The Contribution of Settings to School Improvement and School Change: A Case Study[1]

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Efforts to improve schools have been around since the days when schools were first established. Reformers since the Enlightenment have sought to improve teaching, learning, and the operation of the institutions designated to prepare the young to assume their adult roles (Butts, 1955). It has now been more than 20 years since *A Nation at Risk* precipitated the most recent wave of school reform (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). Its release triggered untold thousands of efforts, at all levels of government and among private and public entities of all sorts, to improve the functioning and effectiveness of U. S. schools. The record of success is, to say the least, mixed (Sarason, 1990).

Discussions about improving our schools have involved numerous questions about the content of schooling; for example, "How do we most effectively teach reading?" "What mathematics should be taught at the elementary grades?" They have also included questions about the processes of school improvement; such as, "What processes actually lead to improved school performance?" "How do schools successfully engage in those processes?" Both the content of schooling and the processes of school improvement are obviously important, since worthwhile content without effective processes is fruitless, and effective processes devoid of worthwhile content is pointless. In this chapter, however, we focus primarily on process, the *how* of school change. For the past decade our research team has been studying school change, assisting schools to make changes, and documenting processes and outcomes as schools attempt to improve teaching, learning, and achievement in culturally and linguistically diverse schools and communities. Improving professional development has been at the heart of our work. In particular, we have tried to establish school settings for ongoing professional development embedded within a larger school wide improvement effort. While there is a growing literature documenting the benefits and challenges of

ongoing, school-based professional development ("Strengthening,"1998), there remains a need for descriptions and analyses of how to make such school settings work.

Our research and development have been greatly informed by the work of Roland Tharp and his many contributions to the behavioral and organizational change literature. In particular, *Rousing Minds to Life* (Tharp & Gallimore, 1988) directed our attention towards the fundamental challenge of creating schools that are vibrant and productive learning contexts for both teachers and students. Along with the work of Sarason (1972), *Rousing Minds* also provided the theoretical and empirical basis for our concentration on school settings as vehicles for school and teacher change. Behavior is maintained, or changed, in relation to the network of settings and relationships in which we participate. Institutional organizations, like schools for example, are comprised of multiple "activity settings." Making constructive changes in such institutions involves improving existing activity settings, creating new ones, establishing supportive linkages between them, and sustaining them over time. In schools, the central activity setting is the classroom wherein teachers and students engage in the process of teaching and learning. Improving schools is at least in part a matter of establishing, connecting, and sustaining activity settings for teachers that maximize their performance in the classroom (Goldenberg, 2004).

One of the problems we find in schools is that many settings exist, but their potential power to influence behavior for the better is rarely, if ever, understood. All schools have faculty meetings and many have department and/or grade level meetings, for example. Our experience has been that these meetings are dominated by bureaucratic, procedural, social, and personal matters far removed from the core concerns of teaching and learning and how to improve both. Thus, it has been a substantial challenge to identify, operationalize, implement, test, and replicate processes that reliably rouse such school settings to life.

This chapter is a case study of a school that we have worked with over the past several years—Pine Elementary School (pseudonym). Like other schools we are currently studying, Pine has shown significant achievement gains. Like other schools we are currently studying, those gains seem to be a result of several factors, first and foremost of which is the creation, maintenance, and refinement of weekly settings in which teachers meet to construct goals, analyze student work, plan and discuss instruction, and evaluate outcomes. In fact, as we will describe shortly, Pine is a particularly strong demonstration of the power of such professional development settings. Drawing on teacher focus group data collected over the last five years—from the very beginning of our work with Pine until the

present—we document from teachers' perspectives how these settings were established, connected to one another, and sustained over time. Case studies of this sort are relevant to school change research because the literature currently has so few prospective studies of the change process (Fullan, 2000). We also think the Pine case study helps illustrate the research and model building that continues to benefit and grow from the work of Roland Tharp.

The chapter includes background information on our previous and current school change project and a brief description of the achievement and process data we analyzed that drew our attention to Pine as an informative case study of settings. We describe the methods we used to analyze the focus group transcripts, and then present our analysis of the development of settings at Pine organized under three topics: Establishing Settings, Connecting Across Settings, and Sustaining Settings. The chapter closes with a discussion of the relevance of this case study.

Background

Getting Results Model and Research

Thus far, we have conducted two phases of research. During Phase 1, we developed a school change model that produced substantial changes in teaching and learning at one elementary school in Southern California, which served primarily Latino children and families (Goldenberg, 2004; Goldenberg & Sullivan, 1994). We refer to this model as the *Getting Results Model* (GR Model). Over a six-year period, the school shifted from being the lowest achieving school in the district to surpassing district averages on both standardized tests and performance-based assessments. The GR Model utilizes five elements to promote changes in educators' instructional behaviors and attitudes, and student outcomes. These elements include: *goals* that are set and shared, *indicators* that measure success; *assistance* by capable others, *leadership* that supports and pressures, and *settings* that allow staff to get important things done. *Settings* is a superordinate concept in the model. Within the context of these settings, the other change elements work in concert to improve teaching, learning, and achievement in *any* targeted curricular area.

During Phase 2, we successfully implemented the *Getting Results Model* at nine schools (a scale-up study) and produced achievement gains similar to those obtained at the original pilot school (McDougall, Saunders, & Goldenberg, 2003; Saunders & Goldenberg, 2004). Phase 2 research also involved refinements to the model and the development of specific settings designed to

ensure effective application of model elements—goals, indicators, assistance, and leadership. Settings include Academic Achievement Leadership Teams (AALT), Grade Level Teams (GLT), and GR Principals' meetings (see Saunders, O'Brien, Marcelletti, Hasenstab, Saldivar, & Goldenberg, 2001, for descriptions of these settings). In addition, GR staff provided on-site assistance to support schools' efforts to establish and maintain these settings, including monthly one-on-one meetings with the principal and participation in AALT meetings. GR staff also provided annual leadership training institutes for school leadership teams, and developed and helped schools implement beginning, middle and end-of-the-year assessments.

