
CASE 9. Is It "Take Us to Our Leader" or "We Can Do It Ourselves"?

Key Concept: Teacher Autonomy vs. Team Coherence and Alignment of Curriculum

A Team Meeting in Mid-February

"I would give this a three out of a possible four," asserted Julia O'Donnell. "I'm so proud of Dudley for his ideas. He answered the question and gave these descriptive details, just like we've been working on. He has a strong voice. This is just like he would say it if I asked him this question in class. What do others think?"

"Well," began Kristen Logan, "I would have to say I disagree. The child makes one statement that partially answers the question, but then goes off topic about the main character's outfit. I'm not sure if he really understood the question and response or if he was more interested in being creative. For a three, or even a two, there needs to be supporting evidence from the text."

"I'd agree—this is clearly a one," commented Megan O'Malley. The rest of the 4th-grade team sat silently, looking at their individual copies of Dudley's piece of work.

"I really think he understood the question, though. Let me get his graphic organizer," Julia said, and rose from her seat to go to her classroom across the hall.

"I have to say, I'm concerned for Julia's students," Megan spoke softly. "We all have to have high expectations and push students to meet them. Imagine claiming this is a three! She's got to be kidding. That just really makes me worried about what's going on in her room."

Later, in the Hallway

"Can I speak with you, Nora?" asked Julia, as they both walked upstairs after dismissing their students. Nora Jackson, a 4th-grade teacher, was hesitant to enter this conversation. Both Julia and Nora had been trained through a city-sponsored teacher residency program, and they were both in their second year of teaching. Nora, still new

to teaching and concerned about the progress of her own students, wasn't sure how to respond to Julia's needs, especially since the veteran teachers seemed skeptical of Julia's teaching.

Nora worried about Julia. Julia had let it be known that she'd had a hard time in her own schooling and believed that because of that she appreciated and understood her weaker students' needs. "I know how it feels to be lost in school. I had an awful time putting my ideas in writing and doing math. School was a struggle for me. I *really* understand my children," she would often say assertively. Last year, her first as a full-time teacher, she'd had several special education students in her classroom and also had the support of a teaching assistant to work with her during literacy blocks. But this year, budget cuts meant that she was working alone, and although the principal had purposely assigned far fewer students to her class than she had assigned to other teachers, Julia still had a disproportionate number of special education students.

"I was so outraged today when Kristen and Megan were speaking to me as though I was so wrong about Dudley's open response," said Julia. "Even after I showed them his graphic organizer, they spoke about him as if he had no clue. It's just not right—if only they knew how much progress he had made since the beginning of the year!"

"Well, yeah—" began Nora, but Julia cut her off.

"I have asked for resources and to collaborate on 'how to answer open-response' lessons, but not one of those veteran teachers has helped me. And they're always the ones who get the high-level kids! It's like they look down on my students and me. It's just not the same for me and my kids. Even you—you have such a higher class. I'm so tired of people not really making an effort to understand my position or help me out. What am I supposed to do?!"

Nora hesitated to respond. She didn't think her students were all that high, and felt as though Julia wasn't being considerate referring to them as such. Though they had both come through the same alternative certification program and both been interns at their current school, they were very different people. Unlike Julia, Nora had been an excellent student throughout her academic career and had attended a prestigious college. She was aware that Julia was struggling, but as the year progressed and it became clear that Julia was not easy to work with, she had begun to distance herself from Julia. She was also aware that others on the team felt the same way. Still, she struggled with her feelings. She wanted to be helpful but didn't know how. And she had her own kids to deal with. She also worried because helping Julia had the potential of alienating her from the rest of the team. It was an ongoing dilemma.

Goodwin Elementary School

With around 1,100 students, Goodwin Elementary School is one of the largest elementary schools in its urban district in a western state. The school is ethnically diverse, with an almost equal percentage of African American, Asian, and white students. It is also academically diverse, with a range of special education and regular education students.

Regarded as a highly functioning and successful public school, Goodwin is known for its rigorous standards and above-district-average test scores. Teachers work in grade-level teams and participate in cross-grade-level teams, such as the Instructional Leadership Team. The school often hosts researchers, teachers, and staffs of other schools who frequently visit Goodwin and take tours to see practices in action.

The 4th grade was one of the largest grades at Goodwin, with six classes. Two of the six 4th-grade teachers were veterans who had taught at Goodwin for nearly two decades; the four others had each only taught their own class for three or fewer years. The veteran teachers were known by parents to be excellent teachers, and many of the more knowledgeable parents requested that their children be placed in those teachers' classes.

