

# The Story of an Urban Learning Community

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## Abstract

This article is a case study of a highly effective school leader in an urban city in Connecticut who has created a successful learning community. Through a one-year study, which involved interviews and observations on a regular basis, the author ascertained the leadership practices and patterns of this leader that have led to a successful learning community where teachers, staff, parents, and children are valued and treated with respect, and children are achieving academically.

The article provides a description of the school and the school's leader. Through qualitative analysis themes emerged that served as the paradigm from which the school operates. The article gives examples of activities and programs and provides excerpts from direct quotes taken from teachers, staff, and parents that give evidence to their success as a learning community.

Key Words: learning community, leader, parent involvement, caring, collaborative, parents and education, community

## Introduction

Creating a learning community requires establishing relationships among teachers, students, parents, and administrators who work together on shared values, purposes, and commitments. Additionally, these shared values, purposes,

and commitments must bond with the community. This image suggests a different type of leadership than what exists in schools today (Cantania, 2001; DePree, 1989; Sergiovanni, 1992). In effective learning communities, leadership is shared. It is no longer the role of one person, but acquires a broadened definition that includes teachers, parents, and members of the entire educational community. Effective learning communities are successful in meeting the needs of the students, involving the parents in the educational process, and empowering the teachers as an integral part of the school community (Chamberlin, 2001; Villani & Atkins, 2000).

The Annenberg Institute at Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island has been doing research since 1995 with thousands of educators around the country to determine which schools are effective learning communities and why. Their results to date demonstrate that the most effective learning communities are schools where every member in the community has the responsibility and authority to take on leadership roles. These schools have embraced the concept of a learning community and have developed a collective vision, shared values and priorities, and strong accountability procedures to meet the vision and values that have been established. The core to the success of these learning communities is the leader. The common leadership strategies they have found to be most effective include: developing a shared vision, determining clear priorities, linking schools to the community, promoting professional development, providing a strong accountability system, and reorganizing the school structure (Neuman & Fisher, 2000).

The two most critical strategies from the list above in developing successful learning communities appear to be the development of partnerships with parents and the local school community and reorganizing the school structure. The Annenberg Institute found that the creation of these partnerships meant schools operated as an integral part of their community. In fact, schools need to become the center of the community by utilizing the knowledge and skills of community members, involving community members in the decision making process, eliciting feedback, creating successful partnerships, and welcoming the community into the school (Neuman & Fisher, 2000)

It appears that researchers and educators have begun to realize that improving student learning and achievement requires creating learning communities. However, according to the Annenberg Institute, the major ingredient is effective leadership, a leadership where the leader has vision, passion, strength, knowledge, commitment, and heart. The leader accomplishes this by framing the learning community as a collaborative sharing of all people involved. It is a relinquishing of the old standard of power and developing a collaborative and collective vision with shared values. It is having the learning community led

by a caring leader who is willing to do whatever it takes to create a an effective learning environment where all children are reaching their highest potential and feel cared for and safe (Goodlad, 2000; Judy & D'Amico, 1997). Schools like this exist and what follows is a one- year case study of an effective learning community led by a passionate, caring, and strong leader.

## Methods

During the 2001-2002 academic year I analyzed, through a qualitative case study, an urban elementary school in Bridgeport, Connecticut that had achieved high standardized test scores in reading and writing and had a reputation for being a successful learning community based not only on test scores, but also on satisfaction surveys completed by parents and collected by the school district. I visited the school on a bi-weekly basis and compiled the data for this case study through observations and interviews.

The principal of the school, all teachers and staff (17), and ten randomly selected parents were interviewed. Every tenth name on an alphabetized list of parents was selected; the total number of parents selected was sixteen. Of the initial sixteen parents who were contacted and asked to participate, ten agreed. Therefore, the total number of interviewees was twenty-eight. All interviews were tape recorded and then transcribed. I also did classroom observations and made field notes which were analyzed against the interview transcripts. The results from the interviews were analyzed according to groups (i.e., kindergarten teachers, first grade teachers, etc.). The interviews were analyzed for themes, and supporting quotations were extracted from the transcripts. I began each interview with three general questions, hoping to receive an overall sense of Newfield School, its leader, and its learning environment.

The interview questions that served as a guide for initiating conversation were as follows:

1. Tell me about your school.
2. Describe the leadership of the school.
3. Tell me about the relationships among the principal, staff, and parents.

## The Story

### Introduction

Carmen Perez-Dickson is an energetic, caring, passionate, family-oriented leader. Carmen is not shy or quiet but rather an imposing woman, whose presence is clearly known, despite her short stature. She wears colorful clothing

and jewelry and her eyes sparkle with enthusiasm for her school. She is a warm and sincere individual and is delighted to share her school with anyone who visits. She is an outspoken, dedicated Hispanic leader who lives her values and translates them to her school. Carmen is the principal of Newfield School and she lovingly refers to her students as her “Newfield Angels.” Her belief in her students is so strong that she has had t-shirts and sweatshirts made from her own resources that proudly display the words, “Newfield Angels.”

