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## Everyone at the Table

*Ellen Behrstock-Sherratt and Allison Rizzolo*

### **The American Institutes for Research and Public Agenda pair up to provide schools with resources to get**

Imagine a school in which most teachers have high levels of trust in their leadership. Teachers, school leaders, and staff—even if pushed outside their comfort zones—support reforms related to teaching and learning on behalf of student success.

Such schools do exist. And all have one ingredient in common: Teachers continually collaborate on making key decisions and share responsibility for reforms that improve student learning.

### **A Model for Teacher Involvement**

Since 2010, the American Institutes for Research and Public Agenda have sought to better understand how to elevate teachers' voices in policy design and implementation and broaden teacher involvement and support for teacher-effectiveness policies. To this end, we interviewed and conducted focus groups with hundreds of teachers and several dozen school and district administrators. We found that teachers are keenly interested in discussing the pros, cons, and considerations of teacher-quality policies. Far from engendering anger or distrust, exploring teachers' diverse perspectives for improving teacher effectiveness created greater appreciation for the complexity of the task and often enthusiasm for the challenge of tackling such an important issue. Moreover, we found that district leaders' reservations about engaging teachers are largely surmountable.

From this research emerged a model that schools can use to spark reflection, discussion, and action on promoting teacher input into policy changes that complement their classroom work. We call this model "Everyone at the Table."<sup>1</sup>

This approach is based on the idea that through structured dialogue—much like the conversation that takes place in focus groups—more teachers can, on more occasions, guide school decision making. Although it may be impractical or even inadvisable to engage teachers on every issue, as schools implement new reforms they should look at when teacher input is needed, on which decisions, and at what stage.

Everyone at the Table has three major components: discussion; *Choicework* (looking at multiple perspectives on an issue); and facilitation. Participants consider three or four realistic scenarios and the policy implications of these scenarios in their own schools.

For example, let's say a school is looking at various approaches to teacher evaluation. One scenario might involve having the principal as sole evaluator, a second might offer a teacher-centered approach in which both the principal and peers take part in observations, and a third might determine teacher effectiveness on the basis of student test

scores and observations by a core group of external evaluators.

Considering these three scenarios moves the conversation away from magic bullet or either/or thinking and toward creative solutions and compromises while helping all participants understand competing values and rationales. If skillfully moderated, Choicework engenders a productive, solutions-oriented discussion on controversial policy issues.

## Why the Focus on Teacher Involvement?

Teacher morale reached a 25-year low in 2012. According to the most recent MetLife Survey of the American Teacher (Harris Interactive, 2013), just 39 percent of teachers are satisfied with the profession, down from 62 percent in 2008. It's hard to tell whether new policies and the policymaking environment are partly to blame because the teachers weren't polled on these items. But the report does find that teachers who report low levels of satisfaction are also more likely than teachers with higher satisfaction levels to say that their opportunities for collaboration with other teachers have decreased in the past year and that they're "somewhat interested" in taking on other roles or responsibilities while teaching in the classroom part-time.

Collaborating and taking on new roles and responsibilities can boost teacher morale and also improve teacher retention. Fully three-quarters of U.S. teachers say a greater decision-making role for teachers in school policies and practices is either "absolutely essential" or "very important" for improving teacher retention (Scholastic & Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, 2012).

Finally, greater teacher involvement in local or state policy discussions may even help attract the best of the next generation to the profession. A recent McKinsey report (Auguste, Kihn, & Miller, 2010) found that top-performing college students viewed teaching as significantly inferior to their alternative career choice. Only 53 percent of these students viewed teaching as offering opportunities for collaboration, compared with 85 percent who saw this trait in their career of choice. Only 23 percent saw teaching as preparing them for future jobs, compared with 57 percent who believed their nonteaching alternative would offer such preparation.

Teacher collaboration and engagement in policy thus offer hope for improving teacher recruitment, retention, and morale—and for reenergizing the profession. Unfortunately, teacher engagement in education policy is woefully lacking. Research has shown that 70 percent of teachers feel out of the loop in district decision making (Duffett, Farkas, Rotherham, & Silva, 2008; Farkas, Foley, & Duffett, 2001; Farkas, Johnson, & Duffett, 2003). The same percentage of teachers believe that district leaders talk to them only to win their support. Just 23 percent of teachers feel that district leaders speak to them to gain a stronger sense of teachers' concerns. And as few as 20 percent of U.S. teachers believe they're regularly consulted about what happens in their schools. Ironically, about half of all teachers don't even feel heard by their union.

Since the authorization of No Child Left Behind in 2002, there has been unprecedented policy and public intervention in our schools, but all too often these reforms have left *teachers* behind.

## Valuing Teacher Voice: What the Process Looks Like

There is no single recipe, but authentically bringing teachers' voices to the table begins with a conversation—among teachers, school or district leaders, or a mix of teachers and leaders—that recognizes a need for teachers to help shape policies around teacher evaluation, professional learning, or other issues that affect teachers and teaching. New state legislation, a school board mandate, or informal chit-chat among teachers may spark this conversation.

