CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Reacting to a state-level budget shortfall that would force school districts across Western State to make deep cuts in services and programs, Superintendent Dave Roberts set up a districtwide shared decision-making process to decide how the Cottonwood School District would deal with a projected shortfall of $10 million, out of a total budget of $91 million. The Cottonwood district had already been cutting back for several years and was very lean in terms of central-office staffing. New budget cuts of this magnitude would mean cutting jobs and eliminating popular programs. Although site-based decision making had been in use in the Cottonwood district for almost a decade, this time an unspoken question—which staff members might lose their jobs?—loomed behind each planning team's deliberations, creating strong emotional crosscurrents.

As the last of a series of fiery public budget meetings drew to a close, Superintendent Dave Roberts spoke to community members about the circumstances that had fixed everyone's attention on crisis management and prevented the Cottonwood district's site-based decision-making teams from playing the long-term planning role originally intended for them. Dr. Roberts made a public plea for wider community involvement in the shared decision-making process, adding:

> If there is anyone out there who is not already actively involved in their neighborhood school, please come onboard and help us out. Those of us who strongly believe in public education must regain the public's support and confidence. If we don't, we will face crises like this again and again.

Widely respected for its record of student achievement, its highly qualified teachers, and its record of keeping teachers informed about new research on teaching, the Cottonwood district has experienced striking successes as well as recurring frustrations since implementing site-based decision-making in the early 1980s. Serving a highly diverse suburban area that includes both affluent new developments and deteriorating low-income neighborhoods, the Cottonwood School District offers an intriguing example of how site-based decision making has worked in an environment characterized by challenges similar to those faced by large numbers of U.S. school districts.

FINDING OUT HOW IT ALL WORKS IN PRACTICE

The research literature has repeatedly pointed to discrepancies between formally adopted policies and the observable practices which actually become embedded in the regularities of the school culture. Sarason (1991) recalls what happened in the 1960s and 1970s when educational policymakers legislated wholesale introduction of the new math, the new biology, the new physics, the new social studies, while remaining "scandalously insensitive to what was involved in changing classroom regularities" (p. 90). Fullan and Miles note: "Schools are overloaded with problems—and, ironically, with solutions that don't work" (1992, p.745). Cuban (1990) describes the need, not for superficial first-order changes, but for deeper, second-order changes in the structures and cultures of schools.

Advocates of taking a more collaborative approach to school management hold forth the possibility of establishing true community standards, mutually acknowledged by parents, teachers, administrators, and community leaders, as the basis for interactions within schools. This does not mean merely moving many decisions about school improvement out of the central office and into the schools, but also implies changes in the roles of parents, students, and school personnel.

> Schools would be markedly different if their ongoing function was to ensure successful performance. . . . We would not put up long with a physician who sent our child home with an F for health, but no assistance in becoming healthy. (Goodlad 1984)

Here lies the rub. Most people agree, at least in a general way, about what constitutes good health. Agreement on what constitutes a "good" education is harder to come by. For a shared decision-mak-

ing approach to be successful, there must be a reorientation not only in the way schools are operated but also in the way many members of the school community have habitually thought about schooling. As Barth (1991) has pointed out:

> Restructuring has suddenly become both a source of hope and a platitude in our profession. It's a big tent under which many people are saying and doing many things. It is a concept that means different things to different people and may, therefore, be in danger of becoming altogether meaningless. At the same time, restructuring has become a watchword for all of us who care deeply about good schools.

Restructuring has often been seen as a corrective to habits of mind common in bureaucratic environments, where private goals, particularly those related to an individual's positioning within the organization, too often take precedence over larger social goals. Site-based shared decision-making has been suggested as a way of counteracting such tendencies through evolving shared values and a strong sense of community at each school site. Fostering strong community goals is seen as a way to transform school environments where service to students and their families is too often deemed less important than taking care not to rock the bureaucratic boat. Shared decision-making has also been closely linked to teacher empowerment.

This book tells the story of one widely recognized experiment in putting these ideas into practice. Two years were spent gathering information from a stratified sample of over one hundred individuals in the Cottonwood School District, as well as from a wide array of written resources. An important focus of the study was how attitudes and procedures left behind by earlier reforms carried out in the district had affected acceptance of this newest restructuring effort. Another focus that evolved as the study progressed was the use of shared decision-making techniques to arrive at decisions about implementation of a new curriculum framework based on the whole language philosophy and an emphasis on the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM) *Standards* in math.

