

Home > Resources > Community Connections > Community Collaboration

Coaching as a Transformative Force

Type: Horace Feature

Author(s): [Shug Brandell](#)

Source: *Horace* Winter 2007, Vol. 23 No. 4



At schools that align with the Common Principles, there's often a palpable sense of high expectations, personalization, and the purpose of school as a place for students to use their minds well. As the co-director and longtime school coach at the Michigan Coalition of Essential Schools (MCES), I have witnessed what it takes for schools to develop those qualities. This article focuses on McCulloch Science and Technology Academy and Northeast Elementary School in Jackson, Michigan, looking at elements of each school's evolution through interviews with staff members. I sat down with Julie Baker, a teacher at McCulloch, and Derry Sims, Northeast's principal, to ask about the transformations: what changed, and how did those developments support the schools to educate all students with personal attention and high standards for all? What made them attractive places to work?

Both educators reported specific elements that changed as a result of forming long-term relationships with MCES going back six years to the selection of MCES as a model provider for Comprehensive School Reform (CSR). Competitive CSR grants were provided to schools serving high-poverty populations. To be eligible, schools were required to select a nationally recognized school reform model to guide their school reform efforts. Jackson Public Schools' principals attended a CSR Model Provider Conference sponsored by the Michigan Department of Education. After comparing the various reform models, MCES was selected as the most appropriate partner for the Jackson schools primarily because it did not prescribe a reform that was program driven but worked with schools to implement the Common Principles in ways that made sense to their community.

Building collaboratively on the schools' strengths and addressing their weaknesses, MCES staff and coaches became partners in change that resulted in schools developing practices that:

- Made teaching, learning and leadership practices visible and accountable;
- Fostered the development of professional learning communities;
- Developed shared leadership practices; and
- Moved the schools' foci from teacher- to learner-centered.

Julie Baker, a fourth grade teacher at McCulloch, described the feeling of her students' first day this year, "The kids came in demonstrating a high level of confidence. They believe they are very capable. I showed them some math that they will be expected to do later on and they were eager to tackle it now, saying, 'We like hard problems.'" When asked how this differs from opening days before the partnership with MCES, Baker responded that the kids now understand the expectations; they help create the norms and display an ownership of the school. Students volunteer for many activities and show more responsibility. Although there is a high student turnover, students who have been there for a couple of years acculturate the new kids. There is more pride in the school and less vandalism."

Remarking on other changes in practice, Baker went on to say, "We came together for a retreat before school to look at student data side by side with parents and community members. We reviewed school policy and parent involvement. Parents are now able to handle MEAP [Michigan Educational Assessment Program, the state standardized test] data. And parents have great ideas about how they can support schools to improve student achievement. All staff worked on co-creating norms with the kids the first days of school. Even former 'resistors' are quick to create norms, rather than going the old way. We look at student work monthly as part of staff meetings. Everybody is part of planning all school activities including staff meetings. The teacher lounge conversations have changed; teachers ask, 'How did you teach this last year?' They are setting up time to team together and are sharing ideas about using best practices. Our goal for this year is

to redo our handbooks to include and align with the Common Principles.”

McCulloch was always a school that was dedicated to the students and families in this inner-city neighborhood of Jackson, a midsize industrial city in southern Michigan. The State of Michigan is the biggest employer, as the largest prison in the state system is located there. The school serves a high-poverty population of mostly African-American students. The principal, Frances Reeves, is remarkable in her determination to keep her school open and recruit community volunteers to support her students in any way possible. Due in part to improved student performance, there is less threat today that the school will be closed. Reflecting student choice, the student population has grown gradually which makes it quite unlikely that the school will be closed in the foreseeable future. Had the school closed, students would have been reassigned to several schools outside of the inner-city and families would have been less likely to be involved because they would not have the means to interact with school staff in an ongoing way that builds trusting relationships for meaningful school-parent partnerships. MCES helped strengthen the school's strong commitment to parent and community involvement by providing the focus of the Common Principles, especially those related to honoring parent involvement and promoting democratic and equitable practices. MCES staff and coaches were able to support the school's effort as advocates for the school by providing them with specific strategies for parent engagement based on Joyce Epstein's National Network of Partnership Schools (NNPS) at Johns Hopkins.

