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PROMOTING A CULTURE OF LEARNING THROUGH COMMUNITY BUILDING

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## Promoting a Culture of Learning Through Community Building

### ABSTRACT

This collective case study of three urban elementary schools in the Midwest examines a community building model for urban school renewal. Schools included in the study are all involved in a university partnership that provides school-based professional development focused on creating sustainable, child-centered, communities of learners. Two research questions guide this study: 1) How do principals, teachers, and parents work together in schools to support professional learning communities? 2) What are the critical success factors that contribute to community building that leads to student achievement? Themes that emerged across cases include the importance of relationship building, the need to find a common focus around which to come together, the power of collective reflection for action and the support of the principal. It suggests that developing a community of learners that is built on trusting relationships, focused on student learning, reflection for action, and supported by the principal can promote a culture of learning that results in improved teaching and learning.

## Promoting a Culture of Learning Through Community Building

The current educational environment of high-stakes testing, public accountability, and the punitive sanctions of No Child Left Behind has focused the nation's attention on student achievement and placed the entire educational system under the microscope of public scrutiny. Failure to meet the adequate yearly progress benchmark for two years puts a school on the path to reconstitution. Success, as currently measured by increased test scores, cannot be purchased from text book companies. Curriculum aligned to standards is necessary but not sufficient to change teacher beliefs or practices about students or about how they learn. To be successful teachers, principals, parents, and students must come together as a child-centered community of learners that not only believes but expects all students to learn at high levels.

The research reported here involved three urban elementary schools in the Midwest that were all involved in a university partnership that provided school-based professional development focusing on creating a sustainable, child-centered, community of learners. Themes that emerged across cases include the importance of relationship building, the need to find a common focus around which to come together, the power of collective reflection for action and the role of the principal. It suggests that developing a community of learners built on trusting relationships, focused on student learning, committed to reflection for action, and supported by the principal can promote a culture of learning that results in improved teaching and learning for all.

Sergiovanni (1994a, 2000) believes that communities create spaces and places for learning together. He suggests that using the metaphor of schools as communities, instead of schools as organizations, could lead to new questions and to a new understanding of authority and leadership and to a unique identity for schools. The community could be a learning community (Lieberman, 1996; Louis & Kruse, 1995; Louis, Marks, & Kruse, 1996; Zawislan, 1999), professional community (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Eaker, DuFour, & DuFour, 2002; Newman & Wehlage, 1995), community of practice (Wenger & Snyder, 2000), community of commitment (Kofman & Senge, 1993) or community of truth (Palmer, 1998). Common themes across the various types of communities include shared vision; collaboration; quest for continuous learning; transformation of experience into knowledge through inquiry and dialogue; shared leadership; and autonomy and empowerment resulting in coordinated action. Learning together in the context of real, meaningful work connects individuals to the school community.

This collective case study (Stake, 1995) of three urban schools in the Midwest explores how individual teachers, administrators, and parents involved in a community building model for school renewal, come together in community to work and to learn from shared experiences so that both the individual and the community continued to grow and develop. Interviews with principals, teachers, and external consultants were the primary source of data. Using a constant comparative approach to data analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), descriptive case studies for each school were prepared. The research reported looks across the three cases and focuses on the community building model for school renewal. The research

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questions this study addresses include: 1) How do the components of the community building model support the development of professional learning communities within the school? 2) How do principals, teachers, and parents work together in schools to support professional learning communities? 3) What are the critical success factors that contribute to community building that leads to student achievement?

#### Framework for Promoting a Culture of Learning Through Community Building

The community building model described here consists of on-site professional development that is grounded in classroom experience, modeled after best practices in literacy and school improvement, and linked to the school's academic achievement plan. The outcome of the community building model is to foster a school climate that promotes learning for all. Williams (2002) defines learning as "the ability of the learner to make meaning of new knowledge by making connections with existing knowledge" (p. 182). Through school-wide professional development, individual coaching and facilitation, external consultants meet teachers and principals where ever they are in their professional development and support them as they develop new knowledge (both practical and theoretical) that lead to improvements in instructional practices and builds their capacity for sharing leadership for their school's success. External consultants also work together with a school's leadership team, with the principal, professional developers, individual teachers, and parents to realize the school's vision and to effect positive changes in teaching, learning, and leadership. The model is rooted in three major areas of

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study and work: collaborative leadership, effective teaching and learning, and positive school culture.

