

## **Building a Professional Learning Community: The Keystone Story**

*Gary S. O'Malley and Paul J. Baker*

**Illinois State University**

Laboratory schools have a long-standing public commitment to serve as model institutions that represent the highest standards of organization and practice in public education. One of the purposes of laboratory schools is to engage in the challenging work of building new communities of practice available for critical scrutiny by practitioners and policymakers throughout the educational establishment. The typical focus for exemplary practices in laboratory schools concerns issues of pedagogy, curriculum, and staff development. In recent decades another topic of urgent importance faces leaders in laboratory schools: the collaborative work of building a professional learning community. Laboratory schools are ideal places to examine the prospects for initiating school development strategies that lead to significant changes in shared decision-making and educational renewal.

The mantle of leadership for laboratory schools requires an ongoing collective commitment to articulate a new kind of school that fosters a learning community and provides concrete policies and procedures for its enactment. This article provides a rationale for fundamental changes in shared governance at University High School (UHS) and tells the story of the crooked path of planned change that finally led to new opportunities to invite teachers to the decision-making table as full participants in the community of educational leaders. Like many stories of educational change in recent years, it is a case study of high hopes, grandiose visions, exhausting work, deep disappointments, and repeated efforts to move beyond the frustrations of fragmented

gains and unexpected barriers. Although this is a story that is still unfolding, sufficient advances have been made to document the case for building a professional learning community in a laboratory school.

### **Professional Learning Communities and Shared Governance**

The idea of a professional learning community is derived from many earlier formulations of organizational change that are related to an improved working environment and greater productivity. As early as the 1950's, Rensis Likert began a series of pioneering studies that championed participatory management as superior to various versions of authoritarianism that prevailed in most workplaces (1961). The first significant shift away from conventional top-down management models occurred in the 1980's and 1990's when a number of school reformers promoted site-based management as an appropriate strategy to re-structure schools. Roland Barth, Ann Lieberman and others wrote about the need to build a professional culture in schools by connecting teacher leadership with robust agendas of educational development. In 1978, Argyris and Schon introduced the concept of learning organization and Senge popularized the idea for many educational leaders (1990, 2000). A salient theme permeates these emerging ideas about the organization of schools: bureaucratic modes of management with a designated administrative leader are no longer sufficient for the adaptive changes of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Many educators write about collegiality, collaboration, teacher leadership, professional learning communities, and other lofty ideas. But these writings rarely mention the actual formal arrangements that bring teachers and administrators together for the collaborative work of making decisions that count. (e.g., DeFour, & Eaker, 1998; Defour, 2004). These formal arrangements are recognized as the system of shared

governance. We argue that professional learning communities must have viable systems of shared governance. We define the professional learning community as an intentional group formed for the purpose of allowing administrators, teachers and others to participate in shared decision-making on a full range of issues that bear on the school's institutional vitality. Participants in the professional learning community accept Roland Barth's assumption that "schools have the capacity to improve themselves." (1990, p. 45). Belief in the autonomy of the school as a continuously self-renewing organization is derived from the legitimacy of professionals to have voice in matters that are of critical importance to them. Barth asks, "Where do legitimacy and accountability come from?" (p.47). In the professional learning community, the answer lies within the school itself as educators create settings of collaborative conversation that recognize the burden and the joy of shared responsibility for all adults and youth in the school.

Professional learning communities need a system of shared governance, but not all shared governance systems contribute to the work of a professional learning community. The relationship between shared governance and learning communities is a complicated matter that needs clarity. This case study describes various episodes of sense-making and action-planning that led to several versions of shared governance. Several years of focused work has allowed UHS leaders a compass for navigating the landscape of school reform. A system of governance has emerged that promises to provide the essential tools for collaborative problem solving, conflict resolution, shared decision-making, continuous improvement, and lateral accountability. In short, the Keystone story is the search for new ways to connect shared governance to the promises of school renewal in a professional learning community.

