

# Collegial Learning Communities: The Road to School Restructuring

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"The relationships among adults in schools are the basis, the precondition, the *sin qua non* that allow, energize, and sustain all other attempts at school improvement. Unless adults talk with one another, observe one another, and help one another, very little will change. "

Barth 1991

## Professional Development Support Teams

- Teachers working together in peer coaching groups, talking, observing, and helping each other broaden their teaching repertoires.
- Teachers choosing to participate in peer coaching groups in lieu of the traditional, formal evaluation procedures.

## Principal Support Network

- High school principals meeting monthly to share their efforts to lead restructuring efforts at their schools.
- Principals talking openly and confidentially to help each other think through appropriate strategies for helping people in schools change.

## Advanced Fieldwork/Peer Coaching

- Beginning school administrators meeting with a peer twice a month, coaching each other.
- Beginning school administrators receiving training and support to observe each other on the job and to give accurate feedback and guidance.

### Committee for the Enhancement of Academic Collegiality

- Junior university professors meeting twice a month to share research and to discuss important educational issues.
- Junior university professors trying to create a culture that values collaboration.

These four activities are serious attempts to create professional collegial learning communities that improve the quality of life for participants. They have been the center of much of my energy over the last six years. All four are based on a commitment, as stated by Roland Barth, to the premise that meaningful, lasting change will not occur in our schools unless the culture of the institution values and actively promotes the collaborative learning of all participants.

### Introduction

Much of the local, state, and national discussion about school restructuring focuses on topics such as national standards, assessment, shared decision-making, choice funding, heterogeneous grouping of students, and student/teacher ratio. *However*, if we agree that meaningful change is needed in our schools (pre-school through university), and if we accept Roland Barth's premise stated above, and if this change process is to be orchestrated by the professionals, the way of life for teachers and site administrators—the *quality of life* for teachers and site administrators—will have to change considerably. In truth, anyone who works in or around schools knows that real change will not occur if orchestrated by any group other than by teachers and site administrators.

Many teachers and administrators will need to alter their perception of teaching and of themselves if they are to be considered professionals. Professionals in most careers practice based on up-to-date knowledge bases, maintain collegial working relationships with peers, have the opportunity for career advancement without leaving the profession, are evaluated and coached by peers, have gone through a required internship, are involved in making decisions that affect their work life, and receive a salary commensurate with education, experience, and responsibility (Urbansky 1987).

The current state of affairs is quite different from the life of a professional. My twenty-five years of experience as a high school teacher, university professor, and high school administrator lead me to agree with Roland Barth (1991) that most faculties I know feel:

- **A sense of discontent and malaise.** They feel unappreciated, overworked, not respected as professionals, under supported, undervalued, and unrewarded.
- **A low sense of trust toward the administration, the public, and even among themselves.** They feel they are not trusted by their superiors or the public.

- **Separated from one another—compartmentalized.** They express a sense of competition among departments for resources, for students, and for jobs as well.
- **Helpless and trapped in their jobs, powerless to effect change.** They see the causes of the situation as beyond their control. They do not feel in charge of their work lives.
- **A sense of frustration at the "non-teaching" demands placed upon them.** They feel it is increasingly difficult to be effective as teachers and to fulfill the other requirements of the job.

These feelings are true not only for public school teachers, but also for principals, assistant principals, and for junior university professors.

School personnel *at all levels* then are too often engaged in work that is basically parallel play, characterized by adversarial and competitive relationships. This situation must change if teachers and site administrators are to be professionals and if the quality of life is to improve for students and staff. Quality of life is, in fact, the key issue that must be addressed. If proposed changes improve the quality of life for adults *and* students, then the changes are probably valid. If they do not improve the quality of life for *both* groups, the changes should probably not be implemented. The quality of life for both students and staff will not be high unless the culture of the institution values and actively promotes the collaborative learning of all participants (Krovetz 1992).

## Theoretical Models

Roland Barth describes a **community of learners** as "a place where students and adults alike are engaged as active learners in matters of special importance to them and where everyone is thereby encouraging everyone else's learning" (1991). Such a school would be characterized by a climate of risk taking; by a safety net protecting those who take risks; by adults who genuinely want to be at that school and who choose to be there because of the importance of their work to others and to themselves; by a profound respect for diversity, where important differences among children and adults are celebrated rather than seen as problems to remedy; by people acting as philosophers, constantly examining and questioning and frequently asking "why" questions; by a great deal of humor; and by a searching for the optimal relationship of low anxiety and high standards. I would want to teach at such a school, and I would gladly send my children and grandchildren there.