To the younger teachers, the veteran teachers seemed friendly, but they did not engage with the newer teachers on a regular basis. It seemed to Nora that the established teachers had routines, units, lessons, and resources and stated that they were willing to share if asked, but they did not seek out avenues of collaboration or sharing with the explicit goal of aiding and supporting the other teachers.

"It's amazing to me that the 'pros' don't seek us out and volunteer to share their work with us. We're on a team together, but we never see each other teach. We live in our own isolated classrooms," complained Julia.

The veteran teachers, on the other hand, felt that their jobs were challenging enough without taking on the role of mentor teacher to the younger members of the team. They had enough to do, and they believed that if the younger ones needed anything, they would ask for it.

The 4th-Grade Team

Last year, the 4th-grade team had an official team leader, Maria Catone, a veteran teacher at the school who as the 4th-grade team leader had no teaching duties. She had been trained as a literacy coach and had already worked as a literacy coach in the building

before being given the job of helping this very novice team throughout the year. The principal believed that a full-time team leader would give much-needed support to the team. Maria felt that the job gave her the new responsibilities she wanted to have as she looked toward a larger school leadership position.

After one year as team leader, though, budget cuts had forced the principal to eliminate her team leader job; Maria left to take a principalship in a nearby school district. Since the team leader job would then be an uncompensated position, no teacher on the team wanted to assume it. So the team started the year without the formal teacher leadership they had experienced during the previous year. The team now consisted of one third-year teacher, two second-year teachers, one first-year teacher, and two teachers with more than 10 years of teaching experience. At the summer team workshop, the teachers together developed their goals for the new year and the norms they would maintain, and they made a serious commitment to rotating their roles on the team.

"You know," commented Nora to one of the other teachers during the summer meeting, "it's not so bad to be working on our own. There's a sort of freedom now that Maria's not here. I like the fact that we're making our own decisions."

The year had started out with a burst of energy; norms were followed, roles were rotated, instructional techniques such as "looking at student work" were tried out by the team. But as the year continued, there was a growing dissension in the group regarding exactly what areas they should be working on. They felt they needed to organize science as a team, but different members of the team felt differently about what key concepts and activities should be implemented. Megan, the most veteran member of the team, expressed her frustration to Kristen: "I've got materials that I know will work. I *am* willing to share them, but when I bring up ideas at our meetings, no one accepts my ideas. I give up. I just keep my mouth shut. It's tough not to have an official role. Rotating facilitation means that we don't stick with any one idea for very long. And no one's in charge of making sure we do what we promise to do from one meeting to the next."

By the middle of the school year, it was clear to all the teachers that team meetings had been getting less productive. The team had originally set goals for weekly sharing of materials and accomplishments, but this schedule had "gone missing," and the practice had fallen by the wayside. The practice of looking at student work was often dismissed until the math coach brought data and test materials for the team to examine. Although periodically the teachers looked at

student work, it often became a source of stress; not everyone brought work, some materials were not of consistent quality, and responses left teachers feeling vulnerable and stressed. Several teachers were repeatedly coming to meetings without the materials they had agreed to bring. Meetings were starting late, often due to teachers returning late from the nearby grocer or not having coverage for their class. And there were disagreements about what content was to be covered at each meeting as well as what expectations were to be met with regard to standards for students and the pacing of curriculum.

Despite these problems, the team seemed to be organized and functioning.

Team Members

As a second-year teacher, Nora was struggling with the dynamics of this new team configuration. Stacy Beauregard was a recently added 4th-grade teacher, in her first year of teaching. Julia and Maggie Hass, the third-year teacher, had worked closely together the previous year. Maggie was interested in her students achieving proficiency, and with minimal conflicts with other teachers and the administration. She made sure that her work was never an issue of conflict and rarely complained about any issues that could be regarded as controversial. Julia, Nora, and Stacy were working individually. Stacy was outwardly self-confident, but the other teachers on the team knew she had much to learn.

Nora could tell that Julia felt increasingly abandoned and separated from the group, but never felt quite comfortable reaching out to her. She wanted to support Julia—she could tell that Julia was frustrated when Maggie chose to work more closely with Megan and Kristen—but Nora wasn't sure what to do. With all of her complaining, what did Julia really have to offer that would help Nora's students? Even though it sounded selfish, would it really benefit her or her own students?

