

THE LEARNING Principal®

FOR A DYNAMIC COMMUNITY OF SCHOOL LEADERS ENSURING SUCCESS FOR ALL STUDENTS

A LEARNING COMMUNITY IS BUILT ON TRUST

BY VALERIE VON FRANK

For two years, the new principal struggled to make the weekly collaborative learning time valuable. Her teachers had what she thought was a gift — two hours during the workday every week for professional learning — but some seemed to see the meetings as a chore that took them away from work they thought they needed to do. The principal diligently designed activities she believed were meaningful. She introduced the concepts of professional learning teams. Some on the veteran staff were excited. Some were politely attentive. Some routinely checked their watches — and checked out the minute they could.

What does it take to create a powerful profes-

sional learning environment within a school? How do leaders create conditions that develop effective learning communities? School leaders who want learning communities to succeed begin by paying attention to the school culture.

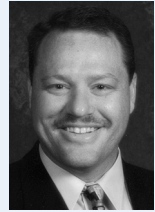
CREATING A CULTURE FOR LEARNING

“When you introduce professional learning communities in a school where there’s a collegial culture beyond people feeling good about one another, you’re more likely to be able to move” that school, said Ed Tobia, a program associate at SEDL. He said many leaders create learning communities without first addressing the changes needed to shift the school’s culture from typical isolation to collaboration.

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Meet Mark McBeth, above, former principal of Dodge City Middle School in Dodge City, Kan.

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MARK McBETH
Former principal,
Dodge City Middle
School
Dodge City, Kansas

Grades: 7-8

Enrollment: 850
students

Staff: 75 teachers

Three of four students in this urban middle school are eligible for free and reduced-price lunch. Six in 10 students are Hispanic; three in 10 are white; and the remainder are black and Asian.

Mark McBeth now works as turnaround director for a service center running leadership academies and other professional development initiatives.



Turnaround doesn't have to take years, just solid leadership

BY VALERIE VON FRANK

Q. You were hired for the 2007-08 school year as a turnaround principal. What does that mean?

In Dodge City, I had to change the climate and the culture. I had to get teachers to put student learning first. In that situation, it had been really about teachers first. It was about protecting their classrooms, what kind of funding they got, the hours that they worked, their classroom loads. To change that climate, I had to talk about student learning, bring the data to the surface, and get them to look at the data without names attached. Then all of a sudden people started saying, "Is that really what we want?"

We had to ask, "What do all teachers need to know and be able to do? How do I know teachers are able?" We used six criteria to determine whether the teachers were able to meet the standards. If they were not, I moved them to a tiered intervention, sometimes after school or even during the day, hiring substitute teachers to bring staff in for some coaching by me or an instructional coach. Then we would measure whether teachers enhanced and changed their practices. If not, we took them to the next level of intervention for intensive one-on-one support.

Q. What role does leadership play?

Michael Fullan said you can turn around a school in six to 18 months. Principals often get stuck functioning based on personality. They continue their practice the same way. Schools can't afford that. The principal has to change himself before the school changes.

Q. What steps did you take initially at Dodge City?

People were saying, "Who's in charge?" When they did do something new, it was always jumping straight to design, and then they would say, "Well, we tried that, and it didn't work." Professional development was hit-and-miss. Nobody ever sat down and talked to each other.

I created a coaching and support team made up of the instructional coaches, two assistant principals, and myself. We met every Monday

morning and went through the six criteria for whether teachers were getting it or not.

Each week we would have particular teachers who went to the most intense level of intervention, along with all first-year teachers, because they needed that one-on-one support early on. Then we established a middle-level intervention.

Then I created an instructional leadership team. They outlined and set the vision of where we were headed. I facilitated that team, but I had to build the capacity of teachers to take

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— Mark McBeth

ownership.

The last week of November, they made the first solid decision — to borrow snow days because we had zero professional development days so they had no opportunity to meet as a whole staff. We had to take it to a union vote. We had the first "yes" vote in the history of Dodge City Middle School.

That's when I knew the school's culture had just changed dramatically. Teachers are on board. They don't want to see the old world again.



Pat Roy is co-author of *Moving NSDC's Staff Development Standards Into Practice: Innovation Configurations* (NSDC, 2003).