Judith Warren Little (Barth 1991) defines collegiality in schools in terms of the following four specific behaviors:

- Adults in school talk about practice.
- Adults in school observe each other.
- Adults engage together in work on curriculum by planning, designing, researching, and evaluating curriculum.

- Adults in schools teach each other what they know about teaching, learning, and leading.

Collegiality obviously is far more than congeniality. When collegiality exists we can expect decisions to be better, implementation of decisions to be better, morale and trust among adults to be high, adult learning to be energized and more likely to be sustained, and students to model the sharing and cooperation of the adults.

Little also states that the behavior of the principal is critical if collegiality is to exist. The principal must state clear expectations for cooperation among teachers, model collegiality, reward collegiality, and protect teachers who take the risk to act collegially.

The principal of a "successful school" (Sergiovanni 1991) *knows* that student learning is dependent upon teacher learning. These principals not only hold high expectations for teachers as learners, but also remove barriers and provide resources to make it easier for teachers to be active learners. These principals charge themselves with promoting the professional life of teachers. These principals know that teachers benefit little from the typical staff development activities. Staff development at a "successful school" is an ongoing, daily way of life (Shanker 1990).

John Gardner's work regarding community is very relevant to this discussion (Gardner 1992). Dr. Gardner proposes ten ingredients of a healthy community:

1. **Wholeness incorporating diversity.** All individuals and groups must have reason to believe that they are accepted and respected and that their voices will be heard. Each individual and subgroup must seek ways to make the community better.
2. **A reasonable base of shared values.** A community must foster an overarching framework of shared values while leaving people free to honor diverse deeper faiths.
3. **Caring, trust, and teamwork.** A good community nurtures its members and fosters an atmosphere of trust.
4. **Effective internal communication.** Members of a well-functioning community communicate freely with one another.
5. **Participation.** There must be a community culture that enables all individuals and sub-groups to feel confident that their needs will be considered.
6. **Affirmation.** A healthy community constantly reaffirms its shared purposes, using celebrations and ceremonies to build its own morale.
7. **Links beyond the community.** A sound community must maintain open, constructive, and extensive relations with the world beyond its borders.
8. **Development of young people.** A vital community introduces its youth to their community responsibilities early on.
9. **A forward view.** A healthy community should have a sense of where it is going and where it should go.

10. **Institutional arrangements for community maintenance.** Public and private partnerships are necessary in order to maintain a commitment to the community.

Dr. Gardner believes that American society is moving back toward community—community incorporating diversity, openness, and pluralistic values—but still community. The traditional community is no longer an appropriate model because it tended to be homogeneous and demanded a high degree of conformity. The traditional community was often unwelcoming to strangers and all too ready to limit communication with the outside. The traditional community also could boast generations of history and continuity, which few communities can claim today.

However, the traditional community did create a structure of social interdependence in which individuals gave and received support. This occurred through the nuclear and extended family and through the interlocking networks of the community. With this no longer as readily available, we must seek to reconstruct comparable structures of dependable interdependence wherever we can.

Whereas schools are often viewed as the *last of the semi-functional, traditional American institutions*, due to the great increase in diversity of the student populations in many of our schools, the school no longer fits the definition of a traditional community. Schools will need to incorporate each of John Gardner's ingredients in order to function as a viable community. The fact that we so often ignore this change in paradigm may be a major cause for the incapability of our schools to demonstrate the will and ability to change in ways appropriate to the changing student population and times. As was argued above, one vital characteristic of a school that is striving to become a learning community must be a culture that values and actively promotes the collaborative learning of all participants; such a culture is central to all ten of Gardner's ingredients.

Below I will describe in more detail the four learning communities introduced at the beginning of this article. I will describe them in enough detail to demonstrate how they meet or don't meet the various criteria presented above (see Table 1) and hopefully describe them in a way that will allow the reader to understand how each could be replicated within her/his own educational community.

