

Meaningful & Sustainable School Improvement with Distributed Leadership

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SCENARIO

How Distributed Leadership Can Lead to Different Decisions

Mr. Devers has been the principal of Harmon High School for the past 12 years. The school has about 1,200 students and a faculty of 45 teachers as well as aides and specialists. About 80 percent of Harmon's faculty are white, and the majority have more experience at the school than Mr. Devers. The younger teachers are more diverse, reflecting the community's changing demographics.

Over the last decade the town of Harmon has undergone a population shift. The two major employers in Harmon – tool-and-die manufacturers making machine and cutting tools for the auto and aerospace industries – have downsized and specialized their product lines in recent years, as much of their old business was outsourced to overseas competitors with cheaper costs. Their new business is more specialized, complex, and customized.

As a consequence, the town of Harmon has also undergone a demographic transition. The jobs at the plants have increasingly required higher and more sophisticated skills, regardless of whether the jobs were in the engineering divisions or on the shop floor. A cadre of engineers and mechanical specialists had moved to town to guide the companies' shift towards more custom high-end equipment. The workers at the plants have also transitioned, as stable well-paying jobs at the factories became more uncertain and second-generation Latino populations moved into town.

The changes in the local population have influenced Harmon High as well. The student population is about a third white, 40% Latinx, and 20% black. About 50 percent of the students are eligible for lunch assistance. Mr. Devers finds that the school is becoming increasingly segregated by college preparatory and vocational tracks that generally mapped onto the children of the two factories' working populations. Mr. Devers wants to figure out ways to better prepare more students to take college preparatory classes and to encourage even those students who are choosing the vocational offerings to take more college preparatory courses.

Mr. Devers considers different approaches to engaging with the problem. Here are three scenarios of what he might do and the changes that result.

SCENARIO 1

Mr. Devers brings the issue to the school's leadership team, which is made up of himself and five faculty members: the school's assistant principal and the chairs of the four subject matter departments. Each have been at the school for at least eight years and have a shared sense of the way the school operates. The discussions go fairly smooth, and the leadership team's recommendations are to modify the 9th grade courses to help students better prepare for the college prep courses in grades 10-12. They also decide to reach out to the two feeder middle schools to make sure they are adequately preparing students for the college preparatory track in high school.

SCENARIO 2

Mr. Devers puts together a committee made up of teachers and high school seniors from both the college preparatory and vocational tracks. He makes sure to include two of the younger teachers on the committee, including Ms. Olivera, a third-year math teacher who teaches in both tracks and is an advocate for preparing more Latinx students to succeed in college prep courses. The conversations of the committee are sometimes contentious, particularly amongst the teachers from the different tracks. There are times when Mr. Devers felt ill-prepared to keep frustrations from boiling over. The students are generally deferential to their teachers, and only seem to voice their views when Mr. Devers asks

them specific questions. The group also proposes to focus on restructuring the 9th grade courses but emphasize an outreach campaign to middle-school and 9th- and 10th-grade parents to make them aware of college options and what students will need to be prepared for them.

SCENARIO 3

Mr. Devers puts together a committee that is made up of teachers, parents, and representatives of the two tool-and-die companies. The parents are relatively quiet in the meetings and Mr. Devers has to make special efforts to get them to voice their thoughts. The committee proposes to connect the school to a range of community and social groups to spread the importance of parental support for families hoping that their children will attend college and what it takes to make it happen. The two companies' representatives offer to help design classes in the vocational track to connect students to the skills they will need in the increasingly sophisticated manufacturing world.

- ▶ *What do you notice about these three scenarios?*
- ▶ *What are the consequences of different distributed leadership approaches in problem diagnosis and solution design?*
- ▶ *Based on their solution designs, how do you think the three groups diagnosed the problem?*