The halls resonate with echoes of the principal's mantra, “McCulloch students are the most intelligent people in the world!” From the moment they walk in the door, students are encouraged to think, behave, and learn in ways that will promise them bright futures. Mrs. Reeves and all staff members greet each student every morning with words of encouragement. Student work adorns the hallway and classroom walls. Students, parents, and staff members are obvious partners in student achievement and ownership of the school. Five years ago, the school was concerned about survival issues. Today, staff and students are now focused on teaching and learning.

Making Values Visible

Baker shared that adopting and implementing key Common Principles were crucial to transformation. She observed, “Putting into words what we already believed and valued, like personalization, made us pay attention to it. For students to use their minds well, we began protecting time during the day for that. Partnering with parents and the community helped them and us see what they can bring to the table. We developed a process of communication, of staying in touch. We changed the tone of our Annual Report [required by the state] and we're talking to these people as our audience. We want them to know what we've been working on and get everyone involved. Focusing on the Common Principles is like a magnifying glass. MCES gave us the tools to do this.” The MCES approach to school reform emphasizes four of the Common Principles as high-priority because of the leverage they have to create the conditions to implement all the principles and increasing student achievement. Those principles are:

Learning to use one's mind well
Personalization
Tone of trust and decency
Democracy and equity

McCulloch integrated these principles in ways unique to their context. Focusing on students using their minds well as the overarching principle, staff members also concentrated on knowing their students and families well. They also took the commitment to develop a tone of decency and respect to heart, highlighting the part about involving parents in meaningful ways. That, coupled with their dedication to democratic and equitable practices, drove them to be much more collaborative with parents as partners in educating the students. MCES provided coaching support and professional development in strategies for all of these principles.

Derry Sims, principal at Jackson Northeast Elementary, believes that communication, accountability, and creating structures for collaboration are the key transformational elements at his large urban school serving more than 700 students, most of whom are from families of color facing economic challenges. “The biggest change in our school is attitude. We didn't have a way to pull together. CES helped us be more open. Privatization in our practice has gone out the window. Teachers like to share and talk with each other. Establishing collaborative relationships has been a major factor; now people feel good about coming to work every day. Students and parents notice the way the staff behaves. Now everyone feels like contributing,

especially during student study groups at which we look at student work and lesson plans. Teachers are not afraid to ask for help like they used to be. Parents find involvement more rewarding. Every year, our school retreat involves more parents. They comment that they had no idea that all of this planning went into making our kids successful. Parents like the tone in the school and the things that we do.

"The main thing is you can't just talk about the Common Principles," Sims believes. "You have to make them visible. We put up a huge banner of the Principles in the lobby, and every classroom has the poster. They keep us focused on what we need to do. In many ways, we were doing it before, but just didn't have a name for it. We lived those principles because they aligned with our values and beliefs. When we first started the CSR change process with MCES, most were on board. We got the rest on board by bringing 28 different people to the trainings so they could see for themselves what the content was and that we were working hard to learn new ways of doing things. They came back and helped sell the naysayers. All staff members eventually became a part of it. I wasn't going to waste time on resisters, but gave them choice to leave. By making a difference as staff members, the naysayers came our way."

Sims describes best practice at Northeast in terms of schoolwide practice with an emphasis on sharing and doing the work together to improve instruction. "This was not the case before MCES. Now teachers ask how they can help each other by observing each other and providing critiques. Teachers are asking one another to come watch them and give feedback, whereas before, they locked their doors. Before, they wanted to know why I was visiting their class. Now I'm in classrooms every day and like a piece of furniture. They act like I'm not there, which is a big change."