Collaborative leadership results from collaboration between teachers, principal and parents to foster a climate for continuous improvement in student performance and school renewal through professional development that is connected to classroom practice and extends into the home. Teachers see themselves as leaders in their own classrooms and in the school as a whole. Principals work to change the nature of the work itself, reorienting its purpose, refocusing its intent. Leadership becomes participatory and collaborative and promotes collegial inquiry, experimentation, and reflection in areas that are professionally significant to participants, relevant to the vision of the school community, and lead to student success. Working together, the principal, professional developers, leadership teams, and grade level teams collaborate in school-wide planning and on becoming a professional learning community focused on success for all.

An integrated comprehensive literacy framework is at the core of effective teaching and learning and provides a focus for school-based professional development. It provides teachers with a framework for integrating oral language, writing, reading, language & word study, and assessment in an environment of culturally and developmentally appropriate practice. When coupled with the English Language Arts Standards, students experience content-rich learning that stresses integration of concepts, information, and essential skills. A constructivist approach to learning is used to develop meaningful and engaging instruction and student-

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centered assessments for learning. Effective literacy strategies provide a basis for instruction that addresses standards while helping teachers focus on content and instructional strategies that are most crucial to students meeting and exceeding standards. The desired outcome for is that students meet and exceed academic standards.

High expectations and mutual respect for all—students, teachers, families, and community— creates a climate in which the entire learning community shares responsibility for all students’ success. In schools with a positive school culture, families are valued as partners in their child’s learning. Clear expectations for appropriate behavior are consistent throughout the school. Consequences for unacceptable behavior are understood and reinforced by students, faculty and parents. Together the school community engages in rituals and celebrations of learning. Teachers create an environment that fosters enthusiasm for learning. Attending to the needs of the whole child and having appreciation for the uniqueness of each individual—students, teachers, staff—results in feelings of belonging and a consensus about goals and responsibilities.

#### Emerging Developmental Stages and Themes

Snapshots of three schools will be presented to illustrate the stages of development in the community building model. The stages are beginning, progressing, and sustaining. In a beginning school, teachers begin to communicate and share effective classroom practices. Teachers’ knowledge of child development, learning theory and academic content deepens. Principal strengthens his/her educational vision for the school through expanded knowledge of best

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practice, professional development resources, and school change. Teachers begin to implement new literacy strategies into literacy instruction. There is a focus on creating a positive school culture.

Emily Dickenson (Dickenson), a K-5 school that is located on the eastern border of a large urban city, is an example of a beginning school. There are approximately 420 students, 97% are African American. There are two Pre Kindergarten classes, three Kindergartens, three first, second, and third grades, four fourth grades, and two fifth grades. The SES of the neighborhood is very low with 100% of the students on free or reduced lunch. Dickenson is situated in a community with a strong neighborhood identity. Local businesses partner with the elementary school and the high school. There are plans to replace the 79 year-old, two story building. There are grassy areas in the front of the school though students use the back area to play during recess. This area is concrete and is used for parking. Balls and ropes are brought out at recess for the students to use. There is no playground equipment. A temporary structure has been set up in the back of the building for special services. When you enter the building, there is a table set up with school information for the parents. There is also a sitting area with a bench and pillows around a rain forest with live animals. Student work is displayed in the halls.

During the first year of the university school partnership, there was a 2-credit graduate course offered at the school. Ten teachers participated. The class focus was on creating standards-based lessons, implementing writing workshop and literature circles. External consultants modeled literacy strategies for teachers enrolled in the course. Teachers very receptive to learning new strategies and

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teachers enrolled in course implemented writers workshop in their classrooms and help an Authors' Tea for parents. The principal met regularly with the consultants to discuss her vision for the school, to plan for school-wide professional development, and to learn about best practices in literacy and school change. Whole school professional development occurred around flexible grouping and classroom management. A Parent Literacy Club was formed. Parents met monthly and participated in literature circles and writers workshop.

In the second year of the partnership, consultants began meeting regularly with the principal and grade level chairs in what was called the "principals' cabinet." This resulted from conversations with the principal regarding the prevalence of whole group instruction, in spite of the building wide focus on flexible grouping. The grade level chairs would meet to discuss principles of flexible grouping and observe consultants model strategies for working with small groups. The grade level chairs would then share what they were learning at grade level meetings. Principal used the "cabinet" as a vehicle for engaging teachers in collaborative work and encourage their interest and use of new literacy strategies in their classroom. The Parent Literacy Club continued to meet regularly and continued to read and discuss books, this year tackling what they called "adult reading" as opposed the children's fiction they read the first year. Consultants continued modeling literacy strategies and assessment for learning.

