

# The Cooperative School

The issue of cooperation among students is part of a larger issue of the organizational structure of schools (Johnson and Johnson 1989b). The organizational structure of any school reflects the school system to which it belongs and basic assumptions about how students learn and how they should be instructed. Many schools are in the process of changing from mass-production organizational structures to **team-based organizational structures**. The team-based structure is known as the cooperative school, which involves the use of cooperative learning in the classroom, faculty collegial support groups in the school, a school-based decision-making structure, and faculty meetings predominated by cooperative procedures. The heart of the cooperative school is the **collegial teaching team**, whose focus is the continuous improvement of teacher expertise in using cooperative learning.

## The Cooperative School Structure

Willi Unsoeld, a renowned mountain climber and philosopher, once stated, *“Take care of each other, share your energies with the group, no one must feel alone, cut off, for that is when you do not make it.”* This thought applies to everyone in schools. For nearly a century, teachers have worked alone, in their own rooms, with their own students, and with their own curriculum materials. Students have been randomly assigned to teachers because teachers have been believed to be equivalent and, therefore, can be given any student to teach.

In order for schools to focus on the quality of instruction, they need to successfully change from this mass-production competitive/individualistic organizational structure to a high-performance, cooperative, team-based organizational structure (see Johnson and Johnson 1989b). They need to develop the cooperative school. **Retraining teachers** to use cooperative learning while organizing teachers to mass produce educated students is self-defeating. W. Edwards Deming and others have suggested that more than 85 percent of all the things that go wrong in any organization are directly attributable to the organization's structure, not the nature of the individuals involved. **Changing teaching methods** is much easier when the changes are congruent with (not in opposition to) the organizational structure of the school, which, in turn, must be congruent with the overall school system.

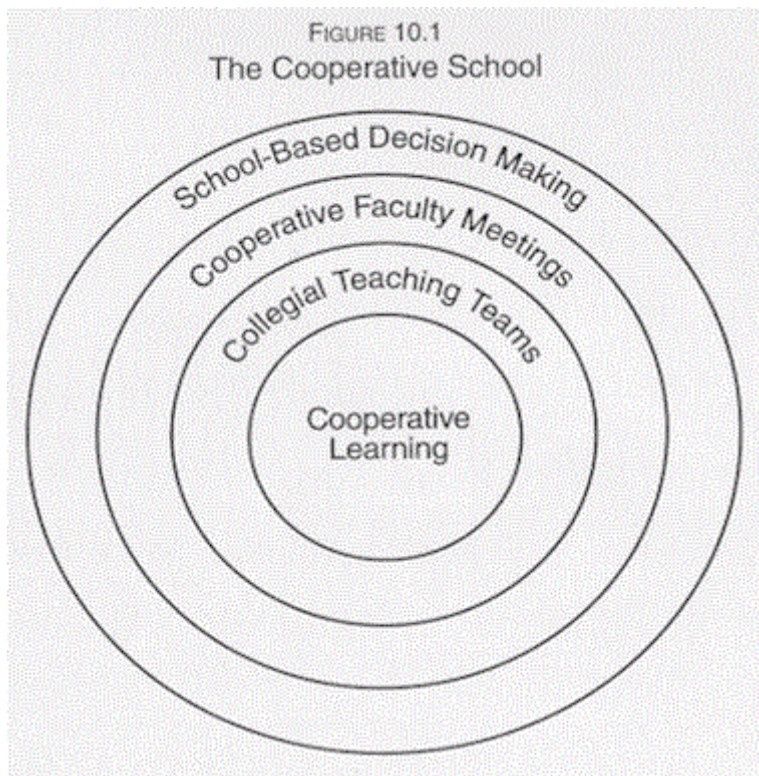
In a cooperative school structure, students work primarily in **cooperative learning groups**, and teachers and building staff work in cooperative teams, as do district administrators (Johnson and Johnson 1989b). The organizational structure of the classroom, school, and district are thus congruent. Effective teamwork is the very center of improving the quality of instruction and education with each level of cooperative teams supporting and enhancing the other levels. **Teamwork** is the hub around which all other elements of school improvement revolve. Teams are, beyond all doubt, the most direct sources of continuous improvement of instruction and education.

Contributing to team efforts is becoming paramount at every level in modern organizations. Schools are no exception. Students and faculty have to want to belong to teams, they must contribute their share of the work, and they must take positions and know how to advocate their views in ways that spark creative problem solving. The student or educator who doesn't pull with peers will increasingly be the odd person out.

## The Cooperative Classroom

The first level of a cooperative school structure is the classroom where cooperative learning is used for the majority of the instructional time (Johnson and Johnson 1989b) (see Figure 10.1). Work teams are the heart of the team-based organizational structure and cooperative learning groups form the primary work teams. Quality learning results from a team effort to challenge each other's reasoning and maximize each other's learning. **Cooperative learning increases student achievement, creates more positive relationships among students, and generally improves students' psychological well-being.** Cooperative learning is also the prerequisite and foundation for most other instructional innovations, including **thematic curriculum, whole language, critical thinking, active reading, process writing, materials-based (problem-solving) mathematics, and learning communities.** In addition, cooperative learning affects teachers' attitudes and competencies regarding working collaboratively because what is promoted during instructional time tends to dominate relationships among staff members.

**Figure 10.1. The Cooperative School**



## The Cooperative School

The second level in creating a cooperative school structure is to form **collegial teaching teams**, task forces, and ad hoc decision-making groups within the school (Johnson and Johnson 1989b). The use of cooperative learning in the classroom occurs most effectively when staff work in collegial teaching teams, faculty meetings are structured cooperatively, and school-based decision making takes place within a cooperative context.