Developing a Professional Learning Community

Baker also reflected on the importance of using the Cycle of Inquiry to make data-driven decisions at McCulloch. Baker recalled, "I don't remember sitting down and doing item analysis of the MEAP and other data analysis of multiple sources much, whereas now we spend 55 percent of the school retreat time to look at student performance and gaps. Most of the staff took part in the School Improvement Plan process, through which the data determine professional development and programs for kids. A big difference may be that I wasn't aware of data before because teachers weren't involved in that process."

Baker credits the intentional development of a professional learning community as to why a new teacher bid into the building. "He wanted common planning time, to visit one another's classrooms, and to meet before school to look at student work. Before we became a professional learning community, it was scary to have a peer observe me. Now, I really want it, because I can't get any better without that feedback. It's exciting to have colleagues see what my kids are doing. I hope that I can tweak my teaching not only to get better, but also to share what I'm doing so others can try it."

From Sims' perspective, "We had done curriculum mapping but didn't know how to pull together to make it work. The Cycle of Inquiry gave us a step-by-step process so it became easy for us. Based on the MEAP, we looked at data and knew what to focus on to improve. These practices are ingrained now, and we are still doing the same things when going to meetings by using protocols. We have our Student Success Groups [Northeast's term for Critical Friends Groups] look at student work, and use text-based-discussions at staff meetings. We have really become a learning organization."

As Sims talked about Northeast developing as a professional learning community, he stated, "That is fundamental to change. You start on day one to focus on student learning and surface shared values and norms. We no longer work as individuals, but as a team. We share with each other. The Principal has to lead and act as the catalyst for the change. Teachers have to trust and believe in me to help them to help the children. We have high expectations and failure is not in our vocabulary. As I mentor future principals, I tell them be mindful of how you carry yourself. If you want to be known as a professional, you have to dress and behave in a way that builds that-trust that you will help them succeed."

Shared Leadership

Baker commented on the change of leadership from principal powered to principle powered as crucial to McCulloch's transformation, observing, "The principal and staff members were greatly affected by learning about shared leadership, and now the faculty has say in so much of what happens, such as planning the school retreat. So much is now done by committee input versus driven by the administration. Meeting time is shared and all decisions are made with staff input and increasingly more and more with input from

community members. We have monthly meetings during which staff members look at lessons and reports and make decisions.”

This shift from principal directed leadership to shared leadership was one that MCES supported with professional development for each CSR school’s Leadership Team which included the principals. These teams acted much like School Improvement teams but their focus was on teaching and learning and to act as stewards of the school reform process. A teacher at heart, Principal Reeves believed in the power of shared leadership and gradually was able to “walk the talk” by relinquishing more and more staff meeting time from an administrative focus to a focus on teaching and learning.

One of the first steps that schools are asked to take in comprehensive school reform is to engage in using the Cycle of Inquiry to articulate the vision for the “graduates” of the school and to determine current status of the students as it relates to the vision. MCES coaches guided the development of the vision statement and assisted staff in identifying the data sources used to determine current reality. Then it became a habit of mind for the staff to seek evidence as to how they were doing as they set goals to achieve the broader vision. Once they developed the skills of data analysis, they were eager to see how their interventions resulted in improved student achievement.

In Baker’s view, “The principal provides support to give us uninterrupted time for instruction as she does the day-to-day operational tasks of handling student and parent issues. She is always checking into classrooms and is an advocate at the district and community level. She’s a strong link to the community and very encouraging. She has overcome adversity as the school was on hit list, but strong relationships with the community, encouraged by MCES, sent a message to the district that the school is valued and good things are happening.”

