

Action Now

TRANSFORMING SCHOOLS THROUGH COMMUNITY

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*This book is dedicated to my late husband, Solomon.
He was my emotional supporter, and really believed in me.
And to my grandchildren—Sean, Madison, Ryan, Michael,
Tayo, and Lola—each one precious, unique, and joyful.
They are the light of my life.*

*Many, many thanks to the amazing Karen Patterson,
who helped so much in the preparation of this manuscript.*

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Introduction

IT is a beautiful Bay Area day. I am standing at the Richmond Marina, admiring the plaques that commemorate World War II and the people who came together to build the Liberty ships. This was a time when diverse groups of people united and took pride in their accomplishments, as they finished ships for World War II. These ships were critical to the winning of the war.

I read the bronze plaque:

“When the work was done as patriotic anthems swelled and champagne sprayed over the new ships, how each worker took pride in what he had built and could believe in the slogan, ‘United we win.’”

This hopeful possibility of people coming together for a higher purpose brings joy, pride, and a sense of accomplishment. Is this not what many of us seek: being a part of a vibrant community that transcends ourselves? This kind of vibrant community is one we want to create in our schools.

The present book will examine community through three lenses. The principal sets the tone. What is it about schools, where children, families, and staff feel a sense of calm? It is the principal who determines this and who is the person who takes and must take a powerful leadership role. In schools with the proper tone collaboration takes place, the needs of children always come first,

and a sense of the common good is constantly present. Strong community-oriented principals know how to support teachers. How do they do it? It is not magic but rather very thoughtful work. They have the “big picture.” More critically they know how to break the big picture into smaller parts. They understand the importance of systems and how strong systems support the whole school. They know how to create systems and make sure that there is communication between systems.

The second lens through which this book examines community is the lens of the classroom teacher. These teachers preside over classrooms that convey a sharing sense and immediate vibrancy. Children are engaged in activities, and no one appears to be left out. There is a gentle hum to the classroom. How do these teachers manage to create an inclusive community? What are their beliefs about community? What are their beliefs about equity? How are they able to create a classroom where each child and each family is a valued member of the community? How do they encourage families to participate in the community? The following will delve into the answers to these questions.

Finally, the third lens we peer into is the lens of the community school. More and more schools now include services beyond traditional school subjects. Child care, medical and dental care, as well as counseling services are available at many schools. In certain buildings, these services interface seamlessly with the rest of the school day. At other schools this calm interface is not in effect. At certain schools the staff is clearly cognizant of their roles and responsibilities. At other schools, turf battles compromise the services offered. In effective community schools, parents learn how to become strong advocates for their children. When their children leave the school, the parents know what services are available in their communities and how to access them. These are the community schools that, in a sense, are transformative. In subsequent chapters we will discover what separates transformative community schools from those that are not.

What is the role of the leader in helping to create a community school that functions in the way it was intended to, where services are provided, and the staff dispenses services and are able to

make sure children and families utilizing the services feel that the school's services meet their needs? How does the leader ensure the total school community understands each service? How does he and she know how and where to refer families and children for multiple services and programs? How does the leader continually promote communication among programs and program providers?

Again, a leader who truly values the whole community is critical to the successful operation of a community school. This type of leader understands that every individual involved is valuable. The leader also understands each program offered by the school, and knows why each of the programs is needed. He or she takes time to be visible in each program. Finally, the leader creates a structure that includes all programs, and promotes understanding and interaction of service options with and throughout other programs.

The leader understands governance structures, and is able to develop a governance structure that works for both the social service component and the academic program. The leader prepares for the possibility that even after he or she leaves, the governance structure continues and thrives.

The Method

Many of the recommendations for community expressed in this book come straight from the source, i.e., administrators and teachers who have created schools with a community spirit and strong structures able to involve all stakeholders. The words of these teachers and principals, as transcribed from interviews, form the heart of this book.

Why were these particular people chosen to interview? They were chosen because step by step they have done the work. What is the evidence? The author has personally visited their classrooms and schools and witnessed their policies in action. When you go into classrooms and see families of all incomes and races coming together, the work is being done. When families who have historically not participated in schools, are now participat-

ing, the strategies introduced by leaders are working. It is not just that families are participating. It is that through this participation, they are learning to be advocates for their children, and this advocacy will help the future years of schooling to be strengthened for their children.

