

EXPANDING The Teacher's Role:

Hammond's School Improvement Process

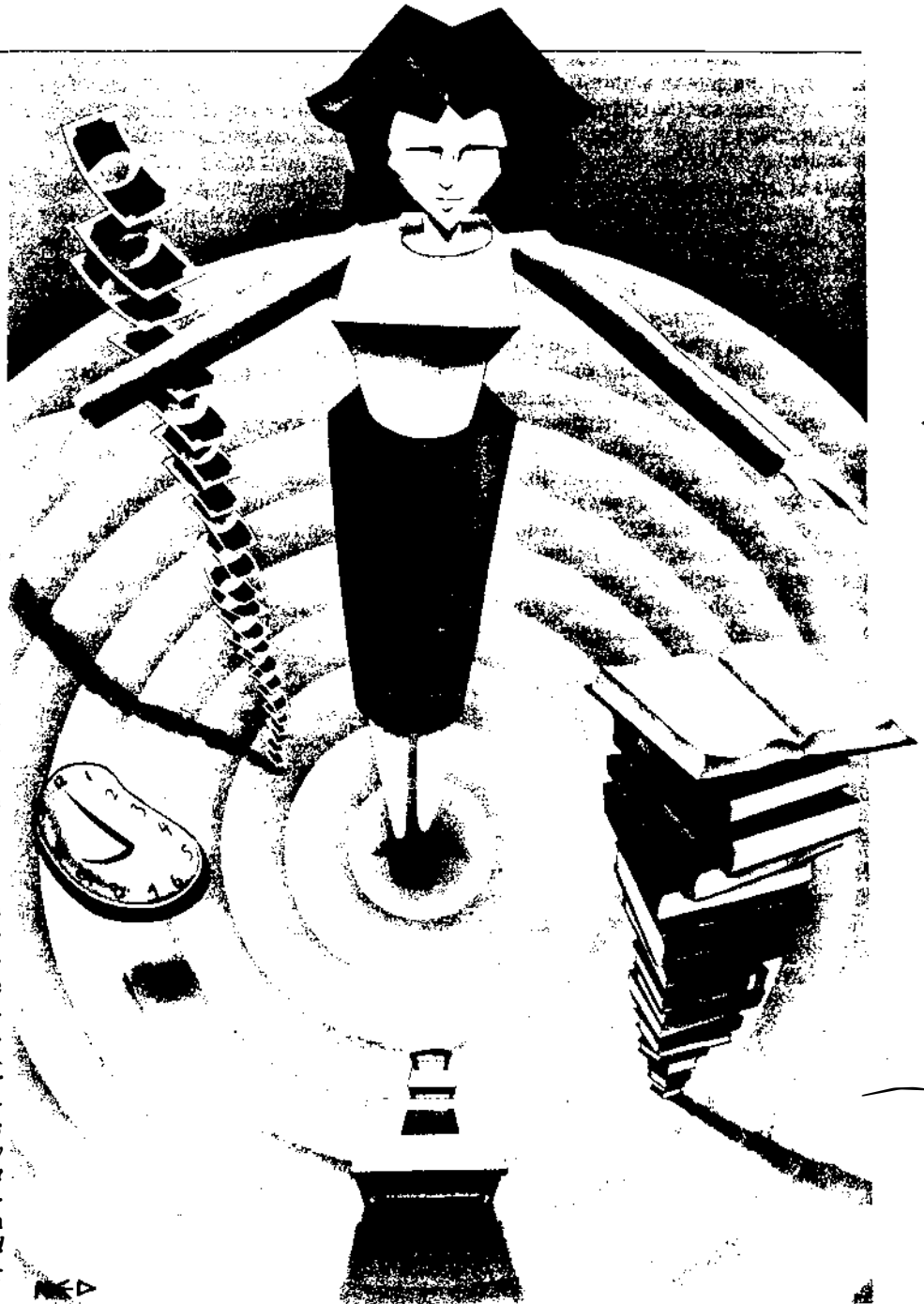
In Hammond, Indiana, a school improvement effort gives teachers a major say in decision making and in shaping the programs they believe will be best suited to the needs of their students. Though the progress of the program has been uneven, the prognosis is good.

BY JILL CASNER-LOTTO

AN UNUSUAL experiment is under way in the public schools in Hammond, Indiana. A School Improvement Process (SIP), which draws on the collective energy and expertise of teachers, administrators, students, parents, and other community members, is fundamentally changing the way schools operate and enhancing opportunities for learning.