From the principal’s perspective, Sims says, “Before this experience, I thought we were doing a lot of things right to be successful, but there was really a lack of pulling things together. With the MCES workshops, we learned how to use protocols and norms to help us keep on track. Sharing leadership with the Leadership Team is different than before, when I felt I had to do everything. Now I see that every person on staff has a contribution and is able to take over some of the leadership roles. I really learned that the whole education process is about building relationships with staff, parents, students, and people in the community. It doesn’t cost money, just time and effort. It’s how you treat people, your staff, and you lose out when you don’t do that. We were making some progress but the old way of ‘my way or the highway’ didn’t work. Shared leadership makes everybody value the way we are doing things now.”

Sims believes the principal keeps the focus to make sure folks keep their sights on the goals. “I am a cheerleader and provider; what staff needs I provide, but I also need people to work with me to implement the ideas they come up with. Shared leadership is that way. Different people facilitate the meetings and that came from the training they’ve had. More can happen when we share leadership than when we try to do it all ourselves.”

Teacher-Centered to Learner-Centered

The MCES approach to school improvement relies heavily on the research on teaching and learning that guides schools to transforming their pedagogy from teacher-centered to learner-centered. Texts co-authored by Harvey Daniels and his colleagues from National Louis University, along with related conferences, have significantly influenced the Theory of Change followed by MCES CSR partner schools. Baker eagerly led the effort at McCulloch toward integrative units where everything is connected. “When kids’ hands shoot up while I’m explaining something, it used to be that I’d think, ‘Not now.’ But now, I know I need to call on them, because they are making connections. Having more hands-on and learning by inquiry – by wondering – is very effective. Hands-on means it has to be cooperative, but kids might not have that background, so you have to teach them the social skills of community building. You put them in groups and hope for the best. You deal with the fall out. Planning the lesson design is important for this work. It definitely feels that if I put a kid in front of me now and lecture for a long while, it would not feel right. I would be doing all the work, but my kids wouldn’t get anything out of it. They would not be engaged like with the hands-on approach. Looping with my kids to really get to know them, their learning styles, and their families is becoming part of the intentional practice here at McCulloch.”

Results

When asked what the impact from CSR has been on practice and performance, Sims listed several examples. "The Student Council is learning democratic values and running the school. Behaviors are different and everything runs smoothly because we are all on the same page about how we do things. We always had good discipline, but it is even less of a problem now; because teachers are doing things differently, the kids are not bored. Teachers are team teaching, specializing in their major field, and that's better for kids. We hadn't passed the MEAP in two years, Then we doubled our proficiency rate in just the first year of partnering with MCES. Although the MEAP testing starts in third grade, we consider it starting in grade K and have cross-grade meetings to align the curriculum to the state standards measured by the MEAP. By adopting the things we learned with MCES, we looked at the data and could prioritize where to focus our efforts. Last year, our third graders had the best scores in the district and exceeded the state average with 85 percent proficient in Math and 83 percent in English Language Arts, and that includes a significant number of English Language Learners."

The impact for Baker centers on her classroom, "For those of us who went through the training, it's hard not to think about those things, such as Literature Circles where students are loving a book, conversing and writing, and wanting to get more information because they love it. That's the end result from my perspective- more than the MEAP or a grade. The student is the product and you know what kind of student you want to send forward. Now I have a vision of what I want a student to look like and the best practices workshops with Smokey [Harvey Daniels] shaped the idea of how to get them there, and really get the goal right."

Future Transformations

Many of the students at Sims' school are from families of poverty and color; his mission is to close the achievement gap. According to Sims, "Talking about equity and how people are treated was a focus of MCES, and we use a lot of the tools and strategies from CES to address equity issues. Even though 90 percent of our students are in poverty, we don't treat kids like they are poor. We treat them all like they are our children or grandchildren." Besides being explicit in looking at data to determine what gaps exist in achievement, staff members eagerly engaged in text-based discussions addressing issues of equity. "The Pedagogy of Poverty, authored by Martin Halverson, is one piece of text that stands out in particular.

