

Leadership by Consensus: A Community-Based Approach to School Governance

by

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Community, at its very best, is a dynamic, collaborative, mutually supportive relationship which enhances the individual as well as the collective. At the core of the educational philosophy of the Hilltown Cooperative Charter School is the concept of school as community. We believe that children learn best from an integrative approach in which not only the various subjects themselves are interactive, but in which the entire process of education is integrated with every facet of students' lives. As a member-run cooperative composed mostly of students' families, the Hilltown School fosters collaborative learning and a strong sense of community. Out of that cooperative approach emerges a governing structure which reflects the school philosophy. This structure is the subject of our paper.

In the following pages, we will explore Hilltown Cooperative Charter School's approach to governance. Following a brief overview of our school, we will discuss HCCS's practice of consensus decision-making, a practice which includes and integrates as many of the various ideas, perspectives, and concerns of community members as possible. We'll discuss how consensus decision-making operates and the principles behind it. Then we will examine the "domain structure," our form of governance, and in particular the unique role of parents and community members in it. Our goal is to share a model of governance very different from that found in the average public school, and thereby provide some possible alternatives for educators and administrators.

The story-to-date of the Hilltown Cooperative Charter School (The Hilltown School, or HCCS), like the story of any "heart-driven" endeavor, is a story characterized by shifting energies, growing pains, exciting milestones, momentum and pride. There have been inevitable changes as the school community has grappled with such fundamental but evolving issues as size, location, curriculum, and student assessment. But one essential guiding principle, outlined in the original charter, has remained central throughout: collaboration and community are essential supports to learning, management, and community itself. The school's mission, in part, reads:

We believe that children, families, schools and communities are an integral system. As such,

a school must interact in a collaborative manner with each component of the system. Our mission is to involve students, teachers, parents, administrators and members of the encompassing community in sustaining a non-discriminatory, rural, learning environment drawing on the Reggio Emilia approach. The inevitable rewards of this process are personal empowerment, critical thinking, joy of learning, and appreciation of the importance of diversity and cooperation.

The Reggio Emilia approach, the basis of this mission, is rooted in an effort by parents of post World War II northern Italy to create care centers and schools for their children of three months to six years old. These parents were inspired by Dewey, Vygotsky, and Piaget, among others, but over the years they have evolved a successful practice that is unique to their culture and circumstance. That approach thrives today for more than half the children of the city of Reggio Emilia and has been adapted for others in schools throughout Europe, East Asia, Australia, and the US.

The philosophical and pedagogical principles of Reggio Emilia are based on the belief that children have inherent potentials and rights, and should not be viewed as needy or dependent. These principles include the following, which are particularly central to the educational and managerial program of the Hilltown Cooperative Charter School:

- The complexity of community-building requires a high degree of cooperation and collaboration among all community members, which requires regular and meaningful dialogue and discussion.
- The necessary support for such cooperation and collaboration is provided by a well-structured organization.
- The well-being of children is directly tied to the well-being of their parents and their teachers. This well-being includes the parents' rights to be involved in the life of the school and the teachers' rights to professional growth and development.
- Peer exchange, especially through small groups, is vital for developing the skills of communication and collaboration. (Gandini, L. 1993. *Foundations of the Reggio Emilia Approach*)

Living out these and other fundamentals of Reggio Emilia demands a learning environment quite distinct from that of the traditional public school. It depends on a culture that requires the meaningful involvement of many voices and provides time to accommodate the various needs expressed in those voices. It depends on an enhanced practice and mastery of skills essential to democratic participation and community building: dialogue (listening and expressing ideas), mutual respect and openness to differences, planning, problem-solving and conflict resolution, project sharing, creative and critical thinking, and evaluation. It depends on the presence of a structure and a process which allow those voices to interact and those skills to be applied. And it depends on a leadership committed to making choices which nurture such priorities.

At the Hilltown School, we have found consensus to be the tool most important to living out the Reggio Emilia philosophy, culture, practice, structure, and type of leadership. What follows is an in-depth examination of consensus as practiced by HCCS's Board of Trustees.

Consensus

The success of any organization depends largely on how well its governing body is able to make

decisions. In an ideal situation, each decision made would fulfill at least four criteria: 1) it is well-informed; 2) it furthers the stated mission of the organization; 3) it benefits as many of the organization's members as possible; and 4) it promotes the organization's ability to continue making good decisions.

Consensus is a cooperative approach which seeks to arrive at decisions that meet the above criteria by representing the integrated views of those participating in the process. It attempts to find a common ground through mutual cooperation, respect and trust, a common ground sufficient enough so that all participants feel the final outcome incorporates their views in an acceptable form.

