. Her cluster teachers were wondering why the cluster assignment process had changed. The new assignment process did not seem to take into account the kids who were achieving. Angela had replied that the new assignment process was random. The old process had been too much like tracking and the teachers could not expect to pick the cream of the crop anymore. Mrs. Jordan, a gregarious itownie who rarely hesitated to speak her mind, was unusually quiet for the rest of that meeting. Betina wondered what Mrs. Jordan had reported back to her cluster teachers after the meeting.

In the other cluster, headed by Mrs. Shields, the reports from the teachers were generally positive. When Betina talked with teachers they said they enjoyed the new found collegiality that cluster team meetings could provide. "Cluster teams are a very good time for venting problems," one teacher had told her. Also, "my cluster team makes it easier for a teacher to get a class covered if he or she has to leave for an emergency." Teachers also found it easier to ikeep tabs on kids and much easier to coordinate discipline and handle problems as they occurred. "Of course", Betina thought to herself, this has not kept you from sending them on to us. Discipline referrals to the Assistant Headmasters had not decreased significantly since clusters were put in place.

Impact of Clusters

Betina could not help but notice there was something missing from the teacher

comments. Cluster team time was not being used to deal with curriculum and instruction. She understood the problem; it was exemplified by a discussion she had in November with one of the teachers in Mrs. Jordanís cluster. She had asked him about ideas or suggestions to improve the cluster. He said that another daily planning block would be a good idea. The forty minutes provided daily simply was not enough. The team had originally planned to use 20 minutes to talk about discipline and student issues and 20 minutes to deal with coordinating instruction and curriculum. Student issues always seemed to go long and between the time needed to get started and a certain amount of “gripe time” the group never seemed to get to the other.

Betinaís observation of a couple of cluster team meetings in Mrs. Shieldís cluster showed the same pattern. The same problem students are discussed over and over, students interrupt the meetings with problems, disciplinary issues seem to always dominate discussion. One teacher remarked with a sigh “we never seem to get even 10 full minutes of substantive conversation.” Of course Betina knew that there was no way a busy school day would ever allow for 80 minutes of common planning time. But the comments made it clear how the cluster teams were prioritizing and using their limited time.

Clusters had, so far, had little impact on instruction, as anyone visiting a 9th grade class would readily see. At the beginning of the school year Angela had asked Betina to take on the role of working with teachers on instruction, so Betina visited classes and talked with teachers regularly. Changes in instruction were coming about, but they were the result of either her initiatives, like her project to improve teaching in English and Literature, or the changes were the result of individual teacherís initiatives. The latter were, of course, sporadic and too easily dropped since there was no recognition or support for the efforts. Clusters seemed to have little or no part in the process of improving instruction.

Expanding the Clusters

Betina was also troubled because the expansion of the clusters to the 10th grade seemed completely stalled. Angela O’Neilís vision for Jefferson High was to have all students in clusters for the 9th and 10th grades. Angela had decided unilaterally, without teacher comment or input, to create a second 9th grade cluster, effectively putting every regular-ed ninth grader in a cluster. Angela had discussed this with Betina and they both agreed at the time that the benefits- speed, demonstrating a unwavering commitment to change, and providing a blueprint for creating a successful whole grade cluster- would outweigh the disadvantages of unilateral action. She, like Angela, had assumed that a successful 9th grade cluster would make creating a 10th grade cluster easy. That had not proved true.

Early in the Fall Angela had formed a change team for the school. The team would be the vehicle for pushing change forward. Expanding to a 10th grade cluster was supposed to be a large part of the agenda for the group. But at the last two meetings, in late January and in February, Betina could not recall anyone even mentioned the 10th grade cluster.

Of course there were many distractions. In November Angela had raised the idea of block scheduling as part of the change effort. This had created a tempest of protest-“too many changes”; “too difficult to do”; “no one understands it”. Angela, seemingly not too ruffled by the storm, simply dropped the idea. Betina noted that it was only one of several ideas that Angela had raised but then put aside when the opposition seemed too strong. This was, Betina thought, probably the politically savvy thing to do. Why pursue an initiative that was doomed? But maybe this had taken a toll on the change team. The meetings seemed unfocused, no one took initiative and everyone seemed to wait for Angela’s arrival. Betina knew Angela was absolutely committed to a 10th grade cluster, but did the change team know this?

Next Steps

Betina knew Angela was frustrated and growing impatient. The cluster initiatives were at the heart of her vision for the school. The existing clusters were not being used effectively and the expansion of the clusters to the 10th grade seemed stalled. Angela would want Betina’s counsel in this meeting and that counsel would be hard to give. Angela was firm in her commitment to having her staff and teachers participate, even initiate school reform efforts. But the process was not working here. If Angela took strong unilateral action, what would that say about the process. Besides, given union rules, some of the changes would be subject to staff approval and without a participatory process would approval be possible.

If you were Betina Jones, what is your analysis of why the 9th clusters were not as effective as they might be and what would you recommend to Angela O’Neil to improve their performance and move clusters to the 10th grade?