



## SALINE SCHOOLS: SUSTAINABLE STRUCTURES, SUSTAINABLE RESULTS

BY APRIL FLANAGAN, SANDRA NADIG, AND GERARD POUND

**T**he year was 1988. The Saline School District, in Saline, Michigan, had endured a contentious teacher's-union strike back in 1985, followed by a last-minute settlement of the contract in 1986. Since then, relationships throughout the school district and community had soured. Teachers lamented unsatisfactory working conditions and inadequate salaries. Board of Education trustees openly confronted each other and the administration and union during public meetings, while frustrated parents and community members sat in the audience, shaking their heads in disbelief. Against this backdrop, a newly passed, state-mandated school improvement process loomed large, as did a dreaded new round of negotiations.

Contrast that troubled year with today: Now, issues and concerns voiced by employees are settled amicably in Saline—even before the contracts expire. Staff grievances have decreased dramatically. Equally important, student test scores and other academic success indicators have improved. Saline's Michigan Education Assessment Program (MEAP) results are currently 39 percent above the state average. The Board of Education now works efficiently and harmoniously, supporting students, staff, administrators, parents, and community.

How did this transformation happen? In this article, we outline the critical decision points behind Saline's turnaround in the hopes that Saline's story will guide other leaders on similar journeys (see "Learning Tips from the Saline School District").

### Mastering Collaborative Bargaining

In 1988, the Saline district's belea-

guered unions and management decided to design a collaborative-bargaining process. The two groups participated in joint training (authorized by the Board) to develop the necessary skills. Certainly, participants learned about collaborative bargaining through the training. But they also learned something else. They found that facilitated, respectful conversation rebuilt trust between them. As the damage from years of conflict healed, both parties began sharing information honestly. Each realized that the other was also trying to improve the system. From this baseline, the two groups moved forward and settled the contracts well before the expiration date. Jase Wholehan, vice president of the Saline Education Association, said, "This was a complete reversal from our historical mental models." Lois Seeger, former president of the Saline Employee Support Personnel Association, remarked, "This was the first time that we felt truly valued at Saline."

Saline then took another leap out

of the box: institutionalizing the collaborative-bargaining process into its everyday operations. How? By holding joint, bimonthly meetings with all employee associations to improve communications and discuss ideas for problem resolution and relationship building. Participants agreed to have letters of understanding drafted as issues arose and were settled. These contracts would thus become living documents. Moreover, by meeting regularly, attendees avoided the surprises and blaming that so often mar labor relations.

### Defining a New Governance Model

Encouraged by its successful union negotiations, Saline launched a project in 1990 called "Focus on the Future." The administration and union leadership selected 34 representatives from among teachers, support staff, building administrators, the Central Office, and the Board to study emerging

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#### LEARNING TIPS FROM THE SALINE SCHOOL DISTRICT

- Invest time in training to improve relationships, build trust, and ensure shared understanding of purpose.
- Integrate successful processes into day-to-day business operations.
- Keep talking and seeking meaning with employees.
- Be willing to abandon ineffective structures and systems.
- Don't compete—collaborate!
- Invite numerous stakeholders to help build shared vision, including those with challenging questions and concerns.
- Document critical learnings in the form of "living documents." Share the learnings broadly.
- Empower individuals who have vision, leadership, and experience by providing them with the resources and support they need.
- Accept that no single person can effect profound change alone. It takes vision and commitment on the part of many.

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educational, social, and technological trends and generate ideas for improving student achievement. The unions helped get the project moving, further strengthening the trust that had arisen between them and other groups. Eighteen months passed—months filled with both excitement and frustration. The team ultimately generated many exciting ideas, such as staff-generated educational initiatives. However, members hesitated to implement their ideas in the face of the district's existing governance model—for good reason. The current model lacked clear delineation of roles and responsibilities, leaving the staff confused and the Board prone to micromanaging.

To address this concern, the team designed a shared decision-making model that they hoped would maximize the strengths of its members. The model entailed involving those people most affected by a decision in the decision-making process itself. At the same time, the Board, also recognizing the need for change, abandoned its traditional strategic-planning approach. In 1992 it appointed a design team charged with developing a blueprint for Saline's future. This team comprised five teachers and one secretarial support person, all of whom were relieved of their regular duties for two years and given office space, administrative and Board support, and a significant budget. Dave Vargo, president of the Saline Employee Association, described these changes as "a whole new way of doing business in Saline. Commitment and rapport replaced compliance and distrust."

Everyone concerned recognized that Saline had to change to remain competitive. The district simply couldn't endure another round of the ruptures it had experienced in the late 1980s, nor could it return to the old way of doing business—i.e., top-down control in a closed, bureaucratic system. Not surprisingly, confusion prevailed during this time, as roles remained ill-defined. The confusion prompted some Board members to step in and instantly fill power voids, which sparked frustration and distrust throughout the system. Happily, com-

mon sense prevailed. The Board decided to develop a new governance system, founded on collaboration with the Central Office, that would directly support the district's vision, mission, guiding principles, and beliefs. This collaborative approach contrasted markedly with the adversarial relationship that the two bodies had struggled with before.

While the design team drafted a blueprint for Saline's future, another crucial decision arose. Rather than restrict the change work to "insiders," the team decided to invite an advisory panel of Saline business and community representatives to gather

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with them. The team looked to these "outsiders" to ask the tough questions that would help it hammer out a robust plan for the future. Twenty high-powered individuals met with the design team monthly over the course of 18 months, raising complex issues and provocative questions about accountability, use of resources, curriculum delivery methods, and more. Board members attended these meet-

ings to listen and provide support.

In 1993, the design team produced a document that linked Saline's vision, mission, beliefs, and guiding principles with instruction and learning outcomes. The team then shared the document with staff and community. Everyone in the school system had the opportunity to review and discuss the work. At several town meetings, attendees analyzed the document in light of emerging educational, social, and technological trends and provided input.

### Sustaining Success

Throughout Saline's learning journey, the investments in training, time, and honest talk revealed a vital fact: Everyone involved—no matter what their position—shared the same vision of making Saline the most effective educational district it could be. By taking the time to design new structures—and align them with that compelling vision—Saline transformed itself from a school district torn by strife and distrust to one that has set new standards in education. The innovative models for decision-making, governance, and stakeholder involvement that Saline designed have laid the foundation for deep, enduring change. ■

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