Using Relationships, Responsibility, and Respect to Get From "Good to Great" in Memphis Middle Schools

This We Believe Characteristics

- *Educators who value working with this age group and are prepared to do so*
- *Courageous, collaborative leadership*
- *A shared vision that guides decisions*
- *An inviting, supportive, and safe environment*
- *High expectations for all members of the learning community*
- *Students and teachers engaged in active learning*
- *School-initiated family and community partnerships*
- *Organizational structures that support meaningful relationships and learning*

By Brenda Cassellius

> *Sustainable transformations follow a predictable pattern of build-up and breakthrough. Like pushing on a giant, heavy flywheel, it takes a lot of effort to get the thing moving at all, but with persistent pushing in a consistent direction over a long period of time, the flywheel builds momentum, eventually hitting a point of breakthrough.*
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> **—Jim Collins, *Good to Great* (p. 186)**

What makes a good middle school? More importantly, what makes a good middle school a great middle school? In August 2005, *TIME* magazine (Wallis, 2005) ran a cover story asking the question "Is Middle School Bad for Kids?" citing current trends and research supporting K–8 programming in some urban districts.[1] With the jury still out concerning the academic advantages of K–8 vs. 6–8 grade configurations, it would be unfortunate if the court of public opinion sways districts into too quickly jumping on a K–8 trend that could prove only to be an empty promise to a complex problem, or worse, another distraction from the real work that is needed at this critical stage of children's development. Another generation of middle school students could be lost.

Collins (2001) described this distraction as getting caught in the doom loop. Collins put it this way, "Instead of a quiet, deliberate process of figuring out what needs to be done and simply doing it, the comparison companies … frequently launched new programs, sought out the killer innovation, the miracle moment and tried to jump right to break-

Memphis middle school educators meet with community members to promote their BRIDGES to Quality initiative, designed to encourage student leadership and empowerment.

PHOTO COURTESY OF BRENDA CASSELLIUS

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through. Thinking they had found the quick solution or silver bullet to success, they would push the flywheel in one direction and then stop, change course, and throw it into yet another direction. After years of lurching back and forth, the comparison companies failed to sustain momentum, lost focus and fell into a doom loop" (p. 178). Educators have a long history of jumping from quick fix to quick fix.

Teachers have become so accustomed to the pendulum swings of new programming that a frequent saying among them is, "This too shall pass." Have you heard that lately? We get so distracted by the urgency to improve quickly and get instantaneous results that we neglect to fully understand data and use the data to guide a plan for fully implementing and evaluating the last innovation before jumping to another.

Schmoker (2005) in *On Common Ground*, described a dilemma similar to Collins' doom loop. He called it the "knowing-doing gap." It is not that we do not know what to do or do not have the capacity within each of us or collectively, it is the untapped potential that must be nurtured through relationships, passion, and teamwork. So how do you get out of the doom loop and begin doing what you know? You stop focusing on programs and the newest trends and start focusing on people—developing and supporting highly qualified teachers and administrators—to work toward a common goal. People do not go away. People either know or most often can be taught what to do. It is the passion and commitment of people that pushes the flywheel. It is getting them to do it that builds the sustained momentum that ensures success.

When educators in Memphis read the *TIME* headline "Is Middle School Bad For Kids?" (Wallis, 2005), we could not help but answer back with smiles on our faces and high five handshakes saying, "not in Memphis!" grinning ear to ear. We had just learned a few weeks earlier, after getting our state test results from the 2004–2005 school year, that two more of our middle schools that were on the state's high priority list two years prior for not making *adequate yearly progress* (AYP), were now upgraded to *good standing* and were now listed on the state's coveted celebration list. To add to the celebration, eight additional middle schools made such large gains that they, too, were eligible this year for the same honor. Seven of these eight had been placed in one of NCLB's most severe categories, Restructuring 1, based on the 2002–2003 data, and now they were

moving in the right direction. Because of our expectations of progress, we have proudly dubbed these eight schools our "2006 celebration schools."

Last summer, eight additional 6–8 middle schools made such large gains that they, too, were eligible for the state's coveted celebration list.

If grade configuration is not the silver bullet, what else affects school success? What does it take to move a school from good to great? Is it the latest trendy program? Is it a complete overhaul? We argue that it is none of the above. Rather it is, first, focusing on people working together, not programs. Second, it is refining the processes and defining the support. And third, through it all, leadership matters, and that is where we started in year one—leadership at the district level and principal leadership. In year two, we began cultivating teacher and student leadership, and in year three, we will dig deeper into the core elements of the middle school model and instructional pedagogy aligned to college readiness standards. We believe it is the continual cranking of the flywheel, the gaining of momentum, and creation of infectious enthusiasm that will get our staff, students, and our schools to the point of break-through. Then, the flywheel begins to fuel itself.

We attribute our success to our primary belief that change is first and foremost about the people—their attitudes and mindsets. This infectious enthusiasm exerted an outward synergy that fueled our flywheel and continues to build momentum.