In addition, as family involvement takes place, community is developed. We see this same sense of empowerment and community at Kira's and Angie's schools. How, as an author, do I know this? I have viewed families of all income levels, participating on committees and in classrooms.

Why are so many ideas offered in this book? For several reasons. One reason is that the idea has to feel like a match for the individual teacher or principal. There are many entry points to start something, and those on the ground in schools have to start where they feel they will have the most success.

Secondly, when trying new things, starting small and building on a single idea is an intelligent approach. Several years ago I wrote a chapter with the Director of the Principal Leadership Institute at UC Berkeley. The chapter focused on how leadership at a school is important in introducing and sustaining the arts in a school ("Artful Teaching Ed" by Dave Donahue and Jennifer Stuart, Teachers College Press, 2010). One of the major findings was to *just start*, and that starting small is just fine. A principal we interviewed introduced ballroom dancing into his low income, Hispanic school. The reader may be chuckling, but it was a huge success, and from that start, he was able to build more arts into his program.

Sometimes we talk, talk, talk about acting and changing things. By actually implementing several strategies, however, staff and families can see change take place and hope begins to grow.

The same process is true with community schools. Begin with one resource and then add another. Zeroing in on one resource often has ripple effects, in that other changes take place, and unintended, positive results can occur. For example, at one community school studied, psychological services were greatly needed for children and families. A clinical social worker was hired and was able to support and supervise psychology graduate students

who needed to accrue practicum hours. These graduate students provided services to children and families, and also became vital advocates for the school.

Families who saw their children and themselves improve their situations, were very grateful for the help they received. The families gained more confidence, and ultimately began volunteering more at the school. This particular school was thus able to build on its initial success, and to add other services.

I have seen schools where there is focus group after focus group. What should we do with little actual action taking place? Beware of procrastination. Thoughtfully take action. You will very likely be part of an energized school and see positive results, some of which may be a serendipitous surprise.

Hopefully, after reading this book, you, the reader, will be able to integrate many of these ideas into your school. You will be able to think of community in a very broad way. You will be able to incorporate the “It takes a village . . .” philosophy.

No one wants to be on the outside looking in. You will be able to create a school where children and families are *all* on the inside.

Principals Tell Their Maya Angelou Stories

“People may not remember what you say, People may not remember what you do, But people always remember how you make them feel.”—Maya Angelou

For this book, I have interviewed principals who have created amazing schools, often under very trying circumstances. Their stories have lessons for the manifold ways that community evolves.

Angie’s Story

Angie is the eternal optimist. When you meet her, you are struck by her smile, warmth, and energy. Do not try to find her in her office. Most likely she is out visiting classrooms, on yard duty, or chatting with parents.

Angie is a person who sees the big picture. She knows where she wants her school to go, and she realizes it will take many carefully orchestrated steps and a great deal of work. Her school has many middle-income Caucasian families and also many families who entered under open enrollment. The latter families tend to be lower income and non-white.

Angie is preoccupied about issues of equity, and particularly concerned about the situation of African-American males at her school. Many of Angie's staff have been at the school a long time. She realizes her work begins with forming relationships.

“. . . So that building relationships or the just how do you greet someone in the morning. Do you come in with a smile? Is my attitude and demeanor—is it welcoming, or am I putting up walls by subtle things in my body language or my way of interacting with people? . . . And so I think it's really building community and really getting to know people is what you want. Then people see that; it comes through.”

Angie realizes that integrity is critical. Integrity can move a school forward.

“So then there's integrity too. I follow through with what I say, if I maintain confidences, and if I say I'm going to do something with a staff, I follow up with it. All of those little things. If I ask them about something they've told me about, then I'm building trust and camaraderie. And I think that makes a difference. I think it has to start with that.”

Also, Angie wants parents and teachers to know she can be trusted. Trust is essential. She states:

“Parents—I think they want to see me present and available, and they want to see that their concerns are being addressed. And I find that with parents, if they—their trust—if they trust that I have their child's best interest at heart and the best interest of the school, then they're more likely to come, convey a concern, and then be able to leave . . .”