## Learning Communities in Practice

### Professional Development Support Team

Mention the word "evaluation" to a group of teachers and the atmosphere tangibly changes. From the meek you hear a heartfelt sigh, while the bold express their feelings in purple prose. Professional Development Support Teams (PDSTs), formed in lieu of traditional formal evaluation, are why many Santa Cruz city schools' certificated staff are feeling more positive about what once was a meaningless, onerous, and demoralizing process.

Table 1

## Criteria for Defining a Community of Learners

<i>BARTH</i>	<i>PDST</i>	<i>PSN</i>	<i>PC</i>	<i>CEAC</i>
Climate of risk taking	X	X	X	Y
Protection for risk takers	X	X	X	
Choice	X	X		X
Respect for diversity	X	X	X	X
Philosophers	X	X	X	X
Humor	X	X	X	X
<i>LITTLE</i>				
Adults talking about practice	X	X	X	X
Adults observe each other	X		X	
Collaborative work/job curriculum	X	X	X	Y
Adults teaching each other	X	X	X	X
Leaders state clear expectations	X	X	X	
Leaders model collegiality	X	X	X	
Leaders reward collegiality	X	X	X	
Leaders protect risk-takers	X	X	X	
<i>GARDNER</i>				
Wholeness incorporating diversity	X	X	X	X
A reasonable base of shared values	X	X	X	X
Caring, trust, and teamwork	X	X	X	X
Effective internal communication	X	X	X	Y
Participation	X	X	X	Y
Affirmation	X	X	X	Y
Links beyond the community	Y	X	Y	Y
Development of young people	X	Y	X	X
A forward view	X	X	X	X
Community maintenance	X	X	X	
PDST: Professional Development Support Teams PSN: Principal Support Network PC: Advanced Fieldwork/Peer Coaching CEAC: Committee for the Enhancement of Academic Collegiality X: Important component of program    Y: Evolving component of program				

The key elements of the program are: choice, support, stimulation, trust, and respect for the professional judgment of peers. This program was initiated at a time of severe budget crisis, limited resources, and public criticism of education, all of which have led to lower teacher morale. When teachers who have participated in this voluntary program were asked why they had chosen this option and how the quality of their work life had changed as a result of participation in PDSTs, their responses were overwhelmingly positive. Teacher quotes identified a feeling of empowerment and verified the importance of the key elements listed above.

"I really appreciate the opportunity we've been given to self-design our own programs. Not only do I get to choose the topic for professional growth, but I also choose the people I work with. This is good for me because I can pick people with whom I feel socially and academically comfortable."

"It gave me the opportunity to try something with payoff rather than threat. I thought it was win-win-win in every direction."

"It made me feel that I'm more on my toes because I'm answering to my colleagues. I feel more responsible."

"This is actually treating us like we are professionals, which is what we all say we want to be."

PDSTs were created under an agreement developed by the Santa Cruz Policy Trust, which included management and union as equal partners. Policy Trust started with the premise that professionals strive for continuous improvement, actively seek job-related knowledge and wish to share growth experiences with peers. Cooperatively, teachers and management developed a program with the following objectives:

1. To offer incentives for teachers to accept responsibility for their own professional growth.
2. To offer opportunities for teachers to learn how to integrate additional productive teaching techniques into their repertoire.
3. To offer opportunities for teachers to work together in peer coaching situations.

PDSTs were begun as a pilot project at two Santa Cruz schools during the 1988-89 school year. At Bay View Elementary School, five teachers worked together to integrate literature into the language arts curriculum. At Soquel High School, where this author was the principal, seven teachers were trained and then coached each other in cooperative learning and eight teachers were trained and coached each other in Teacher Expectations and Student Achievement (TESA). By school board policy, these teachers were able to choose to participate in this program in lieu of formal evaluation for that year.

By the 1990-91 school year, PDSTs were operational throughout the fourteen schools in the district. Tenured staff, with effective or outstanding evaluations in all areas for at least the last five years, can choose to participate in PDSTs for up to three consecutive years in lieu of the the formal evaluation process. Participants, therefore, are all experienced, successful teachers who

are choosing this option because of the potential benefits to themselves as professionals and to their students.

