

# Issues . . . *about Change*

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## Schools as Learning Communities

*Learning community* has become a popularly used term in educational literature, particularly with regard to school reform. The idea of a learning community is an adaptation of the concept of learning organizations, described by Senge (1990). Learning organizations are comprised of people who see themselves as connected to each other and the world, where creative thinking is nurtured, and “. . . where people are continually learning how to learn together” (Senge, 1990, p.3). Sergiovanni (1992) observed that “the idea of a school as a learning community suggests a kind of connectedness among members that resembles what is found in a family, a neighborhood, or some other closely knit group, where bonds tend to be familial or even sacred” (p. 47). A related concept, a “school-based professional community,” was characterized by Kruse and Louis (1993) as one where teachers engage in reflective dialogue, where there is de-privatization of practice, collective focus on student learning, collaboration, and shared norms and values.

In an extensive review of the school reform literature focusing on school context, Boyd(1992a) identified indicators that facilitate change. Seventeen of these indicators (Boyd, 1992b) describe a school as a learning community, whose culture reduces isolation, increases staff capacity, provides a caring, productive environment, and promotes increased quality (Boyd & Hord, 1994). A learning community is a place where critical inquiry is practiced by collegial partners who share a common vision and engage in shared decision-making. This continuous critical inquiry provides a basis for seamless school improvement.

Leadership, however, is essential for the creation of a learning community, whose culture is shaped by an accumulation of hundreds of leaders’ actions — no single one seen as critical. In combination, however, they profoundly affect a school’s context for change and improvement (Peterson, 1988). Beckhard and Pritchard (1992) cite this leadership and note that “a learning mode only occurs when an organization’s top leaders understand the process, see learning as something to be valued, and are prepared to personally commit themselves to it” (p. 14). Through this kind of leadership provided by four principals, a learning community was created at John Dibert Elementary School.

### A Crisis Opportunity

John Dibert Elementary School is located on the fringes of the downtown business and industrial area of a large, southern, urban city. This kindergarten through grade six school serving 400 students is surrounded by houses in need of refurbishing where a majority of the students come from low-income families. The seventy-year old building is close to a large city park, and there is a community college not far away.

As has happened in many urban neighborhoods, the population of the school dwindled as families grew older and residents moved to the suburbs. In the early ‘70s, the school became highly bureaucratic and rigidly structured, and hierarchically dominated by its single administrator as the sole decisionmaker. Because of the ever-decreasing student population, the school board discussed closing the school, and this crisis stimulated significant action by a few tenacious parents

who did not want to lose their school.

These parents developed a coalition of other interested parents who initiated dialogue with the board to keep the school open. As a result, a decision was made to maintain the school as an open-enrollment magnet school. With the new concept of magnet school came new administrators and the challenge to generate sufficient student enrollment to remain open. This paper is the story of that challenge, of the re-creation of the school, and of the principals who played a major role in the re-formulation of the school.

### **Regeneration: The Principal Factor**

As noted, four principals contributed to the Dibert Difference, as it came to be known. They were Lucianne Carmichael, Clif St. Germain, Nancy Picard, and Wiley Ates.

### **Lucy's Legacy**

Lucianne Carmichael favored a child-centered approach, and she suggested this idea to the parents who came seeking her advice. The changes at Dibert began with her idea that “a true child-centered approach is really a person-centered approach . . . because teachers can't honor children until they have been honored themselves.” One part of this person-centered approach was giving staff the option of transferring to another school if they did not want to be part of the new program. Any new staff who came to the school to replace those who chose to leave were to be selected by Lucianne. This was quite unusual in 1975. In fact, Lucianne reports, “I'm sure I was the first principal that ever interviewed teachers [in the district]. It was a battle to achieve that, but [the district] agreed.”

Originally, Lucianne lobbied for a summer-long training program for the teachers, but money was available for only one week. With some new materials and one week of training, they began to re-create the school. They ungraded classrooms and grouped children of several ages in family groupings. Carmichael articulated the philosophy underlying this

arrangement. “Children learn by copying other children more than from any other source. We know that from raising our own children. . . . In schools we don't use that because we think that children are going to learn (a) out of the book and (b) from the teacher. They learn from other kids and by doing it themselves.”