For example, state legislation on teacher evaluation might lead to a school board mandate to redesign the teacher evaluation system, which, in turn, might spur talk over lunch among teachers about the proposed evaluation system. Their concerns might relate to the use of student test scores, possible biases among classroom observers, or tying evaluation ratings to compensation. It's particularly important to define who needs to know teachers' concerns and ideas and how these key decision makers will learn about and use this information.

Once this informal conversation takes place and a rough plan for more deliberate discussion is developed, a leader—typically a teacher leader—steps up or is tapped to lead the process with the support of a teacher-engagement committee. Together, the leader and the engagement committee schedule their first teacher-engagement meeting, recruit a robust and diverse group of teachers, and develop protocols to structure the discussion. These protocols may include guides for conversation facilitators; Choicework scenarios, such as the three previously mentioned scenarios that relate to teacher evaluation policies; or PowerPoint overviews of the local policy context.

The first meeting may also be the last—particularly if an impending policy deadline exists, such as those mandated by state legislation or grants—but ideally it sets the stage for a long series of constructive teacher engagement meetings that might take place over several months or even several school years. To keep track of the many ideas emerging from multiple meetings, a note taker captures each conversation on a template. When all notes are compiled, a picture emerges, not only of the overriding ideas that surfaced, but also of the areas of consensus and disagreement.

For example, teachers may have strongly agreed that eliminating bias among classroom observers is a crucial priority, but they may have disagreed about the lengths to which the district should go to ensure rater consistency. Should classroom observations be removed from the equation altogether, or should multiple observers be hired to

observe the same lesson? How extensive and expensive should the training of classroom observers be to mitigate rater bias?

Teachers may remain further divided about whether peer observations should be used in evaluations. Are peers more or less likely than principals to have biases, provide useful feedback, or have time to add observations to their full plates? Information on teachers' ideas, concerns, and areas of consensus and disagreement is shared in person or through a report at key committee, task force, or school board meetings to supplement the voice of the one or two teacher representatives on these committees or boards.

Teacher engagement doesn't end there. At the district level, it may be supplemented by surveys that ask teachers to indicate, for example, the number of times they've been observed during a year, whether the post-observation feedback they received was high quality, and whether they believe the observers were well-versed enough in their content area to accurately judge their performance. (For guidance, see the Aspen Institute's brief, [Evaluating Evaluations: Using Teacher Surveys to Strengthen Implementation.](#)) The same process that takes place within districts can be extended to the state level.

Teach Plus; Hope Street Group; Educators4Excellence; VIVA (Voices, Ideas, Vision, Action) Teachers; and other groups are modeling what could be the next big teacher-policy wave after evaluation: ground-up leadership *by teachers for teachers* to shape the profession's future. The results of these initiatives have, in some cases, significantly influenced policy. For example, in Chicago, VIVA Teachers worked directly with district administrators to craft new regulations that added recess and a break for every Chicago Public Schools student.

## Why Teachers Aren't Invited

Too often, just a handful of teachers are asked to the table, inviting turmoil, duress, and confusion by excluding diverse perspectives. In some cases, the lack of teacher engagement means that teachers just aren't stepping up. In others, education leaders hesitate to initiate teacher engagement for some of the following reasons.

### Lack of Time

Administrators told us that, like teachers, they're pressed for time, particularly with the demands imposed by new teacher evaluation and professional growth systems. They said it's hard to find time to speak with teachers. Moreover, the state-imposed timelines for implementing new policies often rule out the possibility of collaborative dialogue and have resulted in hasty local policy development.

*Our thoughts:* Although meaningful engagement does take time, the more time leaders invest up front engaging teachers in finding solutions, the less frequently they have to return to the drawing board.

### Prescriptive State and Federal Policies

In some cases, administrators felt that they themselves had no voice in their teacher policies and little space to share additional decision making with teachers. For example, most recent teacher evaluation reforms originated with state legislatures and state education agencies—often in response to federal incentives and requirements—creating policies with limited local policymaker voice.

*Our thoughts:* Unfortunately, school and district leaders can't do much to address this trend. In the long term, we hope it reverses, and some federal priorities are moving in that direction. For example, when launching the U.S. Department of Education's RESPECT (Recognizing Educational Success, Professional Excellence, and Collaborative Teaching) initiative, U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan noted, "Our goal is to work with educators in rebuilding their profession—and to elevate the teacher voice in shaping federal, state, and local education" (Brenchley, 2012). Moreover, the U.S. Department of Education Center on Great Teachers and Leaders has recently convened a Practitioner Advisory Group. Meanwhile, there's always room for implementing federal policies in skillful and creative ways and adjusting those policies over time on the basis of educator feedback.

### Failure to Deliver

Administrators expressed concerns that if brought into the conversation, teachers might make recommendations that are at odds with the administration's priorities or with state laws or pressures. They felt that adopting policies counter to teachers' recommendations would escalate tension rather than cooperation.