Phase 2 involved three levels of research and evaluation. First, at all nine GR schools and six comparison schools (all of which are located in the same school district), we collected annual achievement data based on state mandated standardized tests from 1997 through 2002 and administered annual surveys to certificated staff from 1998 to 2002. Although comparable at baseline, 2002 achievement and survey results showed significant differences favoring GR schools (Saunders & Goldenberg, 2004). Second, between 1998 and 2001, principal interviews, teacher focus groups, and on-site observations were conducted at four GR and three comparison case study schools. During the 2001–2002 school year, an external evaluator collected and analyzed all data from 1998 through 2002 and evaluated each school on the model elements. On average, ratings for GR schools were significantly higher than those of comparison schools on all elements (McDougall, Saunders, & Goldenberg, 2002). Third, we have been analyzing available data for each of the four GR case study schools in order to better understand and illustrate the similarities and differences in the change process that emerged at each school. Pine is one of the four GR case study schools. As we describe next, the evidence seems to suggest that while all model elements were successfully implemented at Pine, that which distinguishes Pine from other GR and comparison schools is their strong implementation of goals and settings.

Pine Elementary School:
Demographics, Achievement, and GR Implementation

Like all current *Getting Results* schools, Pine Elementary school is located in a densely populated metropolitan area of southern California and is a member of one of the largest school districts in the country. The community surrounding Pine is comprised of single-family homes, large apartment complexes, condominiums, and numerous large and small commercial outlets. To the south lies a

primarily affluent, English-speaking neighborhood, and to the north lies a more modest, lower income, primarily Spanish-speaking neighborhood. Pine enrolls approximately 550 students, 55% of whom are Latino, 27% are Caucasian, 14% are African-American, and 2% are Asian. Seventy-three percent of Pine students qualify for free or reduced lunch. Forty-four percent are English language learners (ELLs), 80% of whom come from Spanish-speaking families. With the exception of teachers added as part of state-wide class-size reduction, Pine staff has remained fairly stable over the past several years: average years teaching at Pine and total years teaching experiences are approximately 7 and 10, respectively. Midway through the 2001–2002 school year, at the request of the local superintendent, the principal (one of the most active principals in the GR Network) left Pine to become principal at a new school. Her replacement, a veteran principal who was familiar with GR research, welcomed the opportunity to participate in the GR Network.

Achievement levels at Pine have risen steadily across the last several years. As shown in Figure 1, Pine achievement levels in 1997 (averaged across reading, math, language, and spelling and across grades 2–5) were virtually identical to that of the District: 36.88 and 36.48 Normal Curve Equivalents (NCEs) or
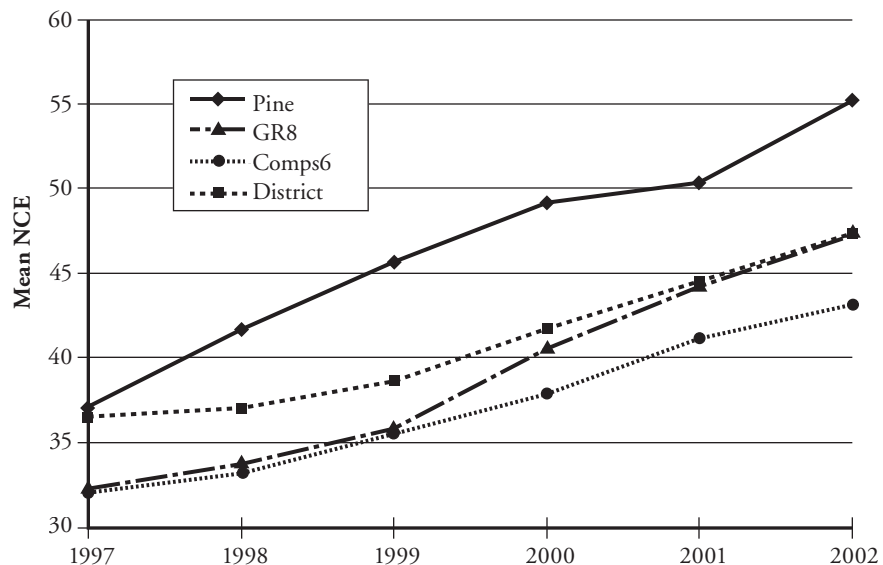

Figure 1. Pine academic achievement on Stanford 9, 1997–2002. Pine Normal Curve Equivalent means compared to other GR, comparison, and district schools.

27th and 26th National Percentile Ranks (NPRs). By 2002, however, Pine students were performing at levels significantly above the District averages: 55.15 and 47.29 NCEs (60th and 45th NPRs). The gain at Pine across the five-year period (18.27 NCEs) was slightly larger than the average gain among all other GR schools (15.12 NCEs), and substantially larger than the average gain among comparable schools (11.01 NCEs) and the District overall (10.82 NCEs).

The above average achievement gains at Pine (i.e., above GR averages) run parallel to the above average ratings Pine received in the external evaluation. On average, GR schools were rated significantly higher than comparison schools on each of the five elements, and Pine was rated significantly higher than the other GR schools on Goals, Leadership, and Settings (see Figure 2). Differences between Pine and other GR schools, reported in standard deviation units are .66, .59, and .74 for Goals, Leadership, and Settings, respectively.

