

COOPERATIVE LEARNING

As Viewed by Conference Educational Administrators

BY ANITA AND DICK MOLSTEAD

Throughout America, as well as in other parts of the world, people are calling for improvements in education. If Adventist schools are to survive and thrive, we too must deal with the issues raised some 10 years ago by the Report for the National Commission on Excellence in Education, "A Nation at Risk," which pointed out the need for new ways to help students prepare for life in the 21st century. As superintendents in the Oregon Conference Office of Education, we have studied the challenges facing teachers in the decade of the nineties. Students must learn to be flexible, possess excellent interaction skills, use high-tech equipment, and develop abstract thinking processes. As a result, we saw a need to move the curriculum focus from knowledge-based to one that emphasized complex thinking skills.

While studying ways to improve our schools, we worked to blend several reform issues into a coordinated and complementary approach to change. Using the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD) model "The Dimensions of Learning" as a framework, we created a set of goals. These include

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implementing the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM) standards, technology, integrated reading/writing, and cooperative learning. We then shared our goals with school staffs and board members. Each year, we have teachers and administrators write a school improvement plan based upon the Office of Education goals and the individual needs and goals of their school.

Cooperative learning became a priority when we recognized its potential for improving educational practice. Teachers using these techniques have seen signifi-

cant changes in their classrooms. Carol Bovee, who teaches grades 1-3 at Mid-Columbia Adventist School, says, "Using cooperative learning strategies has helped me integrate writing and math and science. I teach each student to be a leader and to help others learn. My students know that by collaborating they learn more."

The academic and social benefits of cooperative learning are well documented. Students learn better when they work together cooperatively in small groups. More importantly, cooperative learning provides one of the most powerful tools available to enhance students' thinking. Teri Boyatt, principal at Tualatin Valley Junior Academy, is a leader in using cooperative learning at her school. Teaching world history, she uses collaborative strategies to help students analyze and synthesize information. Teri says, "Cooperative learning is a marvelous way to keep students on task and excited about their own learning."

To foster cooperative learning, the conference office of education offers awareness workshops that present the rationale for using collaborative strategies. Every fall we teach a 30-hour Johnson and Johnson Foundation Training in Cooperative Learning called Brown Book Train-

ing. Teachers learn what cooperative learning is and how to translate their understandings into a set of procedures appropriate to the grade levels they teach. We also encourage the teachers to take classes and workshops from their local ESD offices. This past winter, we taught Johnson and Johnson's Advanced Training in Cooperative Learning, which provides teachers with two hours of college credit from Walla Walla College. Both classes are also offered during WWC's summer session.

Staff development cannot be a single event, several awareness sessions, or even a 30-hour training session. It must be ongoing, developmentally sequenced, and focused on the bottom line—what is best for students. In a recently completed survey of teachers who attended one or more of our training sessions, 92 percent of those who responded requested more training and additional time for peer collaboration.

Staff development cannot focus only on learning techniques; it must also help teachers enhance students' higher-order thinking. Students can effectively teach each other dates and facts and formulas when they study as a group. But far more powerful and appropriate uses of cooperative learning occur when students generate their own pieces of writing by incorporating peer response or when they use group investigations to generate hypotheses, pose questions, and formulate answers.

Joan Oksenholt, principal and social studies teacher at Lincoln City Adventist School, feels that using cooperative learning promotes critical thinking skills. Her high school students thereby learn about democracy, government, and social group relations in a meaningful way while they master content material. Joan's goal is to help students become lifelong learners and responsible, informed citizens in their church and community.

As superintendents, we also see our role shifting, just as teachers' roles are changing from instructor and director to facilitator and coach. Teachers' professional development is changing from workshops to teacher study groups. Our goal is to see that cooperative learning groups for teachers become the norm. This will happen if we can facilitate release time for teachers to network, share

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Completing their group nutrition project, students at Tualatin Valley Junior Academy, Hillsboro, Oregon, build a pyramid showing the four food groups.

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lesson plans, and learn from one another. We want to support our teachers by giving them opportunities to lead and share with their colleagues.

As a result, we expect the entire Oregon Conference educational team to change and grow. School success requires that teachers continually strive to improve their instructional expertise. Becky Harwood, grade three teacher at Tualatin Valley Junior Academy, describes her experience: "I started slowly. We made T-charts, we wrote expectations, we planned

everything in detail before we moved into our groups. This has been the best year yet. I have taken the Brown Book training twice and keep learning each year how to better implement cooperative learning with my students."

We seek to inspire, promote, support, and encourage teachers as they grow professionally. This is not easy. Abandoning the status quo and striking out in a new direction creates anxiety. Some teachers see nothing wrong with their current instructional practices and tolerate only modest innovations that do not require major changes.

A superintendent of a large public school district near our office described a similar situation: "About 25 to 30 percent of our teachers are doers. They are the leaders, the risk takers, and they constantly seek for new ways to improve the quality of their teaching. About 50 percent are followers. They will go along with the leaders, but they are not comfortable with innovation. They keep quiet and tolerate a modicum of change. The remaining teachers could be classified as stumps. Stumps are people who stick in the ground and won't budge. They complain, they stay stuck in the mud, and they do not see the need to change anything."

We don't want that said of any of our teachers. We see teachers in the Oregon Conference as educational leaders who are

committed to being learners. All of us must model trying, failing, learning from mistakes, and trying again. We are all involved in a continuous process of increasing our professional expertise. As superintendents, we schedule time to demonstrate lessons in classrooms across our conference.

