

How we formed our community

Lights and cameras are optional, but action is essential

By BECKY BURNETTE

Principals nationwide are called on to improve their schools and show gains in student achievement. They often start by asking, "How can I persuade teachers to be enthusiastic about this improvement initiative?" or "What can I say to overcome the reluctance of resisters?"

The principal's challenge, however, is not persuading staff of the benefits of an initiative, but helping them experience those benefits. Principals must create situations that lead people to act, helping them do rather than talk about doing. As Perkins says (1992), action precedes understanding. We learn by doing.

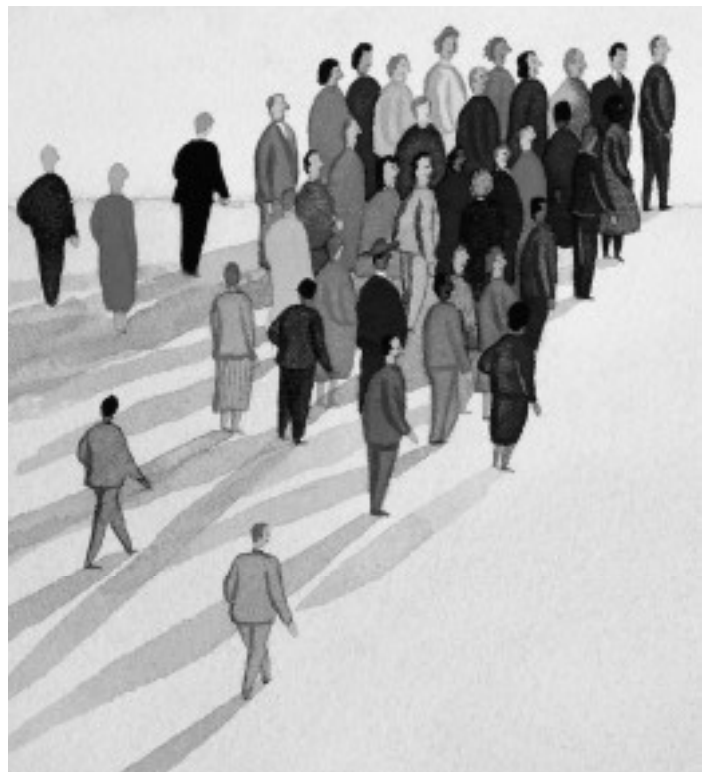
Once teachers are familiar with and practicing the changes, support will follow. Commitment follows competence (Fullan, 1993).

CREATING A COMMUNITY

In summer 2000, I became principal of an elementary school that already was performing well on national, state, and local assessments. As an experienced administrator, I was convinced that developing the capacity of the staff to function as a professional learning community was



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the most promising way to sustain this high achievement. I appreciated the way the professional learning community concept blended Peter Senge's (1990) model of a learning organization with the call for a collaborative culture espoused by such leading educational researchers as Michael Fullan, Milbrey McLaughlin, Karen Seashore Louis, Fred Newmann, and Gary Wehlage.

I hoped to help my school develop the characteristics described in *Professional Learning Communities at Work* (DuFour &

Eaker, 1998) — a school where people are united by a common purpose, shared vision, collective commitments, and specific, measurable goals; where collaborative teams engage



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in action research and collective inquiry into the big questions of teaching and learning; where continuous improvement cycles are built into the routine practices of the school; and where gathering evidence of student learning is a constant focus.

Our school had a solid foundation. For more than a decade, staff had implemented effective schools research. In addition, all current staff had been involved in a two-year study of Boyer's basic school model (1995). The concept of a professional learning community fit with these earlier improvement initiatives.

Despite my own conviction of the merits of the professional learning community, research detailing its benefits for schools, and the staff's apparent readiness, the question remained: How could I lead the effort to develop a professional learning community in this school? I concluded the best strategy was to provide teachers with experiences that allowed them to begin functioning as a professional learning community, believing that positive attitudes and commitment would follow.

FIRST STEPS

The first step in this process began in the summer. The entire staff participated in small-group discussions about the school. At each grade-level and department meeting, I took notes as each team member responded to the questions:

- What makes this school such a good school?
- What can we do to make it an even better school?
- As the new principal, what do I need to know and understand about this school?