In order to explore this pattern of results further, we also analyzed teacher surveys. The survey contained a subset of questions related to each model element. Teachers rated items based on a five-point scale. Similar to the external evaluator's ratings (see Figure 3), the 2002 survey results indicated that, on average, teachers at GR schools rated their schools significantly higher on most model elements than teachers at comparison schools. Pine teachers rated their school higher than teachers at other GR schools, specifically for Goals and Settings.
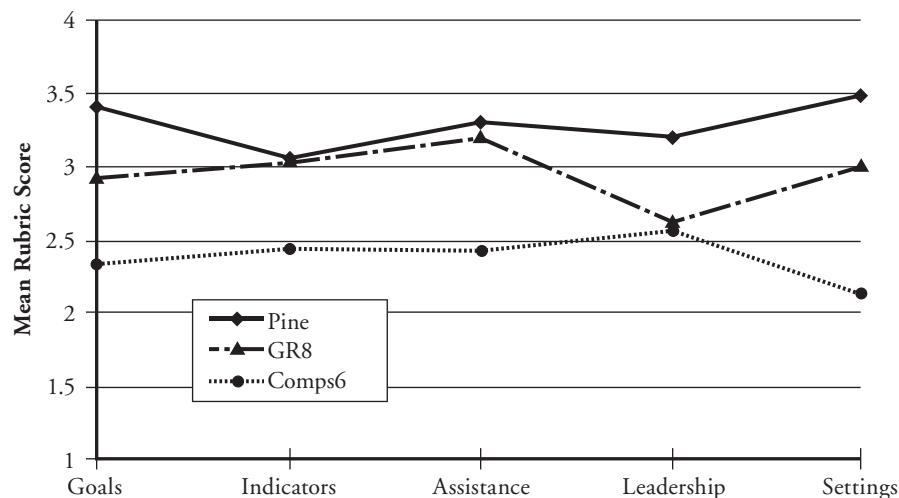

Figure 2. External evaluator's ratings of Getting Results Model elements.

In sum, our analysis of both teachers' ratings and the external evaluator's ratings converged on the same finding: The two model elements that distinguish Pine from other GR and comparison schools are Goals and Settings. In order to investigate this finding further, in particular, the prominent role of Settings, we analyzed transcripts from teacher focus groups conducted at Pine during the Spring semesters of 1998, 1999, 2000, and 2001. We also analyzed transcripts from a teacher focus group conducted at Pine as part of a different project during the Fall of 2003. Finally, we reviewed results of grade level meeting evaluations completed at Pine and all other GR schools during the Spring of 2003. The 2003 data allow us to examine Pine teachers' most current perceptions of Pine settings. Focus groups were conducted by the second author (1998, 1999, 2003), another researcher (2000), and the external evaluator (2001) and involved approximately six teachers in each group. Each year, in accord with guidelines provided by our research staff, principals recruited teachers to form focus groups that were as representative as possible. This included some teachers who were in school leadership positions and others who were not, those from lower, middle and upper grades (K–1, 2–3, and 4–5), and with varying years of experience.

The first author analyzed the transcripts. First, he read all transcripts and compiled all excerpts in which teachers talked about one or more of Pine's major school settings: grade level meetings, leadership team meetings, faculty meetings.
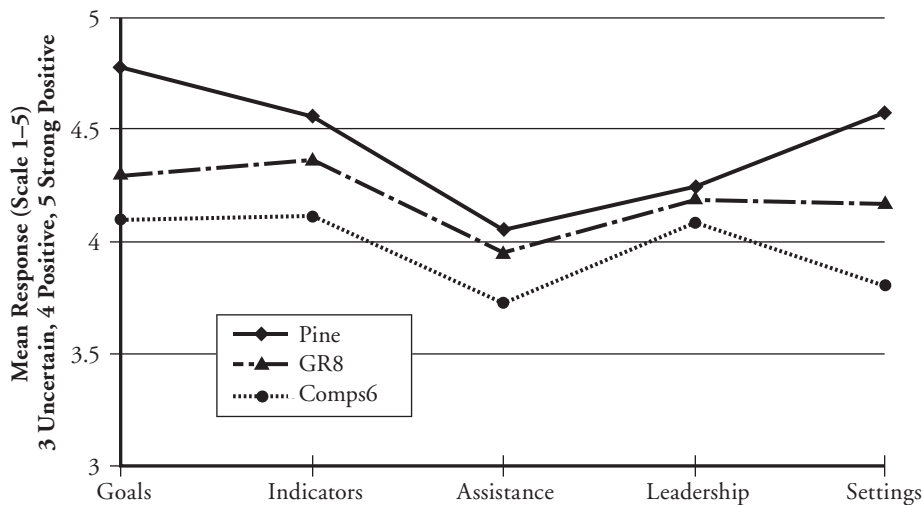

Figure 3. Teachers' ratings of Getting Results Model elements.

Second, excerpts were grouped chronologically, and the first author prepared a written analysis based on excerpts that seemed to best characterize and illustrate teachers' changing perceptions of these settings on a year-by-year basis. Third, excerpts were re-grouped thematically, and the first author prepared a revised analysis based on excerpts that seemed to best characterize and illustrate, from Pine teachers' perspectives, the processes of establishing, connecting, and sustaining settings.

Development of Settings at Pine

Establishing Settings

Like most schools in the district, Pine had weekly faculty meetings that were held after school for approximately one hour every Tuesday. This was the only professional development setting in existence at Pine during the 1997–1998 school year. The principal planned all faculty meeting agendas, and topics included a vast array of items. Everything related to school business, district policies, and professional development was addressed during this one time and place when the staff gathered together. If electricians were coming to install new wiring, the principal reviewed the schedule of work during a faculty meeting. If the district had established new policies regarding report cards, the coordinator explained the new policies during a faculty meeting. If a group of teachers had been sent to a conference on writing instruction, the group shared what they had learned at a faculty meeting. (Below is an excerpt from the focus group meeting. In this and other excerpts throughout the chapter, we use a "T" to denote a teacher speaking. However, because of the way these data were transcribed, we are unable to identify when a particular teacher spoke more than once.)

