Connecting Capacity Building with Leadership

When the principal left Belvedere School, the faculty and the parents lacked the capacity to sustain its efforts at renewal. The gap left by her leaving was too large and too strategically placed (the things that she did were done only by her). The walls came tumbling down—at least, so it seemed. The reforms begun at Belvedere had created a good foundation for further capacity building: teachers were working together, decisions were being made jointly, a shared vision was emerging—certainly enough for teachers from other schools to notice. Belvedere was at a crossroads, one that was so fragile that those who were unsure wavered. Now would be the time for teachers and the new principal to recall their accomplishments and push forward, to use their leadership skills to further the capacity of the school for self-responsibility—this time with broader-based engagement.

Over the past 20 years, the term "capacity building" has frequently appeared in the education reform literature in the United States, although more so in the 1970s and '90s than in the '80s. Ann Lieberman (personal communication, 1997) points out that it was a

very popular term in the '70's and referred to creating the experiences and opportunities for people to learn how to do certain things. In the early '70s, improving schools through capacity building meant that principals would organize the school for improvement, teachers would learn to work in teams, and teachers would talk publicly about what they were doing. Many of the current reform strategies—inquiry, shared leadership, collaboration, collective responsibility—are woven into definitions of capacity building. The driving force in both eras, although not stated explicitly, has been the expansion or thickening of leadership. In the reform climate of the '90s, capacity building has taken on new importance.

Newmann and Wehlage in their 1995 work, *Successful School Restructuring*, firmly link student achievement to the effective work habits of adults:

> The most successful schools were those that used restructuring tools to help them function as professional communities. That is, they found a way to channel staff and student efforts toward a clear, commonly shared purpose for student learning; they created opportunities for teachers to collaborate and help one another achieve the purpose; and teachers in these schools took collective—not just individual—responsibility for student learning. Schools with strong professional communities were better able to offer authentic pedagogy and were more effective in promoting student achievement (p. 3).

The habits and conditions that allow a staff to work well as a unit contribute to a "professional community." Such communities are places in which teachers participate in decision making, have a shared sense of purpose, engage in collaborative work, and accept joint responsibility for the outcomes of their work. These dispositions and skills, as we shall see later, can be understood as leadership skills.

Definitions of capacity building include the usefulness of building an infrastructure of support that is aligned with the work of the school. This infrastructure usually involves the philosophy and mission of a district and school; the process for selecting personnel; resources

(time, money, and talent); staff training; work structures; policies; and available outside networks. If a district supports the internal capacity building of a school, it might delegate staff selection, resource allocation, and staff development decisions to the school. Further, the district would work with the school board to develop congruent policies for decentralization and to establish internal and external networks among schools and within the region. Chapter 6 describes these actions in more detail.

Viewing leadership as a collective learning process leads to the recognition that the dispositions, knowledge, and skills of capacity building are the same as those of leadership. Leadership capacity building, then, can be defined as broad-based, skillful participation in the *work of leadership*. This perspective focuses on two critical dimensions of participation—breadth and skillfulness:

- *Broad-based participation* means involving many people—administrators, parents, students, community members, district personnel, university faculty—in the work of leadership. I often refer to staff in discussions of building leadership capacity because they are the center of the effort. However, most schools will add members of the broader school community to their reform effort.
- *Skillful participation* refers to participants' comprehensive understanding of and demonstrated proficiency in the dispositions, knowledge, and skills of leadership.

A Leadership Capacity Matrix

The intersection of these two dimensions creates a dynamic relationship that allows us to describe conditions in schools with different levels of leadership capacity, as shown in the Leadership Capacity Matrix (see Figure 2.1). Each set of descriptors in the matrix addresses the role of the formal leader(s); the flow of information, defined staff roles, relationships among staff, norms, innovation in teaching and learning, and student achievement.