Consensus, then, is distinct from the more standard process--voting or "parliamentary" approach, the result of which reflects only a majority view. Moreover, because the parliamentary approach tends to focus on the adoption or rejection of a single proposal, or on the choice of one out of two or more proposals, it tends to promote competition rather than cooperation. While certainly democratic in nature, voting makes it relatively easy for minority views to be unheeded or dismissed, thus suppressing potentially helpful insights that could otherwise have informed a better decision. Here participants can lose sight of their mission to support the organization. Instead they become focused on defending their own positions while criticizing those of their opponents. This situation does not foster effective communication and can stifle creative thinking. Those in the majority have no particular incentive to integrate differing views, and minority members end up frustrated, resentful, or otherwise dissatisfied, further impairing a group's decision-making ability.

Since the consensus process strives to promote cooperation instead of competition, neither voting nor majority rule figure in it. Instead, a decision hinges upon whether or not all of the parties involved can reach a mutually satisfactory level of agreement. The strong objections of even one participant can be enough to block the adoption of a proposal. This approach provides a built-in incentive for the majority to respect and to integrate minority views. The ensuing flow of diverse perspectives, and in particular the creative friction generated by the expression of opposing views, tends to result in very well thought-out and informed decisions. The cooperative approach of consensus shifts the focus away from individual positions and onto the collective decision to be made. And, because the final decision reflects an integrated common ground, consensus substantially avoids the divisions that result from dissatisfaction; it enhances the group's ability to continue making good decisions in the future.

Even as the actual decision-making power at the Hilltown School is officially vested on the Board of Trustees, most major decisions involve the consensus of the entire school community. In such decisions, the various opinions of members of all the school domains are solicited through printed questionnaires, telephone surveys and community-wide meetings. The compiled results are then turned over to the appropriate Board committee for tabulation and recording, and then to the full Board for action.

A proposal to the Board usually arises from one of the standing committees, where it has been thoroughly discussed and, ideally, agreed upon by all members. While consensus is not required at the committee level, any proposals which lack unanimous agreement must, when submitted to the Board, include an explanation of dissenting views. Generally then, the proposals are included in the Board information packet which is distributed to the trustees several days in advance of a meeting. This allows any trustee who has questions regarding the proposal to bring them up privately with committee members, thereby minimizing detailed discussion during the meeting.

After a proposal has been officially presented, one or more rounds of clarifying questions are held,

in order to allow the trustees to gather as much information as possible. Once this is done, a brief "finger poll" is usually held as a way to determine the level of consensus existing at that point. Raising four fingers indicates that the trustee fully supports the proposal as it stands; three fingers indicates support with minor reservations; two fingers stands for substantial reservations which will require further discussion and modification of the proposal; and one finger signifies that the trustee disagrees strongly enough with the proposal as to block agreement.

Next, as many rounds of discussion as necessary take place. During these individuals who have raised one or two fingers discuss their objections, and the group attempts to find an acceptable compromise, one that satisfies the objectors enough that an agreement can be reached. At any point during the discussions, the meeting facilitator may call for another finger-poll to gage the progress toward reaching consensus. If it appears that consensus is still lacking, and the time allotted for the discussion has run out, the facilitator may table the discussion until the next Board meeting, or send the proposal back to its committee for further discussion and reformulation. In such a case, dissenting Board members are encouraged to attend the committee meeting to make sure that their views are accurately represented.

Most of the time, consensus can be reached reasonably smoothly. Nonetheless, inevitably the time arises when the group fails to find adequate common ground. When that happens there are several alternatives. First of all, trustees do not have to be in complete agreement with a particular proposal in order for it to pass. A dissenter may choose to "step aside" after having voiced his/her concerns, and allow the decision to be made. At the same time, those concerns voiced are not ignored or dismissed simply because they are not strong enough to block. Ideally, they would still be considered and incorporated in the final decision.

A proposal is blocked when a dissenter is not willing to step aside. Herein lies one of the main differences between consensus and parliamentary voting. In the latter, an individual is unable to block a proposal. In consensus decision-making a single person is entitled to do so. It is this aspect of consensus that generates criticism and fear--fear that even if all but one of a group's members were in agreement on a particular course of action, that individual could nevertheless manipulate and hold the group "hostage" by exercising a block.