> T: I think we have had [a packed agenda] at every single faculty meeting, and speaking only for myself, sometimes, no every time to me, it feels very overwhelming because I'm the kind of person who needs to focus on one thing and work it through and know that I understand what's going on. And when I am bombarded, [or] it feels like I am bombarded—this is very personal—then I lose my focus….

> T: I think one of the other problems also is that our faculty meetings are at the end of the day. And by that point it is really hard to focus, you know, on technical information and process it. By that time you are tired, and sometimes it doesn't matter the way it should. (Teacher Focus Group, Spring 1998)

The litany of state and district initiatives intended to improve student achievement simply compounded the congestion of faculty meetings. The State had reduced class-size, established new content standards, revamped curricular frameworks for language arts and math, mandated literacy instruction trainings for all teachers, and significantly changed its language of instruction policies (Proposition 227). The district had undergone yet another administrative re-organization, hired a new superintendent, and mandated new promotion and retention policies, as well as student intervention programs, assessments, and language arts and math curriculum. The teachers' sense of being bombarded was understandable. Unfortunately, they saw themselves and their principal as virtually powerless against the onslaught of state and district forces.

> T: It's still not in her control. As much as she…is a very experienced teacher, but as far as an administrator saying this is how its gonna be…. She's not the authority.

> T: She has other people higher to answer to. She doesn't get to make those decisions. (Teacher Focus Group, Spring 1998)

Despite the sense of futility, however, teachers seemed more than willing to move forward, and without reservation. They expressed confidence in their colleagues. This was not a staff rife with factions and dissension. At the same time, there simply was no infrastructure of settings that allowed them to turn their intentions into concrete accomplishments.

> T: We really, the staff here really wants to do it. It's not that there's anybody who doesn't want to do it.

> T: There's nobody bitter on our staff. Everybody is motivated.

> T: It's kind of like, tell us what you want and then *let us do it.*

> T: We're ready.

> T: We'll do it. (Teacher Focus Group, Spring 1998)

The first steps, then, involved establishing two core Getting Results (GR) settings: The Academic Achievement Leadership Team (AALT) and Grade Level Team Meetings (GLs). Regarding the former, the principal recruited a representative from each grade level to serve on the AALT. Regarding the latter, the principal instituted a physical education program that would allow grade level meetings to take place while students were participating in the physical education program. During the focus group conducted the following spring, Pine staff were asked about what they were doing to improve student achievement.

> Interviewer: What sort of things are going on at Pine now to try and improve student achievement?
>
> T: We have grade level meetings. Teachers at the grade levels meet once a week to talk about…ways to improve students' learning, setting goals, carrying through with those goals and talking about the curriculum.
>
> T: We've all been working on a pacing [plan] for each grade level so that we are trying to, all of us, work on the same thing at approximately the same time
>
> T: We have a leadership team. One teacher at each grade level is on the team and we talk about setting school wide goals and other issues. (Teacher Focus Group, Spring 1999)

That the teachers immediately mentioned grade level meetings and the AALT is noteworthy, indicating that both settings had been sufficiently established in the day-to-day work of the school.

The launch of grade level meetings was successful in at least two important ways. First, as evident in the teachers' explanation, grade level meetings, as a setting, had a clear purpose: to improve students' learning. Second, that purpose had been translated into action, into specific things to do: "setting goals" and "working on a pacing [plan]." It would be so easy to underestimate the fundamental importance of these accomplishments. Most school settings founder for lack of purposeful activity. Either the purpose of the setting fails to get translated into concrete actions or the concrete actions lack the guidance of a clear purpose. Neither was the case at Pine.

Prior to the standards movement and the development and publication of state content standards, GR schools authored their own grade level standards or expectations. That process corresponded directly to one of the GR Model elements: Goals that are set and shared. When state standards were developed and mandated, we encouraged schools to review those standards carefully in their grade level teams. We suggested that the teachers reorder the standards, and translate them, as necessary, into terms all teachers could understand. At Pine, this document became know as the "pacing plan," and each grade level team authored one. Pine staff took this undertaking seriously, viewed it as a valuable collective product, and actually used it in their grade level meetings to guide their discussions of teaching. Several teachers in the focus group that spring described their grade level team's work on their pacing plan. For example:

> One of the things we did in fifth grade is we had actually worked out a graph which shows what week we're doing what story, what skills go with that story, what writing

> activity goes with that story, what phonics skills, what spelling, what vocabulary, what comprehension, what inference questions pertain to that piece. So we have the whole year charted basically and we are going pretty well by that chart. I have always done it personally, but it has always been just my own. Now it's shared and we're all doing it. (Teacher Focus Group, Spring 1999)

Perhaps the most important comment in this fifth grade teacher's account is the very last utterance: "Now it's shared and we're all doing it." The team had effectively engaged in the process of reviewing the standards; they systematically identified and then aligned all the language arts skills and activities; they produced a collective product; and, most importantly, they used it to guide their teaching and meeting discussions. Another teacher in the focus group reiterated the change they had experienced, "We're all more focused on what we need to be doing for the children" (Teacher Focus Group, Spring 1999).