Year One—A Context for Change

When the new superintendent of Memphis City Schools, Dr. Carol R. Johnson, came to lead the 21st largest urban school district in the United States, she knew what it would take to move a "good" school district to make it "great". Her slogan, "Relationships, Responsibility, and Results," summed up what she learned from years of experience in public schools. This year we added "Respect" to support the new district-wide behavior initiative that ended the use of corporal punishment and instituted a new structure for promoting self-discipline and positive student behavior.

One of the initial pushes on the flywheel involved setting the right mindset for change. The principals would need guidance if change was to be sustained and the trap of the doom loop avoided. All professional staff needed to be on the same page and speaking the same language. To accomplish that, we used three key resources for creating a foundation in the middle schools, *This We Believe* (2003) by NMSA, *The Quality School* by Glasser (1998), and Collins' (2001) bestseller, *Good to Great*. Memphis' early success can be attributed to the core tenets in *Good to Great*. Throughout the reform process, *This We Believe* and *Quality Schools* helped create Memphis' guiding principals and core foundation.

> *Initial pushes on the flywheel get it going, but it begins to gain enough momentum in the inner core that it begins to fuel itself.*

Good to Great is based on five years of research studying the difference between good companies and great companies. Collins discovered several key similarities in all the great companies he studied. The first was what he termed *Level 5 leaders*. A Level 5 leader is categorized as being incredibly ambitious, for the good of the company. Level 5 leaders have incredible humility and a strong will. They set their successors up for success and give credit to the team and others. The second similarity among great companies was the *First who-then what* strategy. Great companies first determined *who* the right people were to lead the organization and then determined *what* to work on. Collins asserted that a great organization has the right people on the bus in the right seats and the wrong people off the bus. Traditionally, getting the wrong people off the bus is often a little harder in the school community than in the private sector. Most importantly, Collins was clear to emphasize that getting the *who* right had to happen before identifying the *what*. The third key element of great companies was *confronting the brutal facts, yet never losing faith*. This involves getting key members of the team together, having courageous conversation, and naming those usually avoided topics, or "naming the elephants" in the room. This necessary open and honest dialogue allows for the root causes of any barriers to success to be identified so they can be addressed

later. Then, after closely examining the brutal realities, great companies define very precisely their *hedgehog concept*. Finding the hedgehog concept involves answering three essential questions: What are we most passionate about? What can we be the best in the world at? and What drives our economic engine? These three questions lead to the "big hairy audacious goal," which becomes the vision and ultimate mission of the team. Collins reiterated that getting great does not happen accidentally and does not happen unless there is a *culture of discipline*—disciplined people, disciplined thought, and disciplined action. Collins (2001) commented on this fifth key element: "When you have disciplined people, you don't need hierarchy. When you have disciplined thought, you don't need bureaucracy. When you have disciplined action, you don't need excessive control. When you have a culture of discipline with an ethic of entrepreneurship, you get the magical alchemy of great performance" (p. 13). Finally, the sixth key element in all great companies that Collins researched is *people think differently about technology*. Technology is not the igniter of transformation. It is the awesome accelerator.

Wrapping around this entire framework of great companies is the metaphor of the flywheel, which Collins claimed "captures the gestalt of the entire process of going from good to great." In becoming great, it is the small adjustments that matter most. A flywheel is like a large battery. With every crank on the flywheel, energy is created in an internal motor at the core. With more cranks, more energy is created, and the flywheel begins to exert energy outward. Less energy is required for the next push. So initial pushes on the flywheel get it going, but it begins to gain enough momentum in the inner core that it begins to fuel itself. This is exactly what our middle school team is doing—working first from within. *Good to Great* became our guide and initial push on the flywheel.

Level 5 Leadership

Compared to high-profile leaders with big personalities who make headlines and become celebrities, the good-to-great leaders seem to have come from Mars. Self-effacing, quiet, reserved, even shy—these leaders are a paradoxical blend of personal humility and professional will. They are more like Lincoln and Socrates than Patton and Caesar.

(Collins, 2001, p. 12)

Collins described Level 5 leaders as having humility and unending will. That is the determining difference between a Level 4 leader and a Level 5 leader. Having the right leader in place makes all the difference. As middle school superintendent, I was charged with the dual roles of identifying where success existed and also turning around schools that continued to struggle. My work and the work of our principals is never in isolation, and no one leader operates alone. The goal of Level 5 leadership is to mobilize the existing energy that uses collective effort strategically.

Superintendent Johnson inspires the vision, models the way, and encourages the heart. Even in the most difficult of situations, she acts with incredible integrity and demonstrates to her followers that she is confident and resolved to meet the high expectations she sets for herself and others. She strategically and intentionally builds relationships. She knows the value of positive relationships and believes that the way we get along with each other is the key to a successful learning community. She makes a point of celebrating, recognizing, and acknowledging the successes and hard work of everyone. When she spoke at her first annual all-district assembly, a bold move in her first year, 16,000 employees came to the local sports arena to hear her share from her heart the vision and mission for Memphis City Schools. During her speech she was careful to acknowledge members and staff from all departments including bus drivers, engineers, principals, teachers, and district personnel. She recognized the contributions of every segment within the organization and inspired all of us to see and appreciate the connections. We left charged, excited, and ready to go. We collectively began to believe we could do it and do it collectively as a team.