Ideally, if the process of consensus were working well to begin with, such a situation would not arise; both the objector and the remainder of the group would approach the sticking points with an attitude of respect and flexibility, and as a result a compromise that satisfied the objector's concerns would be worked out. Or, given that all the other members were in agreement with the proposal, the objector could be persuaded by the one-sidedness of the situation to "stand aside" rather than block.

For clarification: a block requires principled objections. Foremost, the dissent must arise from a substantive concern that a given proposal conflicts with, or is not in the best interests of, the stated aims of the organization. There are other reasons an individual might block: the dissenter may feel more time will resolve the impasse, or the dissenter may feel that his/her concerns and suggestions have not been understood in a climate of mutual respect.

Mere personal preferences are not sufficient to block, and if the group finds little ground for principled objections, it may choose NOT to accept the block.

Another way to override a block is to resort to parliamentary procedure. For example, after a

proposal has been discussed at three separate Board meetings without consensus being reached Trustees have the option of going to a straight vote. We want to make it clear, however, that in these situations, the overriding of the block implicitly means that the use of the consensus process failed. Ideally, this strategy should only be used in extreme circumstances, when all other attempts to achieve consensus have been unsuccessful.

Another frequent objection to the process of consensus is that it takes a very long time to arrive at a decision. Certainly, the emphasis on inclusion means that more time is spent on discussion and negotiation than generally happens in the parliamentary model. But this perceived lack of expediency may be misleading. While it is true that initially consensus may be slower than a straight vote, the time difference can often balance out in the end.

The truth is, a decision is all but useless if it cannot be implemented effectively. Because the parliamentary approach inherently results in winners and losers, those who oppose a final decision may very well get in the way of its implementation, deliberately or unconsciously. As a result, the opponents of the proposal may have to be persuaded or coerced into helping with its implementation, a situation that can take a good deal of time and effort.

Because consensus seeks to find an inclusive common ground, agreement tends to be more widespread and long-lasting. This usually means that even those who originally had reservations about the proposal move on board to implement it, and in the end, there are more human resources available to help implementation. So, if the comparison between parliamentary voting and consensus decision-making calculates the time it takes from the moment a proposal is first made until it is successfully implemented, consensus can actually be the more expedient approach.

A Framework for the Use of consensus: Governance at HCCS

Consensus was the cornerstone of the experience of the first few years of the Hilltown School. The community was small and, while by no means lacking contentiousness, the excitement of the new adventure tended to steer issues toward a resolvable and manageable state. Once a "consensus of founders" was established, the community focused on day-to-day, nuts and bolts issues that kept decision-making focused and practical.

Gradually though, attention to the practical urgencies of those first years began to reveal inadequate systems for governing the growing school. As the school increased in size (as planned in the founding charter), and as the founders' energy was challenged by the immensity of the job, it became clear that management and decision-making needed a readjustment. At about the same time (spring of 1998), a site visit report by the State Dept. of Education articulated the need for clarifying the who and how of decision-making at the school.

Consequently, the Board of Trustees established a group--the Governance Evaluation Committee and Consultant (GECCo)--to examine the governing experience of the school's first years in light of its founding principles and make recommendations for strengthening and clarifying that structure. Using interviews, surveys, and focus groups involving school founders, staff, and parents, as well as the services of a professional management consultant, the committee found a strong continuing commitment to the founding principles set forth in the Charter--namely consensus decision-making, parent involvement, and team leadership--and identified a set of key recommendations to the school's Board of Trustees.

At the heart of the GECCo report was the recommendation that HCCS develop a four-"domain"

structure to address issues and carry out all school functions: The Board of Trustees, Educational Domain, Administrative Domain, and Family Domain. The primary day-to-day managing body of the school--the "Management Team"--was redefined as a place to manage day-to-day decision-making, coordinate "multi-domain" issues and decisions, and enhance communication among the domains.

Establishing and working with the four domains accomplished several goals related to building a structure to support the collaborative and cooperative goals of the Reggio approach:

- Provide open access to all members of the community
- Provide a model of participatory deliberation and decision-making
- Provide clarity for where and how decisions are made.
- Provide clarity for how issues are discussed and initiatives can be presented to the community

As implemented, the work of each domain--with the exception of the Board of Trustees--is coordinated by a paid administrator. A central challenge of each administrator is to navigate an optimum balance between the need for efficiency, given the daily demands of management engaged in ongoing dialogue with domain members, and consensus decision-making.

The Board, by definition of the state charter school laws, is responsible for the mission, educational philosophy, and major policies of the school. As such, it oversees and periodically assesses the school's finances, programs and management.

