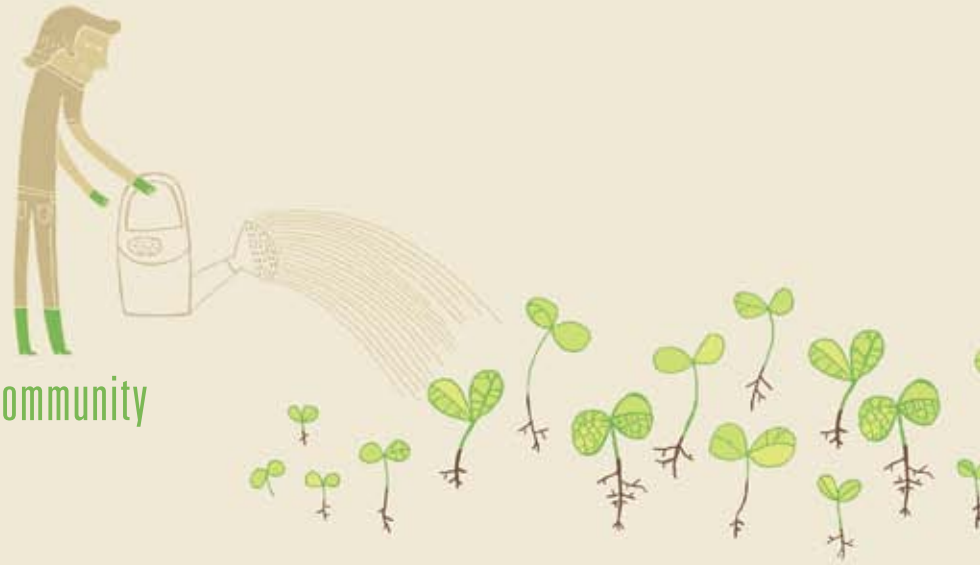
Transform YourSchool into a Successful Learning Community



By Bobby Moore

Using the proven power of learning communities—schools in which adults are accountable to each other and work together to ensure the best possible learning experience for students—education leaders have an opportunity to transform America's middle grades in a way that helps ordinary teachers produce extraordinary results. As a principal and superintendent in two different Ohio school districts, I was involved in building a learning community by restructuring a middle school building and the middle grades of a K–12 building. Although the implementation was challenging, within two years, both the school and district received the Ohio Department of Education's highest rating (Excellent with Distinction) and achieved value-added gains among the top 4% of schools in the state.

The following are three essential steps to help you transform your middle grades into a learning community.

1. Identify a Limited Number of Goals

To implement a successful learning community, you must first identify and select three to five key educational improvement goals. These goals should be based on value-added analysis, if that is available in your district; otherwise, the goals might be based on individual student achievement. They should foster ongoing, effective collaboration and provide timely intervention and enrichment for all students.

Principals in collaboration with grade-level and department teams should set goals that revolve around school environment, fiscal responsibility, and stakeholder satisfaction.

2. Establish the Right Measures

In a learning community, educators hold themselves accountable for all students' learning. They do not stop at proficiency. As a principal and superintendent, I was fortunate to have access to value-added data that allowed us to measure our effectiveness in working with non-proficient, proficient, and advanced students; gauge the impact of initiatives and programs; identify strengths; and determine whether all students achieved at least one year's worth of growth.

Achievement data and survey results from parents and other stakeholders can measure progress and identify areas for improvement; however, achievement data are limited and should always be accompanied by other measurements. It may be impressive to have 90% of your fifth grade students proficient at reading, but if the rest of the state is at 95%, your students are behind. We must operate from a paradigm that "proficient is not college-ready" and be committed to moving all students beyond the proficiency level.

The most important data we collected in our school came from common short-cycle assessments, daily and weekly exit cards, and formative instructional practices. After completing short-cycle assessments, teachers received early release time (four to six times per year) to meet in grade-level teams to respond to student learning.

Having an RtI model to respond only to struggling students is obsolete. While struggling students receive intervention, students mastering material receive enrichment or an opportunity for further study.

3. Focus on the Right Practices

For middle schools to evolve completely into learning communities, the administrators and staff must embed the practices that will enable a successful transformation.

Leadership Practices. Much of the literature on restructuring and redesigning schools describes turmoil, resistance, stress, anger, and frustration during the process. However, reorganizing a school into a learning community can proceed more smoothly under a leader who has strong emotional intelligence.

