

Schools as Learning Communities: A Vision for Organic School Reform

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Abstract

This paper addresses the qualities of a learning organization and the ways in which educational leaders should promote schools to become learning organizations for the community. The lines of who is an educational leader have blurred as organizations have restructured and learning has become a lifelong endeavor. A learning community is one in which all members acquire new ideas and accept responsibility for making the organization work. The educational leader's task is to change the goals of the organization so that learning is rewarded for all participants. In business, market competition has changed from individual competition of nineteenth century to group collaboration of twenty-first century. This means that all the workers—school gardener to school district leader—must feel that their insights are valued and taken into account in community life. In addition, parents and students have to be seen as participants in the life of the school, not simply recipients of services that the professionals deemed important.

Introduction

“Can you believe our students are able to accomplish this?” remarked a parent at his son’s math fair. Replied the school principal, “This would not have been possible without the shared commitment to reform from our total school community.”

Focus on school reform, change, and the changing role of school administrator have been topics for serious educational discussion for a long time (Soder, 1999; Tyack & Cuban, 1995). However, lasting systemic change in schooling can only occur as a result of the combined commitments of the school community—teachers, parents, students, administrators, support staff, and community agencies (Bentley, 1988; Blank, 2001; Sergiovanni, 1994).

Educational leaders on the threshold of the new millennium are critically aware that their students and communities do not face the same life as their parents. The demands on society to adapt to globalization have forced all organizations that wish to survive and remain competitive to operate as learning organizations. As educators assess and reflect on the future needs of education, educational leaders are repeatedly discussing the merits of schools as learning organizations (*Proceedings of the Society of Educators and Scholars*, 2001).

Although educational institutions have faced change and reform as part of their existence, studies repeatedly have revealed that many educational institutions attempt to ignore or circumvent change (Goodlad, 1975; Oakes & Lipton, 2001). However, descriptions of model schools throughout history exhibit the attributes of a learning community, incorporating both the qualities of a learning organization and that of a defined community of learners. This paper will outline a vision for schools as learning communities—a vision that has been and is a reality within model schools. This vision is a result of long-time study of school reform and synthesizes a variety of conceptions—the learning organization, a community of practice, and interdependence of individual persons within the collective institutional organization.

Development of the Vision

Though schools have historically been considered places of learning, the term “learning organization” was developed in schools of management and promoted for business organizations. The major proponent is Peter Senge of Massachusetts’s Institute of Technology, who described the learning organization in his 1990 foundational text *The Fifth Discipline*. In the “Introduction to the Paperback Edition,” Senge remarks that, although public education does not appear in the book, “I believe that nearly as many copies of the book have been sold to educators as to business people” (1994, p. xii). Senge’s basic definition of the learning organization is a “group of people, a community, continually enhancing their capacity to create what *they* [italics mine] want to create” (p. 14). He continues to describe a learning organization as a place “where people continue to expand their capacity to create results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are

nourished, where collective aspirations are set free, and where people are continually learning how to learn together” (p. 14).

Wenger (1999) has eloquently argued that workers function most effectively as communities of practice. His focus is on the environment that fosters learning and change by each member of the community, operating in an open and interdependent work environment. His conception is that schools and their staff should become a community of practice, operating as a shared enterprise over time.

The vision presented in this article defines community as a group of people who are connected by a common mission. This community is bound together by the mutual sharing of personal beliefs that support the mission of the organization. It is the manner, type, and quality of interaction among individual persons which develops a sense of a learning community. The characteristic that creates the strongest learning environment is caring (Hiatt-Michael, 2001; Schroeder, 2001). A climate of caring by all members nurtures the basic human need for a sense of trust, the foundation of human development (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). Caring does not naturally occur nor occur in a short time. Caring is a quality that develops over time through repeated human connections which connotes honest human concerns for another. This becomes the supportive foundation on which community life is played out.

The term learning community connects both the individual human activity of learning and the interdependence of the members of the organization. A model, proposed many years ago by Getzels and Guba (1967), graphically portrays the importance of the connection between the individual and the organization. Elements of their model have been adapted and connected with the terms learning organization and communities of practice to create this vision for the learning community. It is important to connect both terms because the educational leader could focus the individual members' desires to the detriment of maintaining a cohesive community.