The Educational Domain has responsibility for all aspects of the educational program, including curriculum, grouping of students, space use, and student assessment. A unique aspect of the Hilltown Charter states that "the school will grant educational staff the power to make their own decisions.. teachers will be fully sanctioned and trusted to make their own teaching decisions which will enhance their self-esteem and motivation."

The Administrative Domain has responsibility for all non-educational operations of the school, including financial management, physical plant, office and record-keeping, and medical issues.

Finally, the Family Domain's purpose is particularly unique and central to fulfilling the school's community mission, that is, "to support and foster the cooperative, inclusive, expressive culture of HCCS." It is the primary structure for nurturing and coordinating the involvement of school families and the greater "outside" community. Central to this task is organizing and coordinating the parent cooperative--the heart and core governing body of the school--and it is the job of the family domain coordinator to lead the way.

Family Involvement at the Hilltown School

While parent and community involvement has been basic to the school's operation since its founding, the newer domain structure helps HCCS effectively respond to increased school size and the shifting priorities of a school moving beyond its founding mindset. Following are some descriptions of how families are involved at the Hilltown School, particularly as coordinated through the Family Domain as it strives to support the greater cooperative, policy and procedural guidelines, as well as day-to-day administrative and program management.

Membership in the Cooperative

All parents are encouraged to become members of the governing cooperative, and through this to join the Board of Trustees and other committees which make policy decisions. An individual membership (renewable annually) in the Cooperative enables parents to participate in decision making at the annual meeting, including the selection of members to the Board of Trustees and changes in the school's by-laws. Membership also provides the framework of an expectation of active parent participation at the school. Membership is based on the investment of an average of at least four hours of volunteer work at the school per month.

Through the membership system, parents become involved in every aspect of the day to day operation of the school. Not only do they have access to every classroom at virtually all times, they are also involved in the hiring and annual evaluation of teachers and administrative staff. They hold the majority of places on the Board of Trustees and participate in and chair many committees, including finance, long-range planning, personnel and site. In addition, they are involved at the school through the teaching of mini-courses, construction and repair of the facility, managing and coordinating community-service projects, and initiating new programs within the educational domain.

The Hilltown Cooperative, through its structure, has been remarkably successful in encouraging and enabling parents to participate at the school in whichever way works best for their family. Over 90% of families at the school volunteer during the school year and in May, 2000, an impressive 83% of the 109 families at Hilltown had one or more adult who was a member of the cooperative--volunteering at least 4 hours a month at the school. When polled, almost all of the parents reported that they felt as connected and involved at the school as they would like to be, with only a few exceptions, where life circumstances prevented them from participating more--a death in the family, a new baby or graduate school, for example. In the same poll, parents overwhelmingly reported that they felt that their ideas and concerns were heard and valued by the staff at the school, even when the staff were not able to take the actions that the parent had hoped for.

Information often equals power in an institution, and communication with families is a high priority at the Hilltown School. Parents are asked to come into the building each day to collect their children, view the bulletin boards and pick up school mail from their individual mailboxes--a system that keeps parents directly in line with information. Occasional mailings and a monthly newsletter in the mailboxes also keep families up-to-date with what is happening throughout the school. Summaries of all Board and Committee meetings are posed on bulletin boards within 48 hours of the meetings, so that there is plenty of opportunity for parents to make timely responses to the actions being planned and taken. The fact that parents are invited into the classrooms at almost any time greatly increases their access to information; they are in the building that much more often. With this kind of information available, parents have proven to be strong advocates for their children and for the school's development.

Management Team

The Management Team is the body that oversees the everyday decisions and operations of the school. It is an intersection of all of the Domains and its membership includes the Administrative Coordinator, the Education Coordinator, the Community Coordinator, two volunteer Parent Representatives (chosen by the membership), two volunteer teachers (selected on a rotating basis), and a representative from the Board of Trustees. This body deals with issues such as scheduling of special events, additional uses of the building, community outreach, internal

communication, standardization of procedures and policies, and conflict resolution.

The Parent Representatives are an essential voice on the Management Team. They are the conduit for a continual flow of information from the school's families to the administrative structures. In addition to occasionally developing questionnaires and carrying out polls, they hold a weekly "rap session" at morning drop off time and invite parents to discuss questions or problems which need attention; here they also seek suggestions for new programs or changes that might improve the functioning of the school.

Parent and Staff cooperation in the hiring process for teachers

In most public schools, when children are assigned to a classroom, their parents may or may not know the teacher in the room, and they almost certainly have had no part in the hiring of that teacher. In keeping with the parent cooperative governance structure, parents are major participants in the hiring of both teachers and administrative personnel.