In their 1990 article, "Emotional Intelligence," published in *Imagination, Cognition, and Personality,* Peter Salovey and John Mayer describe the trait as "the ability to monitor one's own and others' feelings and emotions, to discriminate among them, and to use this information to guide one's thinking and action."

Principals must learn to be "empathetically assertive" and balance patience and persistence, as Daniel Goleman

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describes in his 1998 book, *Working with Emotional Intelligence.* Many professional principal and superintendent organizations offer strong coaching and mentoring programs that address the importance of emotional intelligence as a leadership trait. Leaders should take advantage of this support when implementing a learning community.

School leaders also must have the courage to make tough curriculum decisions. For example, based on research on high poverty, high diversity, and high achievement, our school and district successfully implemented 80-minute blocks for reading and math for grades K–8.

Organizational Practices. Organizational practices include establishing structures and routines to support staff collaboration in building a successful learning community. For example, it's important to engage teachers within grade-level teams. Teams should meet every two to three weeks to discuss best practices, monitor student learning, and review intervention/enrichment schedules. Consider establishing several periods per week for student intervention/enrichment as well as time for teachers to collaborate.

Learning communities are action oriented and flexible. Plans may not play out 100% as intended, but education leaders are courageous enough to act and flexible enough to course correct. In my district, teachers were responsible for turning in their yearly pacing guides the first week of September. Pacing guides were not "contracts," but roadmaps outlining what they would cover during every four- to six-week period. Teachers reviewed the pacing guides and assessments (which were created before instruction) every few weeks and modified as necessary.

The biggest shift for schools moving to learning organizations is creating a culture that monitors student performance along with the collective commitments made to achieve identified goals. This ensures more timely and frequent intervention and allows teachers to adjust instruction.

When students do not meet learning benchmarks at two or three weeks, for example, teacher teams need to alter instructional or RTI strategies. Waiting more than a quarter or an entire year to assess whether students have reached an achievement benchmark is considered negligence in a learning community.

Teaching Practices. When all professionals are required to come out of isolation and work on teams, the impossible is possible.

Professionals from the field of medicine demonstrated the success of teamwork when 23 heart surgeons from Maine, New Hampshire, and Vermont agreed to observe each other regularly during operations and share best practices. They collaborated and observed each other during a nine-month period. Two years later, research showed that the death rate among their patients fell by an astonishing 25%. Their success was attributed to their emphasis on promoting teamwork and communications rather than working in isolation. All doctors brought about major changes in their professional and organizational practices, according to Bob Garmston and Bruce Wellman in their 2009 book, *The Adaptive School: A Sourcebook for Developing Collaborative Groups.*

Individual success does not ensure organizational success. Professional development must be embedded into the school day and throughout the year, and it must focus on developing the organizational and the professional capacities of the staff. We cannot ask teachers to collaborate, collect and analyze data, and work as a team hoping they will simply know how to deal with change and resistance. Teachers must develop and practice collaborative norms (maybe the most important process of a learning community), collect and analyze data (e.g., value-added, formative and summative assessment), facilitate and organize effective meetings, lead change, and deal with resistance—all of which are organizational capacities.

Although developing organizational capacities should always be a priority, it's important to use early release days or other professional learning time to discuss formative instructional practices (FIP). These practices are not assessments, but on-the-spot teaching modifications and high-yielding strategies for improving student learning. FIP sessions should focus on topics such as communicating learning targets, developing and using high-quality rubrics, giving descriptive feedback, implementing effective questioning strategies, and teaching students to monitor their learning.

Cultivate Your Garden

As Rick DuFour and Becky Burnette describe in their Summer 2002 *Journal of Staff Development* article, "Pull Out Negativity by Its Roots," learning communities could be likened to a garden in which the principal or superintendent is the gardener. When you plant a garden, you make a commitment to make it thrive. You constantly nurture as you water and fertilize the plants and pull the toxic weeds.

Professional learning communities are living organisms, just like a garden. You should expect to work like a gardener every day to build the trust and respect necessary for the community to thrive. This is why emotional intelligence coaching is so beneficial for leaders.

If you want a culture that promotes high levels of learning for students and staff, become a gardener and plant the resources and routines necessary to cultivate a learning community. Your staff, and most important, your students, will reap the fruits and flowers of the work. MG