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Creating Shared Leadership That Works
*By Jerry D. Weast*

As school systems grapple with the very real challenges of providing a high-quality education to all students in the face of growing global competition and increasing diversity, our school leadership structures must evolve to meet those demands.

The classic schoolhouse of our childhood where teachers tended to their individual classrooms while principals were the sole recognized leader in the school needs to transition to a model based on shared leadership and ownership of student outcomes. In Montgomery County, Md., leadership at its core is about collaboration — establishing a culture where the collective wisdom of the team strengthens student learning in every classroom and creates an environment where we can take on the tough issues to ensure every child gets the best possible education.

Jerry D. Weast

At the leadership table in our schools, it is not uncommon to see teachers, parents, administrators, support professionals and, yes, even students, gathered as a professional learning community to make important decisions about the future. They pore over student performance data, reflect on case studies about the nation's most successful businesses, strategize to address students' needs and have difficult, frank conversations about the barriers to student success.

In one of our middle schools, the principal involved members of the student government on the professional learning community team. The team posed this question: What should faculty or the Student Government Association do when students are not learning? The students surveyed their peers and presented the findings to the entire staff. The teachers took the insightful feedback to heart and the students took on a new level of ownership of their learning. One 6th-grade student wrote, "I am pleased to be a student at a school that values our voice as students. As a student government, we are going to work hard to advance our professional learning community as well as improve our achievement."

**Learning Communities**
Sure, we have the traditional duties you find in every school, but cultivating professional learning communities is the strategy we believe will help us hit that next level of success and resolve issues that have perplexed us for generations. It is a key component of our professional development efforts. After all, professional

development is a linchpin to improving student achievement. You have to give all staff the training and tools to help all students be successful in the classroom.

The research is clear about the benefits of creating professional learning communities, and we are seeing results in Montgomery County. But making them a reality in large districts is a significant challenge. It takes an unwavering commitment from the organization to build professional learning communities that thrive.

We formed the Professional Learning Communities Institute to provide concentrated support to schools to enable this leadership transformation. In this leadership model, all stakeholders have a vested interest in student and staff learning as well as school improvement. As staff work and learn together during a two-year course of study, they bolster their collegial relationships, build on each other's strengths, move away from the idea of teaching as a solitary endeavor and look for new ways to solve old problems.

By building a trusting environment, you can have the honest and difficult discussions we must have if we truly want to close the achievement gap and create a nation where student success is no longer predictable by race. While we all think we may have high expectations for every student, student performance data across the nation clearly show that *isn't* the case or there would be no achievement gap in the first place.

As one teacher courageously pointed out during a team session in one of our schools, "Maybe our expectations for our students aren't as high as we think they are." That blunt acknowledgment provoked much discussion and resulted in real changes in the way the school approached the services it was providing to students.

Getting to true collaborative leadership takes time. In Montgomery County, we have deliberatively designed our system of professional development to create a platform for the Professional Learning Communities Institute to take root. We've boosted individual-level training, provided school-based positions devoted to professional development, increased the capacity of our leaders and forged strong working relationships with our employee associations. All three of our employee associations played critical roles in designing our professional development efforts and have a vested interest in their success.

**Human Capacity**
In designing the Professional Learning Communities Institute, we determined that we would learn from high-achieving schools in our district where students are thriving and the achievement gap is narrowing, as well as from the most successful businesses and organizations through a case-study approach. We learned the case-study method through participation with the Public Education Leadership Project at Harvard University. By immersing ourselves in such in-depth reviews, we honed the analytical and problem-solving skills of team members and provided a solid foundation for stronger collaboration to occur.

We couple the case-study approach with professional guidance to create action plans to drive change in the school building. The results have been heartening. Schools in the institute are making gains faster than the district and state averages. This approach also is helping our district successfully address the root causes of the disparities in academic achievement that long have plagued public education in

America.

If there is one thing I've learned as a superintendent for 32 years, it is that investing in the capacity of your people makes lasting and positive change possible and produces excellent student results.

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