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Every child, every day, every opportunity

The equity standard is challenging and multifaceted. The standard is critical, however, if schools are to help every child reach a higher level of achievement. And the principal plays the central role in creating a culture in which students can reach higher expectations. Leaders play a critical role in creating teachers' sense of responsibility for student learning.

The Rodel Charitable Foundation of Arizona, focused on helping educators attain high levels of achievement for low-income students, set out to identify exemplary principals in low-income neighborhoods. Interviews with principals were illustrative. Betty Paterson, principal of Sunset Elementary, said it well: "Our school community works together to determine our vision and mission, in line with our district vision of 'every child, every day, every opportunity.' We set high expectations, and I strive to model those expectations, supporting and encouraging students and staff to do the same" (Kossan, 2009, February 1). This principal **communicates high expectations for herself and for all teachers and students** (Roy & Hord, 2003, p. 100).

Having high expectations means more than just having tough standards; it also means ensuring that educators have the capacity to affect student learning.

LoGerfo (2006) found that a school's environment can help forge a strong personal commitment to student learning. "Teachers who report that their school's leadership is supportive of their efforts in the classroom have a much greater sense of responsibility," according to

LoGerfo. Expectations are not enough, according to Sharon Brittingham, former principal of a high-poverty school in Delaware (in Chenoweth, 2006), who said, "It is teachers' belief in their ability to make the students successful that is key."

Recently, researchers have identified a second type of expectation called *collective efficacy*. Collective efficacy is a shared belief that the "faculty as a whole can execute the actions necessary to produce the positive outcomes for students" (Jerald, 2007, p. 3). Researchers found that collective efficacy among faculty members was a significant predictor of student achievement — a stronger predictor than student demographics. Research also found that principals can develop individual and collective efficacy among educators. Those who "actively modeled positive behaviors, who recognized and rewarded teachers' accomplishments, and who worked to inspire a sense of group purpose fostered stronger feelings of efficacy among teachers" (Jerald, 2007, p. 5).

Another avenue for building efficacy is powerful staff development that supports teachers until they have mastered new instructional strategies. This ongoing professional learning supports teachers through the implementation dip until they confidently and consistently use new strategies with high quality (Jerald, 2007).

The principal as instructional leader is responsible for working to establish both individual and collective beliefs among staff that educators make a difference for *all* students — every day and with every opportunity.

NSDC STANDARD

Equity: Staff development that improves the learning of all students prepares educators to understand and appreciate all students; create safe, orderly, and supportive learning environments; and hold high expectations for their academic achievement.

LEADERSHIP STRATEGIES

A precondition for doing anything to strengthen our practice and improve a school is the **existence of a collegial culture** in which professionals talk about practice, share their craft knowledge, and observe and root for the success of one another. Without these in place, **no meaningful improvement**—no staff or curriculum development, no teacher leadership, no student appraisal, no team teaching, no parent involvement, and no sustained change—**is possible**. (Emphasis added)

— Roland Barth, “Improving relationships within the schoolhouse,” *Educational Leadership*, March 2006

Source: *Leading Professional Learning Communities: Voices from Research and Practice*, by Shirley M. Hord and William A. Sommers. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, 2008.

Purpose: To deepen understanding of strategies that leaders use to create a positive culture and climate that can affect student learning.

Materials: Copies of the strategies.

Time: 1 hour.

Directions: Form six groups. Ask each group to focus on one of the leadership strategies. Groups may use the questions on the handout to guide discussion. Have each small group share one example of that leadership strategy in action.

