

---

## SHARED DECISION-MAKING IN STRATEGIC PLANNING

### Whitewater Unified School District

#### Whitewater, Wisconsin

Changes are easier to implement when the important players are involved in making the decisions. Parents, students, school staff members, and administrators share decision-making in all of Whitewater's school building leadership teams as well as a district leadership council. The district has worked hard to institutionalize shared decision-making so that each of its schools' communities successfully collaborates to support student achievement.

Shared decision-making in Whitewater was institutionalized beginning with the school board adopting a policy that defined shared decision-making. Then, the district employed a consultant to conduct trainings to help the school building leadership teams focus on improvement and develop familiarity with SMART goals (specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, time-bound). At that same time, the district adopted an Improvement Calendar that has become an expected process followed by every school each school year.

The Improvement Calendar outlines the activities of the building leadership teams of parents, students (at the high school), school staff, and administrators. In August, teams come together for one to two days of planning to outline goals for the year. Individuals are paid small stipends for attending. In September, buildings refine the goals and improvement plans. In October, the goals and plans are presented to the school board. In January, the teams come together in an afternoon for mid-year review. Each building team shares a status report on goal progress. In February, the Budget Development Team (with staff and parent representation from each school) begins meeting to develop the next year's budget. In May, the building teams come together again for an end-of-year status report. In June, a preliminary report is made to the Board regarding each building's goals and test data results. The summer is dedicated to reviewing data and refining goals for the next year. Then in August, the process begins anew. This defined calendar has helped schools monitor their progress.

Making *real* decisions for the school proved difficult for the teams initially. Each school team had to transition from being a group of individuals to being a cohesive, collaborative team. By convening all of the teams three times a year in district-wide meetings, the school teams learned about the substantive decisions made by some teams and, therefore, were inspired to follow suit. The concept of shared decision-making has become the way schools do business in

Whitewater. All interview teams are now teams of parents, teachers, administrators, and, at the high school level, students. All significant changes, such as schedules, courses, and programs are expected to go through the respective building leadership team. Those that circumvent the system usually end up going back through the system in order to gain the credibility that comes from having all stakeholders involved.

In addition to the regularly scheduled district-wide meetings, a second strategy that supported collaboration on school teams is the District Curriculum Leadership Council. This council was established to hear concerns about the manner in which the building teams are operating and to keep things honest. This K-12 group consists of the principal of each building, two teachers from each building, several district coordinators, and parents. If there arises a concern that power is not as shared in some school building teams as in others, this council responds with suggestions and directions for operation. This council plus the three district-wide meetings holds teams accountable for progress and collaboration.

District support in institutionalizing shared decision-making teams has called attention to the benefits gained by staff and parents working together. Better decisions have been made from these collaborations, and it has been much easier to garner support for programs when a lot of voices have been heard in shaping the ideas. The district has even observed improved student test scores in schools where the building teams have focused on student achievement goals.

Collaboration has been hard work for both the schools and the district, yet productive in the long run. Structured support for parents, community, and school members to share decision-making has improved programs and practices for all learners.

*Roni Telfer, Curriculum Coordinator*  
(262) 472-8713