Another part of Lucianne's philosophy was expressed in the continuous opportunities provided to children to develop and demonstrate artistic creativity. Whether through music, drama, dance, or the visual arts, children could share themselves and their richly divergent culture and backgrounds. In this way, children were honored for their special differences that collectively contributed to Dibert, their “rainbow school.” This was congruent with Lucianne's own experiences as an artist — a potter.

“Until thinking changes, nothing will change,” Lucianne observed. “I spent a long, long time with teachers. My total investment of time or money or anything was always in the staff. Before I would buy any kind of equipment or spend money on the building, the money would first be spent on opportunities for the teachers or time for teachers, for all of us. I learned from the beginning that the most important resource that we had was the staff. No amount of money was too much to invest in them.”

Lucianne took several teachers to visit schools in England that were using the child-centered approach. “It's just like any kind of learning. To read about it falls short; if you go and experience something you can really know what it is we are talking about. I always felt for myself and the other teachers that we had to get into other schools. We had to really go and see and experience and do. . . . So every penny that I could get for teachers or me to travel, we did.”

“We have to feed ourselves, invest in ourselves, teach ourselves; we have to be the first learners. Unless the teachers are the primary learners in that building, the children don't learn much. Teachers have to have time to do that; they have to have support.”

Time, thus, was another resource Lucianne provided for the staff and their development. Because the district did not provide any more paid time, the staff began to rethink the time that they already had available. They realized that time was “a very malleable resource.” The staff decided to reallocate time by teaching longer on four days of the week and dismissing the children early on Thursdays. The time gained on that day was used for teachers to meet together, but never for “regular” faculty meetings. “The underlying idea was always it was for some kind of self-development process.” Thus Faculty Study began on Thursdays. To that end, the teachers “were bombarded from the first, surrounded as much as possible with good reading, with good materials that we worked on together.”

Through extensive interaction with teachers, Lucianne nurtured a shared vision. “I continuously wrote notes and letters to teachers. I went in classrooms; I would come out and write notes supporting every positive thing that I saw. . . . In my job as principal, the teachers were my students in a sense, and I had to do with them everything that I wanted them to do with the students. I had to trust them, and honor them, and support them, and inspire them, and nurture them, and reinforce the good things that I saw them doing. When they began to experience that, I think they began to have more vision and ability to have things like that happening in their classroom. . . . When that starts in the teacher’s mind, it doesn’t end. It snowballs.”

The entire school community — administrators, teachers, children, parents who dropped in — also met together daily at Morning Meeting. Each day in the school’s basement, they shared school and classroom events, and honored children’s accomplishments. A sense of family was strengthened through this daily interaction.

## **The Second Principal, Clif: Passing the Potter’s Torch**

The faculty remember Clif St. Germain as a twenty-seven year old guidance counselor who became assistant principal at Dibert, to become principal a bit later. Clif said of his mentor, Lucianne, “She was the spirit of the school and the embodiment of tenacity and focus on beauty.” If she was the spirit, he was the heart, suggested the long-time Dibert teachers. His goal was to develop a happy place where children could learn, and where *Be Kind and Share* was the guiding principle in how everyone (administrators, teachers, students, support staff, parents) would interact personally and professionally with each other.

The faculty, as noted, had the option to stay at Dibert, now a magnet school, and sign on as part of the new school and its development, or to go elsewhere. As Clif reported, some people decided they didn’t want to go, but they didn’t want to stay either. Other issues that faced Clif and the faculty in the first year were too many kids in the classrooms, not enough books, no release time for faculty planning, too much rough kids’ play, not enough consistency in discipline, and many others.

One of his strategies was to meet with the entire faculty at Faculty Study on Thursday afternoons and work on the problems they were having to deal with. His thinking was that if he could help resolve some of the problems, then they would be more willing to share a new mind-set, to come with him to a new vision of schooling, to create a happy place where children learn. He believed that the first two or three years of energy would need to be used to build a vision that could be articulated in terms of culture, curriculum, and kids.

One of the symbols of the new Dibert was the rainbow that represented the multicultural dimension of the school’s mission: to honor children of diverse backgrounds and cultures, and to value the contributions that diversity can bring. To make this idea quite clear, St. Germain and the faculty painted a rainbow on the front of the school. In addition, they posted

a banner on which a large goose invited passing motorists on the school's busy boulevard to honk if they loved Dibert. For years, students reckoned that much of the traveling world loved Dibert. Other symbolic acts were cleaning up the dingy, unattractive school facility and putting flowers, music, poetry and song "into the walls."