As a school progresses, the focus shifts from the individual teacher to the grade-level and an emphasis on developing standards based units, sharing ideas and materials. Teachers take responsibility for developing strategies to make

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appropriate changes in their own classroom practice and support each other in this process. Based on their expanding knowledge, teachers begin to design learning experiences that promote individual development, meaningful learning, and measurable academic growth. In collaboration with teachers, the principal refines his/her expectations for classroom practice, and fully supports teachers' implementation of new strategies.

An example of a progressing school is Maple. Maple is neighborhood school that is nestled in an area southeast of the downtown area. It is surrounded by homes that were built years ago to accommodate the many people who came to work in the steel mills and railroad. With the decline of both of those industries, the homes have become run-down. However, the neighborhood feeling still persists. Many families are Appellation and return "home" often, staying for weeks at a time. There is a lot of transience among the families which shows in the number of transfers that occur in the school enrollment. There are approximately 255 students with two classes of each grade Kindergarten through fifth. The student population is 64% African American, 31% White, and 4% Hispanic. The SES of the neighborhood is very low with 100% of the students on free or reduced lunch.

At the time of this study, the partnership was in its third year. There was a building wide focus conducting and implementing writers' workshop. Every classroom except two completed an authoring cycle and every grade level had an Authors' Tea celebration. There was a consensus that independent writing should be a building-wide strategy. Two teachers who had set up classroom libraries by leveling books so students could move into more independent reading, became the

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catalyst for a school-wide focus on leveling books. In addition to leveled books in the classroom, the librarian, who had participated in the graduate course, also leveled the school library books. Teachers who were implementing independent reading within their classrooms opened their classrooms to other teachers in the school as well as to teachers from other schools within the school district.

During year one of the partnership, the 2-credit graduate course focused on writing workshop. Fourteen of the teachers and the principal attended. There was also a focus on building relationships. The teachers had been together for some time and had developed a tight culture that was not receptive to outsiders. In the second year, the 2-credit course focused on balanced literacy and modeling shared writing and independent reading. Attendance dropped to five teachers and the principal no longer attended. The principal collaborated with the IER consultant in presenting school-wide professional development using “Who Moved My Cheese.” Attempts were made to begin working with grade level teams but the teams were not focused on instruction and would handle clerical and administrative tasks. With support from the IER consultant, the leadership team constructed a list of books to be purchased through Ohio Reads money for use in independent reading and guided reading.

During the third year, the graduate course focused on using the classroom library of leveled books to support the curriculum standards. The principal, a veteran of 30 years, was nearing retirement and was beginning to think about the legacy he was leaving the school. Over the summer, he read DuFour’s “Getting Started: Reculturing Schools to Become Professional Learning Communities” and came back

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the following year excited about helping his teachers become a learning community. He met regularly with the teachers at their grade level meetings. He continually asked “What do you want students to learn? How will you know they have learned it? How will you teach it? What will you do if/when they don’t learn it?”

A school becomes a professional learning community that is able to sustain continuous learning when the principal and teachers regularly engaging in collaborative decision-making at grade levels and in the school as a whole. In such schools there is a culture of learning. Teachers assume responsibility for developing the overall school wide planning for continuous improvement in school climate, classroom practice, and educational outcomes. Principal fosters shared leadership with teachers as together they develop an educational plan built on a commitment to continuous improvement. The school’s leadership team continues to lead sustained school improvement through collaboration within the school, mentors teachers new to school or to the profession, and maintains on-going professional development that responds to the school’s educational vision and that responds to current instructional needs. Emerson-Lake is a school that exemplifies such a school.

At the time of the study, the school was 33 years old and was built for 725 students. There were approximately 605 students. As you approach the building you see the Peace Pole, which is located just outside the front door of the building. On the south side of the building are the parking lot and the new playground. From the outside of the building on all windows you can see hanging pieces of work and/or decorations. The original part of the building (the north side) is considered by the city as a historical building. While it is attached to the current structure, it is not

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accessible to the students or staff. As you enter the building after being buzzed in, a large dry erase board greets you and lists for each day the “main event”. On this table is all current information for parents and visitors on a variety of topics. The building has three floors. There are four classes of each grade with the exception of first grade, which has five classes. Lockers line all three floors where children store books and coats. As you walk through the hallways, student work lines the walls.