Cottonwood School District

Serving a diverse population spread over an area of approximately sixty square miles, Cottonwood's thirty-five schools vary

widely in student demographic characteristics—from ethnically diverse schools located near Foothills City, a large regional metropolis, to schools located in relatively homogeneous outer suburbs. Achieving effective communication across a suburban school district that includes all or part of five municipalities has presented a formidable challenge throughout Cottonwood's history. Indeed, in recent years the social and economic diversity of the district has become progressively more striking, with new developments designed around golf courses being built in the outer suburbs even while students living in the large trailer parks and deteriorating apartment complexes near Foothills City increasingly require breakfast and afterschool programs to provide adequate nutrition and physical safety.

In its forty-year history, Cottonwood has had only three superintendents, each with a distinctive philosophy and management style. Ed Larimer, whose tenure lasted from the early 1950s to the early 1970s, encouraged sturdy independence in both students and staff, coupled with traditional academic coursework and a strong emphasis on athletics. Bill Davis, reflecting the emphasis on accountability which dominated the 1970s, instituted a strongly centralized system of school governance and a skills-based curriculum reinforced by criterion-referenced tests. Dave Roberts, who came to the district in 1982, installed a more collaborative model of school governance and a more integrated, activity-based curriculum.

These shifts in emphasis in many ways typify the changes that school districts across the United States have undergone since World War II. However, the Cottonwood district is unusual in that shared decision-making, which is a relatively new idea elsewhere, has been in place in Cottonwood for almost a decade, long enough to have had a significant effect on the culture of individual schools. The curriculum framework that the district began implementing in the mid-1980s has been fashioned and refined through collaborative decision-making—a process that began when, soon after Dr. Roberts arrived, it became clear that many teachers had become dissatisfied with the test-driven curriculum then mandated by the district.

FINDING THE RIGHT LENS

I have used Seymour Sarason's studies of school change as the lens through which to examine the data gathered. Sarason (1971) points out that possession of a mandate for change is often far from

enough to insure achievement of one's intended purpose. The list of educational reforms which did not fulfill their initial promise, even though initiated with great fanfare and the best of intentions, is long. Many of these failures were tied to a failure on the part of reformers to take the complex social interactions of the school setting into consideration. The considerations which Sarason (pp. 58–60) has suggested must be taken into account by a successful theory of change include:

1. Explicit recognition that the setting is differentiated in a variety of ways (i.e., role, power, status) that make for groupings, each of which may see itself differently in relation to the purposes and traditions of the larger setting and, therefore, perceive intended change in different ways.
2. Since the introduction of an important change does not and cannot have the same significance for the different groupings comprising the setting, there will be groups that will feel obligated to obstruct, divert, or defeat the proposed change, making it necessary to have mechanisms in place to recognize and deal with this source of opposition.
3. As the history of the change process includes a series of decisions that increasingly involve or affect more and more groups in the setting, there must be balancing of and/or attention to the demands both of leadership and of representativeness in the decision-making group.
4. A comprehensive conception of the change process must tell one when something should be done and when certain outcomes are to be expected, at the same time furnishing a way of explaining why initial estimations made at the site concerning the time necessary to achieve intended change are usually a gross underestimation of the time actually required.

Conflicting Curricula Differ on Education's Goal

Sarason's guidelines suggested what to look for, but left other problems unsolved. Explicit recognition of the variety of ways that the Cottonwood School District is differentiated, and the groupings that have resulted, required a way of adequately describing the differing ways various groups have viewed the purposes and traditions of the school district. Likewise, there was a need to characterize the differing import that important changes had for various groupings

within the district. Since the history of the Cottonwood School Dis-
trict had been characterized by prolonged struggles between opposing
factions, with conflicts within the district often reflecting struggles
taking place at the national level, I made use of the terms that Her-
bert Kliebard (1987) used in his book *The Struggle for the Ameri-
can Curriculum 1893–1958* to describe competing reform move-
ments: humanist, social efficiency, developmentalist, and social
meliorist.

It should be emphasized, however, that, although Kliebard's
terms did closely mirror the range of philosophical viewpoints voiced
by Cottonwood respondents, there were inevitable differences
between the controversies that arose in a single school district and
the issues that have received attention at the national level. The
manner in which the terms "humanist," "social efficiency," "devel-
opmentalist," and "social meliorist" are used in the following pages
reflects the particular dynamics of the political/philosophical debate
that took place within the Cottonwood School District. With this
caveat, there follows a thumbnail sketch of each of these four view-
points. Borrowing heavily from Kliebard, these brief descriptions
indicate the historical roots and general objectives of each group.

Over the last century the role schools play in U.S. society has
changed radically, as have positions taken by advocates of the
humanist, social efficiency, developmentalist, and social meliorist
curriculums. Of the four, the humanist curriculum has changed
least. Humanists continue to emphasize study of the traditional lib-
eral arts. Sarason describes the justification for such study: "The
adjective *liberal* in liberal arts, historically at least, means libera-
tion from narrowness and ignorance, and exposure to the best in
human knowledge and accomplishment" (1990, 37). On a more mun-
dane level, humanists tend to favor compulsory study of a core cur-
riculum of academic subjects, although ideas about which subjects
ought to be included have changed over time.