Common themes emerged across grade levels and departments. Every team's response to the first question was, "The people who work here make it such a good school." Although it was obvious that staff members valued their colleagues, they also were frustrated that there was not enough time to work with their job-alike peers. They were proud of the school's achievements, but felt they could accomplish more if we could work together more effectively.

We attempted to build on this interest in working together by creating a master schedule that supported the collaborative culture essential to a professional learning community. This new schedule assigned "specials" (music, art, physical education, library skills, computer skills, and guidance services) to every grade level each day of the week. This gave students instructional services in critical areas from teachers with special training in those areas. And it provided each

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teacher with a daily 40-minute planning block. Finally, and most importantly to the professional learning community, grade level teaching teams in 1st through 4th grades now had a guaranteed one-hour collaborative planning session each week.

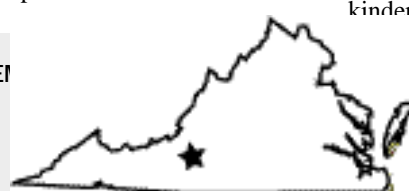
In kindergarten and 5th grade, every kindergarten student was paired with a 1-grade buddy for a weekly lesson facilitated by the principal, librarian, nurse, teaching assistants, and parent volunteers. This time allowed their teachers to

work with colleagues who shared the same curriculum and job responsibilities.

In addition, we scheduled multi-grade team meetings once a month during the school day when students were in cultural arts assemblies to ensure articulation through the grades. We also built in time to share learning at the monthly faculty meeting to keep the full faculty informed of each team's work.

PROVIDING A PURPOSE

Once we began providing time for teachers to work together, we had to determine how to spend the time. We knew we needed to do more than encourage teachers to collaborate and hope for the best (DuFour, 2000). Although many of the teachers had worked together for years and some had used their own time to plan together in the past, we needed to establish guide-



BOONES MILL ELEMENTARY SCHOOL
Boones Mill, Va.

Grades: K-5

Enrollment: 393

Staff: 22 teachers, 1 administrator, 1 guidance counselor, 1 librarian, part-time music, art, and physical education teachers, 2 teacher assistants, 1 computer lab manager.

Racial/ethnic mix:

White:	92%
Black:	5%
Hispanic:	1%
Asian/Pacific Islander:	1%
Native American:	1%
Other:	0%

Limited English proficient: 1%

Languages spoken: 2

Free/reduced lunch: 25%

Special education: 12%

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lines and procedures to ensure each newly formed team had purpose and direction.

Each team was asked to establish protocols or team norms that described how team members would work together. The following statements are typical of the commitments teachers made to one another:

- We will be on time and prepared with all necessary materials.
- Everyone is expected to participate by sharing ideas, concerns, etc.
- We will discuss school issues in school only, maintaining confidentiality.
- We will reach decisions by consensus after all opinions have been heard.
- We will maintain an atmosphere of mutual respect.

We agreed from the beginning that collaborative time was to help teachers engage in collective inquiry related to teaching and learning. Based on a workshop the School Improvement Committee had attended on professional learning communities, a series of critical questions was chosen as a tool for focusing our efforts and building a common vocabulary. Examples included:

- Are we clear on what students are to learn and the evidence they must show that they have learned it?
- Based on our analysis of student achievement data, what are the strengths and weaknesses of our students' performance?
- How will we judge the quality of student work?
- How does our curriculum align with state standards and state tests?

Each question required that teachers produce documents or artifacts. For example, teams created common assessments, reports on student achievement and specific strategies to improve the results, rubrics to guide student assessment, and new curriculum units based on analysis of current local curriculum guides vs. the state's new standards-based resource guides. Generating a product helped bring focus to team meetings. Teachers did not spend their time asking, "Why are we here?" or "What are we

Boones Mill Elementary School

STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT DATA, VIRGINIA STANDARDS OF LEARNING ASSESSMENTS

GRADE 3

% OF STUDENTS PASSING THE STANDARDS OF LEARNING STATE TESTS

	1999-2000		2000-2001	
	Boones Mill	Va.	Boones Mill	Va.
English	85	62	91	65
Math	87	71	97	77
Science	91	74	93	74
History	79	65	96	72

*NOTE: State accreditation benchmark is 70% of students achieving the pass rate in English & math; 50% in science & history