The focus of the PDST is set by the teachers. At Soquel High School, for example, where more than two-thirds of eligible teachers have participated, foci have included cooperative learning, TESA, authentic assessment, integrated/thematic instruction, writing across the curriculum, career paths, and Math A.

I have personally never seen or heard of a process which has had such a positive impact on teaching and learning in a school. When teachers watch each other teach, not only do they give each other timely and accurate feedback, they also learn a tremendous amount as the observers. They hold each other to high standards and raise the standards for themselves. Good teachers watch peers teaching and strive for excellence themselves. Excellent teachers see quality teaching and strive to become even more excellent. Classroom doors open and stay open. Teaching practices change. Students experience and appreciate the improvement in their own quality of life.

Teachers do not try to justify the compromises they make in their teaching with each other; they talk about "uncompromising." In isolation, teachers may justify to themselves the use of objective tests. In PDSTs, teachers work toward what they know is sound educational practice and support each other in developing more authentic measures of student learning and more authentic learning activities. In isolation, teachers may justify to themselves the use of homogeneous groupings of students. In PDSTs, teachers work toward what they know is sound educational practice and support each other in developing the teaching skills to work with students in heterogeneous groupings.

In addition, teachers who have not talked professionally with each other do so. New respect is formed amongst a diverse teaching staff. Teachers who have worked in isolation begin to celebrate together their feelings of increased competence. They share this renewal with peers who are and are not engaged in PDSTs, both at their school and in the community. They share this renewal with their students and are much more likely to expect their students to practice collegiality with their peers (Krovetz and Cohick in press).

### **Principal Support Network**

If lasting and important change is to occur, support networks will need to be established where risk-taking, transformational leaders interact with similar educators in a confidential, trusting setting. Being a school leader is lonely, incredibly stressful work. This is true for administrators and teachers. Too often one cannot rely on one's immediate peers for support because peers may feel that they are in competition with you, or because they do not understand the need for change. The Principal Support Network, which the author organized and facilitates for high school principals who are actively engaged in the restructuring process, is a quality example of a support network in practice. During the 1991-92 school year, eight high school



principals participated. For 1992–93, the support network has grown to fifteen principals. The fifteen schools are located in four California counties and represent twelve school districts. The student populations of the schools vary widely both in terms of campus size and student diversity. The length of principal experience also varies widely from one year of experience to ten years.

The principals meet one morning a month at a location away from their schools. Focus topics are determined by them ahead of time. The author acts as facilitator at meetings, prepares and circulates relevant readings, and sends out monthly minutes. Topics have included authentic assessment, alternative ways to schedule students, dealing with resistant teachers, shared decision-making models, total quality management, and creating a climate for change. Three of the schools are state-funded schools for school restructuring under SB 1274 and five of the schools had planning grants during 1991–92. Several of the schools then are well on the road to restructuring; others are just beginning the dialogue with their staffs. We celebrate successes and openly discuss the important issues surrounding our efforts.

Several of the principals talked about the fact that many of their staff members were making the movement through the transitional stage of the change and were now in the neutral zone. These terms come from William Bridges' book, *Managing Transitions* (1991), a book that we had read and discussed. They felt a need to focus their staffs on the next stages of school transformation. We agreed that it was time to bring together the teacher leaders of their schools in order to help them support each other in the same professional collegial way that the Principal Support Network did for each of us. In March 1993, we organized our first conference for the restructuring teams from each of the fifteen schools. Approximately 100 teachers from the fifteen schools came together for a day to meet each other, to talk about change, and to talk about current practice and common directions for new practice. In June 1993, approximately sixty teachers from the fifteen schools came together again to discuss ways to demonstrate to our school boards and to our communities that restructuring is leading to better student learning. We hope to sponsor such events as a part of what we do through the Principal Support Network. Whereas we have not yet included students, parents, or community in our activities, the school restructuring committees at each of the fifteen schools do include students, parents, and community members as full participants.

Funding has been obtained from the Central Coast Consortium for Professional Development to support the efforts of the Principal Support Network.

Here, as was true for the PDSTs, creating an environment based on the principles of choice, support, stimulation, trust, and respect for the professional judgment of peers has helped to foster a community of learners who are better leaders and learners as a result.