Because Dibert was competing for students with private schools in the area, St. Germain went out into the community to talk with families and to tell them about the programs at Dibert and solicit their attendance. At the same time, he and the faculty were creating the programs and developing relationships to productively work with each other. Because the faculty was young and many staff had small children, they frequently would gather at someone's home with children for informal meals. Occasionally on Friday afternoons, Clif would suggest that they all get together and stop after school at one of the local restaurants for an end-of-the-week celebration. After-school volleyball games were also organized by Clif on an impromptu basis, where the staff could knock the ball around and play together, release tension, and go back to work the next day more relaxed.

One of his pieces of advice to others who wish to re-invent and found a school on new assumptions — on a new paradigm — is to trust that teachers know best about teaching and "when they bellow at you, know that they are coming from wanting to have a good school." Understand also, he cautioned, that time will always be problematic in any process and accept that. But, first of all, an administrator should know his or her administrative strengths, find out what gives the person energy, and never let that go. So that when things get rough or harried, "you go into that energy space to rejuvenate yourself. The principalship is a lonely place, so if you know yourself and who you are in terms of the school," you can stay whole and not "crash into the rocks."

Continuing into years four and five, the faculty and Clif met together weekly about how to

operate the school and how to work with kids, so that "our being here is going to amount to something in the lives of these kids, and they are going to amount to something in our lives because they are going to teach us something." Believing that he had accomplished his purpose at Dibert, Clif felt it was time to leave, but not before he made sure that the new principal would take the school in a strong direction. Thus, he had coffee with Nancy to ask her, can you do this? She looked him straight in the eye and replied with a strong "yes!"

### **The Third Principal: Now It's Nancy**

Nancy Picard's primary goal "was empowerment; I believed that it was the principal's job to empower teachers, students, and parents both as a means for creating a quality school and as an end in itself." This empowerment meant removing barriers and expanding what had been started under Lucianne and Clif. "I put something of an academic focus on and tried to model this at Morning Meeting. I felt like my job was to empower people around me."

To make teachers feel appreciated and valued, and to know that they were important, Nancy encouraged special events such as a parent-sponsored potluck lunch for teachers on the first day of school. "You'd hear kids say, 'We don't do that at Dibert.' I wanted teachers to say with pride that, 'We do this at Dibert; I teach at Dibert.'" New school T-shirts were created using a kindergartner's design and a kindergarten coffee was initiated, where Picard would speak to different parent groups and invite them to the school for a tour given by Dibert parents. It was an effort at public relations, and "it gave the teachers a chance to show off." All these activities were directed toward the goal of increasing teachers' self-esteem.

Nancy's strategies included communicating to teachers that they had the power to set goals and that the school as a community would support them in accomplishing those goals. Nancy takes pride in the Arts Connection program as an example of the way a sense of

empowerment developed among teachers at Dibert. Teachers were interested in writing a proposal to get a program to provide more opportunities for children in the visual arts. “The fact that teachers would work on their own to seek an arts grant and then plan and execute the program was a testament to the accomplishment of my personal goal at the school, which was not simply to establish an arts program but to establish an atmosphere and a mind-set that would encourage and enable others in the school to establish a program as well.”

Another goal Nancy accomplished was that of removing administrative procedures that interrupted teachers’ instructional activities. “My message to teachers was, ‘You are professionals. I value you for your work with students. I don’t want you to have to spend any more energy on other tasks than necessary.’” Her efforts resulted in limiting non-instructional tasks required of teachers, and providing structures for shared decision making and teacher professional development.

During Nancy’s tenure, parents contributed time and took responsibility for projects at the school, thus freeing teachers to teach. She involved parents in the process for lunch money collection. In this way, Nancy moved toward empowering parents as well as teachers. Improving the parents’ bulletin also helped to involve parents. The monthly bulletin was upgraded with pictures and a logo, nicely printed and mailed out to parents, local businesses, and to community people monthly.

Encouraging the elimination of anything that detracted from teaching, Nancy takes some credit for the computerization of the daily attendance report required by the district. She developed a weekly faculty bulletin to eliminate administrative items that took time in faculty meeting. Included were celebrations and praises for children and teachers who were doing those kinds of things she liked to see happen, making sure that over time she mentioned something about each teacher. The bulletin reduced administrivia and highlighted activities she wanted to foster in the school.

