Walking the Walk and Talking the Talk
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When I started my career as a band teacher, I would boost myself up on tough days: “You’re the best band teacher they’ve got here!” Of course, I was the only one. School principals can self-proclaim this same statement.

In his landmark book, Schoolteacher, Dan Lortie described the isolationism of teaching. It took three more decades for authors to describe the isolationism and loneliness of principals. To non-educators, it seems paradoxical: schools are full of people and excitement. How could someone feel adrift in all of that action?

District office staff attempt to bridge relationships, creating monthly opportunities for principals at the district office. All too frequently, those experiences are not fulfilling. “The monthly leadership meeting feels like I drive my truck to the central office and throw it in reverse to the loading door. Once the ‘beep, beep’ sounds cease, they load up stuff for me to do. I throw up the tailgate and head back to school, far heavier than when I came.”

In 2008, Gwinnett County Schools (GA) was one of the fastest growing districts in the nation with over 150,000 students. Geographically covering 437 square miles, schools were divided into high school feeder patterns of 7-10 schools each. Even with these attempts at creating smaller learning communities, principals desired to learn from other colleagues spread throughout the county.

In 2008, after a district-sponsored 5-day professional development institute on using protocols to examine student- and adult-generated work, a group of principals began to dream. Many of them came to the institute with teacher leaders and assistant principals from their home school and left confident how to implement with their school-based teams.

However, during some of the institute sessions, principals gathered together to give and receive feedback about each other’s work. In those moments, these leaders realized even with the most dynamic and thoughtful school leadership teams, they never could replicate learning with other principals. They were realizing their need for collaboration was growing and the opportunities to do so were dwindling.

They started in a way that seems too simple: scheduling a voluntary gathering after school of interested principals and myself as an external coach. All quotes in this article were written by principals as they exited one of these monthly meetings. 18 principals came to the first session.
– the beginning of an intentional learning community still going today, 8 years later. Additional groups eventually began around the district.

As we stop and think about their important learning, we examined our written reflections from the conclusion of each meeting. Five themes recur: tight on time, facilitator of adult learning, relevance, ownership, and risk-taking.

**Tight on Time**

“It is always the right call to make time for this meeting.”

Principals certainly have complicated jobs: from the drama of adults to the complexities of students and everything inbetween. Expected to be instructional and operational leaders, their time is valuable and could easily be filled by a myriad of tasks.

This competition for time is not new to the principalship but certainly has been exacerbated by the context of schooling in the 21st century: new curriculum standards, blended and personalized learning, increased accountability, litigious parents and advocates, threats on student safety. Principal members of this intentional learning community consistently report time is never available for the monthly gathering. As one principal reported, “Every time this meeting is on the calendar, I pause in the morning thinking I don’t have time. Then two hours later when the meeting is over, I am so glad I came.”

Sometimes it is the time of their teachers that most concern principals. Consider Daniel Skelton, principal at Level Creek Elementary School in Suwanee, GA. In an effort to value the time of teachers at his school, Skelton had been cancelling various staff meetings, replacing them with short videos he had created using screencasting software. Although many on his staff appreciated having more time, Skelton worried this practice was taking a toll on the adult community. Additionally, he was unclear how to manage the accountability of teachers truly engaging in the videos. After asking questions to clarify their own thinking as well as questions to push Skelton’s, the group took on his dilemma like it was our own. Using pronouns like “I, me, my, our, and we,” we raised possible assumptions and speculated what the teachers might be thinking. Finally, Skelton returned to the group and reported what he was now thinking. During the debrief of the protocol, participants shared our personal next steps. We marveled how the hour we just spent was far more efficient than many of our own meetings we lead.

**Facilitator of Adult Learning**

“I am becoming quite aware my feedback is only designed to affirm teachers. I just want everyone to be happy.”

Observing classrooms and crafting written feedback is an important responsibility for principals. States differ in their requirements to become an approved evaluator. Unfortunately, in most places, the approval process focuses on the rating, not the quality of the written feedback. In fact, the notion of evaluations being learning experiences for teachers is all too infrequent.

Stacey Schepens, principal of Crews Middle School in Lawrenceville, GA, created a leadership
focus among herself and her three assistant principals: increase feedback quality. She had
gathered feedback on her written feedback from her team but wondered whether they had been
completely honest.

At the next meeting of her principal colleagues, Schepens brought one of her written narratives
and sat back to listen. We described in objective terms what was evident. We interpreted about
the conditions under which Schepens crafted this narrative, and wondered aloud about the
assumptions she may have made in this classroom. Finally, we opportunistically identified
personal goals in the feedback we needed to write. We discussed how we sometimes write
feedback simply to meet evaluation requirements. As the penultimate step, Schepens returned
to the discussion, detailing her learning about how she was going to use this narrative to
facilitate learning for this teacher. Finally, the group discussed the process and how they might
use it in their own leadership teams.

Relevance

“It amazes me every single time - the work, no matter who brings it, is always relevant to my
own journey. I am glad I came because I was able to help someone else in the journey while
learning myself. Best of both worlds.”