We are beginning to see examples of Level 5 leadership in many of our middle schools because the principals understand that they share a common goal focused on student achievement, and, as leaders, they must both lead and inspire as well as share with others the responsibility for student success.

Level 5 leadership was agreed upon by the middle school principals as the one "big hairy audacious goal," as Collins put it, that they wanted to develop in our first year working together. This courageous first step consumed our first year as a middle school team, and we could do little more toward reform because of the emotional energy and time required to fully explore Level 5 leadership. We spent time reading books on leadership from authors like

Collins (2001); Fullan (2001); Maxwell (2004); Covey (2004); Glasser (1998); Dufour, Eaker, & DuFour (2005); and many others that principals read on their own. This reading opened our minds and hearts to thinking differently about how we managed and led our schools and staffs. With our district's focus on relationships, we put our energy and effort into improving our relationships with each other, with our staffs, and with our students and parents.

This focus meant that every middle school principal began to help and support the success of other middle school colleagues. Instead of a competitive environment, we developed one where more honest sharing of both our success and our daily difficulties took place while we sought advice and ideas from each other for how to address them.

First Who, Then What

The good to great leaders began the transformation by first getting the right people on the bus (and the wrong people off the bus) and then figuring out where to drive it. The key here being, the "who" comes before the "what."

(Collins, 2001, p. 63)

Superintendent Johnson began exploring the organizational structure and engaging in the arduous task of discovering the "who" in such a large district. She knew we needed key people in key positions to influence change and get those first cranks on the flywheel going. She began by restructuring the school district administration and support to schools. Once she had the team defined, together we discovered that there were many departments acting in complete isolation, causing confusion and undue stress on schools. It seemed every district department had its own deadlines, meetings, and paperwork that principals were required to comply with. Principals needed one leader to report to, and distractions needed to be minimized. She restructured a key

Retreats, principals academy, and wisdom circles were all part of a coherent plan to develop leadership for the successful reinvigoration of 6–8 middle schools.

position of zone director with K–12 responsibilities to a new position of academic superintendent. This change recognized that change strategies are different at the elementary and secondary levels and was established to align the district by academic areas—elementary (K–5), middle (6–8), and high (9–12). This realignment allowed for more direct support to principals and created a focus on student learning. This district-level position organized by grade level created advocacy for and specialization in the developmental needs of young adolescents and provided direct district support to middle school staff. This change has been very important to the implementation and execution of elementary, middle, and high school reform efforts. We also created an executive leadership team and an academic leadership team that meet weekly to address district-level management, academic learning initiatives, and progress toward our academic goals, which we call "destinations." We have two academic destinations: first, *to accelerate learning for all toward graduation*, and second, *to ensure safe and welcoming school environments*. The district's restructuring began to break down existing fiefdoms and promoted a collective sense of purpose. It aligned support to schools, created efficiency, and eliminated distractions so that we could pursue the destinations throughout the organization.

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Show me a great school, and you will find a great leader leading great teachers who inspire students to greater achievement. Since the 2002–2003 school year, we have had 18 principal changes in Memphis' 31 middle schools. This was due to retirements, promotions, and fresh start schools. We spent the first few years finding the right principals to lead our middle schools and then put them in the right spot to lead. Having the right fit is important, and it takes a huge investment of time to ensure this happens. The decisions are not made lightly and involve many hours of discussion among the leadership team. This process is both a science and an art. Consideration must be given to current student performance, community needs, experience of the staff, grade

levels and size of student population, and what it will take to move achievement forward.

Furthermore, throughout the nation, middle schools—K–8 or 6–8—often struggle to recruit highly qualified staff. Under NCLB guidelines, all content teachers of seventh and eighth grade students must be highly qualified in their content area by the end of the 2005–2006 school year. In the 2002–2003 school year, the majority of the middle school teachers, particularly in the core academic areas (such as mathematics and science) did not meet the highly qualified content area standards. To further complicate the problem of highly qualified, the state of Tennessee permits teachers to teach two classes outside their licensed content area. In a typical six-period day, this can be nearly half of their assignments. This was one of those *brutal facts* facing our district. If we were going to get the right people on the bus, this had to be addressed immediately. Therefore, we began a full-scale campaign within our human resources department to ensure our teachers were highly qualified and had the content knowledge to teach in these high need areas.

Several initiatives for middle level teachers were initiated, including an in-house program of identifying and informing teachers on how to become highly qualified. Our proactive and responsive human resources department also established a content-based course to assist teachers in becoming highly qualified in their content areas and passing the Tennessee Praxis test. In addition, Memphis received a million dollar grant through The New Teacher Project, which helped us to restructure human resources processes that had interfered with the early recruitment of teachers and their retention. Those schools that were hard to staff—and this included almost all middle schools—had priority hiring for the first round of hiring in the early spring. These initiatives helped to accelerate our recruitment of teachers and ensured that more of them were highly qualified. We believe this will have a direct bearing on our achievement in the future. Furthermore, the leadership development of our principals into "lead managers" rather than "boss

Cory Harris, principal of Longview Middle School, a fresh start school, demonstrates his "Coat of Arms" at Team Trek.

managers," (a part of our Glasser (1998) training based on positive relationships and *Choice Theory*) gave principals strategies for better understanding how principal leadership influences teacher retention.