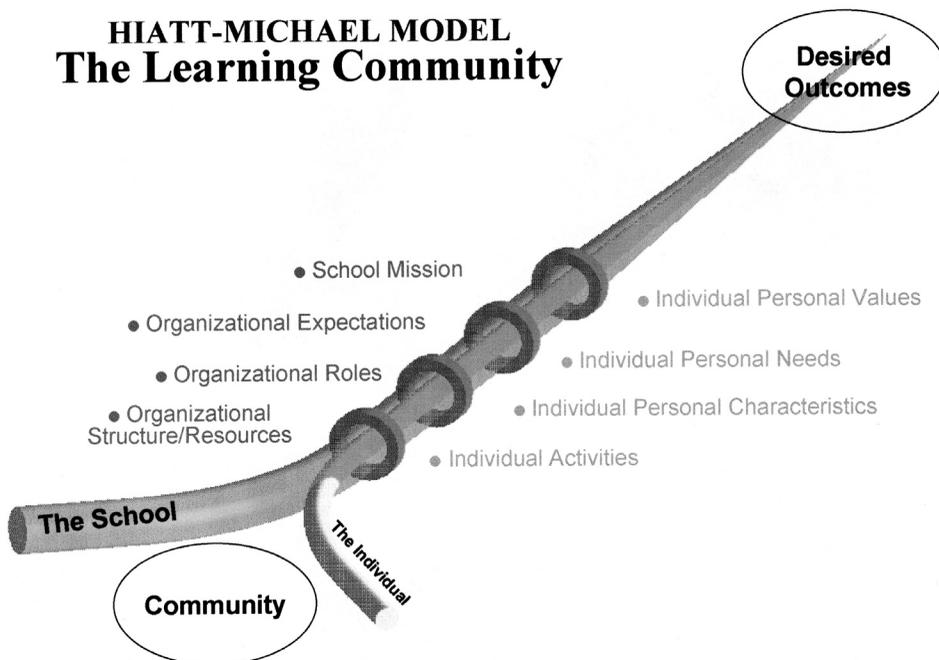
In the Hiatt-Michael model of the vision, the elemental requirements of an organization are described on the upper part of the model and the elements of individuals are described on the lower part. In a learning organization, all members accept responsibility for the growth and change of the organization. The organization is as effective as each individual's contribution to the dynamic activity of the organizational community.

The learning community is as an organization in which all members acquire new ideas and accept responsibility for developing and maintaining the organization. The focus is on harnessing experiences of the members. In a learning organization, members work together, mutually understanding each other, yet respecting the diversity of one other. Every individual's contribution is significant to the life and well-being of the organization (Argyris & Schon, 1996). Thus, in an effective

learning community, there should exist a tight connection between the energy of its members and the organization's direction.

In business, market competition has changed from individual competition of the nineteenth century to group collaboration of the twenty-first century. In the school setting, this means that all the workers—school gardener to school district leader—must feel that their insights are valued and taken into account in community life. In addition, parents and students have to be seen as participants in the life of the school, not simply recipients of services that the professionals deemed important. Students, parents, faculty and staff should be active workers in creating and fulfilling the educational mission, not mindless beings fulfilling mandates from educational leaders at the national or district offices.

Because every member is responsible to identify problems, seek diverse solutions, and adapt to the changes created by solving the problem, each individual should feel rewarded by the successes or distressed by the concerns of the community. No one stands out from the others but all members serve to create wise, shared decisions. In addition, the moral purpose sets the tone of the community and demands loyalty by every person. Accomplishments, whether large or small, whether by one member, the leader, the team, or the concerted efforts of the whole group are acknowledged by community celebrations.



Adapted from J.W. Getzels and E.G. Guba (1967). Social behavior and the administrative process. *The School Review* (Winter 1975), 429.

Learning Community as an Organic System

The learning community operates as an organic, dynamic, ever-changing system. In the Hiatt-Michael vision, the organization is dynamic, like the human system held together by the skeleton and skin, yet changing constantly within all the human subsystems. Despite so many developing parts, a tenuous balance is maintained within the system. The human body is only as healthy as each part. Each part is adapting to changes created by other elements within the environment. Yet the system maintains a unique identity that is discerned from the outside environment. If one envisions an organization like the human system, then the importance of interconnectedness and change seems self-evident.

Connecting individuals and the organization means that the organization is only as strong as its members. IBM recently placed a supplement in the *Los Angeles Times* discussing how this large USA-based international organization can function only as well as its people function. This is not a new concept. Historical analysis of the writings of Confucius and the Greek democracy indicates that the quality of societal decision-making is only as good as the collective wisdom of its members.