Figure 2.1. Leadership Capacity Matrix

Low skillfulness

1

- Autocratic administration
- Limited (primarily one-way) flow of information
- Codependent, paternal relationships
- Rigidly defined roles
- Norms of compliance
- Lack of innovation in teaching and learning
- Student achievement poor or showing short-term improvement

2

- Laissez-faire administration
- Fragmentation and lack of coherence of information and programs
- Norms of individualism
- Undefined roles and responsibilities
- Both excellent and poor classrooms
- "Spotty" innovation
- Student achievement static overall

Low participation – – – – – – – – – – – – – – – – **High participation**

3

- Trained leadership or site-based management team
- Limited uses of schoolwide data, information flow
- Within designated leadership groups
- Polarized staff, pockets of strong resistance
- Designated leaders acting efficiently; others serving in traditional roles
- Pockets of strong innovation and excellent classrooms
- Student achievement static or showing slight improvement

4

- Broad-based, skillful participation in the work of leadership
- Inquiry-based use of information to inform decisions and practice
- Roles and responsibilities that reflect broad involvement and collaboration
- Reflective practice/innovation as the norm
- High student achievement

High skillfulness

A caveat is necessary here. Whenever complex issues or conditions are divided into neat boxes, a problem results. Conditions are never neatly bound or clearly delineated. As you examine this matrix, keep that caveat in mind, realizing that these are approximations that often overlap and intermingle.

Quadrant 1: Low participation, low skillfulness

In a Quadrant 1 school, the principal often exercises autocratic leadership. The flow of information is one-way—from the principal to the staff (as well as from the superintendent to the principal). Presented information is usually regulatory in nature and requires staff compliance. Relationships are codependent; that is, teachers depend upon the principal for answers and guidance, and the principal depends upon the teachers to validate and reinforce his or her autocratic style. Those staff who would be actively resistant in a more open environment express their resistance in silent, nearly invisible ways (e.g., leaving as soon as school is out, absenteeism, doctor appointments on faculty meeting days). There is little innovation in teaching and learning among teachers. Proposals for new practices come from the top, and compliance is expected. Although short-term student achievement may rise, the increase is not sustainable, and student achievement will quickly return to where it was before. This time, teachers will be more disillusioned and disappointed than ever before.

Quadrant 2: High participation, low skillfulness

In a Quadrant 2 school, those in formal leadership positions may operate much of the time in a laissez-faire and unpredictable fashion (with intermittent periods of autocratic rule). Information, like programs and relationships, is fragmented, lacking any coherent pattern. For instance, because the school has no agreed-upon grading policies, some teachers are failing 70 percent of their students, often for absences or unfinished homework, while other teachers may not

penalize for these transgressions. And because there is no schoolwide focus on teaching and learning, poor teaching sometimes goes unnoticed. There is a strong ethos of rugged individualism, with a few skilled entrepreneurs leading pockets of innovation and many other participants "doing their own thing." Roles and responsibilities are unclear. Although overall student achievement is static, disaggregated data show that a few students (primarily girls in the lower grades and boys in the higher grades, and those of higher socioeconomic status) are doing very well whereas others are doing poorly.

Quadrant 3: High skillfulness, low participation

A Quadrant 3 school may be making progress toward reforms. They have selected a small leadership team whose members, along with the principal, are gaining some powerful leadership skills. They have learned to use available data to make school decisions. However, only a few key teacher activists have become involved. Pockets of active resistance are strong and increasingly vocal. Those staff who find themselves in the lonely middle lack the skills to negotiate their ideas and work through stages of conflict with reluctant staff. Roles and responsibilities are unclear for those who are not among the designated leaders. There are pockets of strong innovation and excellent classrooms, but focus on student learning is not a schoolwide norm. Although student achievement is showing slight gains, the long-term pattern is similar to that found in Quadrant 2.

Belvedere Middle School, referred to in Chapter 1 and described more completely in Chapter 4, is a Quadrant 3 School. It has pockets of strong innovations, some skilled leaders, and strong resistance as well. Resistors have used the principal's leaving as an opportunity to block further progress and to throw into question the entire process of reform.