## The School

Newfield School is a pre-kindergarten through 3<sup>rd</sup> grade school in Bridgeport, Connecticut, an urban city in Fairfield County. The school has a total enrollment of approximately 188 students. The school has one administrator (the principal), 12.4 full-time faculty, 4.4 paraprofessionals, and 0.6 psychologists and speech/language therapists. The school also has one secretary, a custodian, 3 cafeteria workers, and a part-time home-school coordinator. The percentage of racial minority students is 98.9%, and 55% of the professional staff are minorities. The students’ race/ethnicity breakdown is: African American, 73.4%, Hispanic, 25.0%, and White, 1.1%.

The number of students who receive free or reduced lunch is 86.5%, as compared to the district average of 92.0%. The number of students with a non-English home language is 11.2% compared to the district-wide average of 31.1%.

The number of students who receive special education is 17.0%. Newfield School uses a school-wide approach to compensatory education. Supplemental instructional services include class tutors for language arts and a summer school program.

The school has a clear mission that was developed by the leader, all staff, parents, and community:

Newfield School is a small pre-kindergarten through third grade school where children are First! Our mission is to develop an effective partnership among all parents, community members and our staff members as stakeholders in our students’ lives. Together, the stakeholders will work collaboratively to develop a *positive learning community* where all students will benefit from quality education in a secure and nurturing environment. As a result, our students will become life long learners and productive citizens that will empower their community through their many successes. *Newfield is a total learning community.*

## The Leader

Newfield lives its mission because of its leader Carmen Perez-Dickson. Carmen is a leader who leads from her heart. She is a caring, dedicated, committed, and proactive leader whose main focus is to create a strong learning community for her students. When asked how she goes about creating a strong learning community, she responded, “it cannot be done unless everyone is working as a team and demonstrating mutual respect and accountability for all children.” Carmen’s bottom line is that all members of her school community are treated with mutual respect and are accountable for learning; this includes teachers, staff, parents, and students. “We are a team; we all come here and work as a team; we give 120 percent, and we all trust each other and collaborate.”

Carmen acknowledged this could not be done unless there is a strong and effective leader. In order to facilitate the learning community she has created, Carmen does many things. She models the behavior she expects, supports her staff with whatever resources they need, fosters the development of her students, and involves her parents in every aspect of Newfield School.

## Analysis and Results

Three major themes to describe Newfield School arose from the responses to the question, “Tell me about Newfield School.” The first theme was that the school has a “caring family environment.” Comments supporting this theme included statements such as, “it’s home here; I don’t feel like I am coming to work, but to my home,” “it is a family; no one is afraid,” and “the school works because we care; we are a family.” Teachers, staff, and parents supported the theme further by stating that Perez-Dickson fostered this “caring family environment.” The second theme that describes the school was a “collaborative and collegial environment.” Comments endlessly supported this theme. Teachers and staff remarked on how everyone in the school works together, all work is done collaboratively, and everyone is collegial. Teachers and staff stated that Perez-Dickson is very collaborative and collegial and again fosters this in Newfield School. A third theme that arose was “supportive leadership is the foundation.” All of the interviewees made comments that the foundation of the school and its family-like environment was the supportive leadership style of Perez-Dickson. Any home needs a solid foundation made of mortar and bricks that will last a lifetime. The “mortar and bricks” of Newfield School is the “supportive leadership style” of Perez-Dickson. Comments taken from the interviews support this: “she is supportive of everyone and is always on top of things; she gets things done;” “she really understands teachers and how children learn; she has a feeling for people, so she supports us in every way.”

Three major themes also arose from the question, “Describe the leadership of the school.” The first theme was that the leader, Carmen Perez-Dickson, was a “dedicated and passionate role model.” Comments supporting this theme included statements such as “she is a hands on person; she is involved in everything;” “...difference is that she is human, these kids know that she is not just an administrator, she is their friend, their mother, their nurse, whatever she needs to be.”

Carmen does things for all members of her school, students, staff, and parents. She drives parents to doctor’s appointments, makes home visits, and even drives children home when necessary. Carmen has an after-school program which she runs herself two of the five days each week. It is her philosophy that she cannot expect teachers and staff to do a job if she is not willing to do it. She models the responsibility and accountability that she expects from all.

The second theme that described the leadership was, “she is supportive, caring, and creates a family.” Comments supporting this theme included, “Your opinion matters; she wants your feedback and she collaborates with us and we work as a group, a team,” “Ms. Dickson goes above and beyond to get grants so that we have the necessary materials, and she advocates for her teachers to make sure we have whatever we need.” Carmen provides her teachers and staff with whatever resources they need. She goes beyond the revenues provided by the district and secures additional monies through the many grants she writes and through community support.

Carmen knows that creating a learning community goes beyond the core academics and scoring high on standardized tests. She recognizes that a learning community teaches the whole child: “Just teaching to the test does not work; it has to be holistic; it has to be more than passing the test; we care about learning about others, and we want our children to be sensitive to each other. We care about the whole child and family, we are a whole learning community.”

