

*The decision: to share or not to share*  
*by Bambi Betts*

This is not an new issue, but it continues to feature in the day- day practice of our international school principals, unfortunately delaying the process of doing what's best for our kids. The issue is when should principals share the making of a decision, and when should they be very clear about making it on their own.

Despite the hundreds of volumes on the decision making process, from the simple to the complex, my recent tour of international schools confirms that international school principals around the world are frequently agonizing over whether to share or not to share coming to a decision, and when.

We all think we have the answer, which is easy to come up with when you are sitting alone at your computer, imagining what you would do. But the reality of the culture in many of our international schools renders much of that advice academic at best.

Nevertheless, here are my two cents.

In school after school, principals lament that they have tried multiple shared-decision-making processes and that the results are pretty consistent. Some people are happy with the decision; some are not. Some perceive it was "shared;" some do not.

Some support it regardless of the process; some reject it regardless (usually very publicly). And leaders are left with the question: Is it human nature or the nature of educators to conclude that, regardless of the process, it is a shared decision only if the decision goes my way?

While shared decision-making certainly can work, it is not, in itself, the goal. It is disturbing, for example, that some of our educational agencies regard collaboration processes on a par with learning results when it comes to setting standards for schools. Surely it is a means to an end, and not the end itself.

And this is when it becomes more alarming. We seem willing to subjugate the quality of the decision to the quality of the process.

What happened to the "decision" in the decision-making process? This is where our kids can become the victims of our dithering about how to make the decision. When we spend our time trying to work out the best way to make the decision, we might in the meantime be denying them access to the best possible curriculum we can offer.

We delay, for example, the all-important decision about whether or not to require teaching for understanding, while we tiptoe around the egos of sensitive colleagues who might not like the idea, even though there is plenty of research to support at least TRYING it.

The purpose of decision-making, whatever the process, is to make a GOOD decision, one that will enhance learning. If the process can additionally build a strong positive culture in our school, that is a plus. But that should be a by-product of the more important goal of making good decisions on behalf of kids.

The PRIMARY role of a school principal has to be as the gatekeeper of learning, not the promoter of processes that make people feel better about their jobs. It is desirable that we do both, but if forced to make a choice, then truly, there is only one to make.

And where is our sense of urgency? These kids are here today; today's opportunities cannot be replaced. Every extra minute that we spend in processing is another minute that we deny them access to the best education we can offer.

Lest we forget, principals are actually paid, at least in part, to do what most leaders are paid to do: make important, effective decisions which will best promote the mission of their organization. In our case, that is high achievement for all learners.

Hardly a goal we can afford to compromise.