The success of grade level meetings at Pine during that first year of implementation could not have happened without effective work completed outside grade level meetings. This is evident both in (a) what was and (b) what was *not* mentioned in the focus group that spring. Regarding the latter, teachers made no critical comments about the operational details that were so central to making grade level meeting time happen. The principal and her administrative staff were responsible for taking care of most of these details, including scheduling grade level meetings, establishing the P. E. program, purchasing the equipment, hiring and training the P. E. staff, and making sure the program functioned effectively. All of these details had to be addressed so that grade level meetings could take place regularly and dependably. When administration fails to address these details, teachers know it, and they are not hesitant to talk about it. Such was not the case at Pine.

Teachers did comment on the work of the AALT and that of the principal in helping to establish the grade level meetings.

> Interviewer: Any factors that have helped move [this] ahead?
>
> T: Our AALT, I think, has really done a really good job.
>
> T: A fine job.
>
> T: Absolutely.
>
> T: Um, pulling all of this together.
>
> Interviewer: Has the AALT played…a leadership role in this?
>
> T: …Guidance.
>
> Ts: (laughter) (Teacher Focus Group, Spring 1999)

The Academic Achievement Leadership Team will be discussed further in the next section. Here it is important to note two things. First, staff recognized the AALT's role in the success of the grade level meetings "pulling all of this together." At same time, however, teachers seemed hesitant to applying the term "leadership" to the work of the AALT, characterizing it instead as "guidance." Teachers in the focus group registered this subtle, semantic shift (guidance rather than leadership). That is evident in their laughter, which is often a marker of sensitive topics (Schegloff, 1987). Indeed, this ambivalence towards teacher leadership dissolved over subsequent years, as we will see shortly.

Teachers in the focus group were not ambivalent about elaborating on the leadership role of the principal. Productive settings, settings wherein teachers get things done, require accountability. The GR Model defines leadership as a balance between support and pressure. As discussed earlier, the principal's support involved providing time for regular grade level meetings. Her pressure, on the other hand, involved holding grade level teams accountable for doing what they said they were going to do.

> Interviewer: What's been the principal's role in all this?
>
> T: She's the force behind it.
>
> T: The hammer behind the wedge
>
> T: Yeah.
>
> T: And I don't mean that unkindly either.
>
> T: She applies pressure to the extent of this is what you have to do, how are you going to do it, now that you've decided how to do it, go do what you just said you're gonna do.
>
> T: Makes us accountable. (Teacher Focus Group, Spring 1999)

In sum, Pine's first year implementation of grade level meetings illustrate several aspects of establishing settings effectively. Grade level meetings were assigned a clear purpose (improving achievement), they involved a worthwhile, shared task (developing goals and a pacing plan), they were guided by the leadership team, and they were both supported and held accountable by the school principal. They were also supported by and connected to other Pine settings, the topic of the next section.

Connecting Across Settings

With the establishment of grade level meetings and the AALT, and the continuing faculty meetings, Pine had three settings in operation. Among these three,

grade level meetings were the most important, specifically because they focused most directly on teachers' instruction. Grade level meetings function, however, within the larger school-wide context. To be effective, the larger school-wide context must support grade level meetings. There must be strong connections between grade level and other school-wide settings and most importantly between the grade level setting and the classroom setting.

From the beginning, connections were made at Pine between grade level meetings and both faculty and leadership team meetings. In the focus group following the first year of implementation, teachers mentioned the importance of instituting grade level meetings school-wide. Every grade level was involved. Every grade level had a representative on the AALT. Teachers viewed this as an opportunity to establish greater continuity. As they explained, that continuity was enabled by the seemingly simple but critical provision of sharing during faculty meetings and within AALT meetings.

> T: We also share whatever we have talked about in our grade level meetings at faculty meetings, as well.
>
> T: Right, right. So that we can build some continuity and see what each grade level is doing.
>
> T: That [also] happens at the AALT. The representatives will share what is happening at [each] grade level. And that meets once a month—the AALT. (Teacher Focus Group, Spring 1999)

In fact, the principal revamped her faculty meetings specifically to allow for grade level sharing. She moved all instruction-related items to the top of the agenda, including time for teams to report on the content and focus of their grade level meetings, and she moved all operational items that had often consumed her faculty meeting to the bottom of the agenda (or in many cases, to the weekly bulletin or memos). AALT meetings operated in much the same way, providing a portion of time for each grade level representative to share what their team was doing. Both the sharing in faculty meetings and AALT meetings reinforced the idea that this was a school wide effort. Teachers' descriptions spoke specifically to the issue of coherence:

> T: A lot of these things are overlapping.
>
> T: It used to be that everyone was on their own in their classroom and [now] with the grade level meetings and school-wide faculty meetings and in-services we're working towards…
>
> T: Yes.

> T: We started in grade levels mostly and now we're trying to synchronize with all grade levels, so that we're sharing, each grade level is sharing what it is they're doing to see if we can unify the whole thing. (Teacher Focus Group, Spring 1999)

In the first focus group conducted prior to implementation of grade level meetings, teachers expressed frustration over the lack of opportunities to digest, follow-up, and dialogue about district in-service trainings. However, grade level meetings helped minimize that frustration, providing time for teachers to share, discuss and assist one another in the actual implementation of methods and techniques introduced during in-service trainings and workshops. For example, one teacher said, "To a certain extent, part of the grade level meetings, too, is to discuss the pros and cons and how to implement some of these things that we bring back from the [inservice] workshops." (Teacher Focus Group, 1999).

The connection between grade level meetings and AALT meetings is important. Consistent with the triadic model (Tharp & Gallimore, 1988), each setting requires its own supporting setting. Teaching in the classroom is supported by grade level meetings, grade level meetings are supported by leadership team meetings, and leadership team meetings are supported by monthly GR principals meetings, including collective meetings of all principals and one-on-one meetings between each principal and GR staff. By design, the leadership team should help distribute leadership. The principal typically plays the central role on the leadership team—providing direction, seeking input, building consensus, establishing deadlines, listening and providing feedback to members, and facilitating cross-grade level sharing and discussion. Leadership team members then play the same role within their grade level meetings. Leadership team meetings should function as a setting that supports the grade level setting. As the teachers described it, the connection between AALT and grade level meetings became stronger and increasingly productive over time.