Our latest efforts stress the attributes of William Glasser's "Quality School." The entire staffs of five schools have taken part in a five-day training in Control Theory and are inaugurating the Quality School concepts during this school year.

enables them to train other teachers.

In addition, we support the establishment of Quality Schools by using a variety of ways to encourage teachers to get actively involved in new teaching methods. We go into classrooms and help or teach classes so teachers who are trying to implement cooperative learning can see those techniques modeled. Our first priority in working for a Quality School is to encourage, help, and support our teachers both professionally and personally as they try out new ideas.

In our conference, a document has

learning, giving us a good start in reaching our goal of seeing cooperative learning implemented in all schools by our 200 teachers. However, training does not equal implementation, and teachers need coaching and support to change the way they facilitate students' learning.

Shauna Rustad, who teaches grades five and six at Livingstone Junior Academy, has worked for five years to implement cooperative learning strategies in her class. She says, "I am looking forward to taking the Advanced Training class. I have high expectations for effectively using group work. Working with other teachers on practical applications will give me support to help make my expectations become reality." Shauna is piloting a new math program that uses group process to implement the NCTM standards. Her students work in small groups to construct a life-size average person, after spending a week measuring, compiling data, and planning how to build their person. Shauna says that despite considerable training, she sees the need for coaching and a support team to help her effectively use cooperative learning strategies during 50 percent of class time.

Each year our teachers express a growing interest in learning to use collaborative strategies to enhance learning in their classrooms. Our best press agents are teachers who have found cooperative learning to be a useful and effective tool in their repertoire of teaching strategies and skills. Barbara Gohl, a second-grade teacher at Hood View Junior Academy, writes, "I see cooperative learning promoting creativity and growth. After the learning activity is presented, new ideas grow as children help and encourage each other. It is exciting for all of us."

Teachers' success in implementing cooperative learning is inspiring. Tom Lee, a math/science teacher at Columbia Adventist Academy, says, "I see cooperative learning as an important teaching/learning strategy available to us. It's really a formalized way of doing things that many teachers have used for a long time. Formalizing it, however, helped me see the important components that had been lacking before."

In the previously mentioned survey, 77 percent of the teachers said it was very important to them to use cooperative

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Tualatin Valley Junior Academy teachers Dorothy Berger, Becky Harwood, and Barbara Houghton develop a cooperative lesson for a unit on Creation.

They are joining the Quality School Consortium, which means they commit themselves to working together to make their school a Quality School. Since cooperative learning is foundational to the success of a Quality School, the teachers in these schools have had considerable training and experience in collaborative learning and can serve as mentors to newly hired teachers who are unfamiliar with cooperative learning processes. We plan to support these teachers with training that

been developed entitled "Standards for Using Cooperative Learning in the Oregon Conference." These guidelines were generated by parent-teacher town hall meetings. Teachers and parents have worked on the guidelines, which are now being revised to include critical thinking skills. Copies are available from the Oregon Conference Office of Education, 13455 SE 97th Ave., Clackamas, OR 97015-9798.

More than 50 of our teachers have had extensive training in cooperative

learning about 50 percent of class time. They rated themselves as having a high level of implementation. Eleanore Tarangul, grades one to four teacher at Kelso-Longview, writes: "I use cooperative learning in classes that are hands-on or project work. We build an evaluation which, I feel, enhances accountability and the child's ability to think through the processes used." Barbara Houghton, fifth-grade teacher at Tualatin Valley Junior Academy, says, "By empowering students, cooperative learning helps them learn the value of initiative, organization, and the need for the skills targeted."

During the annual teachers' convention, our superintendent, Ed Boyatt, has stressed the need to grow, to never be satisfied with being a good teacher. Ed told teachers this past August that they are expected to be innovative, not for the sake of innovation, but for the sake of their students and schools.

The office of education continually wrestles with three big issues. First, staff development must receive high priority at the conference level, both in time and money, so that we can respond to school reform issues that hold promise for improvement of instruction. Our office of education continually struggles with the need to budget our time and money to accomplish our mission.

Second, educators are faced with almost too many school reform ideas and issues. While in-service workshops will always need to address the various aspects of content-focused instructional strategies, we need a holistic vision of schooling to provide overall direction. Recognizing the frustration that results from trying to respond to all of the new educational innovations, our office of education staff and principals have developed a model to meet the needs of our K-12 schools. This model is presented to K-12 board members and local school board members for feedback.

Finally, current practice in effective schools has shown that implementation of educational innovation requires teachers to be in-serviced beyond the awareness level. Translating the best research into consistent classroom practice requires follow-up coaching by school and conference administrators and teaching colleagues. Once again, this is a challenge because of bud-

Students work on a stained glass window project illustrating scenes from Creation for the Tualatin Valley Junior Academy lobby.

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Left to right: Tualatin Valley Junior Academy teacher Terresa Cornelius, Oregon Conference Superintendent of Education Anita Molstead, and TVJA Principal Teri Boyatt participate in a cooperative team-building lesson.

getary demands as well as time available for coaching purposes.

We have found the most effective way to help teachers change their approaches is to listen and be supportive. When we visit schools, we ask teachers to talk about their successes. They have much to say about what works and what hinders their progress. As we offer teachers ownership and control, they become more deeply committed to their teaching and to their students. They inspire us with their creativity and ability to innovate. As we strive to model working collaboratively, we constantly find that "two heads are better than

one" as we work together with teachers following the model Ellen White writes about: "Cooperation should be the spirit of the schoolroom, the law of its life" (*Education*, p. 285).

As we continue to oversee the work of Adventist education in Oregon, we believe that the spirit of collaboration in the classroom and between teachers and administrators will enhance teaching and learning. ✍️

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