FACILITATIVE LEADERSHIP STRATEGIES

<p>Create an atmosphere and context for change</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do districts and schools create a sense of urgency about the need for improvement? • What elements are crucial in creating an environment of trust and a collaborative atmosphere? • What do leaders do to develop a collegial relationship with teachers and staff? • What can districts and schools do to build a sense of mutual responsibility and accountability? 	<p>Invest in professional development</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How does our vision guide us in creating professional development? • What forms of professional development are needed to support the implementation of a new strategy or improvement plan? • What resources are available to guide us in deciding what professional development we need?
<p>Develop and communicate a shared vision</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ideally, what do we want meetings and classroom instruction to look like once we've implemented a new strategy or improvement plan? • What are the best ways of getting input from staff, parents, and community members to develop our vision? • What are some effective methods of communicating the vision? 	<p>Check progress</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What effective tools and processes are available to use to assess our progress? • How can teachers help each other to check their progress in using new strategies and approaches? • What types of data are needed to check on progress? • How do we use data to measure progress? • How do we communicate the data we collect?
<p>Plan and provide resources</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What activities must occur to have a new strategy or improvement plan be effectively implemented? • How can we make the most efficient use of the time, personnel, and funds we have available to support the implementation of a new strategy or improvement plan? • How do we ensure that our plan remains up-to-date and is working as planned? 	<p>Continue to give assistance</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What forms of assistance will maintain the momentum of a new strategy or improvement plan? • How do we continue to sustain and improve a new strategy or program in the face of changes and challenges? • How can we incorporate what we learn from assessment to improve performance? • When and how might we celebrate and acknowledge successes?

Leadership actions that help professional learning communities flourish

Purpose: To develop a plan with specific actions to help learning communities flourish.

Materials: Paper.

Time: 1 hour.

Directions:

1. Individually or in teams, complete a plan that includes action steps to help learning teams determine what contextual issues they are facing that need attention.
2. List the factors that almost guarantee the failure of any initiative. Next to each factor identified, list the actions leaders must take to create conditions that promote successful implementation.
3. Record the actions in a planning document, along with identifying needed resources, a timeline, and responsible individuals.
4. As each action is planned and completed, ask, "What is the effect on student learning?"

ACTION PLAN TEMPLATE

IMPEDIMENTS	ACTION STEP	RESOURCES NEEDED	TIMELINE	PERSONS INVOLVED

Source: Edward Tobia, SEDL

A learning community is built on trust

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of Shirley Hord, have outlined six actions leaders take to help learning communities flourish. The first and most critical aspect, according to Tobia, is to create the atmosphere and context for change.

“A lot of people spend a lot of time thinking about the resources — creating time, providing instructional support, a facilitator or coach,” Tobia said. He said while those elements may be necessary, without a culture of trust, nothing changes.

“To get teachers to have the kinds of conversations we’d like them to have when they get together in professional learning communities,” Tobia said, “you have to have a culture in the school that supports that, or teachers will not be as open as they should be to have deep conversations.”

Tobia relies on strategies outlined in Megan Tschannen-Moran’s *Trust Matters: Leadership for Successful Schools* (Jossey-Bass, 2004), including demonstrating benevolence, honesty, openness, reliability, and competence. Tschannen-Moran defines trust as “one’s willingness to be vulnerable to another based on the confidence that the other is benevolent, honest, open, reliable, and competent” (p. 17). Tobia said teachers, whose expertise varies,

of controlling behaviors is essential, Tobia said. “You have to have enough confidence in yourself as a leader that you’re not feeling the need to control people’s actions,” he said.

SHAPING A NEW CULTURE

Kent Peterson, a professor in the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis at the University of Wisconsin who writes extensively on school culture, said modeling is important to creating a positive culture. If the school leader focuses on having people pick up paper off the floor and control students’

behavior, teachers will automatically make tidiness and control their priorities, Peterson said.

“If leaders go into classrooms and focus on what kids are learning, teachers are going to be reinforced for thinking that’s what’s important,” he said. A focus on instructional successes and time to share those stories is part of building a climate of collaboration and trust, he said.

“In a positive culture,” he said, “people believe in the vision and so begin to act in ways that move them toward success. Thoughts frame attitudes which lead to actions.”

In *Shaping School Culture: Pitfalls, Paradoxes and Promises, 2nd Ed.* (Jossey-Bass, 2009), Terrence Deal and Peterson write that, “The leader needs to unpack and understand the culture, how it came to be, the strength and modes of its influence, and who its prime beneficiaries and most formidable guardians are” (p. 198). The leader must uncover what the school community’s vision of the school is because, “Every school is a repository of unconscious sentiments and expectations that carry the code of the collective dream — the high ground to which they aspire” (p. 198).

School leaders can ask several questions to understand the school’s current culture (Deal & Peterson, 2009, pp. 198-199):

- What are the social rituals of interaction and support?

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NSDC’S BELIEF

Schools’ most complex problems are best solved by educators collaborating and learning together.