> T: Our AALT meets monthly. This year [our principal] gave us an agenda, all the things to have done in our weekly grade level meetings. So now, those grade level meetings are on task, you know. Last year they were also, we started getting a lot done, but now, we have to look at the schedule and say, okay by this week we're supposed to have these things done, so today we need to do this.

> T: It's more focused. (Teacher Focus Group, Spring 2000)

GR researchers and principals developed a protocol that outlined a series of steps grade level teams might take to analyze student work and identify specific

needs to which instruction might be targeted. That protocol was discussed at monthly principal meetings, the Pine principal shared it with her AALT, and then some of the AALT representatives began using it in their grade level meetings.

> [Our principal] started asking us to bring something that our grade levels were work-ing on, so now at our grade level meetings.…Like a perfect example, at my grade level, we've all kind of committed to bringing work samples every week. Every week, as soon as we get in there, we're looking at work, you know, right away. So it's very student based, you know. How are you getting that done? And why isn't this working? Which is good for us. (Teacher Focus Group, Spring 2000)

The most important setting-to-setting connection is between grade level meetings and the classroom. In grade level meetings, teachers identify student needs, set goals, plan and discuss instruction, and analyze student work. To the extent that grade level teams engage in these activities productively, they affect what teachers do in the classroom. According to Pine teachers, grade level meetings had a positive effect on their teaching. In the excerpt below, teachers attribute their improved focus in the classroom to the improved focus of grade level meetings.

> T: Our classrooms are much more focused now than they have been.
>
> T: For sure. (all laugh)
>
> T: Oh yeah.
>
> Interviewer: What is this a result of?
>
> T: A combination of things.
>
> T: I think the AALT members were kind of forced—(someone laughs) Which helped though. I mean it was a big help to keep us focused and to keep a continued focus throughout every week—to keep our mind on a certain aspect of what we need to work on.
>
> T: And setting goals every week. Besides all the big school goals that we cre-ated in grade levels and as a school at the beginning of the year, every week we're making weekly goals at each grade levels. Agreeing on them, writ-ing them down, adhering to them the following week, following up on them—all based on student needs. (Teacher Focus Group, Spring 2001)

The excerpt above illustrates the connection between grade level meetings and the classroom, but it also references the connection between the leadership team setting and the grade level meetings. A bit earlier in the discussion from which the above excerpt was taken, one of the teachers commented that grade

level meetings had improved, specifically because the AALT was taking time during its meetings to plan and prepare written agendas for each meeting: "Grade level meetings are very well planned and organized. And they have agendas. And the agendas are reviewed and checked at the AALT. And suggestions are made. And revisions are made" (Teacher Focus Group, Spring 2001). The focus group also revealed that the principal required leadership team members to provide her with a copy of the agenda for each meeting. She also regularly attended grade level meetings—to participate, and also to check that teams were staying on task and accomplishing what was stated on the agenda. The principal improved the focus of leadership team meetings (spending more time on developing and refining agendas for grade level meetings), which helped sharpen the focus of grade level meetings, which in turn contributed to increased focus in the classroom.

Over time, the connection between grade level meetings and the classroom strengthened as Pine teachers' increasingly focused on results. For example, in the excerpt below, a teacher describes how the second grade team shared lessons, analyzed samples of student work, and provided demonstrations during their meetings. However, these activities seem to be driven by a common purpose: identifying and then implementing in the classroom those teaching strategies that worked best.

> We shared different lessons. Like in second grade, one week maybe someone would bring journals. The following week maybe different work samples of language arts, and maybe someone would demonstrate a lesson—whatever's working in the classroom. Because different things were working in different classes—and then, when you find out what's working in one class, then you can try it in the other classroom, and so eventually everybody's doing the same thing because it works. (Teacher Focus Group, Spring 2001)

At the heart of this process—sharing lessons, trying them in the classroom, identifying what works, and then collectively implementing—is the connection between grade level meetings and the classroom. That which is discussed in meetings has a direct bearing on what teachers do in the classroom, and what teachers experience in the classroom has a direct bearing on the discussions and activities of subsequent meetings. When this connection is maintained, grade level meetings take on increasing continuity, driven by the collective effort to identify and implement teaching that best addresses specific student needs.

> T: First we evaluate the student work and as we evaluate the student work we look at strengths and weaknesses. Then we decide on what kind of instruction we're gonna try in the classroom. And we try the instruction in

the classroom, and then we go back and re-assess to see if the instruction
is working. If it's not working we just, we try to take a different approach
until we meet those goals and those standards and objectives.

Interviewer: Would that be true in [kindergarten and Grades] 1, 2, 3, 4?

T: Absolutely. (Teacher Focus Group, Fall 2003)

Sustaining Settings

Pine settings have sustained over the last five school years (1998–1999 through
2002–2003). There were approximately 200 meetings each year. Each grade level
team met three times each month for 45 to 50 minutes, for a total of 30 meetings
per year. The AALT met once a month for 90 minutes, for a total of 10 meet-
ings each year. In addition, 1 to 2 faculty meetings were held each month for 30
to 60 minutes, for a total of 20 meetings each year. How does a school go about
sustaining all of these settings? At least three variables emerge as important from
our analysis of Pine: leadership, resilience, and productivity.