Carmen involves her parents on every level, evident in the portion of the theme that states, “she creates family.” Carmen has developed various parent programs such as classes on parenting and discipline, working with a child’s homework, and working with the school. Parents are actively involved through monthly parent meetings, volunteering in the school, taking workshops, and sitting on the school’s advisory council. The principal and staff report that parent participation is extremely high, at times close to ninety percent. However, making parent involvement work requires persistence and dedication from the leader and staff. One teacher reported, “we have weekly newsletters that go home; we have phones in our classrooms so we can call parents anytime...we have an open door policy; parents are welcome; they come in our classrooms; we allow them to come and sit and observe which makes them part of the

classroom; it says to the parents, ‘you are your child’s teachers, too, and we want you to know that we think that way about you.’”

Parents reported that the involvement was high and that they felt welcomed at all times. One parent stated, “This is a learning environment; nobody here is afraid to walk up to the principal and talk to her about whatever problem you may have...parents here are involved and reinforce the teachers and the homework they give.” Another parent described how her son had been in another school and the teacher would tell her every day that he was not “up to level” without telling her what that meant or giving her any support. She transferred her son to Newfield School and things changed, her son was doing well and there was constant communication with the parents. Another parent stated, “Here at Newfield they praise your children, encourage them, challenge them, focus on the positive; this is an awesome school.”

Additionally, Carmen has created strong links to the community at large, fostering partnerships with various organizations. For example, she created a partnership with St. Marks Church, which is across the street. Carmen holds her after school program there and her pre-K students go to day care there; St. Marks staff bring the students to school in the morning and pick them up at 11 a.m. In addition, several of the parishioners do a “read aloud” program for the Newfield students. Newfield School has partnerships with various agencies that provide support to the parents and the school. For example, Carmen became a member of the Lions Club, and as part of this became President of Eye Saver, affording her the opportunity to get eyeglasses free of charge for her students who lacked insurance or whose insurance only covered one pair, leaving a child whose glasses broke without the means to replace them. As Carmen stated, “people say parents don’t care, but that is not true; it’s that they don’t give them what they need, things that are basic to their survival; we are not afraid of touching our parents and having them hug us; we are not phony; we care about the whole child and family; we are a whole learning community.”

The third theme that arose was, “she sets high expectations.” As Carmen stated: “We motivate everybody; we give attendance awards daily; we announce any kind of recognition; everything gets praise, and we give very clear expectations of what we expect children and teachers to do...we let them know they can do the work and that they are smart; we have high expectations...we are always reaching for the stars.”

Academic achievement measured by state scores from 1999-2001 show that students who completed Newfield School performed above the district average and met state averages in reading, writing, and mathematics. Grade level, criterion referenced tests have revealed that students in grades one and two have consistently scored first in the school district in both reading and math.

Beyond academic achievement is the sense of pride and self-esteem that all students exude. There are many things that occur to make this happen. One such example is that Carmen gives out pins and certificates for students of the month. The criteria are that the students have been a pillar of character by being respectful to all and have done their best work. Students clamor to receive this recognition, and unlimited numbers of the award insure that every child receives it within the course of the school year.

The true testimony to how this learning community fosters high expectations can be seen in the students themselves. Student work is displayed all over the school and the students take pride in “showing off” their school to any and all visitors. They are excited about learning, evidenced by their desire to share their work not only with their parents but also with visitors. I never made a visit when a student did not want to share his or her work. The enthusiasm was contagious.

There was only one single theme that generated from the statement, “tell me about the relationships among staff and parents,” and that was “a caring and loving family.” Teachers and parents confirmed this repeatedly. As one teacher stated, “it is like home here, a family, we treat the students the way we would want our own children treated, and we expect nothing but the best.” Another parent commented with enthusiasm in her voice, “I love it here, we are a family, and they give each child the attention they need.” Another parent stated, “the principal has an open door policy; I can come and talk about my child anytime; she makes my child feel special; she makes each one of the children in this school feel special, as do the teachers.”

## Conclusion

Carmen Perez-Dickson, through her leadership, has enabled Newfield School to link itself to the community with a shared vision and a clear mission that “all children can learn.” She has created a true learning community where all share the education of the students at Newfield School. The question remains, “what is the key to creating such a successful learning community?” It seems clear that a dedicated, caring, passionate leader who sets high expectations, models the behavior that is expected of all, and reaches out to the parents and community at large is key. However, when Carmen was asked why she has been so successful in creating this environment, her answer was simple: “accountability...Educators need to do the job they get paid for; it’s that simple.”

In order to develop learning communities, leaders need to develop partnerships, delegate responsibilities, share leadership, involve the community, and,

foremost, be accountable. I am sure there are many schools such as Newfield that are successfully making these efforts. Still, the concept is not widespread, and the question remains, “why?” I think it is more than a lack of accountability, passion, or caring. Maybe it is because we have built the outside of the building with no inside or, more importantly, no foundation. It seems that what needs to happen first is for educational leaders to make a philosophical and pedagogical shift regarding the meaning of leadership and learning communities. In other words, leadership needs to be part of their “soul.” It is something they need to believe firmly in, be willing to make part of who they are, and be willing to share with other stakeholders in the school community. If that does not occur, then the work of places like the Newfield School become just another educational wave that eventually disappears and leads us right back to ineffective or non-existent learning communities.

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