



## Best bets for building a culture of shared leadership

BY RICK FISHER AND SHARON NEPOTE

**I**ncreased teacher turnover. Higher rates of absenteeism. Lower student engagement. And wait — a new district initiative that will demand significant resources. Sound familiar? We've been there. As former principals who led turnaround schools and now as coaches who work with school leaders and their teams, we

know that these are just some of the common challenges all school leaders face, to say nothing of those unexpected challenges that inevitably emerge in any school year.

We have found there is one consistent factor that separates schools that successfully respond to these challenges from the rest: the collective

understanding that overcoming challenges is a shared responsibility. In every successful school we've been part of or worked with, principals and other administrators are not the only leaders. In schools that make real progress, the staff as a whole has recognized that leadership is a shared responsibility. When you walk into one of these

schools, you can practically feel what we call the “we of leadership.” You can see it in staff meetings, where collaboration is obvious and the room buzzes with positive energy. You can hear it when you talk to teachers, who are eager to tackle problems and are confident those problems will be solved with everyone’s help. This shared commitment to school improvement has the power to move mountains, metaphorically speaking, because it unlocks so much potential — potential that, in far too many schools, goes untapped.

While every school has its own culture and unique challenges, we have found there are some best bets for building this kind of shared leadership culture. In this article, we highlight three of these best bets, or practical moves school leaders can make to promote shared leadership across their schools. Key to all of these moves is inviting teachers into the school improvement process so they have the agency “to act purposefully and constructively to direct their professional growth and contribute to the growth of their colleagues” (Calvert, 2016, p. 4).

### **MOVE 1: SET AND MONITOR GOALS COLLABORATIVELY**

If we hope to build shared leadership, setting goals for improvement cannot be the responsibility of administrators alone. That’s why at James E. Bazzell Middle School in Scottsville, Kentucky (where Rick first became principal in 2004), one of the first moves we made was to bring all faculty together to develop a core set of beliefs we could use to drive collective goal setting. We used a shared leadership tool called *The More’s* (Silver Strong & Associates, 2005). When using that tool, each teacher makes an individual list of what they want to see *more* of in terms of student learning. Teachers then work in teams to look for patterns and commonalities and share their top suggestions. Together, the school team arrives at a unifying set of beliefs about their school culture, working relationships, and what they want for their students. This simple move of considering what we want more of promotes teacher agency because it honors each team member’s personal values.

At Bazzell, these collectively developed beliefs helped us agree on ambitious instructional goals, which ultimately led to significant gains in student achievement. The beliefs also helped us establish a tone of positive change without insinuating that our culture was broken or that we were in “fix-it-now” mode.

Another way school communities come to collective agreement is setting goals that are SMART: Strategic and Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Results-based, and Time-bound (O’Neill & Conzemius, 2006). Many educators are already familiar with SMART goals, but we encourage schools to go a step further and develop them in a way that fosters collaboration.

At Wagoner Elementary School in Sauk Village, Illinois (where Sharon was principal until she retired in 2023), each grade-level team collaborated to establish collective SMART goals that were aligned with the district’s goals and supported by the whole team. The team then laid out a timeline of action steps for achieving each goal, collecting data, and monitoring progress.

# IDEAS

Central to this effort was a data wall, a dedicated space where faculty collected and displayed data relevant to collective goals. A data wall is not just a space; it's a shared leadership strategy that empowers teachers to take control of the school improvement process by analyzing data, identifying patterns, and making collective decisions about how to improve instruction. Note that a data wall is most collaborative and useful when it is in a place where faculty can access and use it. Ideally, it should be in the same space where teachers plan collaboratively.

## MOVE 2: ESTABLISH LEARNING CLUBS

A shared-leadership protocol focused on instruction, known as a learning club (Silver Strong & Associates, 2016), helps teams collaborate to build coherence and improve the way they plan, implement, and refine instruction. Learning clubs give teams a grassroots approach to building a professional learning community. They can be organized by grade level, content area, or cohort — whatever works to ensure all teachers are engaged and focusing on deep learning about instructional strategies, planning lessons collaboratively, and then trying them out in their classrooms. After implementing a new strategy, all members bring samples of student work (representing low, medium, and high achievement) back to the next learning club session. The team analyzes the samples of student work, focusing on students' mastery of content, use of the target thinking process, and quality of the product. Members also assess their own progress on using the strategies. Then they determine next steps together, emphasizing how to improve the use of the strategy so that it has a consistently positive impact on student learning before moving on to a new strategy.