Confront the brutal facts, yet never lose faith

All good-to-great companies begin the process of finding a path to greatness by confronting the brutal facts of their current reality. When you start with an honest and diligent effort to determine the truth of your situation, the right decisions often become self-evident. It is impossible to make good decisions without infusing the entire process with an honest confrontation of the brutal facts. A primary task in taking a company from good to great is to create a culture wherein people have a tremendous opportunity to be heard and, ultimately, for the truth to be heard.

(Collins, 2001, p. 88)

My first experience as middle school superintendent involved attending a meeting of community agencies interested in reforming the middle schools in Memphis. As I sat at the table, I was keenly aware that there were no principals sitting at this table. I had not even had the opportunity to get to know the principals yet, much less understand what it was they needed. I could not help but wonder if the well-intentioned community supporters had been in our schools or talked with the principals about what they needed. As I sat there and listened, I found myself agreeing with much of what they were proposing. But something kept nagging at me. I knew from experience that no matter how well-researched or well-intentioned school change is, if it does not involve the principals from the beginning, and especially if it does not precisely target their areas of need, it will be perceived as an "add on," or worse yet, it will become a distraction from the real work that NCLB and new accountability measures have made so real for school administrators and teachers alike.

Not knowing anyone at the table well enough, I took a chance and asked them to consider putting their plans on hold until we could have an opportunity to listen to the principals and ask them what they needed before moving forward. I think they were a bit taken aback, but with further discussion, we came to a consensus that this would be the wisest approach. I created the Principal Advisory Team, later named the Concept Council, and invited the lead community member, Lisa Moore Willis from

BRIDGES, a youth advocacy center in Memphis, to become a member. I felt that if they were inviting us to the table, we could invite them to our table. She has been a valuable member ever since and provides a unique perspective to the team. After the Concept Council's initial meetings, we decided that while we were working on our leadership our students should be working on theirs, too. That is how BRIDGES to Quality, or B2Q as we call it, was born. The B2Q efforts were recognized by Congressman Harold Ford, Jr., and resulted in a federal appropriation of $480,000 for this major student leadership and empowerment initiative.

During our annual principals academy, the Concept Council got its first chance to sit down with all of the principals and have the critical conversations needed to begin our school improvement work. We used the strategy of Native American wisdom circles to quickly build intimacy and trust among our group. Wisdom circles are used to bring people together, giving each person an equal voice by taking turns in the circle and respecting each other's contributions by listening and not interrupting. It is particularly useful when trying to break down established hierarchical dynamics in a group and encourage honest feedback. It was very successful. We discussed three things—pluses, minuses, and wishes. The principals felt heard and valued and were genuinely encouraged, creating a strong foundation of a collaborative culture moving forward. This began the process of confronting the brutal facts and determining the *what* in terms of our focus on improvement and student learning goals.

Figure 1
Number of Middle Schools Making AYP (based on prior year's performance)
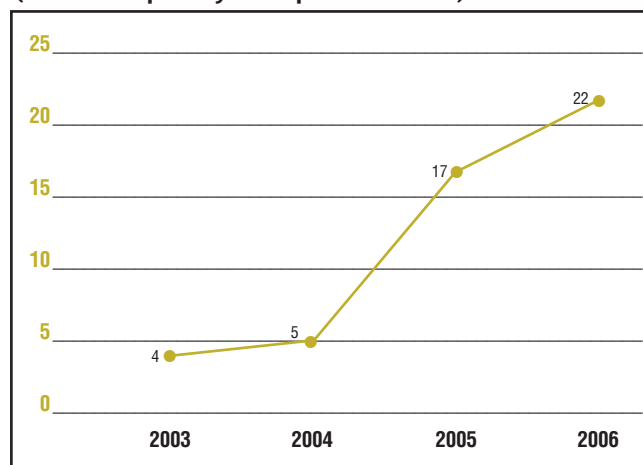
Figure 2
Middle Grades Configuration in Memphis

	CURRENT		PROPOSED	
K–8	1	3%	6	16%
1–8	1	3%	0	
5–8	3	8%	0	
6–8	21	55%	32	84%
7–8	2	5%	0	
7–9	3	8%	0	
7–12	7	18%	0	
TOTAL	38	100%	38	100%

- Build two new 6–8 middle schools
- Build two new K–8s
- Convert two K–5s to K–8s
- Convert one 1–8 to K–8 (adding Kindergarten)

See further information on background of grade configuration proposal in *5-year facility plan: Achieving the vision.* (2006). Available at www.mcsk12.net, p.50–61.