“In a positive culture, people believe in the vision and so begin to act in ways that move them toward success. Thoughts frame attitudes which lead to actions.”

— Kent Peterson

often fear talking with colleagues about content, standards, instructional strategies, or other topics, feeling that any lack of knowledge may be exposed and they will be judged.

Tobia advises school leaders to model and maintain trusting relationships in order to develop a climate where teachers can be more open and reflect deeply about their teaching — the mark of a true learning community. Letting go

Strategies for building effective learning communities

Depending on the school's context, Ed Tobia, SEDL program associate, said leaders may want to begin at a different point within the six steps outlined by SEDL as actions leaders take to create successful PLCs:

- **Develop and communicate a shared vision for change.** Leaders work with staff to create a picture of what instruction should look like once an improvement strategy has been implemented. They get input from staff, parents, and community members and plan specific ways to communicate the vision.
- **Plan and provide resources.** Leaders plan what activities must occur for a strategy or improvement plan to be effectively implemented. They make sure teachers have time and materials to support the process, such as disaggregated data to discuss, state standards, and information about research-based instructional strategies and assessment practices. Leaders allocate time for teachers to collaborate.
- **Invest in professional development.** Educators' professional learning should not be the one-shot inservice of the past, but should be job-embedded, ongoing, and focused specifically on how to improve student learning. Leaders ask, "How does our vision guide us in creating a program for teacher learning? What do we need to learn to support the implementation of a new strategy or improvement plan? What resources are available to guide us in selecting effective activities for professional learning?"
- **Check progress.** Leaders follow up with teams working in learning communities, visit classrooms to observe the effects on changed teacher practice, and consider data about teaching and student achievement to determine whether teachers need further assistance or to adjust implementation plans.
- **Give continuous assistance.** Leaders make sure that learning communities are supported through focused assistance as needed in content areas or instructional strategies and that resources are available. They ask, "What forms of assistance will maintain the momentum of a new strategy or improvement plan? How can we incorporate what we learn from assessment to improve performance? How will we celebrate and acknowledge successes?"

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- How and when (if at all) are classroom successes shared and recognized?
 - What subcultures exist inside and outside the school? What are their values?
 - Who are the recognized (and unrecognized) heroes and villains of the school?
 - How is the work of teaching defined — as job or calling?
 - What do people say (and think) when asked what the school stands for? How is conflict typically defined? How is it handled?
 - What events are assigned special importance?
 - How are newcomers welcomed?
 - What do people wish for? Are there patterns to their individual dreams? What does the school's architecture convey?
 - How is space arranged and used?
 - What are the key ceremonies and stories of the school?
- Tobia said the point is that leaders need to be mindful of the school's culture to have learning communities work successfully. "Leaders have to put it all together and think about the strategies on a regular basis," he said.
- "People frequently make a giant leap in thinking that if we put a new measure in place, we're going to get an increase in outcomes. If you don't pay attention to the bridge, you fall into the chasm where you don't see changes in practice." ■

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New alliance will help schools share, learn, and grow together

NSDC is facilitating a group of 100 schools committed to collaborative professional learning, with support from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the MetLife Foundation.

The Learning School Alliance will focus on participants' professional practices and improving the academic success of students in their schools. Participants will learn from one another's decisions and actions, helping them to create schools where all students excel and helping to generate national attention to the importance of educator learning in schools.

"These schools will serve as models of what effective professional learning looks like in practice and the impact it can have on students," said NSDC Executive Director Stephanie Hirsh.

A survey of members showed that education leaders across the country are seeking new ways to collaborate with other educators and reduce the culture of isolation that exists so often in schools,

reflect on their own practices by examining others' practices, re-search and share quality materials, share ideas on meeting similar challenges, and work with other schools that have high learning goals to demonstrate results.

This group of educators, committed to NSDC principles and standards for professional learning, will work over the next two years to increase teachers' capacity to meet their students' needs. NSDC will support their work with monthly webinars and facilitated conversations, tools and materials, coaching, a dedicated web site, and the means to convene as a group at NSDC summer and Annual Conferences.

The selected schools will represent a range of performance, geography, levels, and geographic locations. More information is available at www.nsdcc.org/alliance/index.cfm. The names of selected schools will be posted on the web site.

