

A Different Kind of Community

By Greg Cameron, Monette McIver, and Roger Goddard

PICTURE A GROUP of teachers animatedly sharing ideas about how they utilized an agreed-upon, researched-based strategy in their classrooms over the last week. They share samples of student work, look at the data they have been collecting over the course of the previous month, and talk about what the strategy looks like when utilized with fidelity, consistency, and intensity. They leave the conversation with new insights, ideas, and thoughts about how they can continually keep improving on their practice.

Increasingly, schools and districts understand the importance of creating environments where collaborative, rather than individual, practice is the norm and where staff members share a common vision. Although this is important, it isn't enough to sustain a school through its improvement efforts. A truly "purposeful community" involves more than a shared mission and vision, two characteristics of professional learning communities. Rather, purposeful communities exhibit these four characteristics:

1. High levels of collective efficacy
2. Strategic use of all available assets
3. Outcomes that matter to all
4. Adherence to agreed-upon processes

1. High levels of collective efficacy

Collective efficacy is a shared belief that group members can execute a course of action that makes a difference (Goddard, 2001). Researcher Albert Bandura (1997) identified these key sources of collective efficacy:

- **Mastery experiences:** When people experience initial successes and have the opportunity to build on them. This occurs, for example, when a group of teachers utilizes a researched-based instructional strategy with fidelity, sees positive results, and begins to believe that as a team they can make a difference in the learning of students who had previously not shown significant academic success.

- **Vicarious experiences:** When there are opportunities to observe successful individuals in situations with similar circumstances. For example, when a group of teachers observes other teachers, whether in the same school or a different school, who are effectively utilizing new instructional strategies with students similar to their own, the first group begins to believe that they too could use these strategies effectively.
- **Social Persuasion:** When influential individuals within a group create high expectations and provide support to others to pursue their goals. This might occur when more experienced teachers model and share high expectations with newer staff, and all of the teachers have opportunities to interact and work together toward common goals for their students.
- **Affective States:** When there is a shared sense of optimism that the group can accomplish their desired outcomes, even after disappointments. When a school staff responds to poor results on a state assessment by analyzing the data more deeply to identify what they can do differently next time, they exhibit this behavior.

Four Steps to Effective Use of All Available Assets

1. Determine which assets are important to attaining identified outcomes.
2. Assess existing assets by collecting perception data regarding the strengths of the school or district from all stakeholders.
3. Determine underutilized assets by asking staff members to identify talents and strengths they have to contribute but do not.
4. Include all assets in school improvement planning.

What are Agreed-upon Processes?

Operating principles and agreements comprise agreed-upon processes.

Operating principles

- Lay the foundation for how individuals will function in the community
- Are developed to meet specific purposes and outcomes
- Are unique for every organization

Agreements

- Are behavioral expectations that guide and uphold the operating principles
- Require intentional leadership and stakeholder dialogue
- Complete the statement: *This operating principle requires us to . . .*

2. Strategic and effective use of all available assets

Typically, educators focus on tangible assets, which we think of as physical, observable, and measurable. It would be foolish to suggest that school or district leaders ignore their budgets, facilities, and technology needs, but it is equally important for them to attend to the intangible assets (e.g., leadership, transparency, reputation) that have an equal and positive impact on student achievement.

All schools have the potential to develop and use all of their assets, although some schools do so more effectively than others. Leaders who continuously assess their use of available assets have the knowledge to confidently reallocate them to produce desired outcomes.

3. Outcomes that matter to all

Perhaps your school community has been brought together more by coincidence than by an enduring and articulated purpose that everyone shares. Accomplishing purpose and producing outcomes requires input from stakeholders and intentionality from a school's leaders. Using structured dialogues and protocols, school or district leaders can develop a vision of meaningful outcomes that they can only achieve together. The question to ask is, "What can we do together that we cannot do as individuals?"

4. Adherence to agreed-upon processes

Having agreed-upon processes builds patterns of communication, stronger relationships among community members, a sense of individual and collective well-being, connections between school and other critical institutions, shared leadership opportunities, and an orderly and disciplined environment. Agreed-upon processes contribute to a community's stability and can rally its members to move in a different direction.

More than the sum of its parts

Virtually everything in a school occurs within the context of a community consisting of students, parents, teachers and other school staff members, central office administrators and support personnel, the school board, other social agencies, and businesses. The more this diverse community is able to unite around shared purposes, the more sustainable and effective a school's change efforts will be. School leaders who understand the characteristics of a purposeful community are better able to lead their schools and districts to success. **CS**

References

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- Goddard, R. D. (2001). Collective efficacy: A neglected construct in the study of schools and achievement. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 93 (3), 467–476.

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