

**A**lthough middle schools should be committed to student learning, developmental responsiveness, and social equity, most are focusing their attention on test scores, adequate yearly progress, and No Child Left Behind. Unfortunately, many middle schools do not use one of the most important strategies to improve student achievement and create socially equitable, developmentally responsive middle schools: becoming a professional learning community.

In 1990 Peter Senge published *The Fifth Discipline*, a book that inspired educators as they began transforming and reculturing their schools. Senge's five disciplines, which he contends are vital for a learning organization, are (1) systems thinking, (2) personal

mastery, (3) mental models, (4) building shared vision, and (5) team learning. It is shared vision and team learning that come to life in professional learning communities; however, all five disciplines are important to creating an environment that promotes collaborative learning.

#### **Systems Thinking and Shared Vision**

Senge advocates organizations addressing all five disciplines, but he believes that the first discipline, systems thinking, is the cornerstone of a learning organization because it integrates the other disciplines. The importance of this first discipline is illustrated in one urban middle school that was revitalized into a school where teachers truly feel committed to their students' intellectual, emotional,

# Shared Vision, Team Learning and Professional Learning Communities

By Sue C. Thompson  
and Earline McKelvy



and social growth.

The new principal and staff came together on a professional development day and envisioned the way they wanted their school to look in five years. They were told to “dream big” and see the whole picture, not individual parts. Their first goal was to develop a shared vision that would be the guidepost for all decisions they made about the school. They eliminated programs that did not fit their vision and they wrote grants for programs that did support it.

The most pressing task facing the principal in this urban school was to develop a sense of community among all the stakeholders. To be successful, staff, students, parents, and community members needed to rally around a common vision, the heart of

principal encouraged her staff to frame a professional development plan based on their needs.

“In developing our shared vision, we talked at length about what we expected our students to know and do,” she says. “Now we needed to pursue what we needed to know and do to ensure student achievement.”

The staff identified five strands for staff development: depth of knowledge, technology, diversity, pedagogy, and learning theory. They also developed a needs assessment based on what the students were expected to know and to learn, the skills and knowledge teachers needed, and pedagogy.

Teachers identified personal areas that needed attention and committed to personal mastery. The principal

advance the learning of their students. An important part of this process was to welcome and develop other leaders in the building—student leaders, teacher leaders, support staff leaders, and parent leaders who committed to the task of providing the necessary structure for promoting student learning and achievement.

Part of the development of the learning community involved setting procedures for accomplishing the work. This is a key element that cannot be ignored. Procedures say to the entire school community, “This is the way we do it here,” and that sense should pervade every aspect and activity of the school day.

A school assembly on the first day of school presents a golden opportunity to explain the vision and involve students

The new principal and staff came together on a professional development day and envisioned the way they wanted their school to look in five years.

which was a commitment to student achievement now and learning in the future. They needed to understand that for students to engage in the type of learning required in this world community, the important adults in their lives must also be clearly visible learners who embrace the idea “I must do and learn what is necessary to teach my students what they must do and learn.”

### Personal Mastery

The students cannot be the only learners in the school. Senge maintains that organizations learn only through people who learn, and that personal mastery can be defined as a commitment to one’s own lifelong learning. The urban school

made commitments as well.

1. The school day was organized so that both interdisciplinary and subject matter teams could plan together.
2. Study groups who had to meet after school were paid a stipend.
3. Special arrangements were made with a university to assist teachers who needed to deepen their knowledge of their subject matter.

The staff and the administration, bound by shared vision, now were committed to personal mastery.

### Mental Models

To build a learning community, the principal and staff needed to examine mental models, develop new models, and sometimes undo “old” models to

from the beginning. But principals may lose this important opportunity by starting with the do’s and don’ts rather than creating a sense of “we.” Starting with the rules says to the students, “I am the boss; I know what you need; and everyone here does what I say.” On the other hand, the principal with the mental model that says “If I lead effectively, I must develop other leaders,” might do the following:

1. Talk about the vision for the school and let the students know that she will need their suggestions and help.
2. Talk about the school as a learning community where everyone is expected to learn—the teachers, other staff, parents, and the

students. Tell the students about the learning the teachers accomplished during the summer and the learning experiences that the students should have in their classrooms.

3. Talk to the students about the goals and objectives of the school and ask that they share with her any suggestions for improvement.
4. Talk about ways of involving the students in all functions of the school that she and the teachers have discussed. Ask the students to write her a note suggesting

support a collaborative work culture. The principal must take leadership in creating and supporting an environment where stakeholders talk freely about student achievement, where staff members reflect on their practices and take risks to support student learning.

The urban school principal fostered the idea of team learning in several ways. For example,

- As the school staff members were developing their shared vision, the principal introduced the concepts of team learning, collaboration, community building, and reflection.

strategies, and activities. They developed total school strategies and designed lessons for thematic units, assessments, rubrics, criteria charts, and scoring guides.

- The principal provided substitutes so teachers could observe their colleagues. Collaboration became a norm. It was not unusual for a teacher to ask colleagues, and even the principal, to observe a new lesson and to give feedback.

### In the End

This kind of professional learning community can only emerge in a

To build a learning community, the principal and staff needed to examine mental models, develop new models, and sometimes undo “old” mental models to advance the learning of their students.

additional ways they can be involved. Give examples of “jobs” she is anxious to fill: writers, speakers, artists, photographers, technology experts.

### Team Learning

Senge’s fifth discipline is team learning, which differs from the concept of teaming. Most middle schools are organized into interdisciplinary teams, small learning communities, or houses. While these structures support team learning, team learning requires more.

Team learning must be part of the common language used to develop the shared vision. It must become a procedure; it must become the expectation of the way we are going to

- Most of the job-embedded staff development occurred during team planning time. These sessions were always held in different teachers’ classrooms and always started with a discussion of the classroom itself.
- The teachers became very adept at determining whether the current teaching unit was reflected in the classroom environment and if the room looked like “literacy is our focus.” They also discussed the student work displayed and whether the room met the criteria the teachers had established at the beginning of the year. If something needed improvement, the teachers always volunteered to help their peers. After the room review, the teachers shared information,

school culture of trust, risk-taking, and support. The confident principal understands the power of developing teacher and student leaders so that this empowerment translates to a successful school for everyone.

Students believe in their ability to learn because everyone is learning. Professional learning communities are a powerful resource for creating the kind of school that every student and adult appreciates and values. ■

*Sue Thompson is an associate professor in Urban Leadership and Policy Studies at the University of Missouri, Kansas City. e-mail [sthompson@sprintmail.com](mailto:sthompson@sprintmail.com)  
Earline McKelvy is the former principal of Central Middle School in Kansas City, Missouri.*