In 1893 Charles W. Eliot, chairman of the National Education
Association's Committee of Ten and president of Harvard Univer-
sity, enunciated the humanist position that educators should not
differentiate between "education for college" and "education for
life." A liberal education was seen as that type of schooling which
would be most suitable for a free human being, quite apart from
any consideration of work or vocation. Educators were to be
regarded as guardians of the finest elements of the Western her-
itage. Schools would be entrusted with using the teaching of this
heritage to develop the reasoning power of students, thus enabling

them to express their thoughts clearly, concisely, cogently.

There were, however, more and more educators who questioned these assumptions. Until the 1880s most academic schooling beyond the elementary level had been provided at private "academies" where entrance was limited to those who could afford the tuition (Bennett and LeCompte 1990). By the 1890s, publicly supported secondary schools were being established across the nation, and concerns about the social utility of teaching the traditional academic subjects were increasingly voiced. Officials designated to improve public schools and work out school laws increasingly challenged the humanist ideal. European, particularly German, ideas of vocational education were introduced in response to demands that education be made more efficient and "practical."

Businessmen elected to local school boards began to apply principles of "scientific management," originally developed in industry, to public schools. A social efficiency curriculum was developed that put a premium on acquisition of specific and observable skills. In an effort to make teaching more effective, skills to be learned were broken down into component parts. Over time, the component parts became increasingly decontextualized. Often they would be listed as behavioral objectives that teachers were required to check off as students mastered them. Methods borrowed from business were also used to systematize educational bureaucracies that had become increasingly large and chaotic. Uniform rules were created for codifying attendance, financial records, curricula, and time allocated for instruction (Butts 1978).

Social efficiency advocates also made a case for trimming the "deadwood" from the traditional curriculum. They argued that teaching of algebra and foreign languages to people who would not use the knowledge in their future jobs was an inexcusable waste. Their efforts were often focused on casting off what they considered to be wasteful and inert subjects and replacing them, for non-college-bound students, with courses that taught occupational skills students would need after they left school. Directly functional courses were advocated, with vocational subjects advanced as a prime example.

During the early years of this century, the main challenge to this businesslike approach to education grew out of the child-study movement, which was a product of the new status accorded to scientific inquiry. Child-study advocates, referred to by Kliebard as developmentalists, argued that the natural order of development in the child was the most significant and scientifically defensible basis for determining what should be taught. Developmentalists

attempted to solve the curriculum riddle through gathering more accurate scientific data, focusing their attention on stages of child development and the nature of learning. They assumed that if they could devise a curriculum that was in harmony with the child's real interests, needs, and learning patterns, this curriculum would provide the means by which the natural powers within the child could be unharnessed.

Social meliorists took a more sociological view. In the late nineteenth century, at a time when Social Darwinism enjoyed great popularity, Lester Frank Ward argued strongly against the contention that survival of the fittest ought to be accepted as a natural law. He held that if moral progress is to be made, it must be the result of an *intellectual* direction of the forces of human nature into advantageous channels. Critical to further social progress was a properly constructed and fairly distributed system of education. Ward argued that social inequality was, fundamentally, a product of maldistribution of the social inheritance. The key to progress was the proper distribution of cultural capital through a vitalized system of education. Ward thus became the forerunner of the social meliorist curriculum which sees education as key to any meaningful movement toward a more just society.

Although, since the turn of the century, the social efficiency curriculum has had the strongest influence on United States public schools, the pendulum of public favor has swung back and forth. In the last century all of the philosophies outlined by Kliebard have played a part in influencing how Americans view the goals of schooling. Broadly speaking, the three Cottonwood superintendents have represented, respectively, a humanist, a social efficiency, and a developmentalist perspective (although none represented an ideal/typical instance of that philosophy, each having incorporated some elements of other viewpoints). Also, as in most public school districts, the policies favored by the superintendent have not been the only factor that has influenced what happened in classrooms. The struggle the present superintendent has faced in his attempt to alter various elements of the social efficiency curriculum put in place by his predecessor lies at the core of this study.

A Geology of School Reform

The geological metaphor found in the title of this book was suggested in part by the spectacular topography of Western State,

and in part by repeated references by respondents to earlier events. Historical circumstances they described were often key to understanding why various groups or individuals had reacted in particular ways to later events. Searching through archives and interview transcripts, to see how various groups had reacted to specific events, frequently resembled the work of a geologist, uncovering the characteristics an area had exhibited in earlier times by digging through layers of rock. Other times it seemed that, just as the force of gravity—which has always been in evidence all around us, drawing our planet's water into hollows on the earth's solid surface, forming oceans, lakes, and ponds—remained undiscovered till particular questions were asked, many of the social forces at work in Cottonwood could only be made visible by seeking out the causes behind broader patterns. Therefore, geological metaphors seemed the most effective way to describe many findings of this study.