Essential Elements for a Learning Community

There are four essential elements to a learning community: a servant leader who performs as a guide and nurturer, a shared moral purpose, a sense of trust and respect among all members, and an open environment for collaborative decision-making.

Study after study, article after article supports the critical role the leader plays in educational reform and school change (J. I. Goodlad, personal communication, April 12, 2001). Lamoureaux (1988) remarked that to be most effective, the school site leader must become a learner and create conditions promoting a similar attitude among the faculty.

The learning community is only possible with an educational leader who serves in the capacity of a *servant leader* and operates with a transformational leadership style (DePree, 1999; Gray, 2001; Schroeder, 2001). The servant leader encourages and nurtures all members of the community to perform to their utmost capacity for the good of the organization (Bolman & Deal, 1995). A servant leader supports the learning and individuality of each member, rather than garnering praise for his or her efforts. Bolman and Deal (1995) identify four gifts that servant leaders present to their communities: personal authorship for implemented ideas by community members, love for each member, sharing power, and making persons and their work significant to the organization. These gifts capture the energy and diversity of the members in order to make the community stronger and more vital. The community

is more than the sum of the individuals; the community interaction adds a value to the sum. In the opening vignette above, the principal shared his efforts to incorporate all parts of the school community to focus on increasing student interest in math.

To be a powerful energizing vision, Fullan (1999) asserts that the individuals perceive the vision and goals to include a *moral purpose*. This moral purpose should appeal to the common good of the community. This moral purpose becomes the core force that binds the individuals together. The learning organization may be open to new practices, but the core set of values which creates the moral purpose ought not to change (De Vito, 1996). The educational leader should both fervently believe in the worth of this moral purpose and his/her life should fully act on this moral purpose. The educational leader's role is to translate the essence of the purpose in a manner that is understood by all members of the school community. This moral purpose should capture the personal values of the individual members so that their hearts are on fire and their passions are kindled to work fervently toward that shared moral purpose.

The following are two examples from contemporary model schools. In Rhode Island, the "Met" is capturing national interest because of the belief that every child can academically succeed and be responsible for his or own learning. The school is supported by a Mott foundation grant that encourages the development of small, student-centered schools. At the Casey Elementary School in Jackson, Michigan, the parents, community and principal united to support biracial governance and school activities. The school changed from an academic "endangered school" to a "Blue Ribbon School" through the concerted efforts toward the shared moral purpose.

The leaders' actions directed toward the shared moral purpose promote the third essential element—a *sense of trust and mutual respect* among all members of the community. The leader understands himself, the qualities and lives of every member within the organization, and the purpose of the organization. His task is to embody in word and action the shared moral purpose. The passion for this shared moral purpose drives the culture of the learning community. Members' lives and work center on the accomplishment of moral purpose, and in so doing, build trust and mutual respect.

In schools, the leader creates a learning organization by showing a sense of trust and respect for each member of the group. In his *Study of School Change*, Goodlad (1975) noted that the school site principal (administrative leader) was the primary agent for change. The principal showed a strong sense of personal confidence and commitment to the moral purpose of school renewal. Confidence, commitment, and personal integrity are leadership attributes that promote trust. Trust is demonstrated by acting faithfully on what one says and believes.

In order for a leader to evidence personal trustworthiness, he or she should understand what the personal characteristics, needs, and values of each member of the organization are. That means that the educational leader has to restructure his behavior so that he becomes an empathic observer and listener—an observer of what is actually going on in the work of the schools, and a listener to what people say. Active listening is a difficult skill to develop. The leader has to assume an input, not an output, mode, as well as restating what various members say to insure accurate interpretation. Becoming a leader of a learning community requires substantial intrapersonal and interpersonal skills of the leader.

The fourth essential element, *collaborative decision-making among members*, presents a challenge to any leader who wants to move toward the concept of a learning community. Changing the manner in which people interact requires significant time and patience (Schroeder, 2001). Frances Hesselbein (1999) of the Drucker Foundation, Claremont Business Schools, describes “managing in a world that is round.” In the bureaucratic model of organizational leadership, ideas were passed from top-down or bottom up in an orderly fashion. She describes the limited intellectual growth and energy in operating in a world which is managed from the top down. In such an organizational structure, the energy and vision is passed from the leader and down to members of the organization. This organization management structure promotes a centralized force, whose energy dissipates as it moves down and out into the larger organization.