*Our thoughts:* In any organization, senior leadership ultimately has authority for setting new policies to address employee promotion, dismissal, compensation, and assignment. Rarely do policies on sensitive topics like these align exactly with employees' preferences. Yet if any group of employees can meaningfully weigh in on these policies, it's the smart and fair-minded teaching profession.

One teacher who was working with colleagues on teacher evaluation reform using the Everyone at the Table materials said, "It's nice if everyone is heard, even if you aren't able to get what you want. When decisions are made, you know everybody talked about it and agreed on it, not just one person making the decision." We've heard educators across the board express this sentiment. It's time for leaders to stop using this excuse.

### A Headache or an Earful

Several administrators with whom we spoke feared that opening the conversation to teachers would wind up being stressful or acrimonious. Although, in theory, they supported including teacher voice in policymaking, they shied away from potential confrontation.

*Our thoughts:* Well-designed engagement provides room for venting—vital when reform fatigue makes teachers feel powerless—while, at the same time, enabling participants to quickly separate trivial gripes from those requiring more attention so the discussion can move along productively. Education leaders are amazed at how thoughtful and constructive people can be, given a little information, a few tools, and a modicum of support.

## Teachers Belong in the Classroom

Finally, some administrators told us that teachers should focus on the classroom, not school policy. Some administrators believe that teachers prefer that division of labor.

*Our thoughts:* It's true that some teachers are not interested in reflecting on, conversing about, and influencing the policies that affect the teaching profession. However, in our focus groups around the United States, we've found that most are. Meanwhile, even a one-hour policy discussion can leave participants feeling energized and eager to keep the dialogue going.

## Guidelines for Engagement

Here are some guidelines for teachers and administrators who are interested in expanding meaningful teacher engagement in education reform.

### Set Expectations Up Front

Although teachers can embark on an engagement initiative with or without their administrators' blessing, beginning with a conversation between teachers and their administrators clarifies to all how teacher participants will use their input in policy deliberation. The VIVA Teachers program (which includes 3,500 members across 11 states) requires at least one leadership group—be it a district, state government agency, or another agency—to sign a commitment to a specified process for considering teachers' ideas and providing opportunities for motivated teachers to continue working on their recommendations.

### Create Time for Authentic Engagement

In the Nataki Talibah charter school in Detroit, Michigan, participants used the Everyone at the Table model during an all-day inservice meeting to structure teacher engagement around the design of a new teacher evaluation system. Schools can create time and space for teacher engagement in local policy through clever scheduling for teacher collaboration, such as in the Generation Schools model, which is active in the U.S. Northeast and Rocky Mountain states. This model significantly reduces teachers' workloads by scheduling only 1–2 different classes that require preparation each day, increases professional development opportunities, and provides common planning time daily for all teachers. Professional learning communities could also play a central role in building teacher involvement.

### Encourage Participation

Some teachers suggested that nontenured teachers should refrain from Everyone at the Table discussions, in case administrators dislike what they hear and retaliate against those teachers. School and district leaders who value teacher engagement should quell this fear by explicitly stating that they want teachers to engage honestly and openly with them to create workable solutions. Deputy Superintendent John Bash from North Thurston Public Schools in Lacey, Washington, explained, "I encourage teachers to openly share how we can do better. I want to know where they think policies and practices can be improved."

### Support Teacher Leaders

In the Everyone at the Table model, teachers ultimately drive engagement with other teachers in a school or district. Teacher representatives who already have facilitation experience are natural choices to lead teacher engagement in policy. These individuals may include teachers who currently serve as union building representatives, as professional learning community leaders, or in other formal leadership roles or teachers who have more informally expressed interest in the targeted policy issues. Teach Plus and other teacher voice organizations also provide recognized teacher leadership positions to channel teacher voice.

### Practice Engagement

Why wait until highly contentious high-stakes policies, such as teacher dismissal, tenure, or compensation, are under debate to engage teachers in policy? By "practicing" on smaller, lower-stakes issues, such as professional learning and induction of new teachers or the strategic recruitment of new staff members as baby boomers retire, all involved can build policy vocabulary, familiarity with research, effective practices outside their school or district, and trust in one another.

In Washington state, teachers (as well as principals, district administrators, parents, and school board members)

take part in regional focus groups to share feedback on the state's new educator evaluation policies. Recently, the state department of education held focus groups to share with the legislature educators' views on tying evaluation results to personnel decisions. The ensuing dialogues might not have been highly civil and smooth without years of prior discussions on less contentious topics.

## Just Do It

There's never a best time or enough time to embark on a new way of doing business that brings teachers to the table. But by jumping in—with care and forethought—and continually learning from and modifying the approach, a district can signal that having teachers at the table is a priority. And that, in turn, helps make the priority a reality.

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## Endnote

- <sup>1</sup> *The Everyone at the Table model is specifically geared to involving teachers in the discussion around teacher evaluation reform. The tools and resources that have emerged from this initiative—including slide presentation templates, a moderator's guide, sample handouts, and discussion starter videos—are available free at [www.everyoneatthetable.org](http://www.everyoneatthetable.org).*

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## KEYWORDS

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