## **A New Vision of Shared Governance at University High School**

University High School has been a part of Illinois State University, Normal, Illinois, since 1857 when the first president of the University also carried the title of principal of the model school. Like many lab schools across the country, University High School serves as a site for clinical experience and educational research, a “normal” school where one can observe, study, experiment, and model educational theory. University High School enjoys a history of exemplary student achievement, visible community support, and a legacy of an independent and resourceful faculty, proud of their work and loyal to the disciplines they teach. More information about University High School can be found at the school’s website: <http://www.uhigh.ilstu.edu/>.

In the early 1990’s, many universities began to question the role of the lab school as a resource for both the community and the university. Debate about the purpose of the ISU lab school, its connection to the college, and its role in teacher education led to changes at University High School in administration, faculty, programs, curriculum and admissions. During this same period, a new interim UHS principal instituted a series of “action planning workshops” designed for UHS faculty to become active partners in decision-making. The Keystone Council was created in the spring of that school year, during a one day retreat led by an external facilitator. Keystone, an interdisciplinary group of faculty, civil service staff and administrators, was modeled after the Council for Teacher Education, a university committee responsible for defining teacher education policies and practices at Illinois State University.

The Keystone Council was named for the corner stone upon which a foundation rests, a stone so vital that its removal impacts the stability of the foundation. Keystone

represented a shift in exercising control, meaning that the Council, as the foundation of the school, was expected to make decisions about the future of the school. The interim principal described the original purpose:

We were looking to make the building principal-proof. That is, a school that knows itself well will hire an appropriate principal and not always be subject to the whim of changing personalities. A strong faculty can ensure that decisions are not owned by the few.

The creation of Keystone became the promise of distributed leadership, an expectation of ownership pledged among interested and caring adults, destined to provide multiple opportunities for teachers to demonstrate leadership as “keepers of the flame,” advocates of the school’s mission as a laboratory school. The excitement, energy and enthusiasm generated by this covenant would be necessary for the challenges ahead.

### **Implementing the Vision: The Turbulent Waters of 1993-2001**

Before Keystone could begin its work, the interim principal returned to other duties at the University. “We never got to live in the house that we built,” stated the principal. “The faculty never really had the opportunity to work with administration in moving the school forward on any new initiatives.” Over the next five years, University High School would have four principals. Keystone would re-invent itself during this implementation stage, struggling to honor the promise of opportunity negotiated years before. The veteran Director of the Laboratory School System described the challenge this way: “The legitimacy of any school governance group will ultimately be determined by the attention it gives to the essential elements of schooling, i.e., curriculum, instruction and assessment. The focus should be upon improved student learning.” A review of Keystone minutes indicated that most discussions in the first eight years did not focus on

student achievement; instead, discussions centered on mission, connection with the university, personnel, and working conditions. The 1998 school year, for example, was dominated by discussion regarding a proposed schedule change, a four year faculty debate that had never been resolved. The principal described the dilemma of shared decision-making during this period:

Keystone members had a difficult time making major decisions that affected their colleagues. In the end, Keystone members voted to let administration decide whether to proceed with a schedule change. It was much safer to discuss, at length, what should be done and later turn to the principal and say ‘make this work, that’s why you get paid the big bucks.’ Keystone was a good faith effort, but the group did not have the expertise, experience or confidence to make decisions collectively.

This “good faith effort” proved to be exhausting work. Keystone members spoke of the difficulty of balancing classroom and building expectations, calling the task an “impossible workload,” with few tangible results. Organizational procedures became problematic: finding a time to meet, collecting and distributing minutes, or deciding whose terms had ended. Candidates for election to Keystone dwindled as some veteran teachers declined additional terms; volunteers willing to serve faced little opposition.