Under Nancy’s administration, a new report card was designed that was both administratively easy and reflected what the school was trying to do with the students. Nancy reviewed every child’s report card and modeled the type of comments she felt teachers should include. She developed “a handout with suggested ways of communicating difficult messages to parents in a positive manner.” The new report card eliminated duplication of record keeping by teachers and more “adequately reflected the skills that were being taught at each level.” Teachers were highly involved with Nancy in the process through “many lengthy and loud discussions of curriculum, child development, grade levels, etc. We produced a new report card that reflected our curriculum, our expectations for our children and was easier to complete in the bargain.”

Nancy surveyed parents to solicit their suggestions, comments, concerns. This was done in concert with the school’s management team she organized, including the lower- and upper-grade chairpersons, special education chairperson, a union representative, two parents, a university professor, and a community person constituted the first team. The management team was designed as another way to reserve Faculty Study for teachers’ professional development needs. The team represented the teachers and was a smaller body of people that would be more efficient in soliciting information and making decisions about how the school would operate — decisions that their colleagues would support.

Nancy sought to empower students as well as teachers and parents. The Dibert student council conducted meetings where junior high principals from across the district came to inform Dibert parents and students about grades and other requirements of the various schools. “I wanted students to know they had a choice about what they could do with their lives, the direction they could take, the schools they could choose, etc.”

## **The Fourth and Current Principal: Wiley's Way**

"The three principals who preceded me had a real commitment to share decision making and move teachers toward ownership in what was going on in the school, so when I came it was clearly understood when I interviewed for the position that was the way business was done at Dibert." Thus, Wiley came with the attitude that he would maintain things and, if possible, bring new ideas into the school. He had a sincere appreciation for the management team that represented experience, knowledge, and leadership in the school. The team served as his colleagues as well as his guide in the transition period. "If you are not intimidated by that, then you put your faith in people you work with, and you can become oriented very quickly and get a great deal accomplished," he noted.

A teachers' strike in the district led to considerable tension across the faculty, and it was resolved through "circle table" discussion that was beneficial to both Wiley and the faculty. They sat and leveled with each other about how they were feeling about the strike and their role in it. It was hard for everyone to deal with, but in so doing, they learned how to give Wiley and each other feedback in a group setting or individually. Wiley solicits feedback at times, but on some occasions the faculty lets him know they need to talk about some issues. At other times he pulls them together for a series of meetings to discuss things, where they are "very blunt and deal with emotional kinds of things where people have a hard time saying what they are really feeling . . . but we work our way through it."

This kind of catharsis is used regularly, sometimes with a facilitator. They believe they make the best progress when they sit down as a faculty with an agenda and lay their cards on the table, giving each other explanations about why and how things happen. They liken their process to that of a family where feelings get hurt and where concerns and animosities build up. They recognize the need for a vehicle to dissipate some of that through talking it out.

Another family aspect is that staff members address each other and Wiley by their first names. Typically in classrooms, they address each other as "Mr." or "Mrs." but it's not unusual for first names to be used in the presence of children.

To set the family tone, Morning Meeting is used to start the day together. This special daily time with all children, staff, and numbers of parents who attend, is used for sharing and for honoring students. The children have learned how to focus and to listen as their peers contribute to the meeting. These contributions could be a child reading a poem he or she has written; first graders reading a bit from the first primer they have completed; reports about field trips that have been taken; presentations of projects underway or finished; or a demonstration of peer mediation from fifth or sixth graders who use their skills to ameliorate problems on the play yard. Wiley conducts this meeting, but it is really the children who are the participants.

Wiley's area of specialization and professional preparation is in curriculum. The teachers report that he has brought an emphasis on the use of technology as an instructional tool and a focus on curriculum. His tenure as middle school assistant principal shaped his concerns that students be ready to matriculate from the elementary to middle school. With Wiley, the faculty examines their California Achievement Test data to identify areas of non-mastery and partial mastery. Their goal is to move all kids up, with particular – attention to students in the bottom quartile with whom they have had good success in moving into the second quartile.

One of the goals that Wiley and the faculty set for the new school year was to explore and adopt a curriculum to which they could all subscribe. They had been thinking for quite a long time about the need for a consistent curriculum so that every child received an adequate and appropriate set of learning opportunities. Further, they wanted a curriculum that would foster their vision of multiculturalism, since the school had always

been diverse, the rainbow school, and they want to perpetuate that.