Quadrant 4: High skillfulness, high participation

A school with high leadership capacity has a principal capable of *collaboration* and inclusive leading. More than half of the staff have

gained the leadership skills necessary to affect the norms, roles, and responsibilities of the school. The *schoolwide focus is on both student and adult learning*. Schoolwide inquiry generates and discovers information that informs practice and decisions. *Decision making is shared*. Information loops follow a spiraling process that keeps all informed and provides for reflective interpretation and construction of shared meaning (for examples, read the story of Capricorn High School in Chapter 5). Roles and responsibilities overlap, with each person taking personal and *collective responsibility* for the work of leadership. Staff describe themselves as being part of a professional community. *Student achievement is high*. Even disaggregated data show relatively little difference among socioeconomic or gender groups.

These four quadrants provide four scenarios of leadership capacity in schools. Of course, numerous other possible scenarios would blend many of these features in different combinations. For our purposes, I will use the indicators described here and offer assessment tools, stories, and strategies for your consideration. For instance, the Appendixes include staff and school assessment tools for estimating the level of leadership capacity in your school.

Critical Features of High Leadership Capacity

The work undertaken by Quadrant 4 schools is difficult. It needs to be informed and guided by skilled professionals who hold a firm vision of what it means to develop a school with high leadership capacity. The rich work now available on school reform can be distilled down to the elements in the matrix and the following five critical features of a successful school:

- Broad-based, skillful participation in the work of leadership
- Inquiry-based use of information to inform shared decisions and practice

- Roles and responsibilities that reflect broad involvement and collaboration
- Reflective practice/innovation as the norm
- High student achievement

The following sections describe each critical feature and the leadership dispositions, knowledge, and skills essential to the development of such a school. As noted earlier, Chapters 3 through 5 include specific stories of schools at each level of leadership capacity, the actions taken by their staffs, critical questions confronting each school, and suggested interventions and strategies. The matrix (Figure 2.1) and these five features are the backdrop for analyzing the school narratives.

Broad-based, skillful participation in the work of leadership

This feature is the essence of leadership capacity and requires attention to two areas: (1) structures and processes for participation and (2) opportunities to become skillful participants. (These correspond to the two axes on the Leadership Capacity Matrix—Participation and Skillfulness, respectively.)

A school needs several kinds of working groups. First, it needs governance groups that are representative of the school's many constituents: teachers, administrators, students, parents, community members, and, if possible, district office personnel and university faculty. Governance groups are charged with the authority to facilitate the decision-making processes in the school, engaging all faculty in those processes. Through mutual agreement, they will make some decisions directly; they will take others to the whole faculty. Governance groups, however, are just the beginning. Almost as important are the multiple groups needed for getting the work of the school done. These might include collaborative action research groups (ad hoc groups that all faculty serve on at least once) and grade-level and interdisciplinary teams. As stated in Chapter 1, collaborative work is

directly linked to school improvement and to children's and adults' learning. Yet the work must be spread out and shared, so that staff are not overwhelmed with tasks. It is important to note that the work involves two kinds of changes or shifts: (1) taking on different roles and tasks, and (2) working differently; that is, communicating differently in individual and group conversations (asking questions, listening, giving feedback).

Opportunities for collaboration are not enough in and of themselves. Shared work that is not skillfully done can be nonproductive because it focuses, for example, on war stories, complaints, and tales of atypical students. The leadership skills needed for collaborative work involve the ability to develop a shared sense of purpose with colleagues, facilitate group processes, communicate well, understand transition and change and their effects on people, mediate conflict, and hold a keen understanding of adult learning from a constructivist perspective. Such a perspective enables us to create mutual trust, hear each other, pose questions and look for answers together, and make sense of our common work. Individuals can learn these perspectives and skills through observation and guided practice, coaching, skill-focused dialogue (talking through strategies and approaches), and training.

Inquiry-based use of information to inform shared decisions and practice

Renewal processes include reflection, dialogue, question posing, inquiry (including use of data), construction of new meaning and knowledge, and action. Faculty meetings that use these processes can be highly stimulating. For example, an agenda might call for the staff to reflect upon past successes and beliefs about teaching the Constitution. Questions are posed: "Are the students experiencing this the way we think they are? What do they think about the Constitution by the end of their junior year?" A few focus groups—and an examination of student projects—can provide some interesting answers

from students that are shared with the rest of the faculty at the next meeting. The dialogue focuses on making sense of student responses in reference to staff experiences and beliefs. Working together, the staff might suggest alterations in how and where the Constitution is taught. This can be a natural and comfortable process. Even if all teachers are not teaching the Constitution, to the extent that others join in the inquiry and dialogue, this allows for a "tuning" process (McDonald, 1996) that is priceless for practice. By "tuning," McDonald means the improvement of the quality of the craft of teaching through hearing and considering feedback from multiple sources, both inside and outside the school.