Learning clubs were critical to our success as school leaders and are critical to the improvement we see in the schools we currently serve in our

consulting roles. Although we don't insist on a rigid structure, allowing each team to customize the process to fit their needs, we do have some recommendations to make them as effective as possible. Learning clubs should meet on a consistent basis and a regular schedule so that everyone can participate together. A good rule of thumb is to schedule learning club meetings frequently enough to keep the conversation fresh and active, while also allowing adequate time between sessions for teachers to implement new strategies. We also recommend sticking with the term learning clubs; think about what it communicates to a staff. People join clubs because they want to, and because they share a common interest. A school team's shared interest is in learning, and learning clubs are founded on the recognition that working together to increase our own learning is the surest way to increase student learning.

Perhaps more than any other initiative, learning clubs have the power to build buy-in and drive transformation. By promoting regular and rich conversations about student learning, learning clubs helped our staff get better at collaborating. And rather than evaluators, we — Rick and Sharon — became partners in learning. Put all these factors together and you get the ultimate support group for educators who are taking greater responsibility as they test new strategies, refine their work, and build the “we of leadership” mindset.

## MOVE 3: CONDUCT COLLABORATIVE LEARNING WALKS

Learning walks give school teams a non-evaluative way to gather information about how staff are putting collective commitments into action and to highlight best practices that other staff can emulate. They can be used in combination with collaborative goal-setting and learning clubs to foster collective understanding and action. Whereas walk-throughs

typically happen at the discretion of school leadership, learning walks empower teachers to become leaders of learning. In a learning walk, a rotating team of five to seven staff members, mostly teachers, lead the work of gathering information about what's happening in classrooms and how it's affecting students. In both Wagoner and Bazzell schools, teachers quickly realized learning walks were not a “gotcha,” but a strategy to advance collective goals together. This spirit of openness and collective improvement is essential to the success of a school's learning walks — and to shared leadership as a whole — and so we make it a focus in our work with school leaders.

Effective learning walks include three separate parts: the focus, the observation, and the reflection. The focus is determined by the learning walk team, with input from the faculty. The focus should be clearly observable and based on a recent initiative, a schoolwide goal, or a desired implementation strategy. An example of a guiding focus question is, “What do we see and hear that tells us students are actively engaged in rich conversations and supporting their ideas with evidence?”

After determining the focus, the learning walk team identifies the classrooms that will be visited and shares the schedule with the faculty to promote transparency and build trust in the process. Each classroom visit should be 5 to 10 minutes in length, and observers should make notes on what they see in the classroom. It is helpful to use a uniform data collection sheet that includes the date, focus, reflective questions, and space for notes. After all classrooms have been visited, the learning walk team summarizes their findings and notes patterns to highlight with the entire faculty.

In the final step, the full team comes together to process the findings. It is important to establish clear expectations for reflective discussion and collaborative analysis with the entire

## PREPARING FOR POWERFUL REFLECTION

Dear Team,

The chance to reflect together is what makes a learning walk truly powerful. Remember that a learning walk is not an evaluation. We will stay focused on the identified goal, work as a team, and refrain from assessing individual performance. During our reflection, please be prepared to:

1. Present data to support discussion and analysis. Bring your learning walk notes, personal insights, and anything you believe will help deepen understanding.
2. Explain and discuss what the data tells you about implementation, current practices, progress toward goals, and trends.
3. Identify possible factors that may be promoting success and hindering success and be ready to explain your reasoning.
4. Identify any staff and student needs and what supports you believe are required for continued growth.

faculty. The figure above shows a sample of communication a learning walk team developed to facilitate deep thinking during the reflection session. A good move to increase faculty engagement is to ask the entire group to make predictions about what the learning walk team discovered, then compare the findings against the predictions and discuss the results.

Here are a few tips for making the most of your learning walks:

- Have school leadership team members and instructional coaches work directly with teachers to schedule and facilitate learning walks and reflection meetings.
- Rotate participants to ensure all staff members have the opportunity to observe.
- Encourage school leadership team members and experienced teachers to be the first to have learning walks conducted in their classrooms to highlight powerful practices.
- Invite (rather than demand) teachers and paraprofessionals to participate.

- Have observers write thank you notes to the teachers who opened their classrooms.
- Celebrate bright spots and progress.
- Reiterate that the purpose of learning walks is to advance shared understanding, promote learning, and build a culture that communicates “We’re all in this together!”

### THE “WE OF LEADERSHIP”

The three moves described here help school communities build “the we of leadership” — a school culture that embraces and communicates a shared desire to improve together. They reinforce a concept we learned from our mentor, educator, and thought leader Harvey Silver: Improving schools together starts with the words “How can we ... ?” *How* signifies there is a practical solution that we will strive to implement. *Can* communicates that the work will be achievable, as in “We can do this!” And *we* is a constant reminder that this will only work if we collaborate. But more than speaking the words,

it’s how school teams take their shared desire to improve together and make it real. The three moves highlighted in this article put the question “How can we ... ?” into action.

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