A BRIEF OUTLINE

Before delving into the historical strata that underlie current events in Cottonwood, we will turn our attention to the Cottonwood School District's present organizational topography. Chapter 2 outlines how the shared decision-making process was intended to operate within the site-based environment established by Dr. Dave Roberts. An understanding of the ideal type of governance structure the Cottonwood district was striving to set in place will be important to later discussions of those areas where success was attained, as well as of instances where school cultures evolved that departed in important ways from the envisioned ideal.

Chapter 3 will explore the historical bedrock upon which later events in the Cottonwood district were built. Ed Larimer, Cottonwood's first superintendent, administered a school district that was, for a number of years, one of the fastest-growing in the nation. His strong belief that the teacher stood at the center of the educational enterprise, along with the emphasis his administration put on using innovative methods to teach traditional academic subjects, played an important part shaping the culture of the Cottonwood School District. Larimer's tenure stretched from the early 1950s to the early 1970s. Many of the staff members whom he hired continue to have an important role in shaping Cottonwood's educational policies.

Chapter 4 traces the reforms implemented by Dr. Bill Davis, who headed the Cottonwood district from 1972 to 1982. A strong

believer in Management by Objectives, as well as Mastery Learn-
ing, Dr. Davis transformed the loose-knit Cottonwood School Dis-
trict into an administratively unified whole which soon achieved
national prominence for its emphasis on accountability and thor-
ough-going use of criterion-referenced tests. Yet the use of criterion-
referenced testing was relatively short-lived, running into widespread
resistance from teachers who questioned both the value of teaching
isolated skills and the validity of teaching the same lessons to all
children at a given grade level, regardless of a particular child's devel-
opmental level.

Chapter 5 will describe the district-level organizational struc-
ture that evolved out of the shared decision-making process
described in chapter 2. Strategic planning will be discussed, as well as
how efforts to keep teachers informed about the newest research on
teaching led to development of a new curriculum framework for the
Cottonwood district. The new meaning given to the phrase "perfor-
mance-based," which under Dr. Davis had referred to use of paper-
and-pencil tests to measure basic skills, will be explained. During the
Roberts tenure, "performance-based" came to mean the use of com-
plex activities requiring higher-order thinking skills, both to teach
and to assess student understanding of important concepts.

Chapter 6 will focus on how the Cottonwood district went
about implementing its new curriculum framework in a site-based
environment. The use of teacher/coaches to assist other teachers at
their school with implementation will be described. Problems
encountered during implementation will be discussed, along with
changes that were made in the curriculum framework as a result of
feedback from teachers. Among these changes was the use of mini-
lessons to make sure that adequate instruction in spelling, phonics,
and grammar was included within the whole language curriculum.
The use of naturalistic assessment will be described, with a special
focus on the struggle of curriculum coaches to help teachers under-
stand the philosophy behind the new way of teaching.

Chapter 7 will trace the differing paths the Cottonwood dis-
trict's three high schools have followed since implementation of
site-based decision-making. The radically restructured Sagebrush
High, built to closely follow the pattern laid out by Dr. Theodore
Sizer and the Coalition of Essential Schools, will be contrasted with
Suburban High, which proudly remained a "shopping mall" high
school, and the more urban Metroville High, located in an area that
was once considered "the suburbs" but is now coping with many
social problems usually associated with the inner city. The impact of

the individual leadership styles of the three principals will be discussed, along with resentments and jealousies that can be traced to construction of a new high school in the outer suburbs that siphoned off many middle-class students.

Chapter 8 will discuss the use of shared decision-making to address districtwide concerns, such as high school attendance areas and the budget cuts necessitated by a large state-level funding shortfall. Demographic changes in the more urbanized areas of the Cottonwood district are described, along with social tensions connected to the manner in which the regional media have reported crimes committed by members of minority groups. Also discussed are conflicts that arose between the ideal of participatory democracy inherent in shared decision-making and the reality of representative democracy as it was embodied in the local school board.

Chapter 9 will describe how the differing lenses through which various groups within the Cottonwood School District have viewed major issues have caused misunderstandings. In regard to some issues, a climate of distrust arose that made it difficult to build a consensus even behind changes that mutually distrustful groups both appeared to desire. When participants in the shared decision-making process were not able to put the best interests of the school community above personal concerns, planning meetings tended to turn aside from consensus building and to take on the characteristics of negotiating sessions. Also discussed are the effect the broader national debate about educational policy had on the attitudes of college-educated Cottonwood parents and the impact parent attitudes had on shared decision-making efforts within the Cottonwood School District.