



## LEARNING LEADERS

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# LEADERS CAN BUILD COMMUNITY, EVEN IN A DIVIDED SCHOOL

**Building a school family takes intentionality from leaders and staff — intentionality on day one and every day after.**

**W**hen I was a principal, I regularly referred to my school community as a family. When I delivered my morning message, I would say, “Good morning to my Newark Tech family.” I used the words “family” and “community” intentionally because I wanted my students to see the school as more than the facility where they were being educated. I wanted them to feel a sense of belonging, respect, and appreciation. I wanted them to feel safe to be themselves so they could take academic risks without fear of ridicule.

A school family does not occur organically, particularly in a diverse school like the one I led, or in a divided community. Building a school family takes intentionality from leaders and staff — intentionality on day one and every day after.

On my first day as principal, I saw my Black students sitting on one side of the cafeteria and my Latino students sitting on the opposite side. Although I understood why the students gravitated toward familiar people, I wanted them to see themselves as one school community.

To build that community, I knew I had to establish credibility right away. In my opening day message, I shared who I am as a person and a leader, and where we were headed collectively as a school. I told them that, although we were currently a low-performing school, we’d be a national force to be reckoned with academically within the next three to four years. I could tell they heard me loud and clear.

With that credibility, I entered the cafeteria and requested that everyone stand, face the other side of the cafeteria, go introduce themselves to someone they didn’t know, and then dare to sit with the new acquaintance and have a conversation. I stayed consistent with this approach until the culture of the cafeteria shifted and the two groups of students became one community.

Building community among students is actually the easy part because children are still impressionable and flexible. The heavy lifting in building community is with adults.

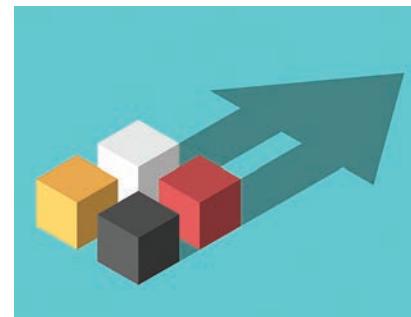
A school staff can be comprised of a wide array of people with different political beliefs as well as perspectives on students’ needs and potential and beliefs about what the school should be striving to achieve and for whom. I learned early in my career that those divides can be hard to bridge.

When I was a 5th-grade teacher in a classroom of Black students, I wanted my students to be conversant in the history of Black people in America and familiar with African culture. I was intentional about building pride in being Black along with the responsibilities that must accompany their pride and responsibilities to fight injustice.

The students became highly focused, and their academic results became exemplary. But several colleagues opposed what and how I taught. Throughout the school year, the faculty engaged in intense debates over how to educate Black children. The division was typically along racial lines, predicated upon our different experiences and the different “bubbles” we grew up in. Because we, the adults, were not as open and adaptable as children are, we never resolved our differences.

As the reflective practitioner that I pride myself to be, I look back on that experience frequently to this day. If I had it to do over again, with the skills I possess now, I’d focus more on building community. I’d be less combative with colleagues who saw the world differently from me, recognizing that they were shaped by their own life experiences, beliefs, and values. I

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that it was because their families couldn't afford any others.

But I quickly came to understand a different story: that, for some, those were the students' best clothes, and their parents would not send them to school in anything less, such was their level of respect for education. I came to realize that many of the students and families saw school as a community anchor that served more than an academic purpose. It symbolized possibility, opportunity, and, in some cases, safety.

To this day, I encourage the educators with whom I work to reframe how they diagnose needs by taking time to learn the stories of students, colleagues, and community to gather empathy data. This data will center the humanity of the communities you serve and guide the professional learning that will help you to better meet their real needs.

#### **Measure what you treasure.**

If we want data to inform our professional learning, then we need to reframe it to challenge deficit-thinking about our students and communities. As Ghodly Muhammad (author of *Cultivating Genius*) challenges us: Rather than saying that 40% of our students are proficient on a specific metric and 60% are not, consider what happens when we say that our current system, curriculum, instruction, and professional learning are responsive to

only 40% of our students' needs. How might that change our response to and posture toward the data?

#### **Serve the kids you have, not the ones you wish you had.**

Our kids come to us with rich cultural and linguistic assets, and it is our job to mine those assets, center them, and learn from them. It is our job to draw out of the students the giftedness that every single one of them has and make sure that our curriculum, instruction, and professional learning support that effort.

#### **Be a catalyst to help kids realize their potential.**

Catalysts spark a reaction between two elements that would otherwise not interact to create a stable compound without leaving any traces of itself. True change does not always come with recognition. That can be tiring and frustrating. But we know we have made systemic change when equity-mindedness becomes an integral part of how we and our colleagues do our work. When the work is happening but we can't attribute it to a specific leader or initiative, that's a sign of success.

#### **What really matters**

Above all, the lesson that sticks with me from my first teaching experience is the feeling that this is what matters: to invest my life in others and amplify the assets that our kids and communities

bring into our classrooms. As a teacher, it was my responsibility to learn how to mine the students' talents so that each one of them achieved to their potential and education delivered on its promise of hope and opportunity. Now that I am a professional learning leader, I have an additional responsibility to help other educators make that investment and do that work.

Leading and learning for equity is a collective journey. We all have to take our own individual steps on that journey, but we also have to support and draw inspiration from one another. In the words of Robert F. Kennedy (1966): "Each time a [person] stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, [he/she/they] sends forth a tiny ripple of hope, and crossing each other from a million different centers of energy and daring, those ripples build a current that can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance."

#### **REFERENCE**

**Kennedy, R.F. (1966, June 6).** *Day of Affirmation address, University of Capetown, Capetown, South Africa* [Speech transcript]. John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum. [www.jfklibrary.org/learn/about-jfk/the-kennedy-family/robert-f-kennedy/robert-f-kennedy-speeches/day-of-affirmation-address-university-of-capetown-capetown-south-africa-june-6-1966](http://www.jfklibrary.org/learn/about-jfk/the-kennedy-family/robert-f-kennedy/robert-f-kennedy-speeches/day-of-affirmation-address-university-of-capetown-capetown-south-africa-june-6-1966) ■

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would use a conversational, teaching-focused approach because all of the disagreements and debates were actually teachable moments.

It takes skill to deal with people who see the world differently. When I was a young teacher, those skills were just beginning to form — they were raw and undeveloped. But over time, I learned that there will be individuals on my staff who are just as passionate

about their beliefs and values as I am about mine. I learned how to disagree without being disagreeable. I became more strategic about the way I approach my staff on issues of race.

Those skills are imperative to be a leader who builds a school family. A school can't be a functioning community if its people are not mindful of how others see the world. The leadership lays the foundation for listening and looking through other lenses.

Leaders set the tone and inspire the courage for difficult, uncomfortable conversations. They set an expectation and establish a space for staff to think deeply and critically about their own beliefs and values relative to others'. With intentionality, leaders can build community, even in a divided school. They can bring people together as one school — one that serves every child. ■