## Advanced Fieldwork/Peer Coaching

In the fall semester of 1989, the Educational Administration and Higher Education Program at San Jose State University introduced a new required course entitled Advanced Fieldwork in Peer Coaching. In order to meet all requirements for the professional services credential through the Second Tier Program, students are required to enroll in this class for at least two semesters, the first corresponding with a student's first semester in the program. The course is based on a program developed at Far West Laboratory entitled Peer-Assisted Leadership (Barnett 1984).

All students new to the Second Tier program receive twenty-four hours of instruction and training in peer coaching. Instruction and training includes helping students look at themselves within the school organization in terms of their roles as manager, leader, and educator, and to consider how these roles interact. Much of this is a review of our Preliminary Service Credential/First Tier course content. In addition, instruction and practice emphasize pre- and post-conferencing skills needed for peer coaching. Considerable time is spent in role playing activities. Students in their second, third, or fourth semesters in Advanced Fieldwork receive four hours of training review.

All students are paired with a classmate. Pairings are for the most part self-selected, based to a great extent on proximity of work site. We encourage students to pair with someone who works with a different student clientele. We do not allow people to pair with someone from the same school and discourage pairings within the same school district. Pairings may be job-alike, but often are not. Students are required to conduct peer observations including pre- and post-conferences three times at each site during the semester. The focus for each observation is determined by the person being observed. We stress that students should use this process to take risks and should choose to focus on areas in which they wish to improve. These students, regardless of age, are the "young people" (Gardner's eighth ingredient) based on shortness of administrative experience whom we are working to develop.

In addition, all students meet monthly in small regional groups with an instructor to discuss peer coaching and other topics of interest. Each student maintains a reflective journal centered on the six visitations which is turned in to the instructor at the conclusion of the course. Confidentiality is stressed continuously.

At the end of the fall 1991 semester, all class participants filled out a survey to assess the effectiveness of this class (Krovetz and Berekman submitted). We were interested in how effective the peer coaching was in the following seven areas:

1. Reducing isolation among administrators.
2. Building collaborative norms to enable administrators to give and receive ideas and assistance.
3. Enabling administrators to work smarter, not harder.
4. Sharing successful practices.

5. Transferring training from the classroom to the workplace.
6. Investigating the connection between their own planning/organization and the consequences.
7. Encouraging reflective practice.

We also investigated students' feelings about the effectiveness of preparation for peer coaching and the workings of the program as we had implemented it.

Results were extremely positive. More than 75% of the students "strongly agreed" or "agreed" that six of the seven goals had occurred for them. We used the feedback to improve several aspects of the program, primarily to improve our instructional component to assure that transference would occur from the classroom to the workplace (#5 above); 67% "strongly agreed" or "agreed" that transference had occurred for them.

Typical student responses included:

Q: What are the strengths of SJSU's peer coaching program?

A: "Establishing a networking relationship with a fellow administrator—sharing problems, concerns, and successes." "The opportunity to reflect on both my own and another's performance and skills." "It was a reflective mirror which helped me see things I would not ordinarily have seen." "Showed me that some schools are well run." "I'm always glad after the time spent. I would recommend more informal contact. It's lonely out there."

Q: What recommendation would you make to someone taking this course next semester?

A: "You'll love it!"

It is clear to the two of us who supervise this program that students place great value on the peer coaching experience and on the regional monthly meetings. Whereas the focus for peer coaching visits and agenda topics for regional meetings are all at the option of the students, every one of them talk and write openly about the job stress they experience and about specific causes of that stress. They receive important coaching, both from their peer coach and from their regional peers. Journal entries reflect that this coaching leads to changes in their behaviors on the job, and in many cases, to increased success in their leadership roles. Journal entries also reflect that this input helps beginning administrators deal with all the self-doubt that comes with the isolation and stress of being a school administrator.

We celebrate many successes, laugh together, and console peers through tough situations. Collegial relationships form, and regular contacts occur amongst class members apart from the peer coaching and class meetings. These continue in subsequent years.

For the 1992-93 school year, we asked that each student choose a mentor within her/his school district. The mentor could be her/his supervisor, but need not be so. We held individual conferences with each student and her/his mentor to explain the importance of this relationship and to discuss areas for expansion of job skills that each student had identified the mentor could help with.