From attendance at a national conference, one of the teachers brought information about a curriculum for exploration. Wiley and this key teacher planned how to share information and support the staff in their curriculum decision-making process. An initial activity, led by Wiley, was to revisit the school's mission and reiterate its operating principles, and then to look at the curriculum in light of the vision that the faculty shared for the school. They did a force-field analysis of the benefits and disadvantages of the curriculum in relationship to their vision for the school and its multicultural mission. They planned a thematic unit from the curriculum so they could feel a real sense of how the curriculum would work, the materials needed to start, and areas of need for inservice. They also planned how to use a consultant (a teacher from another state who was using the curriculum).

In addition to spending a great deal of time at the copy machine preparing materials for teachers' inspection and analysis, Wiley encouraged staff to go to a national conference in another state, that would focus on the curriculum, its users, and adaptations made by schools. Sixteen teachers and Wiley flew to the two-day conference at their own expense to attend general sessions and breakout sessions related to their own teaching assignments. Twice daily Wiley gathered them around the swimming pool to discuss their learnings and how to share them with their colleagues at home.

At various times in the curriculum search process, Wiley was seen by observers as "pushing" and at other times as showing patience and reassuring the staff that he was not unequivocally "for" this curriculum. His role in the process could best be described as "guide on the side" in contrast to "sage on stage," to borrow terms from the popular press. "Are you sure you want to do this?" he asked as they all became weary. "Yes," they said, "it's just that it's going to be a lot of work and we all need to commit to it." They did.

## **Creating a Learning Community at Dibert**

Dibert was richly blessed with a series of talented and unique principals, each of whom was apparently the right person at the right time. Clif judged first principal Lucianne as the "embodiment of tenacity and beauty." Her vision required that children be honored and respected for who they were and what they brought of themselves to school. Further, Lucianne's vision included children who respected and appreciated themselves, who had high self-esteem and self-regard. Lucianne, herself an artist, encouraged teachers to use the arts — visual and performing — to provide children with opportunities for self-expression that would lead to feelings of self-worthiness. Above all, she invested time, energy, and other resources in honoring teachers to develop their capacity to honor the children.

Whereas Lucianne was the "quiet but forceful center of things," teachers observed that Clif was the "energymeister," cheerleading and bringing about bonding of faculty and children. "He's a people person, going around talking with and touching everyone, connecting to them and connecting them with each other." Teachers without fail acknowledged his energy and the way he used it to turn the school around with a well-articulated and consistently enforced discipline process. Teachers studied the process together in the early days of Faculty Study, and through this activity they bonded around a common goal.

Nancy's goals for the school included the achievement of increased teacher self esteem and the empowerment of teachers, parents, and students. She promoted activities with parents that would recognize and show appreciation for teachers. Nancy freed teachers to devote their attention to professional development and innovative practices for children, practices they were empowered to develop themselves. By proactively streamlining procedures and processes, she was able to reduce administrivia and other distractions.

Each succeeding principal maintained the evolving culture — its values, beliefs, and operations — and added to it. Such was the case with Wiley, the current principal. Teachers report that Wiley has responded to the need to think about academics by promoting interest in looking critically at the academic program of the school. He has imbued this examination with his own expertise in curriculum. Teachers credit him with further influence on academics through his introduction of computer hardware and software. The qualities that described Dibert earlier remain in Wiley's administration; they have been institutionalized. For example, Morning Meeting still happens daily, "We meet as a family to start the day," explains Wiley. "It is a time when we can honor our students and applaud and celebrate their accomplishments."

In succession all four of these principals — the vision person, the people person, the empowering person, and the academic person — added important dimensions to Dibert. None of it could have happened as it did, with a widely held vision and shared decision making, without the structures and schedules that permitted the conversation to develop in the first place: Morning Meeting, where everyone in the school shares the first twenty minutes of the day; and Faculty Study, where faculty as a learning community continue to learn, grow, and improve their work with children.

John Dibert Elementary School sees itself as a family and a community of learners. Teachers are encouraged to innovate. They are involved in shared decision making, and they share a common vision of what the school should be and where it is headed. Reflection is encouraged. If conflict occurs, it is brought to the surface, shared openly, and resolved. The entire school learns together: students, teachers, parents, all. The school continually discovers how to create and change its reality.

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