Inquiry requires time—and it also requires rethinking how we use the time that we have, such as faculty meetings. Schools need to develop plans and schedules that create common time for dialogue and reflection. Often it is important to engage in proactive advocacy with the community, district, and political groups concerning the essential nature of professional time.

Even in the best of schools, polarization arises between those who are actively involved in change efforts and those who are holding back. A typical missing piece in reform efforts is a comprehensive information system that involves everyone at their varied stages of thinking and talking about the issues at hand. A communication system needs to keep all informed and involved through what are known as feedback loops. Information needs to accumulate and be reinterpreted as it moves through the school. For instance, if a school is considering block scheduling, staff members need to engage in numerous conversations to surface early concerns and ideas, interpret those concerns, and design strategies to work through problems. This could involve four or five rounds of small-scale conversations as concerns are heard and addressed. It cannot be done solely in writing or in whole faculty meeting pronouncements. It is essential that small, personal conversations take place about things that are happening in the school, how people are thinking and feeling about these develop-

ments, what ideas are occurring to them, and what meanings are emerging.

I have found that a useful strategy is to have a group such as a leadership team divide up the faculty among team members. For instance, each team member might take responsibility for six to eight faculty members with whom she or he regularly talks. Or a span of time—perhaps a week—can be set for a regular round of small conversations with others who have rooms nearby, who are in the same department or grade, who serve on similar teams, or who are chosen randomly. These small interactions can test the waters on ideas that are emerging in the team and invite new thoughts from faculty members. This fluid process weaves together the thinking and engagement of a staff in ways that diminish the likelihood of polarization.

Participation in shared governance groups is an important calling for a school leader. Each person should plan on doing this often during the course of a career. It is in such a setting that individuals can finely hone their leadership skills. Performed on a regular basis, the reciprocal learning processes can become familiar practice. Keep in mind that information will come to these groups in ways that are both formal (data and evidence) and informal (feedback loop conversations).

Roles and responsibilities that reflect broad involvement and collaboration

Growth in individual capacity brings about a change in self-perception and roles. As roles change, new behaviors emerge: staff members can speak before an adult group or analyze data, be persuasive with parents or district personnel, and ask critical questions. Teachers, particularly, no longer see themselves as responsible only for their classroom, but for the school as well. Old responses no longer work. A strong indicator of this shift is the questions that people ask in faculty rooms and meetings, and the items they suggest for agendas.

Consider the difference in the following items that individuals suggested for discussion over two years in an elementary school:

Year One

- Hours for individual aides
- Materials budget for each classroom
- Playground duty schedule
- Social committee report

Year Two

- Program review process
- K–6 reading program: How well are our students reading?
- Community participation in the school
- Professional development program

The scope of items changed in this school as teachers began to perceive their roles differently and to assume responsibility in a broader arena of work. These changes in perception took place as teachers were asked to reflect, to inquire, to construct meanings, and to rethink old actions (reciprocal learning processes). The year-one issues remained important, but the staff recognized the year-two issues as broader and more important in the long run.

The goal of shifting roles is to enable each participant to take responsibility for the classroom, the school, the community, and the profession. When faculty observe colleagues assuming responsibility outside of traditional roles, it is helpful to give feedback regarding that change. Such feedback might involve praising the idea, asking the next question ("and then what would happen if we . . . ?"), or asking how you can become involved in investigating this issue.

As roles change, relationships change. People see each other in a new light. They recognize new skills and resources in people they've known for years. As the opportunities for new ways of being together emerge, relationships can cut across former boundaries that had been

established. For instance, 1st grade teachers find new reasons for talking with 4th grade teachers; English teachers find something in common with math teachers. As more of who we are becomes exposed, we find more in common with others.