Reflecting on where McCullough is headed, Baker said, "We want to find more ways for the school to be more about authentic learning vs. testing. School reform shouldn't be about tests but having a vision of each student as a learner and how to get them there. I would have a sense of guilt if I went back to the more teacher-centered approach. Once you know there's something out there for your school and your students, it would be really hard to go back to the old way. You know you can build a better culture for staff to share, participate more, have more of a say. They are more committed making it a better place to work as opposed to staying in their rooms with the doors closed. We are more supportive and open about things we need help with. Teachers have fears. 'Am I doing this right?' Now there is freedom; you can say, 'I need help with this.' It's empowering to say that to one another. The results for students are in the products that they produce. By being involved in their school, they feel empowered also. We now send them out more able than before, more capable with more skills."

Serving students from preschool through sixth grade in urban Jackson, Michigan, Northeast Elementary School has 700 students, 47 teachers, and one administrator. Forty percent of its students are Latino or African American, 60 percent are Caucasian, and 90 percent receive free/reduced breakfast and lunch. The school is located within one and a half miles of five prisons.

Also in Jackson, Michigan, 207 preschool through sixth grade students attend McCulloch Academy, taught by 12 teachers and one administrator. McCulloch's students are 98 percent African American and two percent Caucasian and Latino. One hundred percent of its students receive free/reduced breakfast and lunch.

MCES staff uses these resources to coach educators to transform their practice from teacher-centered to learner-centered pedagogy:

Teaching the Best Practice Way, Methods That Matter, K-12 by Harvey Daniels and Marilyn Bizar, Stenhouse

Publishers.

Best Practice, Third Edition, by Steven Zemelman, Harvey Daniels, and Arthur Hyde, Heinemann.

School Leadership that Works from Research to Results by Robert Marzano, Timothy Walters, and Brian McNulty, ASCD.

The Michigan Coalition of Essential Schools, a regional center in Jackson, Michigan, was established in 1995 with considerable support from Jackson philanthropic organizations and area schools. The Board of Directors of MCES is committed to using the principles of CES to create true learner-centered schools. The work of MCES is to help educators, parents, students, and other stakeholders in developing students' ability to use their minds well. Rigorous academic standards and high expectations for all students are at the core of this effort. MCES has served as the school change partner in more than 50 schools across the state, almost all of which are historically low-performing schools with high percentages of children in poverty.

MCES aligns school change with the state School Improvement Framework by strengthening or creating a school-wide professional learning community that collaborates, inquires, and reflects about teaching and learning. Improving student achievement is at the heart of the ten Common Principles and the MCES model, which provides a Roadmap for Student Achievement to examine and improve practices in four key areas: school organization, classroom practice, leadership, and community connections.

MCES provides explicit training for the development of the school as a reflective learning organization focused on achieving clearly defined goals and indicators of success. Staff members study research on classroom best practices and adopt those practices according to the needs of the students. Students, teachers, administrators, and community members must share in the leadership of creating and sustaining a culture of inquiry by placing students at the center of the educational experience. Schools must develop and sustain meaningful, interactive relationships with their varied communities (i.e., parent, education, civic, business) so that all understand and share the vision and focus while taking an active role in helping the school reach high standards.

Related Resource

For more about Literature Circles at an Essential school, see "Literature Circles: Families Reading Together" in "Strengthening Bonds between Families and Schools," *Horace* Volume 19, Number 4, Summer 2003. This article is available online at www.essentialschools.org/cs/resources/view/ces_res/306

Shug Brandell is Co-director and School Reform Coach of the Michigan Coalition of Essential Schools, CES regional center with offices in Jackson, Michigan. She is a retired K-12 teacher, principal, central office administrator in the Battle Creek-Lakeview Schools.

This resource last updated: February 19, 2008

Database Information:

Source: <i>Horace</i> Winter 2007, Vol. 23 No. 4
Publication Year: 2007
Publisher: CES National
School Level: All
Audience: New to CES, Teacher, Parent
Issue: 23.4
Focus Area: Community Connections
STRAND: Community Connections: community collaboration