*Collegial teaching teams.* Just as cooperative learning is at the heart of the classroom, the collegial teaching team is at the heart of the school. *Collegial teaching teams* are small,

cooperative groups (from two to five faculty members) whose purpose is to increase teachers' instructional expertise and success (Johnson and Johnson 1989b). **The focus is on improving instruction in general and increasing members' expertise in using cooperative learning in particular.** Collegial teams are first and foremost safe places where members like to be; where there is support, caring, concern, laughter, camaraderie, and celebration; and where the primary goal of continually improving each other's competence in using cooperative learning is never obscured.

As we've said, in mass-production schools, teachers are isolated from each other and may feel alienated, overloaded, harried, and overwhelmed. This isolation and alienation is reduced when teachers form collegial teaching teams. Teachers generally teach better when they work in collegial teaching teams to jointly support each other's efforts to increase their instructional expertise. Collegial teaching teams give teachers ownership of the professional agenda, break down the barriers to collegial interaction, and reduce program fragmentation. Collegial teaching teams undertake three key activities (Johnson and Johnson 1989b).

- *Frequent professional discussions of cooperative learning.* Collegial interaction is essential for building collaborative cultures in schools (Little 1990) and critical for teachers' ongoing professional development (Nias 1984). Expertise in using cooperative learning begins with conceptual understanding of the nature of cooperative learning, how to implement cooperative learning, and what results can be expected from using cooperative learning. Teachers must also think critically about the strategy and adapt it to their specific students and subject areas. In team discussions, teachers consolidate and strengthen their knowledge about cooperative learning and provide each other with relevant feedback about the degree to which mastery and understanding have been achieved. Within collegial teams, faculty members exchange understandings of what cooperative learning is and how it may be used within their classes. They develop a common vocabulary, share information, celebrate successes, and solve implementation problems.
- *Co-planning, co-designing, and co-preparing cooperative learning lessons and instructional units.* Once teachers understand cooperative learning, they must implement it. Members of collegial teams should frequently design, prepare, and evaluate lesson plans together. Doing so distributes the work of developing the materials and machinery for implementing cooperative learning. Integrated curriculum and thematic teaching clearly depend on co-planning and co-designing.
- *Co-teaching cooperative lessons and jointly processing observations.* If faculty are to progress through the initial awkward and mechanical stages to mastering the use of cooperative learning, they must receive continual feedback about the accuracy of their implementation and be encouraged to persevere in their implementation attempts long enough to integrate cooperative learning into their ongoing instructional practice. The more time colleagues spend involved in each other's teaching, the more valuable the help and assistance they can provide. Frequently co-teaching cooperative lessons and then providing each other with useful feedback provides members of collegial teams with shared experiences to discuss and reflect upon, thus promoting continuous improvement.

Collegial teams ideally **meet daily**. At a minimum, teams should meet weekly. During a typical meeting team members review how they have used cooperative learning since the previous meeting, share a success in doing so, complete a quality chart on their implementation of cooperative learning, set three to five goals to accomplish before the next

meeting, decide how they will help each other achieve their goals, learn something new about cooperative learning, and celebrate (Johnson and Johnson 1989b). Following this agenda ensures that teachers (1) experience the learning environment they are creating for students (i.e., they meet with supportive peers who encourage them to learn and grow), (2) have a procedure for continuously improving their use of cooperative learning, (3) receive continuous training in how to use cooperative learning, (4) encourage pride of workmanship and recognize and celebrate self-improvement (i.e., any time a faculty member makes an effort to improve, the effort can be recognized and celebrated by teammates), and (5) discourage poor workmanship and negativism.

*Task forces and ad hoc decision-making groups.* School-based decision making occurs through the use of two types of cooperative teams: task forces and ad hoc decision-making groups (Johnson and Johnson 1989b). Task forces plan and implement solutions to schoolwide issues and problems such as curriculum adoptions and lunchroom behavior. Task forces diagnose a problem, gather data about the causes and extent of the problem, consider a variety of alternative solutions, make conclusions, and present a recommendation to the faculty as a whole. Ad hoc decision-making groups are part of a small-group/large-group procedure in which staff members as a whole listen to a recommendation, are assigned to small groups, meet to consider the recommendation, report to the entire faculty their decision, and then participate in a whole-faculty decision as to what the course of action should be. The use of these two types of faculty cooperative teams tends to increase teacher productivity, morale, and professional self-esteem.

The clearest modeling of cooperative procedures in the school may be in faculty meetings and other meetings structured by the school administration. When administrators use a competitive/individualistic format of lecture, whole-group discussion, and individual worksheets in faculty meetings, they make a powerful statement about the way they want their faculty to teach. Formal and informal cooperative groups, cooperative base groups, and repetitive structures can be used during faculty meetings just as they can be used within the classroom, thus making faculty meetings staff development and training as well as business meetings.

## **The Cooperative District**

The third level of a cooperative school structure is administrative cooperative teams within the district (Johnson and Johnson 1989b). Administrators should be organized into collegial teams, task forces, and ad hoc triads (temporary groups of three) as part of the **shared decision-making process**. Using cooperative procedures during administrative meetings is the best way to model what the school district should be like. If administrators compete to see who is the best administrator in the district, they aren't likely to promote cooperation among staff members at the schools. The more the district and school personnel work in cooperative teams, the easier it is for teachers to envision and use cooperative learning, and vice versa.