Assuming responsibility for the agreements that the school community has made represents an important role shift. Agreements usually require that everyone's role change, and this can be done only with the full involvement of everyone affected. Otherwise the principal is cast as the "implementor," the person who must force the change on the school through edict, evaluation, supervision, or monitoring. Decisions need to be accompanied by explicit agreements about responsibilities for each aspect of the new or modified program.

Reflective practice/innovation as the norm

The cycle of inquiry described above has an essential reflective phase. Many forms of reflection must become an integral part of the school: reflection on beliefs, assumptions, and past practice (the first step in constructivism); reflection in action, in practice; collective reflection during dialogue and in coaching relationships. To make such habits of mind the norm, time must be available for reflection, a "language of reflection" must be part of the talk of the school (deliberate use of phrases like "I've been thinking about, pondering . . . ," "When I reflect upon . . . ," "I need to reflect about that"); reflection must be demonstrated and honored—but never used as an obstacle; rather it must be seen as the prelude before movement to action.

Reflection leads to the opportunity to "run with" an idea, to see it through. If the principal customarily blocks ideas, if discretionary resources are lacking, if there are restrictive policies or district unwillingness, the ideas are not likely to blossom on a regular basis. If a school community feels that an idea warrants a trial, many doors need to open to enable the inventors (entrepreneurs) to transform the idea

into reality. Innovators should be encouraged to involve other colleagues, to establish responsible criteria for success, and to create a realistic time line for monitoring and evaluation.

High student achievement

The central focus of any school must be teaching and learning. Learning needs to be viewed as "authentic"—that is, based on real tasks that have a relationship to work and life in society or in the family. Curriculum, instruction, and assessment that are authentic involve performances and products that transfer into the actual world of citizenship as well as future scholarship. A comprehensive view of authentic relationships with children requires that teaching roles expand to include teacher as facilitator, mentor, coach, and advisor.

Information about student achievement gathered through performances and products is the most precious kind of information for inquiry and general improvement. This information needs to cycle back to students and parents as well—those who can help interpret the meaning of the information and help to refine instructional processes. Parents make fine pedagogical partners, for they have deep knowledge about how their children learn.

Student learning is the *content* of leadership. It is what we talk about, struggle with, decide about, plan for. Unless the reciprocal learning processes of leadership include student learning, we will have only process for the sake of process.

In this book, student achievement is broadly conceived and has several components:

- Academic achievement in work that is authentically performed and assessed whenever possible
- Positive involvement (good attendance, few suspensions, low dropout rate, high graduation rate, parent and student satisfaction)
- Resiliency behaviors (self-direction, problem solving, social competence, having a sense of purpose and future)

- Equitable gains across socioeconomic groups; improvement regardless of gender, race, or ethnicity
- Narrowed gaps between socioeconomic groups
- Sustained improvement over time, with improvement increasing and gaps narrowing the longer that students are exposed to school improvement factors

The Role of the Principal

Teachers must take the major responsibility for building leadership capacity in schools and ultimately for the work of school improvement. Teachers represent the largest and most stable group of adults in the school, and the most politically powerful (Lambert, Kent, Richert, Collay, & Dietz, 1997). However, the role of the principal is more important than ever. Sound contradictory?

Why is the role of the principal more important than ever? Because the work is much more complex than we thought it was; it demands a more sophisticated set of skills and understandings than ever before. It is more difficult to build leadership capacity among colleagues than to tell colleagues what to do. It is more difficult to be full partners with other adults engaged in hard work than to evaluate and supervise subordinates.

This hard work requires that principals and teachers alike serve as reflective, inquiring practitioners who can sustain real dialogue and can seek outside feedback to assist with self-analysis. These learning processes require finely honed skills in communication, group process facilitation, inquiry, conflict mediation, and dialogue. Further, these skills are generally not the focus of many professional preparation programs and must be refined on the job.