Hesselbein created the concept of managing in a world that is round as a leader of the Girl Scouts. In this concept, the leader is the center of a hub with concentric circles that are laterally connected from the center outward by teams of individuals. In managing in a world that is round, the energy and vision of the leader is the catalyst, but only the catalyst, not the source. The leader develops an organization linked to the hub but operating as interdependent teams. The community interaction increases the capacity of the members across the circles from the leader out, even to members who may only tangentially intersect with the organization. Harnessing prior personal experiences captures each individual’s energy as well as the collective energy of the group. Ideas may be drawn from any member or across teams at any time. This does include a sense of calculated risk. Sometimes a group may capture an idea shared from one member’s experience and put it tentatively into practice. If the practice appears successful, members may share it with others. The learning organization is open and flexible. Harnessing experiences of all individuals eventually builds a network of systems communication so that new ideas are quickly deployed and easily adapted by others desiring similar information or solutions. The support of technology is invaluable to the learning organization for the process of idea dissemination (De Vito, 1996). Television, e-mail, and web sites connect interested persons within moments.

Ways to Create a Learning Community

How can educational leaders change their schools to be learning communities? Three categories in which leaders may focus their efforts in order to promote the learning community are presented. The first category encompasses the moral purpose of the organization, including vision, mission and goals. What is it that binds all members of the organization? The second category deals with creating an open work environment—open to new ideas, different ways of doing things, and connecting the diverse constituents of the community. How can we accomplish our moral purpose and live our work in a meaningful way? The third category focuses on evaluation of our efforts, both means and ends. How well are we working together to solve perceived challenges and how well are we achieving our purpose?

Garvin (in De Vito, 1996) identifies the following five main activities of the learning organization:

- Systemic problem solving,
- Experimentation with new approaches,
- Learning from experiences,
- Learning from best practices of others, and
- Transferring knowledge across the organization quickly.

These activities may be translated to schools that desire to work towards becoming learning communities. In schools, the organizational leader rallies the members around a problem, which has become important to a sufficient number of members. This problem is connected to the moral purpose of the institution. The leader's tasks include the identification of the critical elements of the problem and selecting appropriate members to work on the solution.

For example, middle school parents and school personnel observed that many students had irregular attendance patterns. Since attendance is correlated with academic performance as well as neighborhood crime, this was presented as a concern at a school forum. Following a brainstorming session led by a university facilitator, the group decided that the problem was created because students were concerned about walking through gang-controlled territory on the way to the school. The parents volunteered to create and implement a neighborhood watch program before and after school. The principal secured financial support for parent training from an agency for juvenile justice and orange jackets from local businesses and a state anti-violence grant.

In a learning organization there is a tension between the central mission and an openness to new ideas (Fullan, 1999). The mission holds the organization together; however, in order to solve important problems such as meeting educational standards the school must look outward for new ideas and promising

practices. This is what Garvin (in De Vito, 1996) means when he advocates experimentation with new approaches and learning from best practices of others

Both Garvin and Senge promote the systems approach. To these business scholars, “system” includes all the parts that make an organization function. The system includes all the workers, the clients, and resource vendors. For a school, the system includes the administrators, teachers, students, parents, support staff, and other adults involved in the school community. For a business or a school, a critical element is transferring knowledge across the organization quickly. However, quality transference means more than simply an e-mail, printed memo, or newsletter. Quality transference means that all members who should be involved with the new practice are available to observe the promising practice, understand the qualities and attributes of the practice, if necessary be coached on how to use the practice, and perceive the value of the new practice.

The educational leader should examine the environment in which the members of the organization live out their work. The work environment may need to be altered to connect individuals. For example, at one school, staff worked in individual cubicles called workstations, and, in another instance, some members worked online from home. This barrier of space affected the quality of transference of new practices. Members did not understand what the others were actually doing.

To effect a learning organization, the principal had a meeting with the affected staff. Each person explained what they needed to have in order to accomplish their work and what they would like to know about the work of others in their organization. Everyone agreed to take down the dividers between the workstations. They redesigned the space so that each worker had a place, but there was a central worktable. Also, each person changed work habits because they could visually determine the behavior of their co-workers. They knew when it was polite to ask questions or hand information to a co-worker. They also knew when another was so busy that the other worker needed personal assistance. Not only did this group feel more productive, they also felt less overwhelmed. Outcomes were a sense of collegiality and less stress. Staff knew the principal was visually aware that they were diligent workers, and the principal informally viewed the efforts of each worker.