First and perhaps foremost, Pine has maintained strong leadership over the
past five years. Our observations at the school suggest that the principal at Pine
(both the original and the current principal) consistently made these settings a
top priority. In addition, Pine has maintained a very stable and highly commit-
ted AALT (3 of its 6 members have, with the support of their grade level teams,
remained in their position over the entire five year period). Among the many
indicators of strong leadership is one that is easily overlooked: being able to suc-
cessfully address all the seemingly mundane operational details upon which these
settings depend. For example, at the beginning of each of the last five years, the
Pine principal and the AALT prepared a schedule of all meetings for the year.
With very few exceptions, each meeting scheduled was conducted. All meetings
had a designated leader (leadership team member, principal, other administrator
or teacher). With very few exceptions, there was also a written agenda that was
prepared ahead of time, used during the meeting, and stored in the principal's
binder. Consistent leadership was also indicated by the continuation of the physi-
cal education program that provided the weekly time for grade level meetings.

Pine also seems to be a particularly strong example of distributed leadership.
Teachers in the Fall 2003 focus group mentioned both their sense of empower-
ment and also their school's culture of leadership.

T: We're very empowered here when you think about it because at grade
levels we make a lot of decisions about how we're gonna go forth.

> T: And we are supported.
>
> T: I think there is a culture of leadership. Whether you're the AALT rep for your grade level or whether you're the head of another committee, you know that you have a job. And whatever level your job is, if it is Assistant Principal, AALT leader or a supporting member in your grade level team, you know that your job is important, and it builds on this culture of leadership at the school. (Teacher Focus Group, Fall, 2003)

The above teacher's explanation of this "culture of leadership" seems to include two important elements. On the one hand, Pine staff recognized that leadership positions are jobs with specific responsibilities to be fulfilled. At same time, the staff recognized the importance of everyone's role including those in non-leadership or supportive positions. Our observations at Pine corroborate the teacher's descriptions. Among teachers, even among those who sometimes do not get along, we have never observed anything but consistent mutual respect between school leaders and others in the school community. Teachers who are not in leadership roles vest their colleagues with license to lead, in addition to fulfilling their responsibilities as members of grade level and school-wide teams.

One last point regarding leadership concerns the principal's support and pressure. Teachers in focus groups credited both the original and current principals for sustained support of the staff's efforts. These conversations included discussions about the original principal's application of pressure. Although some teachers were somewhat put off by the principal's pressure and wondered if they were being singled out, most teachers seemed to view the pressure as beneficial. For example, one teacher described how the principal consistently provided positive feedback, but always followed it up with a challenge.

> "Sure, you're doing it good. It's beautiful. You're doing a great job. Now, here's the challenge. Challenge question: Bonus!" You know, there's always that little star at the bottom, "Try this. Bonus!" (laughter). "What standard are you working on?" "Great bulletin board. What standard does that project address?" You know, that's like the big thing I'm always thinking about now. But, it, that's a great thing. I love it. I mean, I don't love it. (laughter). You know, it's just, it's a good thing. Of course it's good for us. You know, but it's a little intense. (Teacher Focus Group, Spring 2001)

Other teachers in the focus group followed up on this characterization, corroborating their colleague's assertion that the principal's challenging questions were a good thing.

> T: Well, it just forces you to focus. It forces you to think
>
> T: I was just going to say that.

> T: About, why am I teaching this? Why am I teaching it this way? Is it necessary, and do I need to add this, or should I add this?
>
> T: Yeah, it— It's getting the results.
>
> T: Mmhm.
>
> T: Sometimes it's uncomfortable to be pushed that hard. But, it's getting the results and ultimately that's what our job is all about. (Teacher Focus Group, Spring 2001)

We cannot definitively establish how the original principal's pressure, specifically her capacity to deliver challenging feedback to her teachers, helped sustain settings during her tenure at Pine. However, it seems likely that it served to communicate her expectations to her teachers.

> I think that's the case with a leader. They always let you know that you have this much to grow, you know? I mean, no one's going to say, "You're perfect. That's it. Stop right there." …It's only normal, I think. We need to grow. (Teacher Focus Group, Spring 2001)

Conceivably, the principal's feedback continued to provide a sense of direction to Pine staff and its settings, which were established from the beginning to improve student achievement and support teachers' professional development and growth.

Settings also sustained at Pine because the leadership and staff did not appear to have allowed themselves to get overly distracted by numerous external mandates that could have easily derailed the effort. Each year, they faced new state and district requirements with resilience, modifying and adapting what they were doing in order to fold-in new reading and math programs, new reading and math assessments, new reading and math coaches, district authored and annually revised reading and math pacing plans, and so on. Each year, focus group discussions revealed teachers' concerns about the litany of mandates, as well as the pressure to produce ever increasing test scores.

> T: I think we're all sort of overwhelmed that there's so much to teach, and there's not enough time in each day.
>
> T: And they keep pushing literacy, and then they push math and then, you know, well wait a minute, there's science, there's social studies, there's health, and there's never enough time to teach everything. (Teacher Focus Group, Spring 1999)

In the Spring 2000 focus group, teachers talked about the disappointment they felt when the pacing plan they developed the previous year had to be replaced by the district's pacing plan. One teacher noted,

> We had put a lot of time in making our monthly plan and then the District came out with their plan, and it was kind of like, "Oh well, throw yours away and use this because if you don't, you're going to be up a creek. "(Teacher Focus Group, Spring 2000

The teachers also talked about the pressure they felt from the district.

> T: There's a lot of pressure from the District right now. It's just, you know, pressure, pressure, pressure.