For the first time, teachers in Hammond can have a major say in decision making and in shaping educational programs that they believe will be best suited to their students. Decisions in a wide range of areas that were traditionally under the sole jurisdiction of school prin-

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cipals and central administrators – curriculum planning and development, instructional strategies, staffing needs and hiring, professional development, disciplinary procedures, scheduling, and so on – are now being made by teachers and administrators, working together with parents and students on school-based improvement teams.

What further distinguishes this school improvement effort from similar efforts elsewhere is the active involvement of the teacher union – the Hammond Teachers' Federation, Local 394 of the American Federation of Teachers – and the strong support of the central administration. In 1985 the union and the district negotiated an agreement by which teachers, on a school-by-school basis, may set aside elements of their contract in order to implement school improvement plans.

Although the improvement process is still in its early stages, one indication of success is the change in roles and attitudes evident among the participants. Both the union president and the district superintendent remark that each side is moving away from the adversarial stance that has characterized the traditional relationship between labor and management and toward a more cooperative approach that better serves the interests of all parties. Although significant numbers of principals and teachers continue to resist change, many others support the SIP and say that it has enhanced their roles as professionals. Parents say that the SIP has opened a new channel of communication for them and offers a way to become actively involved in their children's schools. Students acquire new leadership

skills through the SIP and are able to assume greater responsibilities for their own learning and for the success of programs in their schools.

THE SIP IN HAMMOND

Participants in the School Improvement Process in Hammond define it as a building-based method of managing schools that can lead to significant improvements in the quality of education. Though the process has been implemented district-wide, teachers and administrators emphasize that decision making remains *school-based*. This is in keeping with their belief that those most closely affected by decisions should have a major role in making them and that reforms are most effective when carried out by people who feel a sense of ownership of them. The SIP is completely compatible with the collective bargaining process; in fact, by involving teachers in making decisions about policy, the SIP actually strengthens the bargaining process, according to Patrick O'Rourke, president of the Hammond Teachers' Federation.

In planning the improvement process, participants identify certain key elements that are necessary if the SIP is to be effective. Among these ingredients are such things as training, time, money, ongoing district support, and access to current or state-of-the-art information on which to base decisions.

The city of Hammond, with a population of about 100,000, is in the northwestern tip of Indiana, sandwiched between Gary, Indiana, and the Chicago metropolitan area. Located in the middle

One indication of the SIP's success is the change in roles and attitudes evident among the participants.

of what has come to be called the "rust belt," the Hammond community has felt the trauma of plant closings and job layoffs in the steel industry. The Hammond school district is the eighth largest school corporation in Indiana and employs more than 1,600 people, of whom about 900 are teachers and 70 are administrators. There are 25 schools in the district: four high schools, two middle schools, and 19 elementary schools. Student enrollment – which declined by 3% between 1983 and 1984 – is now more than 13,000. Achievement test scores have shown steady improvement in the district since 1984. Overall results of the spring 1986 testing program showed that students in 11 of the 12 grades scored at or above national norms.

Like many urban school districts across the country, Hammond has had its share of financial problems. In 1985 the district faced a \$2 million budget deficit, which was projected to increase to \$7 million. Since then, however, that deficit has been reduced to half a million dollars.

This feat was accomplished through the cooperative efforts of the school board, the administration, the teachers, the parents, and other community members. A team representing these groups met with state authorities to discuss solutions to the district's financial problems. Through a variety of measures – fund transfers, payment of late bills with bonds, and reductions in administrative and teaching staff through attrition – the deficit was lowered "without closing one neighborhood school and without eviscerating any



"While I was watching my P's and Q's, the other 24 letters got away from me."

educational programs, and we still managed to award competitive salary raises," boasts Hammond Superintendent David Dickson.

A sense of camaraderie and trust has helped facilitate the School Improvement Process. The SIP started as a pilot project in 1982 in Hammond High School, which was once a top-ranked school in the state but which had been in continuous decline since the early 1970s. Academic achievement had slipped dramatically, while the rates of absences and dropping out were rising. Racial tensions, vandalism, drug abuse, and fighting in the halls were rampant. Teacher morale was at an all-time low, and the level of hostility between teachers and administrators was mounting.

Initial costs for the Hammond High pilot project were underwritten by the Eli Lilly Endowment, the Institute for the Development of Educational Activities (part of the Charles Kettering Foundation), the Hammond school district, and the Indiana Criminal Justice Institute. Through the efforts of a school improvement committee composed of teachers, administrators, parents, students, and community members, Hammond High achieved a remarkable turnaround in a two-year period. Several measures proposed by the committee led to visible improvements: less vandalism and graffiti, increased attendance, higher levels of student achievement, and a dramatic reduction in student failures.