We started with the data. In the fall of 2003 (based on 2002–2003 data), only 4 of the 31 schools were identified by the Tennessee State Department of Education as being in good standing (Figure 1). In the 2002–2003 school year, 67.7% of the middle school eighth grade students[2] were scoring proficient in reading and 61.9 % were scoring proficient in math. Disaggregating the data by community cluster revealed great disparities. For example, Community 3 students scored lowest, 62.4% proficient in reading, and Community 2 students scored 52.9% proficient in math. To further compound the problem, suspension and attendance rates were just as dismal. In the 2003–2004 school year, during the first 120 days of school, we had 54,359 office referrals, 11,203 suspensions, administered 9,335 incidents of corporal punishment, saw 3,698 students cited for fighting, and expelled 350 students. The final yearly student attendance rate in 2002–2003 was 92%. Only 66% of schools made their attendance goals that year. During our first year, the 2003–2004 school year, our middle schools showed minimal gains in reading, with 68.8% of eighth grade students reading at proficiency. Our scores in math were slightly better—69.9% of eighth grade students were proficient (Figure 5).

As mentioned above, our data showed disparities by community. There was little equity among middle schools in the district. The quality of teaching was not standard in all schools throughout the city. Some schools received greater support, training, and

resources. There was little accountability in regard to equity of programming or resources and, therefore, little accountability to ensure quality or achievement results. To compound the problem, Memphis has eleven different grade configurations. Middle school students are arranged K–8, 1–8, 5–8, 6–8, 7–8, 7–9, and 7–12. Most young adolescents are assigned to 6–8 middle schools. However, when Memphis went to the middle school model in 1993, it never fully implemented the model, and due to both turnover in district leadership and financial cost, there was little support for finishing the reconfiguration of the schools to 6–8 organization. Recently, the Memphis Board of Commissioners embarked on a five-year facility study, which proposes a K–5, 6–8, and 9–12 grade structure for most schools. Where there are unique circumstances due to building utilization, land use, or community characteristics, we have supported an alternative K–8 model. Currently, we have two magnet schools, one K–8 and one 1–8. In the five-year facility study we are proposing the conversion of two K–5s to K–8s and building two new K–8 schools. Otherwise, all other changes proposed in our five-year facility study involve converting all other schools to the 6–8 grade configuration. We have added new K–8s only due to unique characteristics and facility use in particular communities (Figures 1 & 2).

In the *School Administrator* article "The Fate of Middle Schooling," authors Williamson and Johnston (1998) stated, "The greatest challenge to middle school education lies not in confronting outside forces but in looking inward and examining our own practice." As we took a closer look at ourselves, we could not help but see that our middle schools were in crisis. This discovery created a real sense of urgency among the principals. For the first time, they could collectively see that the first order of business was to agree that this state of affairs was unacceptable and, as a team, determine what we were going to do about it.

Develop Your Hedgehog Concept

Foxes pursue many ends at the same time and see the world in all its complexity. They are scattered or diffused, moving on many levels, says Berlin, never integrating their thinking into one overall concept or unifying vision. Hedgehogs, on the other hand, simplify a complex world into a single organizing idea, a basic principle or concept that unifies and guides everything.

(Collins, 2001, p. 91)

The Concept Council is responsible for the improvement agenda in the middle schools. We read through *Good to Great* together and struggled to discover the *what*. We had the *who*, but our hedgehog concept took longer to discover. At one long meeting, I remember one principal becoming frustrated and telling me to just tell them what to do. This was the standard way of the hierarchical culture and boss management style. As middle school superintendent, I would be tested, but I was trained to know that it had to come from them. They knew what worked. They had the answers, and patience would eventually bring it out of them. Again, this demonstrated the "knowing-doing gap" mentioned earlier. After months of meetings they finally answered those three essential questions: What are we most passionate about? What can we be the best in the world at? and What drives our economic engine? We decided our hedgehog concept would be "accelerate learning for all." Every decision we made would have to support our new mission.

We also knew that leadership was the key to our success, so we decided in our inaugural year to focus on developing Level 5 leadership within ourselves and teams. It was a priority for us. We decided that we would begin supporting each other in very strategic ways to strengthen and hone our personal and professional leadership skills. We developed a reading list of top books on leadership, divided ourselves into community clusters, and posted a "Weekly Check In," an inspirational essay, on the middle school Web site to keep us all connected and focused (http://memphis.urbanplanet.com/middle_school.html). When we got together for monthly principal meetings, our time in breakout was often spent sharing successes and building relationships with each other through the "wisdom circle." We continued to use the wisdom circle to encourage free sharing of ideas and thoughts. It created immediate closeness and eliminated differential power structures. It was very powerful when discussing difficult issues and getting at the real root of core problems. It was also a means for creating synergy and commitment to new ideas and initiatives. Many of the principals took the wisdom circle to their schools and used it with their teachers and students.

Mid-year we were ready to delve deeper into our development. We organized a shared training in Glasser's (1998) Choice Theory to learn more about basic human needs, relationships, and lead management. This was life changing for some. It helped others to work professionally with staff, parents, and students. With all the reading, the Weekly Check In, and the Choice Theory training, we were well on our way as a unified team with a common purpose. We were ready to take on more responsibility and continue cranking our flywheel.