The turbulent waters became more unsettled as questions of who “owned” decisions became more apparent. University policies took precedence and were honored. UHS administration made difficult personnel decisions in which Keystone, legally, could not participate. Lab school initiatives in staff development, technology, diversity, and program renewal were reminders that the high school operated as a part of a K-12 school system. For some faculty members, this pattern appeared to be the rule rather than the exception: Keystone was informed, but never consulted, by a principal familiar with traditional public schools. For the principal, Keystone was an obstacle to lateral

accountability, creating more conflict than it resolved. He labeled Keystone the “complaint department,” stopped attending meetings and sent the assistant principal instead. He explained his actions:

Everything seemed to be a priority and some individuals were able to direct agendas with single issues. Projects were started, but rarely finished. Projects completed were never reviewed. Complex issues were defined by simplistic analogies. Mission and purpose were revisited regularly, yet we never developed a school wide emphasis. Where were the structures to guide our work so that it was public, predictable, and positive?

### **Crisis for Keystone: A Time for Burial or Renewal—2001-2003**

In the fall of 2001, the Dean and the Director of Laboratory Schools asked an outside consultant to review the Keystone situation at University High School. The consultant had some familiarity with University High School, but had no prior knowledge of Keystone or the history of shared governance at the school. He defined his role as a “friendly critic,” helping school leaders develop a school development plan. This assignment rested on a basic assumption: the consultant came to the school at the invitation of the principal, but his primary client was the entire staff including administration, faculty, and civil service personnel. The consultant had complete freedom to meet with anyone in the school and during the next few months he shadowed students in classrooms, attended Keystone meetings, interviewed faculty and administrators, and studied a wide array of documents related to governance and school improvement planning.

Within the first month of the project, the consultant realized that the original assignment would not work. He needed at least a year to study the intricacies of the governance puzzle before any recommendations could be made about new directions for

school development at University High School. The first and most important task was to determine if Keystone had become so controversial and dysfunctional that it would be best to terminate the innovation and begin with a new model of shared decision making. Despite the dedicated work of school leaders, the collective efforts of Keystone lacked coherence and continuity. All parties agreed to the revised time table and the consultant began to ask a new set of questions: Does Keystone have a viable future at University High School? If so, how can it be rebuilt as an effective system of shared decision-making and school development?

A year of inquiry led to a new understanding of the ambivalent nature of the Keystone experiment. Despite the dedicated work of school leaders, the collective efforts of Keystone lacked coherence and continuity. Although many faculty members were frustrated with the difficulties of making the visionary innovation work, faculty members were committed to keeping Keystone. To quote from a memo sent by the consultant to the principal and faculty leaders: “Despite various opinions about the past performance of Keystone, it is the pivotal group for the articulation of shared governance at University High School” (June 8, 2002). Convinced that Keystone deserved a new life, the consultant, principal and faculty leaders agreed on a four step planning process: (1) form a planning group, later named the Governance Committee, (2) draft a working document and build school-wide consensus on critical issues, (3) use the new consensus as the basis to revise the Keystone by-laws, (4) ratify revision of the by-laws by the entire staff of University High School. This four step plan was presented to the faculty in September, 2002, and thirteen months later the faculty and staff ratified the revised by-laws with an overwhelming vote of support.

The thirteen months from planning to ratification was a period of studying Keystone as both an idea and as an instrument of deliberation and action. By the spring of 2003, the first report outlined a framework for shared decision-making and identified problems in the existing by-laws that made it nearly impossible to connect lofty visions with practical realities. Considerable attention was given to a frank appraisal of the way power and authority can be distributed in a high school. The Governance Committee, a group of volunteers (four faculty members, lab school director, principal, and facilitator), were organized as a Keystone subcommittee to develop strategies for implementation. This committee struggled with the conventional zero-sum assumptions of school management where one party holds power (usually administration) at the expense of other parties (usually faculty) who are skeptical of genteel assurances that unilateral decisions are made for the welfare of the entire school. The leaders at University High School were challenged to move beyond zero-sum thinking toward a new understanding of collaborative relationships, one which honored the authority of administration and the legitimate voice of faculty, resulting in the collective enterprise of shaping policies for internal operations and school development.