Shortly after the experiment at Hammond High, two elementary/middle schools also became involved in the SIP. In 1984, after the successful experiences at the three pilot schools, the process was extended to the remaining 22 schools in the district.

THE SIP TODAY

The implementation of the SIP has not been uniform throughout the district. This is understandable because each school adapts the process to its own particular culture and changes at its own pace. While some schools are developing programs that signal a "gradual yet fundamental shift in the decision-making authority, others have simply put in place the mechanisms for change and conducted the initial training," O'Rourke observed.

The mechanisms for change at each school include an improvement committee of 15 to 20 members, including

teachers, administrators, parents, students, and, when possible, other community members. The agenda for the improvement process is set by a smaller core team — usually consisting of the principal, one or two teachers from the larger SIP team, and a parent. The principal may also serve on the larger SIP team or may occasionally attend the SIP meetings, when, for instance, information on the school budget may directly affect the committee's work. Although Hammond school representatives have made it a point not to set any rigid rules concerning SIP committee membership or meeting times and procedures, there is one rule to which all teams are expected to adhere: a principal should never chair the SIP committee, because this would merely perpetuate the traditional top-down approach to school management.

Gary Phillips, a consultant who was with the Kettering Foundation when the pilot project began, continues to provide some technical assistance to the school district. But the major responsibility for training staff and for overseeing other SIP activities has been assumed by Wayne Pechers, who in 1985 was appointed by the district superintendent as coordinator for the SIP.

Pechers conducts the initial training workshop when a school first becomes involved in the SIP. Then, in the traditional "train-the-trainer" approach, individuals who have completed Pechers' workshop train others in the school community. The initial training improves participants' skills in consensus building, brainstorming, creative problem solving, and group dynamics. In addition, Pechers and Jane Kendrick, principal of Eggers Elementary/Middle School and a leading

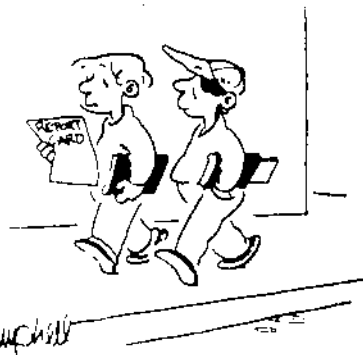
advocate of the SIP, have conducted ongoing workshops in leadership skills for principals and for SIP committee chairs. "Several principals are still uncomfortable in their new roles because they feel they have lost power. What we've tried to do is convince them that their power is strengthened since the policies implemented have the full support of the faculty," said Pechers.

For example, one elementary school was struggling to improve itself but its attempts to do so had been thwarted by mistrust and hostility between the faculty members and the principal. At a faculty meeting, Pechers introduced consensus building in small groups and the use of brainstorming techniques. What might have been just another gripe session turned into a productive meeting at which the teachers and the principal at least agreed about some of the barriers to change and about ways to try to overcome them.

Pechers, who is also a math teacher at Hammond High School, is able to continue in his teaching duties at full salary because he has been granted "half-time release" by the central administration to carry out his SIP responsibilities. He also receives a small stipend for his SIP work.

After the initial training at a school has been completed, the SIP team's first task is to develop a "vision of excellence" — a statement of what the team members want to achieve in five or 10 years. Specific long- and short-range goals and priorities are determined, and then a strategic improvement plan is developed. Often, the teams go on weekend retreats to a peaceful setting far removed from the school environment to develop their vision and start work on an improvement plan.

A key component of the SIP is the concept of "pyramiding," which, when done properly, increases the number of people who have input into decision making and thus increases the acceptance of new programs and policies. Pyramiding requires that each member of the SIP team interact regularly with five to seven peers. This interaction consists of communicating information about the team's work or about a specific proposal and gathering feedback from interested parties who are not members of the team. Each member of the initial group of five to seven individuals is then expected to reach a similar number of people, who, in turn, contact others. In this way, a significant portion of the school population



"The problem with these average report cards is, it's hard to get them funded."

can be reached in a relatively short time. The success of pyramiding varies from school to school and depends on how well the teams are organized and on the school's level of commitment to the improvement process.

In addition to the grant money received from the Lilly Endowment and the Kettering Foundation, in 1986 the Hammond school district, largely through the efforts of Jane Kendrick, received a \$50,000 grant from the Indiana State Department of Education to provide incentives for teachers to participate in the School Improvement Process. This money, which has been allocated among the various schools, can be used for whatever purposes the SIP committee chooses, including travel expenses for weekend retreats, for special training sessions or conferences, for visits to other schools experimenting with new ideas, and for visits to universities where research related to school improvement is being conducted. Some SIP teams have used the money to pay for substitute teachers so that the teachers on the SIP team could spend more time participating in school improvement activities.