The success story in Memphis is all about the generosity and caring the middle school principals show to each other on a daily basis. They have become systems thinkers, caring more about the overall achievement of all middle schools over the individual achievement of their own schools. They are more aware of the larger context and have a greater sense of the bigger purpose and their role in not only leading their schools but leading the district. Their accountability and love for each other is really unique and special.

A Culture of Discipline

All companies have culture, some companies have discipline, but few companies have a culture of discipline.

(Collins, 2001, p.13)

Grade configuration is an artifact of district organization. It is not the grade structure that is making the difference in our achievement at the middle level. It is the core belief and principles outlined in *This We Believe* by the National Middle School Association (2003) and other middle school scholarship such as *Turning Points 2000* (Jackson & Davis, 2000) that, when consistently implemented, makes the difference for our young adolescent learners. In 1993 the district efforts toward middle school reform were outstanding and built a strong foundation in the essential elements of educating

Figure 3
Growth of 6–8 Middle Schools in Memphis
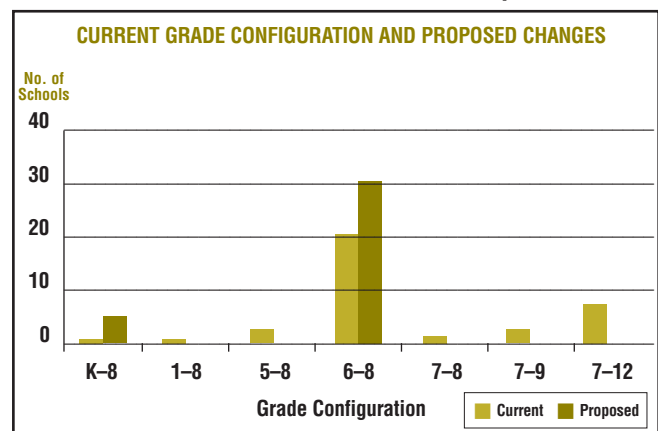
young adolescents, which are evident on an individual school basis. What was missing was the collective movement, the energy, and the momentum from a teamed approach—a professional learning community—engaged and advocated for at the district-level. It is this district systems-level effort that is the difference in getting great. We did not waste time looking for new answers. We spent time with the "knowing-doing gap," and strengthened our core knowledge through resurrecting our best practices and prior knowledge built from the strong foundation of years before.

One of the key elements in becoming a great organization is a culture of discipline. Collins (2001) said it takes disciplined people, disciplined thought, and disciplined action to create a culture of discipline. Creating a culture of discipline in schools is very difficult and adds to the complexity of educating middle school students. Our teachers and administrators must be ready for the challenges adolescents bring and must be self-disciplined to respond in supportive rather than destructive or demoralizing ways. Getting adults to adhere to the core practices requires coherence and consistency within the organization and must be modeled both top-down and down-up. It requires constant diligence and strategic and intentional action.

Let us take disciplined people first. We must always improve upon our technique, sharpening the saw. To do this, the middle school principals began a regime of reading. They then separated themselves into community clusters (local school groups of five to seven schools), a concept that the district had used before. Because the clusters had a K–12 focus, the principals in the previous cluster structure had little in common, making it more difficult to make connections and gain a shared purpose and vision. So we took an older concept that was somewhat successful in getting principals together, realigned it to middle school principals only, and made it more relevant and meaningful to the principals, who now have resurrected a familiar strategy and taken it from a good means of communicating to a great way of collaborating. Now principals are able to share best practices within their areas without having to feel uncomfortable because they are unfamiliar with another level of schooling. These new professional learning communities are beginning to branch out to include the instructional facilitators and teachers within the community clusters as well. This expansion has empowered the schools to develop professional networks among themselves

and has created a shared culture of best practice and discipline. This new approach is beginning to spread to all middle school clusters.

Moving to disciplined thought, every week we post on our middle school Web site a new inspirational message that sets the tone for the week. We call it the "Weekly Check In." I used to write them based on something I was reading or something great I saw during the week, but I was approached by a principal who asked if he could write for the Weekly Check In. I was thrilled that we were beginning to see the culture of learning among us taking off. The principals were stepping up and inspiring each other. Now all the middle school administrators take turns writing the Weekly Check In, which makes it more meaningful. We are constantly writing and sharing our thoughts and beliefs through the wisdom circle, clusters, and in the Weekly Check In. This helps build shared commitment and grounds and protects our core work.

Disciplined action is the most difficult of the three discipline culture components. People may say they are disciplined, but sometimes when the work gets tough, it gets sloppy, too. That is why we have each other to hold ourselves accountable for results. We are constantly evaluating our data on student attendance, behavior, and achievement and discussing it with teachers. We believe that the data is a clear indicator of whether the practices we have in place are truly being implemented in a way that raises student achievement and gets results.