Faculty and staff were given an opportunity to study the Governance Report and to generate feedback on specific recommendations and issues deserving greater clarification and further consideration. The Governance Committee responded to these concerns by writing a second report and seeking further feedback. Further discussion followed and the Governance Committee perceived broad consensus on a new set of guidelines for revision of Keystone by-laws. Revisions to the by-laws clarified authority and focused attention on areas of shared responsibility. To review by-laws and both

governance reports, visit: <http://www.uhigh.ilstu.edu/keystone/index.htm> . The original by-laws wrote about “empowered faculty and staff” who were to be “full participants” with a sweeping mandate “to review, evaluate and recommend to the school community, internal policies and procedures as they relate to faculty and staff, curriculum, discipline, admissions, budget, research, technology, scheduling and staffing needs, field experiences and day to day operations in the building.” These claims of faculty empowerment were juxtaposed with other provisions that recognized the principal as the “administrative head of the school.” The broad commitment to cover a wide array of school topics never translated into manageable areas of shared responsibility.

School leaders at University High School now realize that “less is more.” The emphasis is on policies and not daily operations. They have trimmed Keystone’s work to six areas of shared responsibility: policies and procedures related to (1) field experiences of student teachers, (2) personnel matters, (3) parent-school relations, (4) student conduct, (5) extra curricular activities, and (6) critical issues of school development that involve consideration of curriculum, instruction, assessment, professional development and their interrelationships. The accent is on policies and procedures that articulate and support the mission of the school and help shape the ethos of a healthy learning community. Daily operations are not scrutinized by governance groups with inclinations of micro-management. The revised by-laws also clarified structures and processes that are essential for shared decision-making arrangements. An Executive Committee (principal, assistant principal, officers of Keystone Council) meets on a regular basis to set short term and long term goals, establishes the monthly agenda for Council meetings, and organizes at least one annual open forum for administrators, faculty and staff. The

key to making Keystone work is the leadership of the Executive Committee. University High School now has a system of mutual accountability designed to keep all educators and staff in the school community focused on critical issues of school renewal.

### **A Sobering Second Chance to Implement Keystone—2004-2005**

The ratification of the by-laws provided a new opportunity to re-visit a question that has no definitive answer: How many groups does it take to run a high school? The original Keystone model suggested one group (Keystone Council) could do just about everything. This approach proved unworkable. The second chance to get it right begins with a new set of assumptions about decision-making groups at University High School. There is no formula for designating groups, but the implementation of the new Keystone vision will require four decision-making entities: (1) Keystone Council, (2) Executive Committee, (3) Standing Committees of Keystone Council; and (4) Ad Hoc Committees as needed. Other groups are vital to the organization of University High School (e.g. admissions committee, departments, meetings of chairpersons with the principal), but they are not under the purview of Keystone Council and their work is only related to Keystone when it concerns one of the six areas of responsibility defined in the by-laws.

Implementation of a shared governance system that is designed to advance professional community and school renewal must identify specific decision-making groups capable of continuous development. To this end, the Governance Committee created a framework to guide the efforts of groups accountable to the Keystone Council. Five critical issues are addressed in the framework: (1) clarity of purpose, (2) a practical and workable agenda, (3) membership that assures both continuity (institutional memory) and turnover for fresh ideas, (4) specific outcomes and products expected on an annual

cycle, (5) the structures and procedures utilized by group leaders and members. No prescriptive formula is used to address these five issues. Members in each group construct their own specific guidelines to meet the special circumstances in their particular area of responsibility. The system is designed to be both flexible and focused.

During the first year of implementation four groups were formed as standing committees of Keystone Council (Clinical Field Experiences, School Development, School/Parent Relations, Shared Governance) and other groups are under consideration. The implementation strategy is deliberately incremental. Keystone leaders decided that groups would be formed in a gradual fashion to assure a better understanding of the actual work commitments for each decision-making body. Building a new canopy of shared governance at University High School is an emerging and organic process.