> T: It's a kind of pressure that I feel as a seasoned teacher, that's not necessary. I think it can be done in a much different way, in a much healthier way. And I see the pressure on teachers when it comes to standardized tests. I don't think that's the true indicator of what's really going on. I think it's very unhealthy. (Teacher Focus Group, Spring 2000)

In short, Pine teachers battled the same potential distractions and pressures that all other schools in district faced, but we have no evidence to suggest that those distractions and pressures ever overtook Pine settings or ever seriously threatened the staff's efforts to improve achievement. If anything, focus group evidence suggests that Pine settings may have actually helped teachers deal with the mandates and pressures. For example, one teacher shared, "Just getting together with your grade level and talking about some of these things that make you feel overloaded ….You don't feel so alone" (Teacher Focus Group, Spring 1999).

How and why did settings sustain at Pine? Year after year, teachers felt these settings, particularly grade level meetings, were valuable and productive. Every focus group from 1998 through 2001 started with the same open-ended question: "What sort of things are going on at Pine now to try and improve student achievement?" Every year following implementation of grade level meetings (1998–1999), the very first responses to that question mentioned grade level meetings. Pine teachers have used these settings to accomplish things that they felt improved student achievement. Perhaps the lesson here is that settings have a reasonable chance of sustaining from one year to the next, if teachers perceive them to be productive and worthwhile. The evaluation of grade level meetings conducted at the end of the 2002–2003 school year suggested that this is the case at Pine. While results were generally positive at all GR schools, Pine teachers (n=24) consistently rated their grade level meetings higher than teachers from other GR schools—on average, approximately .65 standard deviations higher than means based on all respondents (n=491). For example, when asked, "Do grade level meetings contribute to the larger effort at your school to improve achievement? "Most Pine teachers said, "Definitely Yes" (Pine mean: 5.75, All GR schools mean: 5.18, sd, .82, scale 1–6; 6=definitely yes, 5=mostly yes).

Moreover, most Pine teachers responded very positively to the question, "Did grade level meetings have a positive effect on your classroom teaching this year?" (Pine: 5.75, All GR schools: 5.10, sd, .89). Finally, most Pine teachers responded very positively to the question, "Did your grade level meetings enhance your professional relationships with other teachers at your grade level this year?" (Pine: 5.88, All GR schools: 5.21, sd, .88)

We also know that Pine teachers continue to view their grade level meetings as productive, based on the Fall 2003 focus group.

> T: [We] formulate an objective. Assess for that objective. Look at the result. Did we meet the objective? No…let's go ahead and, you know, do it again. We all know this process.
>
> T: Very focused.
>
> T: We all know what we're doing at this meeting. We all know what we're doing at next week's meeting. We have an idea of what we will be doing, you know, two months from now.
>
> Interviewer: Is that school wide? Is not just something at one grade level only?
>
> T: School wide. (Teacher Focus Group, Fall, 2003)

In fact, when asked specifically about continuing to strive for high levels of academic achievement, teachers remarked that the staff's expectations have increased, that they have seen positive results each year, and that grade level teams work closely together to meet those expectations.

> Interviewer: How does the faculty feel about striving for high levels of academic achievement?
>
> T: I think we have higher expectations.
>
> T: Totally.
>
> T: We've been going up over the last, what is it, six years or so? Since we've been part the Getting Results group, we've been going up on our assessments every year. So we already have the mind set. We expect (pause) to do really well.
>
> T: I think it's something that we pride ourselves in, you know, knowing that we're gonna meet with our grade level and together we're fighting for this common goal, you know, and it all comes together as a school.
>
> T: I know my grade level, when I was in second grade, we were really tight and in first grade we are really tight. Very cohesive.
>
> Interviewer: So if you had to characterized the academic climate for the school?

> T: Very academic. Very high expectations. (Teacher Focus Group, Fall, 2003)

For Pine teachers, at least at this point in time, high expectations, results, and grade level meetings are tightly linked together. Such perceptions are probably both a product of and a promising condition for sustaining settings over time.

Conclusion

A generation ago, Sarason (1996) identified a gap in the school reform literature that still largely exists: the absence of comprehensive, systematic, and prospective descriptions of the school change process. Likewise, in his review of evidence that a collaborative school culture was related to student learning, Fullan (2000) commented that a "fundamental problem" was a lack of information about the development of such reform:

> The researchers who reported these results examined schools…once they were "up and running." We know nothing about how these particular schools got that way, let alone how to go about producing more of them. (Fullan, 2000, p. 582)

The ever-growing school change literature includes valuable portraits of changed or changing schools (e.g., Chasin & Levin, 1995; Heckman, 1996; Lieberman, 1995; Wagner, 1994). A recent and helpful trend in teacher professional development has focused more on actual instruction and learning in classrooms (e.g., Clark, 2001; Lieberman & Miller, 2001). However, what has been missing is a more detailed view of the change process, together with its results and outcomes, including measured student achievement.

We have been trying to fill this gap by simultaneously working with and studying schools using a model of school reform that focuses on establishing shared goals for student achievement, indicators to measure success, mutual assistance among professionals, and strong but supportive leadership to keep the process moving forward. Central to this effort is the concept of "settings." It is in settings such as grade level meetings and leadership team meetings, as we have tried to illustrate here, that these elements come together and influence the thinking and behavior of teachers. Settings provide an arena in which colleagues work together to understand and accomplish shared goals, examine data about whether students are accomplishing goals, and provide each other with assistance to accomplish the goals. Without settings, the other elements in our "change model" would be mere abstractions. But in the context of settings—stable, predictable, practical vehicles for joint, productive work—the elements create a dynamic that can lead to improved teaching and learning.

Understanding the phenomena we have attempted to document in this case study has of course been enriched by the work of many others, not least that of Tharp and colleagues. This work serves as a clear reminder that teachers' work—indeed, the work in which we all engage—cannot be seen in isolation, removed from the broad network of relationships that define who and what we are. Strategic use of this network can provide us with powerful tools for improving teaching, learning, and schools themselves.

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