We know that every day counts and that our credibility models the way for others. Therefore, it is essential that we have incredible self-discipline in our actions, thoughts, and selves. We have started a new process of focused quality walk-throughs to ensure a culture of discipline and quality learning environments. We have established teams of educators who walk through our schools and provide feedback to school leadership teams on our K–12 Common Characteristics of High Quality Schools. A recent study by Harvard's Wagner (2006) reported in *Education Week* found that when school walk-throughs are focused on student-centered questions rather than teacher-centered questions, more reliable and consistent information regarding quality of instruction is captured. The principals discuss with their cluster colleagues the criteria of common characteristics and by conducting their own walk-throughs are able to provide each other with concrete evidence and feedback. They also meet periodically in each other's schools, do walk-throughs, and talk about the level

of quality they find in their schools. Furthermore, they organize their attendance, achievement, and behavior data by cluster and share best practices to address any gaps within their cluster. This helps create equity and standards of practice that are aligned throughout the city and ensure accountability for high quality.

Technology Accelerators

When used right, technology becomes an accelerator of momentum, not a creator of it. The good-to-great companies never began their transitions with pioneering technology, for the simple reason that you cannot make good use of technology until you know which technologies are relevant.

(Collins, 2001, p. 152)

Since our hedgehog concept was "accelerating learning for all," the technology we used had to directly result in improved academic gains. We are using a reading program in all middle schools to meet the needs of students who are not proficient in reading. We are seeing early success with this program. We have also used technology to supplement a course recovery program for students during summer school and an intervention program during second semester that allows more time for students who did not pass a core class.

We were careful in investing our resources in technology. During the 2004–2005 school year we were approached by a company that wanted us to use their math program. Their program had been used in the past with mixed results, due primarily to poor implementation. We decided that instead of investing thousands to use that program, we would work with our new math adoption and its accompanying technology to accelerate learning. Since we knew it was about people and not programs, it was critical that teachers be given the support with the new math curriculum, calculators, and online resources associated with our new math curriculum. Technology is not always the ideal accelerator. The time and money saved was then invested in professional development for our teachers—an investment in people that avoids another distraction with learning a new program.

We did not focus all of our efforts on new technologies. We used existing technology in the district to help us communicate better, disaggregate data better, and provide extra support to our lower performing students. In the future, we plan to use a standards-based formative assessment system and

PDAs for our quality walk-throughs. These two technologies will help us continue to meet our goal of accelerating the quality of teaching and learning. Although technology is important, we have found through our 1:1 initiative at Longview Middle School that, although technology helps accelerate learning, it is really high quality leadership and high quality teachers implementing the technology that makes a difference.

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Cranking the Flywheel

When you let the flywheel do the talking, you don't need to fervently communicate your goals. People can just extrapolate from the momentum of the flywheel for themselves: "Hey, if we just keep doing this, look at where we can go!" As people decide among themselves to turn the fact of potential into the fact of results, the goal almost sets itself.

(Collins, 2001, p. 177)

The principals now work together in ways they had not before. We intentionally mixed the community clusters to promote dialogue and collaboration among the schools. We were developing leaders who care as much about all of the schools as they do about their own individual schools. They were not going to let each other fail. They have become responsible for each other and for each other's schools and students. This is what Fullan (2005) called "lateral capacity-building." In *On Common Ground*, Fullan wrote about his work on district reform and the development of professional learning communities:

> Individual school principals became almost as concerned about the success of other schools in the district as they were with the success of their own school. This is a direct result of being engaged in a larger purpose and getting to know other schools through walkthroughs (sic) and other lateral capacity-building strategies. These strategies might involve small clusters of schools working together to improve literacy or principals and teachers conducting walk-throughs of a school or schools to provide critical feedback to the staff. Their world-views and

commitments increased to encompass the larger system, but at the same time, they helped change the very system within which they work. They literally changed their context. (2005, p. 218)

This passage from *On Common Ground* described the Memphis middle school principals.

During the 2004–2005 school year, Memphis middle schools saw an increase in our reading and math scores. The district also saw student conduct (Figure 4) and attendance rates improve (92.7% to 93.5%). In 2004–2005 eighth grade students[2] scoring proficient or advanced increased significantly in both reading (to 80.2%) and math (to 74.4 %). These scores reflect an increase since the 2002–2003 school year when only 67.7% of eighth grade students scored proficient or advanced in reading/language arts and only 61.9% scored as well in math (Figure 5). Looking at the data by community shows that the middle schools met their goal of accelerating student learning. Those clusters and many of the individual schools, including those we reconstituted through a fresh start process, showed double digit gains in achievement (Figure 6). For example, Community 3, scoring lowest in reading proficiency in 2002–2003, jumped 15.4 % from 62.4 in 2002–2003 to 77.8% in 2004–2005. Community 2, scoring lowest in math in 2002–2003, jumped 13% from 52.9% in 2002–2003 to 65.9% in 2004–2005. Furthermore, both communities not only moved students to proficient, they began to accelerate learning into the advanced categories as well.