Here, as was true for PDSTs and the Principal Support Network, creating an environment based on the principles of choice (the course is required, but

focus and degree of participation are at the student's option), support, stimulation, trust, and respect for the professional judgment of peers has helped to foster a community of learners who are better leaders and learners as a result.

### **Committee for the Enhancement of Academic Collegiality (CEAC)**

During the fall semester of 1991, a non-tenured faculty member within the College of Education at San Jose State University (SJSU) approached several other non-tenured faculty members to learn if we'd be interested in meeting regularly to share research and ideas. Historically, the College of Education at SJSU has been a very isolating place for many new faculty. SJSU is a large, urban, commuter university. As a California State University campus, the mission of the College of Education is to prepare educators who are competent professionals within a diverse, technologically complex society. Many of our students, all students in Educational Administration, work during the day and take classes during the late afternoons, evenings, and weekends. Many faculty spend much of their time supervising students at work sites. Classes are taught generally in isolation from other faculty. The tenure, promotion, and retention process does not currently place value on collaborative efforts. Professional research and writing, then, is typically done in isolation, most often at one's home computer.

In deciding whether or not to spend time organizing and participating in a collegial learning group, each of us recognized that this was time away from the activities valued by the culture of our university and college. Of the twenty-eight non-tenured, tenured track professors, approximately twenty volunteered to participate. (Non-tenured, tenured track faculty represent 41% of the College of Education faculty). Six of us, including this author, agreed to serve on a steering committee.

Beginning in December 1991 CEAC has met once or twice a month with agendas centered on current issues in education (i.e., America 2000, schools of choice, restructuring, budget) or on faculty research. A volunteer prepares readings and facilitates the discussion. Typically ten to fifteen people attend. During the 1992-93 school year, several tenured faculty began to attend the sessions.

The result for those of us who choose to participate is a lessening of isolation. Informal discussions in the halls are more common. Friendships are forming. Four of us are engaged in a collaborative research project on establishing intellectual learning communities and presented our ideas at the 1993 American Education Research Association National Conference. We find ourselves volunteering for many leadership roles within the College of Education and supporting each other in these efforts.

Whereas the primary risk-taking involved in this activity is time away from teaching preparation and research/writing, a community of learners has been established at SJSU which meets many of the criteria established by Barth, Little, and Gardner. We can proudly state that a group of educators with very diverse research interests now talk to each other about our

practices. Our group includes Latinos, Asians, Afro-Americans, and Caucasians. We are the young people, regardless of age but based on length of experience at the university level, whom we are working to develop.

## Conclusion

The restructuring of our schooling more than anything else is a quality of life issue. Teachers and principals need to believe that they are more than *just teachers* or *just school principals*. Teachers and principals need to be seen and recognized as professionals; they need to see themselves and recognize themselves as professionals. They need to believe that what happens inside their rooms, each and every class period, each and every day, is of critical importance, *and* just as important is what happens outside of their rooms; *and* they need to believe that they can influence what happens outside their rooms.

Teachers and principals need recognition and respect. Recognition and respect can come from true collegiality—sharing the craft knowledge about practice, sharing personal vision and the way we want school to be, and taking deliberate steps to be a part of that school. When the professionals in the schools are confident in their own professionalism and reach out and include students, parents and community in that learning community, school improvement/restructuring/transformation will occur.

Teachers who feel that they are alone in their efforts to meet the needs of students are more likely to persist in traditional practice, to rely increasingly on control and authority as classroom strategies, and to view the issues that students bring to school which interfere with the student's ability to learn in school as outside of their purview. Research by McLaughlin and Talbert (1992) shows that professional communities which are cohesive, highly collegial environments are also settings in which teachers report a high level of innovativeness, high levels of energy and enthusiasm, and support for personal growth and learning. Teachers who belong to communities of this sort also report a high level of commitment to teaching, and to all of the students with whom they work.

I have written very little about students. The primary purpose of schooling is to help students develop the capacity to think critically and analytically and to solve problems that are important to them and to society. It is this author's belief that this can and will occur in schools *if and only if* the adults in that school are engaged in like practice. Therefore the development of professional, collegial learning communities as the core of the culture of our schools should be at the forefront of all discussion about school improvement. As Barth writes, "In a community of learners, adults and children learn simultaneously and in the same place to think critically and analytically and to solve problems that are important to them" (1991).

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