Meeting Day, a Month Later

One o'clock, the team's meeting start time, had come and passed, and the table in Megan's room where the 4th-grade teachers met was nearly empty. Nora arrived and began grading papers. Maggie sat down and set up her lunch.

"I brought chocolate-covered almonds for everyone, and fruit salad from Domingo's," said Stacy as she entered Megan's room. "Let

me get some napkins and spoons," she added as she walked toward her classroom across the hall.

"Does anyone have a copy of the agenda?" asked Nora. She was shuffling through her students' math tests and sipping a caffeinated soda.

"Since Julia's the facilitator, if she were here, maybe we would have it," Megan commented with annoyance. "It's already 10 minutes past the start time. Without an agenda, what are we supposed to do? We made a commitment to start on time, and Julia is always running late for one reason or another. I'm tired of her excuses." Megan looked toward her colleagues with her eyebrows raised. Kristen, the other veteran teacher on the team, was the only one who met her look and nodded.

"I saw Julia in the hall with some of her students and the Student Support Coordinator, Mrs. Gagnon," offered Stacy as she came back into the meeting area with spoons, napkins, and cups. "I couldn't find bowls, but we can put the fruit salad in these cups."

"Maggie deals with challenging students every day, and she's not late," Megan moaned. "We all do. This is ridiculous." Maggie kept her eyes on her salad. Nora and Stacy kept silent. Minutes later Julia bustled in.

"I'm so sorry I'm late," Julia hastened to say. "Mrs. Isles is supposed to work on study skills with my class this period, but she was late. I still can't believe my class gets a 'study hall' with the building substitute while others get actual specials and instruction. It's unfair; of all the classes, my students need to make up the most ground! No offense to Mrs. Isles, but we know that she isn't going to promote real studying or instruction."

Julia flopped into her seat and looked around. No one commented in response to her laments. "I brought fruit salad and chocolate-covered almonds," chimed in Stacy.

"Julia, did you bring copies of the agenda?" Megan asked. Maggie sat silently.

"Yes, here's an agenda for everyone," Julia replied. "I know we discussed how we would develop our informal play unit, but my students are still working on first person narratives, so I have some of them here that we didn't get to discuss last time. I was thinking we could break into two groups to work on both genres."

"Well, I brought some information on informal plays. I'm really getting tired of bringing all of the materials, though," stated Megan. "And I thought we had all agreed to finish persuasion and move onto informal plays. You know I have students on IEPs in my class, too, but we have to address the standards and move forward. Otherwise,

our students are not getting equal access to all of the curriculum that they should.”

“Look, everyone knows my class is like the unofficial Sped room,” Julia began, and then exhaled slowly. “It’s not like I can just go at the same pace. My students need more intensive time on these subjects. I feel like we are always rushing forward and I don’t get a chance to talk about my students’ work or needs. This is a whole 4th-grade team. It’s not just for classes that have higher-level kids.”

Megan took a deep breath and tried to stay calm, but asserted, “Look, we’re all in this together to make it work. You were 15 minutes late, Julia. Our time is precious.” Maggie, Nora, and Stacy sat in their seats quietly, averting their eyes. Julia stood up and set down her papers emphatically. “Just because I am different from you does not mean I’m not a good teacher! We set routines as a team, and we have all managed to stray from our goals somehow. It’s not just me. I wish everyone would stop acting like I don’t have a different situation or set of kids in my room!”

Megan shot back, “I’m tired of hearing excuses for why your class is behind. It’s wasting our meeting time trying to catch you up. This is not productive for the whole 4th-grade student body, and frankly I feel like every one of these meetings is a waste of my time.”

Julia informed the group she needed to walk away for now and picked up her papers as she went toward her own classroom, visibly upset. Stacy tried to rearrange the treats she had brought to be more accessible for those who were left. Maggie’s eyebrows were raised, but she said nothing. Nora started to refocus on her math papers and then stopped.

“Is the math coach coming to speak with us at the end of this period about the data from last year?” Nora asked.

“I don’t know for sure, but I think so,” answered Megan.” It will be good to hear his analysis of the math assessments. I’m just so tired of Julia acting like she is the only one with students on special education plans. Her students need a teacher that’s going to push them. I’ve walked past her room on too many occasions when the kids are out of control. She can’t control even that very small class.”

It was quiet for a few minutes. The math coach arrived, but everyone remained silent. “Should we check on Julia or just proceed?” asked Nora, breaking the silence.