### **University High School as a Professional Learning Community**

Keystone began with a grand vision of shared governance and teacher empowerment, but grand visions often face a major risk of becoming disconnected from practical realities. In the school reform business, vision that becomes illusion is the first step toward disillusionment. The question facing the consultant, the principal and the school leaders in 2001 was unavoidable: Can the Keystone vision be rejuvenated through pragmatic strategies that re-connect it to the demanding realities of collaborative leadership in the high school? The continuous efforts of many school leaders in the past four years provide a hopeful affirmation to this question.

Numerous implications confront school leaders who are attempting to connect visions of a professional learning community to a system of shared governance. First, the Keystone story illustrates the ups and downs of school reform, the twists and turns of a

never ending journey, evident as Keystone moves toward a second chance to correct itself. The strategy of recovery made deliberate use of Michael Fullan's insight that the meaning of educational change must be thoughtfully explored by all key actors of the change process (2001). The consultant refused to rush in with a quick fix solution to a complex problem he did not fully understand. Instead, careful and patient inquiry created a new context for everyone to learn together, a time and place where struggles with governance could become scaffolding of a professional learning community. Such efforts lead, gradually, to a greater appreciation of the necessity of working past uncertainty and difficulty. The test of this endurance is a system of governance designed by and for adults that ultimately serves the educational interests of students.

Second, shared governance should never be considered an end in itself. The larger goal is always the cultivation of collegiality among faculty, staff, and administrators, called to serve the best interests of students and the broader educational community. Collegiality builds better schools; governance documents do not. By-laws are essential to shared governance because they offer the needed tools for collaborative endeavors to shape renewed opportunities to participate in the school community. Yet, by-laws alone do not guarantee wisdom, appropriate behavior, or successful innovation. Organizational mechanisms of participatory leadership do not always yield significant outcomes: they can become self-serving arrangements that serve trivial goals and they can become little more than busy work. Such efforts are time consuming, but not productive. These conditions lead to disillusionment, frustration and cynicism.

Third, promising developments in governance can result in school-wide changes. Work continues for school leaders at University High School: clinical experiences have

been revised, parent-teacher conferences have been redesigned, and conversations about “quality control” in curriculum have begun. The organization of essential structures for committee organization provides guidance for placing problems in appropriate discussion forums. Keystone will continue to learn how to prioritize, re-directing important issues toward appropriate channels, comfortable that hearings, discussion formats and conversation channels may take a variety of forms using a variety of technologies.

Finally, the hope of connecting shared governance with professional learning community aspires to two major goals of any school. First, school leaders work to create new opportunities to model civility, mutual respect and trust in a toxic world of shallow manipulation, cynicism, and confusion. Keystone is an opportunity to transcend individual interests. When administrators consider the significance of involving others, they are learning about leadership. When teachers reconsider their commitment as school leaders, they are teaching beyond their classrooms. The learning community can emerge as an end in itself. Second, local leaders work to sustain continuous change for a better education for adults and young people. The connection of shared governance and the professional learning community is a formula for sustaining school development endeavors as a way of life in schools, because it facilitates the dialogue so essential in the quest to build better schools. Left unattended, abstract constructs of “collective ownership” become unfulfilled promises of distributed leadership. Formalizing our notion of how governance structures prepare the context for better conversations about school reform leads us past rhetoric and towards demonstrating meaning as a professional learning community.

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Gary S. O'Malley, (Ph.D., University of Iowa), is an Assistant Professor in The Department of Curriculum and Instruction at Illinois State University, Normal, Illinois. For six years, he served as principal at University High School. His research interests are professional learning communities, school development, and program evaluation. Gary can be reached at [gsomall@ilstu.edu](mailto:gsomall@ilstu.edu).

Paul J. Baker, (Ed.D., Duke University), is a Distinguished Professor, Emeritus, in The Department of Educational Administration and Foundations at Illinois State University. For more than thirty years, he has served schools involved in school development activities as consultant, resource and advocate. Paul can be reached at [pjbaker@ilstu.edu](mailto:pjbaker@ilstu.edu).

University High School is a public, tuition-free high school of 600 students located on the campus of Illinois State University. Each semester, 1,000 ISU students use this lab school as a site for documenting clinical hours in observation, tutoring and teaching.