GRADE 5

% OF STUDENTS PASSING THE STANDARDS OF LEARNING STATE TESTS

	1999-2000		2000-2001	
	Boones Mill	Va.	Boones Mill	Va.
English	84	75	85	73
Writing	87	81	88	84
Math	82	64	82	67
Science	78	64	94	75
History	**	51	72	63
Computer/Tech.	92	85	99	82

*NOTE: State accreditation benchmark is 70% of students achieving the pass rate in all areas

** Test not administered

LOCAL ASSESSMENT RESULTS

% OF STUDENTS ACHIEVING THE DISTRICT GOAL ON THE FRANKLIN COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS READING RUBRIC

	1999-2000	2000-2001
Kindergarten	84%	97%
1st grade	65%	72%
2nd grade	91%	92%

supposed to accomplish?" They understood.

ENSURING COMMUNICATION

So that teams wouldn't get stuck, we created a feedback system: a color-coded worksheet the team completed each week. Teams reported the issues they were considering, identified problems they faced, and suggested resources and

support I could provide to help them. I responded to these reports every week. The reports maintained the two-way communication necessary to sustain our efforts.

Another strategy for maintaining two-way communication was creating team chairpersons. Each team selected a chair to serve as a liaison between the

team and the principal, to lead meetings, and to ensure that feedback sheets were completed. Because we're a small school with six grade-level teams, I occasionally attended meetings to provide yet another opportunity for communication.

Not only did team chairpersons enhance communication, this format expanded leadership. John Kotter (1996) advises that leaders must develop a guiding coalition to sustain a change initiative in any organization. The team chairs and members of the School Improvement Committee functioned as our guiding coalition throughout our improvement process.

BUILD ON WHAT EXISTS

Teachers often see improvement initiatives as additional burdens placed on them when they are already straining to meet the demands of their position. We attempted to diffuse that reaction by presenting the professional learning community initiative within the context of the existing school improvement framework.

We already were required to submit an annual Comprehensive School Improvement Plan to the district, and so our professional learning community initiative became the bulk of the School Improvement Plan. Each teacher already was required to establish a Professional Enhancement Plan for professional development. Their work on their collaborative teams, the goals the teams pursued, and the products they generated became the crux of each teacher's plan. The plans also were written to satisfy the state's requirements for teacher recertification.

Staff development funds from the site-based instructional budget were devoted to provide training, materials, and resources to enhance each team's work.

In other words, we linked our professional learning community initiative to existing school, district, and state programs, requirements, and expectations. By integrating our work within the context of existing structures, we avoided creating extra work. We worked smarter, not harder.

Comments from teachers

- "Time to plan together is wonderful!"
- "There is wonderful support for collaboration ..."
- "(The principal) has been very supportive in helping us to see what our focus should be, and in trying to find training, workshops, etc. to help us learn more about our subject."
- "We are seen as a team and treated as a team."

FOCUS ON RESULTS

Most importantly, we wanted the focus on creating a collaborative culture to have a positive impact on student achievement. Therefore, every team was asked to commit to a specific, measurable student achievement goal, to identify the action steps teachers would take to achieve the goal, and to outline the evidence they would monitor to assess their progress.

For example, our analysis of student performance on state standardized tests revealed a deficiency in the area of word analysis. We agreed to set a goal of increasing student performance on the word analysis subtest by at least five percentile points by spring 2001. One step to achieving this goal was revising the spelling and vocabulary curricula to incorporate word analysis skills each week. Another was developing grade-level assessments based on the state test format. Everyone understood that the state achievement test would be an important

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indicator of our effectiveness.

At the end of the school year, we had much to celebrate. Student performance on the state tests matched the school's all-time record in one of the nine areas tested and established new records in the other eight areas. Students also showed gains on our local assessments (see chart on the previous page). The staff was enthusiastic about the new collaborative culture we were building. As some teachers wrote to the superintendent in a letter of gratitude, "The emphasis on collaboration has been super! The time we have to plan together is wonderful! In working as a team and being treated as a team, we feel more professional."

COMMIT TO CHANGE

Psychologist Allen Wheelis (1973) advises, "We are what we do. If we want to change what we are, we must begin by changing what we do." This applies not only to individuals, but also to organizations. Principals who want to change their schools must change the routine practices of those within the schools and move beyond intentions to action. With action comes deeper understanding. Only when staff understand and can assess the implications of an improvement initiative are they able to commit to sustaining the effort.

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