

Jefferson High (E)¹

The Teachers' Vote

Monday - February 9 , 1998

Phil Lee walked through the halls of Jefferson High on a gray early February day. He noticed the bright Chinese New Year banners posted on the walls. The gold characters proclaimed "good luck", "great fortune". Maybe this was a fortuitous sign, the vote was coming just as the new year was starting. A New Year- a new start, better luck, better fortune for him and for Jefferson High.

Lee certainly felt he could use luck right now. On Thursday the faculty would vote on the new school reorganization plan that he had first presented to them in November. The plan called for the creation of career Pathways for the 11th and 12th grades and in order to make those Pathways work Lee would have to hire 5 new teachers, some for specialized areas like information technology and finance. Lee's proposal included a provision that would allow him to "open post" the five positions - avoiding the union hiring provisions that would otherwise apply, possibly leading to some teachers losing their jobs.

It was a high risk strategy. He had never heard of a Headmaster getting agreement to allow open posting for so many positions, but he had to follow his instincts. If the school was to make breakthrough gains they could not keep "shoehorning" people into positions they were marginally qualified for, and he explained this to his faculty. He implored them to trust his experience and judgment. Now he would find out if they did- he might go down to defeat but at least this vote would be a clear referendum on his leadership so far.

Friday- February 13, 1998

Victory.

Phil Lee grinned at his Assistant Headmasters as they walked into his office. "No one will even believe it. Complete approval for the plan and for 5 open postings. I'm not sure anyone has pulled this off before. Now we have a real mandate and we can get to work." The vote had been overwhelmingly in his favor, 67 to 11, over 85% of his faculty had agreed to the plan. Even Lee had been surprised at the margin, only

¹ This case was written by Carol Elder and Helen Long under the supervision of Prof. Gerry Leader. Its preparation was supported by the General Electric Fund through its sponsorship of the BEST Program, a collaborative effort between Boston University's Schools of Education and Management. Case is intended to serve as a basis for classroom discussion, not to illustrate either effective or ineffective handling of administrative situations.

a few hard line unionists had opposed him. Restuccia and Jones sat down. Of course, the first order of business was reliving the vote.

In retrospect the victory made sense to Lee. He could see that the teachers had been coming around. The reorganization of classrooms, which had cause so much confusion and frustration, now made the day much easier. One teacher had commented, "You know, now I see that it makes a lot of sense to have us together." Located in the same area and having common planning time, teachers could discuss students and talk with parents together. Another teacher had noted,

We can be more on top of the kids because we know them, we know who should be out of class and who shouldn't. Last year you'd see kids in the hall and you didn't know why they were there. The halls are a lot quieter this year; it's less disruptive.

Many teachers believed that the new system benefited students as well. Not only were classes disrupted less often, but the students also got to know the teachers better. When they needed help, they could ask a teacher or unit head whom they knew, instead of going to the school office. In general, everyone agreed that the overall atmosphere had improved.

Lee also realized he had managed to get across his message. He had worked hard to communicate his long-term vision to teachers and others in the Jefferson High School community. In a memo to the teachers he noted that:

"By the year 2000, no developed country will have more than one-sixth of its workforce employed in the traditional roles of making and moving goods....The economy is shifting more and more from production and manufacturing to services and knowledge work....In his recent book, *Post-Capitalist Society* [Harper Business, 1993]...Peter Drucker points out that in the knowledge society, people have to learn how to learn. Indeed, subjects may matter less than the students' capacity to continue learning and their motivation to do so. He calls for a different kind of school: one that provides universal literacy of a higher order; one that imbues students with motivation to learn and with the discipline of continuing learning; one that is open; and one that imparts knowledge both as substance and as process.

Lee tried to make clear that his proposed restructuring was tied to these objectives, this future work world. His plan called for a two-tiered structure of a Lower and Upper School. The Lower School, made up of the 9th and 10th grades, would focus on providing students with a strong foundation in the major subjects of math, English, social studies, and sciences, as well as in what Lee termed "The New Basic Skills" described in Exhibit 1. The Lower School would be divided into four units with the same characteristics as the units implemented that fall.

The Upper School, made up of 11th and 12th grade students, had a different goal, which Lee took from the 1992 GPS Career Awareness Curriculum :

What we seek is a model in which students and teachers, working together, can experiment, explore, and demonstrate competence in skill areas and can apply those skills to the process of investigating, choosing, and preparing for a career.

To achieve this goal, The Upper School would be structured into Pathways with curriculum in career fields such as communications technology, advertisement/desktop and web-page publishing, and finance and economics. These Pathways, Lee wrote, would “provide students with the opportunity for hands-on, project- and portfolio-based investigative education.” This would help students use learning techniques that were more relevant to the work world as well as linking content knowledge to work areas.

Lee had tried to make the plan as clear and complete as he could. He discussed the school system’s long term plans and showed how Jefferson’s plan fit in. He told teachers that if they had a question they could ask him, no question was unworthy. He encouraged the units to discuss the plan and said he would welcome their input or questions. But, once again, he made it clear that he would make the large scale decisions, but he would rely on faculty and staff to work out the details, to help bring the plan to life. His ideas were only a broad sketch, they were the ones who would turn ideas into a working school. And the vote showed that he had reached them.

As he chatted with his Assistant Headmasters, Phil was happy to revel in this hard won success. He could have talked about it all morning, but he knew the meeting had to move on. This was a victory, and an important one at that, but it was only the start of a long campaign.

Exhibit 1

The New Basic Skills from Jefferson High 1998-99 New Organizational Structure

We will consider the students “competent”, if they have acquired certain skills and attitudes by the end of the tenth grade. At the very minimum, these skills and attitudes should include:

- The willingness to come to work every day on time
- The willingness to work hard to complete a task on time
- The ability to maintain a positive attitude
- The ability to read at the ninth grade level (understand a training manual)
- The ability to do math at the ninth grade level (mastery of fractions, decimals, percent, pie charts, and line graphs)
- The ability to solve semi-structured problems by formulating and testing hypotheses
- The ability to communicate effectively, both orally and in writing
- The ability to work productively in groups with persons from different backgrounds
- Familiarity with how computers work (acquiring the confidence and the skill to learn new software applications)

[Reference: Murnane and Levy, Teaching the New Basic Skills, Chapter 2]