In 1987 the Hammond School District was awarded a \$66,000 grant from the Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service. The money will be used for additional personnel to help coordinate SIP activities and train participants and for sponsoring other events, including two labor/management conferences for principals and teachers during the school year.

Time is a resource as precious as money. And time has been provided by the central administration of the Hammond school district. SIP teams can request released time in order to meet during the school day. Each team decides when and how often it needs to meet. Depending on the workload, some teams may meet monthly or weekly — either on their own time or, if their requests for released time have been approved, during school hours. Some teams that need extended blocks of time have worked out arrangements whereby team members combine their own free time with the released time granted by the district.

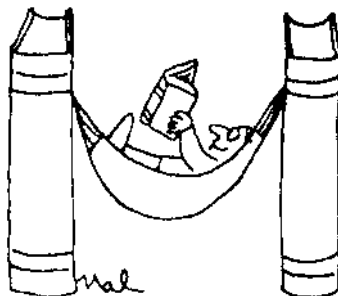
THE SIP AND THE UNION

During the early stages of the SIP, the Hammond Teachers' Federation was not directly involved. However, several individual members and union leaders —

including O'Rourke, who was also a member of the Hammond High School SIP committee — were active participants. "Our feeling during those early stages was that, with only three schools involved as pilots, we could monitor the development of the SIP and intervene as an institution at the proper time, should we feel threatened," said O'Rourke. That attitude changed in 1985 as it became increasingly obvious to union leaders, building representatives, and rank-and-file members that shared decision making in the local schools could complicate the process of collective bargaining. More and more schools were considering programs, such as peer evaluation, that clearly deviated from contractual procedures.

For the union, the SIP represented both a threat and an opportunity. On the one hand, the prospect of teachers, parents, administrators, and students working together to implement programs at individual schools "seemed to threaten the very institutional balance of power that existed within the district," according to O'Rourke. On the other hand, this new model of shared governance was a way to give teachers the opportunity to develop programs and policies and thus broaden their scope as professionals. "We concluded that it was possible to move in this direction by working within the traditional collective bargaining process, while simultaneously developing new relationships with management that go beyond bargaining," O'Rourke said.

In September 1985 the union negotiated a three-year contract with the school board that endorses the SIP and includes language permitting local schools to deviate from the master contract in order to pursue their improvement plans — providing a specific procedure is followed. O'Rourke believes that the language of the contract frees individual teachers at each school to make decisions without union interference and without weakening the union contract.



The procedure for deviating from the contract is fairly complex, and I will only outline it here. Briefly, all faculty members at a school must reach a consensus on a proposed program. The faculty as a body then determines a time period — not to exceed one school year — for a trial test of the program. Criteria are established by the faculty to evaluate the program at the end of the trial period. The faculty then rates the proposal on a scale of zero to five, with a five indicating enthusiastic endorsement of the limited trial test and zero indicating strong opposition to even a limited trial test. If the procedure is followed correctly, the union does not have the right to file a grievance alleging that a school improvement project violates any contract provision; however, an individual teacher may still file a grievance in his or her own name.

At one elementary school, where an innovative, cross-grade-level reading program created through the SIP has dramatically improved student reading levels and eased teachers' workloads, the faculty members followed the procedure because the program required teaching arrangements that violated certain work rules spelled out in the contract. "The procedure allowed us to meet our individual needs at this school," said one teacher, "without making a blanket statement for all the schools."

In general, union involvement in the SIP has boosted teacher support. "It has convinced many teachers," Pechers said, "that the SIP is not simply another fad, but something that is here to stay." O'Rourke, who has used general meetings of the union as a vehicle for "selling" the SIP and informing members of its programs, estimates that today about one-third of the teachers are actively participating in the School Improvement Process, while the remaining two-thirds are equally divided among the skeptics and those who take a "wait-and-see" attitude.

SUPPORT FROM THE TOP

David Dickson, the superintendent of schools, says that his job has become easier since the SIP came to Hammond. Because teachers, parents, and principals take part in the decision-making process, the traditional mistrust and negative feelings toward the central administration have been significantly reduced. "There's better communication, and the pool of ex-

expertise has been broadened," said Dickson. A strong believer in the professional development of classroom teachers, Dickson believes that teachers should have decision-making authority in such areas as curriculum development, instructional strategies, and disciplinary policies, and he has honored most decisions reached by the SIP teams.