As instructional leaders, principals persist for rigor and relevance in each of their school’s
classrooms. They design professional development suitable for the adults who desire engaging
and applicable experiences. Unfortunately, it is often rare for principals to be involved in their
own professional development meeting those two criteria.

Our intentional learning community does exactly that. Agendas are determined by the needs of
individuals as we use these monthly meetings to gather feedback what matters most to us.
Structured conversations, called protocols, from the School Reform Initiative are used to create
efficient and effective experiences modeling equity and excellence.

Sample Agenda

1. Opening: Connections
2. Written reflections snippets from last time
3. Text Study on a text brought by Tonya
4. Feedback Session presented by Christine, facilitated by Angie
5. Closing: Written Reflections

Yvonne Frey, former principal of Ivy Creek Elementary School in Buford, GA, was frustrated that
despite numerous training sessions with the math instructional coach how to rate constructed
responses, the reliability within and across grade levels continued to be uneven. Frey brought
the rubric and several samples of student work. Each principal rated the work and posted their
thinking. As predicted, there was very little agreement among the ratings. Frey sat away from
the group and listened to their discussion. As the last step in the process, she returned, offering
her next steps for improving assessment reliability at her school. During the debrief, each
principal noted their own next steps, even though Frey brought the work.
Ownership
“Talking in this way really made the data come to life. We were talking about the cluster’s kids - our kids.”
The Mill Creek cluster schools in Gwinnett County Public Schools wanted to work more coherently as a cluster. In fact, they had adopted a cluster-wide theme of “Stronger Together.” Principals from the six elementary schools, two middle schools, and one high school agreed to consistently meet to better coordinate and improve the experience of their 12,000 students.

As part of their learning, Jason Lane, the high school principal, brought graduation and dropout data. His disaggregation included the school history of each non-graduate: each elementary and middle school these students had attended over their 12+ year career. Each of his colleagues received a folder with the overall data as well as data personalized for their individual school.

The process was new to many: “Never have we looked at data like this,” commented several elementary school leaders. The protocol asked participants to not immediately talk: first just look. “As soon as the data was passed out, I wanted to talk. But just practicing the discipline to wait and using a structured conversation afforded us so much more.”

Although using the protocol’s particular steps was important for these leaders who frequently lead data meetings, a bigger learning emerged: ownership. After a thorough examination of the data, the group identified next steps at each campus to genuinely build a collective responsibility for the post-high school success of their cluster’s students.

Risk-taking
“I think there is a direct correlation between the amount of SQUIRM I feel to the amount of learning I am having” (uppercase original).
Collaborative leadership practices yield important dividends in schools. Andrew Bryk and colleagues have written about the successes of Chicago schools developing professional community. An important feature of these workplaces is risk-taking.

What is troublesome for principals is they are often the leaders of collaborative groups where they are ex officio members. Many times principals do not have their own group with which to practice the same risk they are expecting from their teaching staff.

Paul Willis, principal of Fort Daniel Elementary School in Dacula, GA, decided to bring a dilemma of his leadership practice to his intentional learning community. This wasn’t a problem for Willis, for if it truly was a problem, he would have already solved it. Instead, this situation smacked of a dilemma: a tangled web of assumptions, past practices, and current beliefs. He needed insights from outside his school.

A series of steps gave his colleagues deeper and deeper insights into the dilemma. We resisted our quick-fix solutions and “Have you tried...” quips. Instead, we accepted our job: to push and prod Willis’ thinking. Often times, a barrage of solutions and ideas do not cause an examination
of the dilemma; rather they simply ask the dilemma-holder to ascertain whether the offered solution matches the situation.

In this case, Willis’ own words indicate our performance: “I think there is a direct correlation between the amount of SQUIRM I feel to the amount of learning I am having” (uppercase original). Probing questions were used to offer other perspectives. A particularly poignant question was “In what ways might this dilemma be indicative of other processes or procedures at your school that also have gaps?”

Risk was evident in multiple ways. Clearly Willis risked his status with his colleagues by bringing an issue where his school wasn’t meeting his expectations. However, others demonstrated risk as well. With each step of the protocol, these leaders restrained their problem-solving tendencies, trading prescriptive ideas for probing interpretations.

**Our Norms**
*We prioritize our learning - risking and challenging ourselves as we:*

- **present**
  - bring work that matters to us

- **facilitate**
  - hone our skills

- **participate**
  - listen deeply and openly
  - give and receive purposeful and constructive feedback

_all the while, being trustworthy with what we discuss as we grow as leaders._

These are the norms for one of these intentional learning communities. They are not aspirational; rather, they are our chosen accountability, for we know through them we grow. Our time together allows us to model the very expectations we have the teachers we support.

**Web Resources**

This website serves as the storehouse of protocols. These structured conversations build community and practice equity among adults engaged in SRI Critical Friendship.

[www.schoolreforminitiative.org](http://www.schoolreforminitiative.org)

Examining work products of students and adults can produce powerful learning experiences. The Annenberg Institute for School Reform helped create the conditions to develop these structures.

[www.lasw.org](http://www.lasw.org)

Salem State University uses intentional learning communities and protocols as the foundation for their educational leadership program.

[www.salemstate.edu](http://www.salemstate.edu)