Principals' leadership is crucial because they are uniquely situated to exercise some special skills of initiation, support, and visioning. Among the more important tasks for the principal is to establish collegial relationships in an environment that may previously have

fostered dependency relationships. For instance, teachers may have been accustomed to asking permission, waiting to discover clues of right behavior from the principal, expecting the principal to clarify goals and programs, receiving praise and criticism, being uninformed about the overall direction of the school. The principal may have derived much of her informal authority from teachers' expectations that she would behave in a benevolently authoritarian way. Breaking through this "codependency" arrangement requires staff to develop adult-to-adult relationships with each other. Here are a few examples of successful strategies for breaking codependent relationships:

- When a staff member asks the principal's permission for something he wants to do, she can redirect the question by asking, "What do you recommend?"
- When a staff group remains silent, waiting for "the answer" from the principal, the principal can say, "I've thought about this issue in three ways. . . . Help me analyze and critique these ideas," or "I don't know the answers. . . . Let's think it through together."
- When the staff have expectations about the role of the principal and refuse to take on responsibilities "because that is the principal's job," the principal can ask the staff to explicitly negotiate in a faculty meeting everyone's roles and responsibilities. During this discussion, the principal can clarify her perceptions and consider and discuss other expectations.
- When a teachers union objects to changing role expectations, those involved shouldn't accept the objection at face value; they should insist on a thorough discussion of the issue and opportunities for a negotiated reconsideration.

The first column of the Rubric of Emerging Teacher Leadership (Appendix C) describes many kinds of codependent and dependent behaviors.

Much of the vital work on student achievement described in this book comes from the studies of Newmann and Wehlage (1995, 1996). They did not ignore the role of the principal. They found that principals in successful restructuring schools demonstrate some consistent habits of leadership that are compelling in their clarity. Formal leaders in restructuring schools "gave central attention to building a schoolwide collective focus on student learning of high intellectual quality" (p. 291). By keeping issues of teaching and learning at the center of the dialogue, these leaders built organizational capacity in their schools. They consistently expressed the norms and values that defined the school's vision, initiated conversations, and provoked staff to think about that vision. They created time for reflective inquiry and staff development and shared power by being at the center of the school's organizational pattern. In a critically important role, they were conflict managers and politicians in the best sense, often seeking waivers, resources, and policies to support the restructuring work.

If such principals are teaching others in the school to understand what they are doing and to be able to behave in similar ways, we can say that these principals are the teachers of teachers when it comes to building leadership capacity. On the other hand, if key teachers want to move the school and it is the principal who is reluctant, teachers must educate the principal, making suggestions, posing questions, volunteering to take responsibility for certain tasks, and giving feedback.

Principals can use authority to reinforce and maintain dependent relationships or to establish and maintain processes that improve the leadership capacity of the school. To accomplish the latter, a principal can do the following:

- Develop a shared vision based on school community values by involving staff and community in a process that allows them to reflect upon their own cherished values, listen to those held by others, and

make sense through dialogue of how to bring personal and community values together into a shared vision statement.

- Organize, focus, and maintain momentum in the learning dialogue by convening the group on a regular basis.
- Interpret and protect school community values, assuring both focus and congruence with teaching and learning approaches.
- Work with all participants to implement school community decisions.

These uses of authority will actually redistribute authority and power in a school so that a culture of peers—a professional community—can grow. The following strategies can help principals be highly effective in creating a culture of peers and building leadership capacity within the school:

- Posing questions that hold up assumptions and beliefs for reexamination
- Remaining silent, letting other voices surface
- Promoting dialogue and conversations
- Raising a range of possibilities but avoiding simplistic answers
- Keeping the value agenda on the table, reminding the group that what they have agreed on is important, focusing attention
- Providing space and time for people to struggle with tough issues
- Confronting data, subjecting one's own ideas to the challenge of evidence
- Turning a concern into a question
- Being wrong with grace, candor, and humility
- Being explicit and public about strategies, since the purpose is to model, demonstrate, and teach them to others

When a principal uses the authority of the position to convene and sustain the conversation, and demonstrates for a staff and school community the enabling behaviors listed above, the school is on a

sure road toward building leadership capacity. The goal that focuses a principal's choice of behaviors is to enable more and more individuals to build their own informal authority and demonstrate leadership behaviors. The sum of these concerted efforts is broad-based, skillful participation in the work of leadership.