Although he has been in his present position only since 1985, both teachers and principals view Dickson as instrumental in mobilizing the support of school board members for the SIP. Today, three school board members are active members of SIP teams. Jane Kendrick says that Dickson's leadership style has allowed the SIP to grow by "letting the principal and the faculty run their school

without interference from the central office."

Perhaps the most tangible demonstration of district support for the SIP has been the provision of released time so that the SIP teams can meet. Recently, however, some SIP teams have had their requests for released time denied by the central administration, because certain state rules mandate the number of days students must be in the schools and the number of hours and minutes they must spend in the classroom. Dickson is committed to challenging such rules — many of which he considers educationally unsound — and, together with the union's O'Rourke, he is developing measures that will permit SIP teams to adjust school schedules to allow adequate time to meet

and plan their activities. "Any loss of school days," Dickson said, "is far outweighed by the advantages of the SIP: improved curriculum, more creative instructional strategies, and a positive educational climate."

Because the SIP has been in place districtwide only since 1984, representatives of the Hammond school district say that it is too early to evaluate its impact on districtwide trends in achievement test scores, attendance rates, and other indicators of student performance. Based on the programs developed thus far, the impact on attitudes, and the changes in teacher/administrator roles and relationships, the School Improvement Process has clearly made a difference in the Hammond school district and will continue to do so in the future, say SIP participants. "We have a process in place that will enable change to occur. And all things are possible," O'Rourke stated.

O'Rourke's optimism, however, is tempered by his knowledge of the forces that work against school improvement. The existence of federal and state laws that limit the effectiveness of the SIP is one obvious factor, and teacher cynicism is another. Less obvious, however, is the departure of key leaders who have been strong advocates of shared decision making and school improvement. And in school districts — where leadership changes occur regularly — this becomes an especially important factor.

At Hammond High School, the school improvement process has lost some of its momentum since its early days. While several factors undoubtedly combined to account for this, several members of the school community believe that the departure of Elizabeth Ennis, a principal who was committed to the SIP, was a major one. Nonetheless, even the loss of a strong leader can be viewed as but a temporary setback.

Today there are signs that the School Improvement Process at Hammond High is being revived. An alternative mathematics program, conceived and designed by teachers, was recently introduced there. The program relies on such non-traditional methods as small-group instruction, peer tutoring, and team teaching. Students advance according to their mastery of the subject matter rather than according to time spent. Said Wayne Pechers, "We got lazy. But now we're ready to get the engines started once again." □

Inside the Schools

ALTHOUGH THE Hammond School Improvement Process (SIP) was implemented districtwide only three years ago, several SIP committees have already made impressive strides in curriculum reform, the improvement of teaching techniques, new hiring strategies, and other areas. Some of the SIP-related achievements at the local schools are noted below.

- At Lafayette Elementary School, a transitional first-grade/kindergarten program was created for youngsters who experienced difficulty in kindergarten and needed more preparation before entering first grade. The program, which was researched, reviewed, and designed by teachers and administrators working closely with parents, represents a major departure from the established curriculum. Teachers also say that they are actively involved in determining personnel needs, scheduling, student placement, curriculum development, and the selection of textbooks.

- Meanwhile, at Eggers Elementary/Middle School, teaching techniques and instruction have been enriched through the adoption of state-of-the-art methods that address the individualized learning styles of students. Other accomplishments related to the SIP include: the adoption of a course schedule in which the time slots for various subjects are rotated every 12 weeks in order to accommodate the needs of both morning learners and afternoon learners; the develop-

ment of a reading center for teaching across grade levels; and the receipt of a \$20,000 middle-school recognition award from the Lilly Endowment to plan and carry out further improvement activities.

- At Hammond High School, where the first pilot program was conducted, the SIP team screened and interviewed candidates for the principal's position and made recommendations to the district superintendent and the school board. Four other schools have followed suit, with teams of teachers, administrators, students, and parents interviewing and ranking candidates. In all five cases, the final choices of the SIP teams were approved by the central administration.

- At Morton Elementary School, the teachers and administrators have agreed informally to a peer evaluation program. Pending further study, the model could be adopted at other schools.

- At Kenwood Elementary School, an innovative, cross-grade-level reading program was created through the SIP. The program, which restructures the daily schedule to guarantee 90 minutes of uninterrupted time for reading instruction, has dramatically improved student reading levels and at the same time eased teachers' workloads.

- Also at Hammond High School, a coaching mentor program, which requires the cooperation of the central administration, the building administrators, and the affected teachers, pairs seasoned career teachers with new teachers who are experiencing difficulties. — JCL