Evaluation of the Learning Community

The final category of this discussion toward which the educational leader should direct his energies in order to create a learning organization is evaluation. In the learning organization, evaluation is a personal, team, and community endeavor.

However, the most critical evaluation is one of the full organization. How well is it achieving its moral purpose? What has been attempted to create new solu-

tions or incorporate new ideas and practices in the organization? Have there been both failures as well as successes? How has the organization learned from both? In the learning organization, work by McGill and others (1992) indicates educational leaders focus on individuals and teams whose behavior exemplifies the following five qualities—openness, systemic thinking, creativity, a sense of efficacy, and empathy.

In America, schools are moving toward an individualized approach to accreditation, currently in the drawing board stage. For accreditation, committees at each school will be asked to describe their moral purpose and then prepare ways to assess its achievement. For example, if the purpose of the school is to prepare students to become good citizens, then the school has to find out if their graduates are good citizens. Some easily assessed attributes might be employment of graduates—the students are assuming the roles of community workers; voter registration—students care enough to participate in democratic choices; participation of graduates in service or volunteer work; community leadership activities; and records of criminal activity. This could be played out for other school goals, such as students should care for a healthy body, or students should be lifelong readers, and the like.

In addition, the organization should assess the lives of the individual members as they work toward the achievement of the moral purpose of the organization. Personal achievements are publicly acknowledged, not just team efforts. The following are some questions that might be asked across the organization. What is the quality of life for each individual within the organization? What is the degree of job satisfaction? Are all the talents of each individual being utilized? How does each perceive that their personal values connect with the moral purpose of the organization?

Promising practices for student learning assessment include portfolios and culminating exhibitions. These concepts have been utilized in the arts, national competitions, and for university faculty advancement. During the past decade, numerous educators have provided concrete practices that can be readily applied at school sites. These types of assessment can readily be attached to national standards and thus satisfy societal requirements for high standards (Scherer, 1999).

Kallay's study (1989) of effective school leaders showed that evaluation as "walking-around" and "observing the teachers teaching" was a far more accurate assessment of the teachers than any constructed test or assessment. School leaders need to examine with teachers how they can best accomplish the schools' goals as teams, not individuals. Goodlad (1975) indicated decades ago that school site leaders were the ones responsible for the quality of education at the school site. Furthermore, his work supports that teachers working in teams were more productive than assigning one teacher for one group of students. Research by Hiatt (1978) revealed that assigning teacher aides was cost effective and that staff differentiation,

using a mentor teacher as team leader with teachers and aides, was very cost effective regarding additional time devoted to quality instruction by teachers. While these are some tried methods to promote a change in an educational environment and provide a better learning environment for less money, educational leaders and their school community should design environments that promote a learning organization for their particular site.

The educational leader of a school or district must look outside as well as around and inside for new ideas. The school site is connected to the community it serves (Hiatt-Michael, 2001). An effective educational leader listens to the voices outside the schoolhouse. An important voice is that of parents. As highly trained educators, we as teachers can feel so empowered by our teaching credentials that “we know best,” but we must remain servants to the parents who send their greatest earthly treasures—their children—to our school. Parents want the very best for their children. They want their children to have what they did not have, as well as what they valued in their own childhood. These children are their legacy. Therefore, parents’ voices are powerful.

Making the school environment open so that parents become part of the school change is like walking a tightrope for the educational leader. The leader needs to listen to the parents and have several ways in which parents may tell the school what they want. However, the educational leader also needs to keep the school organization functioning. There are a large number of parents and these parents have diverse wishes for their children. The principal cannot respond to every parent’s desire but must listen and understand each desire. Members of the school’s administration, faculty, staff, students, parents, community members, and the government need to be constantly looking for better ways to do things and take the initiative to try them at their school.

Decentralization as a Key to a School Becoming a Learning Community

In order to fulfill the vision of schools as learning communities, schools and their employees have to be trusted to operate distinctly, serving the requirements of their constituencies. The original site-based management of colonial schools must be the contemporary model for schools as learning communities.