Figure 4

MIDDLE SCHOOL CONDUCT			
**First 120 Days of Each School Year*			
	2003–2004	**2004–2005**	**2005–2006**
Office Referrals	54,359	50,833	39,856
Suspensions	11,203	10,401	10,084
Corporal Punishment	9,335	2,795	0
Fights	3,698	4,032	3,510
Expulsions	350	364	351

** Note that this year we ended corporal punishment but in October of 2004–2005 we agreed before the Board vote to end it in 2005–2006, we chose as a group to phase it out. This is why the suspensions went up as we learned new strategies for promoting positive behavor and alternatives to suspension. As we continue to implement our Blue Ribbon Behavior Initiative and adjust to not having corporal punishment we expect to continue to see improvements in student behavior.

** Since I am writing this now. I decided to give comparision data from beginning of the school year to now.

Figure 5
Tennessee Comprehensive Achievement Test (TCAP)

Grade 8 TCAP Summary Results 2002–2005*					
	Reading/LA			Math		
Test Year	Below Proficient	Proficient	Advanced	Below Proficient	Proficient	Advanced
2002–03	32.3	51.0	16.7	38.2	50.1	11.8
2003–04	31.2	50.6	18.2	30.1	54.3	15.6
2004–05	19.8	59.5	20.8	25.6	58.1	16.3

All grade 8 middle school students except those from one school.

We believe this is a direct link to the professional sharing, support, and their sharp focus on the data these principals have been giving to each other regardless of their school's location.

We had some early cranks on our flywheel. Year one there were no new big initiatives or changes until the spring when the "fresh start," as we called it, or reconstituted schools were announced and the new district restructuring for the 2004–2005 school year was put in place. When we "fresh started" some schools, it created a sense of urgency. That was the first real push made on the flywheel. We developed the Concept Council. We focused our efforts on leadership development, we read, and we shared. Through all of these small but significant events, we developed our relationships with each other and our commitment to seeing that all middle schools were quality learning environments. Through this build up, we were able to define and refine our shared values and beliefs about educating children. Through it all we created a strong foundational core for the reform work ahead of us.

We know that continuing our work toward Level 5 leadership is critical, but now that we have a good grasp on the *what*, we have begun to tackle some of the harder issues around equity and quality through-out all middle schools in Memphis so that regardless of where a student lives he or she will be assured a standard of programming that is essential for the superintendent's new mission, "Every child, every day, college bound."

To paraphrase Collins (2001) in Chapter 8, it is not the big initiatives or new, large-scale discoveries that promote productivity. It is a simple focus on refining processes in small but innumerable ways. Such small but powerful adjustments emerge in team settings where a desire for improvement is encouraged by collective reinforcement and ongoing recognition and celebration of each small step forward, until, as Collins puts it, "the essential positive momentum is achieved.

Figure 6
Tennessee Comprehensive Achievement Test (TCAP)
Grade 8 TCAP Summary Results by Cluster

Grade 8 2002–03 TCAP Cluster Summary Results*					
	Reading/LA			Math		
Cluster	Below Proficient	Proficient	Advanced	Below Proficient	Proficient	Advanced
1	34.7	54.0	11.3	43.0	51.4	5.6
2	35.9	57.6	6.5	47.1	50.5	2.4
3	37.6	48.9	13.6	44.4	46.1	9.6
4	26.9	42.4	30.6	30.5	44.4	25.1
5	30.5	54.1	15.4	33.9	55.5	10.6

Grade 8 2003–04 TCAP Cluster Summary Results*					
	Reading/LA			Math		
Cluster	Below Proficient	Proficient	Advanced	Below Proficient	Proficient	Advanced
1	33.0	55.3	11.8	29.6	59.6	10.8
2	41.3	51.1	7.6	38.4	56.0	5.6
3	39.6	46.2	14.2	37.8	49.0	13.2
4	22.0	44.7	33.3	23.9	45.0	31.1
5	27.1	54.8	18.1	26.4	60.6	13.0

Grade 8 2004–05 TCAP Cluster Summary Results*					
	Reading/LA			Math		
Cluster	Below Proficient	Proficient	Advanced	Below Proficient	Proficient	Advanced
1	22.6	62.8	14.6	28.0	59.0	13.0
2	26.4	64.1	9.5	34.1	59.3	6.7
3	22.2	59.7	18.2	27.2	55.4	17.4
4	13.8	48.9	37.3	20.6	49.1	30.3
5	17.4	62.6	20.1	22.3	65.2	12.5

All grade 8 middle school students except those from one school.

Editor's Notes

[1]This is the same *TIME* article that erroneously reported: "A surprising number of other U.S. cities … [are] reversing the trend that created thousands of middle schools in the 1970s and '80s. Cincinnati and Cleveland, Ohio; Minneapolis, Minn.; Philadelphia; Memphis, Tenn.; and Baltimore, Md., are in various stages of reconfiguring their schools away from the middle school model and toward K-8s." Contrary to the claims in the *TIME* article, Figures 2 & 3 on pp. 10 & 11 document a 52% *increase* in the number of proposed 6-8 middle schools in Memphis.

[2]For technical reasons, the scores from one of the 31 middle schools have been excluded from these totals.

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