At the time of the study, this school had been working with IER consultants for three-plus years. The school began the partnership with the traditional 2-credit graduate course with a focus on writing workshop and literature circles. The principal attended the course and met regularly with grade-level teams and with the leadership team. There was a group of parents who participated in writers’ workshop. During this year there was a formal transition of responsibility for professional development from IER external consultants to the school’s leadership team. Together, a mentoring program for teachers within the school was developed and implemented. The mentoring program consisted of a graduate course taught by an Emerson-Lake teacher and an IER consultant. Mentor teachers worked one-on-one with teachers taking the course to model literacy strategies or provide coaching. The mentoring team also designed and implemented school-wide professional development around principles of Responsive Classroom. Teachers then read “First Six Weeks of School” over the summer and met in August for additional professional development.

How do principals, teachers, and parents work together in schools to foster professional learning communities and promote a culture of learning?

Shifting from hierarchical structures and a culture of compliance to collaborative structures and a culture of learning is a complex process. When teachers and principals realize that they need new knowledge and new practices to be successful, they become open to learning about best practices in literacy and school improvement. Together they begin to articulate an educational vision for themselves and for the school. Engaging in professional dialogue, they begin to share effective classroom practices. Teachers' knowledge of child development, learning theory and academic content deepens. The principal strengthens his/her educational vision through expanding knowledge of best practices in leadership, allocating professional development resources, and fostering collaboration.

Adopting a learning community approach to professional development models in the adult learning environment the same learner-involved approach advocated for the classroom.

As a school progresses, the focus shifts from the individual teacher to the grade-level and an emphasis on developing standards based units, sharing ideas and materials. Teachers take responsibility for developing strategies to make appropriate changes in their own classroom practice and support each other in this process. Based on their expanding knowledge, teachers begin to design learning experiences that promote individual development, meaningful learning, and measurable academic growth. In collaboration with teachers, the principal refines his/her expectations for classroom practice, and fully supports teachers' implementation of new strategies.

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When teachers are regularly engaging in collaborative decision-making at grade levels and in the school as a whole, they begin functioning as an empowered leadership team that assumes responsibility for developing the overall school wide planning for continuous improvement in school climate, classroom practice, and educational outcomes. Principals work closely with teacher leaders to develop and execute an educational plan built on a commitment to closing the achievement gap and promoting a culture of learning for all. The school community continues to lead sustained school improvement through collaboration within school, mentoring teachers who are new to school or to the profession, and maintaining ongoing professional development that responds to the school's educational vision.

What are the critical success factors that contribute to community building that lead to student achievement?

Themes that emerged across the three cases in support of building community include the importance of relationship building, the need to find a common focus around which to come together, the power of collective reflection for action, and principal support. Relationships of trust between the external consultants and the teachers, between teachers and teachers, and between teachers and the principal need to be present before teachers will engage in honest dialogue about their teaching practice or open their classroom to other teachers. Once a trusting relationship was formed, teachers and administrators were able to work collaboratively in learning communities of practice. Communities of practice are made up of people who are drawn together by their commitment to understanding the particular practice in which all the members are engaged.

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Knowledge and expertise grow out of the experience of the practitioners and the new knowledge gets put to use in their practice (Wenger, 1998). Teachers are no longer afraid to discuss those aspects of their teaching which are challenging them or the students that they can't seem to reach. Together, the community assumes ownership for each other's learning. The importance of having a common focus around which to come together is also an important characteristic of community building. A focus on student learning creates a collective responsibility among teachers and administrators for all students. Members of the community commit to understanding the particular practice in which members are engaged. A culture that encourages continuous inquiry is present when teachers are able to ask question, challenge, and think together about real students' learning needs. Knowledge and expertise grow out of the experience of the teachers as they reflect on their teaching and develop action plans for improving their classroom practice. The new knowledge generated in within the learning community gets put to use in the classroom. As a community, they continually engage in problem posing and solving. Principals are no longer the sole source for solutions but rather seen as a member of the community of practice. The principal supports teacher leaders as they take on more responsibility for the success of the school.

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