In recent years, national and state politicians are using education as a major campaign issue to garner popularity and votes. They are attempting to move the force of change from the local needs to federal policy. America’s Twentieth Century sage, Ralph W. Tyler, remarked in his ninety-first year:

Educational problems are local, not national. They should be addressed at the local level by the individuals who directly understand the problem. The more distant from the seat of responsibility, the less attuned people

are to the solution of actual problems. In my life's experiences I have never found a problem that could not be solved if everyone at hand worked on the solution together. Simply expending federal money to solve problems does not solve local problems (in Hiatt, 1994, p. 788).

The present trend toward federal control of educational pursuits should be returned to meet the wisdom of the writers of the Constitution.

In America, education is decentralized to the states, which assume control and direction of the educational process. That is positive for changing schools to become learning communities. However, there are pressures at the national level to change the current structure and promote a highly traditional method to centralize education. The pressure is the development of national standards by academic disciplines, and the pressure by politicians to create national assessments of all students. Politicians seem to like national testing as an apparently easy way to foster higher academic achievement. However, research on national testing seems to indicate that such testing reduces the number of students who continue on in educational situations. Brain research on the emotions and learning also confirm that national testing results in anxiety, parental pressures, and fear of failure for both parents and their children. There is no moral purpose inherent in national testing. Students are not better human beings or American citizens because they can pass the type of items placed on a national test.

Examples of Schools as Learning Communities

There are many researched and recorded examples of groups of individual schools operating as learning organizations. These schools applied Kurt Lewin's (1947) force field analysis and changed the forces so that the schools had a clear mission and renewal could take place. Goodlad's League of Cooperating Schools (Goodlad, 1975) and Goodlad's present day Consortium are probably the best-known examples in America (Soder, 1999). LEARN schools in Los Angeles Unified Schools (Hiatt & Starr, 1996) are examples of how the second largest school district in America, with a highly diverse student population, can make exciting changes involving the total surrounding communities. Fullan's report of Chicago Public Schools (1999) shares similar excitement.

In northern Italy, the affluent town of Reggio Emilio developed a world class model of a town's commitment to early childhood education (New, 1999). Parents and the community are expected to be actively involved in school policy, curricular planning, and evaluation. Schools were remodeled to open the inner space towards the community.

The Charter School movement throughout America evidences that community change in schooling can be a positive grass roots affair (Manno, 1998; Molner,

1996). Buffehr (1992) and Johnstone's (1997) dynamic leadership of elementary schools in culturally diverse, low income, new immigrant populations provide explicit detail regarding how each school can become an exciting learning organization. President Bush recognized Joan Buffehr's Hispanic/Vietnamese population primary school as one of his 1001 lights of excellence. Tom Johnstone's elementary school, located in an impoverished, high crime inner-city, created an open environment between new immigrants from Samoa and Mexico and allowed all members of the community to provide input into the creation of a safe learning environment.

Concluding Remarks

The remarkable efforts of these coalition schools, towns, charter schools, and individual school leaders attest to the power of becoming a learning community. A learning community is a win-win situation for all involved. The benefits of a learning community far outweigh the time and attention that the site leader must devote to development activities. These integral activities include observation of the environment, listening to all individuals, developing interpersonal relationships, and holding frequent open meetings to handle emerging concerns. These time-consuming activities replace the formal meetings, memo-writing, and legal conflict resolution activities.

In the beginning, the leader may feel a sense of being part of guerilla warfare from the central office's or the state's inappropriate mandates, but the focus on development of the learning community will result in a shining beacon for the school district and state (Goodlad, 1975). Yes, there is a sense of risk in getting started, but the positive momentum of events will encourage any leader to continue in the direction of a learning community. Schroeder (2001) commented that once the rewards from staff and community began, he could never return to top-down, directive management. The site leader will be called upon to share with others how that site has accomplished a variety of challenges. In the process of writing recently for a book I edited, (Hiatt-Micheal, 2001), I called model schools to request particular information. The enthusiasm about their work began with the first person that answered the phone or e-mail. These schools had increased test scores and produced outstanding academic results despite local situations that would predict less stellar findings. The learning community schools focused on solving the problems and the increased academic success resulted as a secondary goal.

The learning community concept requires no extra funding; the school environment reflects positive feeling tones; public relations becomes a shared community effort; there is very limited conflict; and conflict situations are handled quickly through collaboration, not legal confrontations. I encourage all educational leaders to focus their energies and talents to develop a caring learning community at their school site. There will be no turning back to the prior way of "doing business."

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