The Education Coordinator has the final authority to hire teachers, but the process through which hiring decisions are made is clearly spelled out and includes full participation by both parents and existing staff. At HCCS the Hiring Committee for a teacher consists of the Education Coordinator, a current teacher, a parent and a member of the Board of Trustees (who may also be a parent). The members of this group read all the resumes and letters received in response to advertising, and they rank the applicants on a numeric scale. A meeting is held in which the committee discusses the resumes, and schedules interviews with the candidates--those who receive the most top ratings and those whom any member of the committee feels very strongly should be included. After all the first interviews are finished, the committee decides, by consensus, which candidates to invite back for a second round.

If a candidate is selected he/she returns to the school to teach a sample lesson, which is observed by the full committee and by the other teachers in the school. After the lesson, the committee meets with the teachers to hear their response to the candidate. All parents in the school are informed about the hiring process as it goes on and are invited to an open meeting, after the sample lessons, to ask the candidates questions. Generally, the open meetings are well attended and often they include most of the families whose children will be in the new teacher's classroom the following year. Afterwards the Hiring Committee hears responses from parents. Once this process has been completed, the Hiring Committee meets again to arrive at consensus about whether to offer the position to one of the candidates. Generally this process runs smoothly, but sometimes more than one meeting is required.

This may seem an extraordinary process in comparison with those used by most public schools, but it is based on the assumption that both parents and teachers have significant experience and knowledge to contribute, and that their opinions about who will be the best teacher for a certain classroom are not only valid but essential. The hiring process for the Administrator, Community Coordinator and Education Coordinator of the school are very similar, with parents having a strong voice in the decision.

Conclusion

What we have sought to describe is a process and structure of governing at the Hilltown School that is more cooperative and democratic than those utilized in traditional schools. As a laboratory, the Hilltown School is taking advantage of one of the most important aspects of charter school

legislation: the privilege to shift the power structure from one that is hierarchical to one that is more participatory and inclusive. Crucial to the success of these innovations is creating a culture of cooperation and involvement which in itself depends on such power alterations.

The possibility for implementing of these ideas (in their richest sense) in other schools is largely tied to the ability to model participatory systems throughout a school. Administrative structures and decision-making processes must allow families and students more control than is accommodated in traditional schools.

We are aware that on occasion participatory and cooperative goals exist in traditional schools or classrooms. Parent involvement is certainly on the increase, and the existence of school councils and classroom assistance programs encourage its growth. The kind of information sharing practiced at HCCS is certainly transferable: invitations to parents to come into the school either on a particular day each week (to begin with), or whenever they like; a special bulletin board inside the school where minutes from school-board meetings get posted along with accounts of any administrative decisions being contemplated; a suggestion box alongside these postings; a weekly open house (in the mornings or evenings) with designated Parent Representatives present, individuals who could then attend staff or administrative meetings. Any of these could become a vehicle for more active parent input into the management of the school.

In any public elementary school parents can also become active in the hiring process. Such participation gives value and weight to their insights, and it recognizes that they and their children are the ones most affected by the choice of teacher. First-time changes might include the addition of a parent to an interview team or the instigation of an open meeting for parents in the school to question the top three prospective teachers and then give feedback to the person or group who will be doing the hiring. If the school is large, perhaps this meeting would only include parents of children in and around the grade-level of the available position. A group of parents who are involved, heard, and who have taken on part of the responsibility for finding a teacher for their children will feel more connected and committed to a school and, if encouraged, will continue to offer their support both in and out of the classroom.

Use of the consensus process in governance will likely be a greater challenge for the typical public school. One of the main drawbacks to the use of consensus is simply that most people are not very accustomed to it. Our educational system, like so much else in our society, is based on a business model that values efficiency, competition, expediency, and quantifiable results. Consensus, on the other hand, is a community-based model that promotes cooperation, relationship, communication and inclusion, and places at least an equal degree of importance on the process that leads to the goal, as on the goal itself. It emphasizes not only a different set of values, but a different mindset as well--one that can take time and effort and even formal training to assimilate. Yet some of its strategies and underlying philosophy can provide valuable guidance for schools which have an interest in fostering a greater sense of family participation and community development.

What we have learned at the Hilltown Cooperative Charter School is that community is about trust, involvement, and a collective commitment to working together. When the system is structured to provide a variety of openings to parents and community members--busy and burdened ones as well as those who are more available--and their concerns are reflected in the life of the school, learning is a deep and rich experience.

About the Authors

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