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Schools as Learning Communities Pages 33-37

Building a Community of Hope

Thomas J. Sergiovanni

Hopeful school communities clearly articulate their articles of faith and then create realistic structures to translate faith into action.



Archimedes once said, "Give me a lever long enough . . . and I shall move the world." In many schools, the lever that can make difficult situations manageable and challenging goals attainable is

hope. Placing hope at the core of our school community provides encouragement and promotes clear thinking and informed action, giving us the leverage we need to close the achievement gap and solve other intractable problems.

The evidence suggests that hope can be a powerful force. We know that sick people who belong to groups that provide encouragement, prayer, or other forms of support get healthier and stay healthier than do sick people who lack the benefit of this hopeful support. According to Roset,

Medical researchers find that a sense of hopefulness, from an increased sense of control, is connected with biological changes that enhance physical, as well as mental, health. (1999, p. 7)

But too often, hope is overlooked or misunderstood. Modern management theory tells us that the only results that count are those you can see and compute—not those you can feel. According to this theory, we must be objective; look at hard evidence before we dare to believe, think, or judge; and in other ways blindly face reality. "If it can't be measured," the saying goes, "it can't be managed."

Why tie our hands and discourage our hearts when we know that hope can make a difference? Educators can be both hopeful and realistic as long as the possibilities for change remain open. Being realistic differs from facing reality in important ways. Facing reality means accepting the inevitability of a situation or circumstance; being realistic means calculating the odds with an eye toward optimism.

Hope and Wishful Thinking

Hoping is often confused with wishing. But hope is grounded in realism, not in wishful thinking. Menninger, Mayman, and Pruyser write about *realistic hope*, which they define as

the attempt to understand the concrete conditions of reality, to see one's own role in it realistically, and to engage in such efforts of thoughtful action as might be expected to bring about the hoped-for change. (1963, p. 385)

The activating effect of hope makes the difference (see fig. 1). Some education communities engage in wishful thinking but take no deliberate action to make their wishes come true. Hopeful education communities, in contrast, take action to turn their hopes into reality.

Figure 1. Wishful Leaders/Hopeful Leaders

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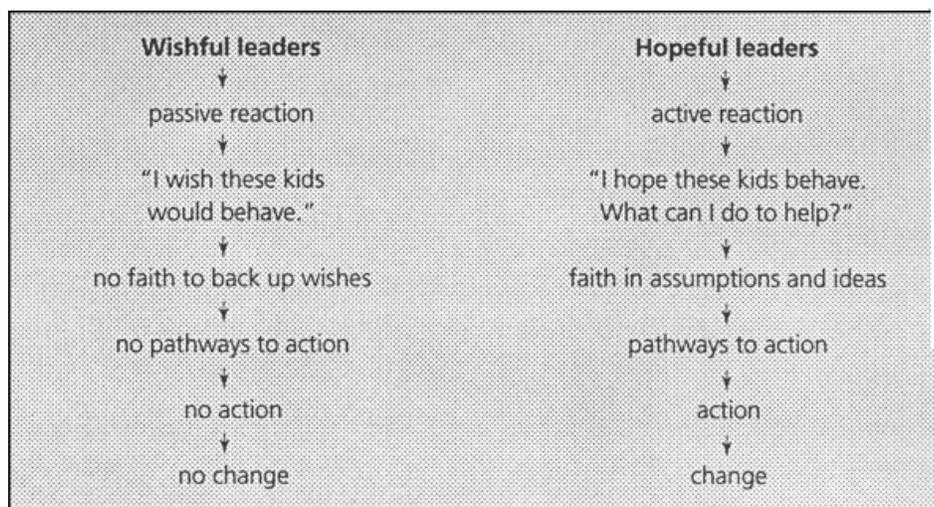
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Hope and Faith

Hope and faith go together. Faith comes from commitment to a cause and strong belief in a set of ideas.

Hope is so closely linked to faith that the two tend to blend into one. . . . No matter what we put our faith *in*, when faith goes, hope goes with it. In some ways, hope *is* faith—faith with our eyes on possibilities for the future. (Smedes, 1998, p. 21)

This quotation brings us closer to an understanding of how hope works to help schools become effective learning communities. Organizations often communicate faith as a set of assumptions. By publicly articulating and endorsing our key assumptions, we make them come alive and give them the power to stir others to action. We might have faith, for example, that

- All students can succeed if given appropriate support.
- Under the right conditions, both students and teachers will take responsibility for their own learning.
- Schools can transform themselves into caring learning communities.
- Given the opportunity and the training, all parents can be effective partners in the education of their children.
- Under the right circumstances, all teachers can become leaders if the issues are important to them.

These assumptions suggest pathways that bring faith and action together. For example, our faith that all students can succeed will remain wishful thinking unless we transform it into hope by providing the necessary support to ensure that all students *do* succeed.

School leaders have an important responsibility here. They need to guide the school community in developing and articulating its articles of faith, thereby creating a powerful force of ideas. These ideas provide the basis for becoming a community of hope, and they fuel the school's efforts to transform hope into reality. Developing a community of hope elevates the work of leadership to the level of moral action.

Schools Built Around Hope

The following examples show how faith fuels hope and how hope can transform a school.

A Framework for Hope

In 1995, test scores at Wyandotte High School in Kansas City, Kansas, were among the lowest in the state, threatening the school's accreditation. "Even at their worst, other schools in the district could always guarantee that they were 'at least better than Wyandotte'" (Stewart, 2004, p. 75).

Instead of closing the school, the district made a last-ditch effort to improve it. Wyandotte administrators were hopeful that the school could succeed, but they recognized that their hope needed to be embedded in ideas that they trusted. A framework of reform called First Things First, developed by the Institute for Research and Reform in Education and adopted districtwide in Kansas City, provided the key to building a new community of hope at Wyandotte. School staff committed to this framework, which identified seven crucial conditions for school improvement (Institute for Research and Reform in Education, n.d.).

Four features specifically applied to students. The school would

- Provide continuity of care by forming Small Learning Communities that keep the same group of professionals and students together for extended periods during the day and across multiple school years.

- Set high, clear, and fair standards for academics and conduct that clearly define what all students will know and be able to do by graduation and at key points along the way.
- Reduce student-adult ratios to 15:1 or lower during core instructional periods, primarily by redistributing the professional staff.
- Provide enriched and diverse opportunities for students to learn, perform, and be recognized.

Three features specifically applied to teachers and administrators. The school would

- Equip, empower, and expect all teaching staff to implement standards-based instruction that actively engages all students in learning by giving teaching teams the authority to make instructional decisions, creating opportunities for continual staff learning, and specifying clear expectations about what good teaching and learning look like.
- Give Small Learning Communities the flexibility to quickly redirect resources (time, money, people, and space) to meet emerging needs.
- Ensure collective responsibility for student outcomes by providing collective incentives and consequences for teaching teams based on improvements in district performance.

As the Wyandotte staff worked toward faithful implementation of the First Things First framework, staff members increasingly committed to aligning their practice with the framework. Each of the school's eight Small Learning Communities pairs a team of 10 teachers with a group of 150–200 students, who remain together throughout their high school experience. Mutual commitment to and belief in the framework have created a greater sense of community among school staff members. Teacher study groups have emerged, and peer coaching has become an established practice, further helping to develop a collaborative culture.

Ample evidence exists that the Wyandotte of today has been remarkably successful in improving student learning as measured by a variety of tests and other indicators. Perhaps most telling, however, is that “families used to stand in line to have their child transferred from Wyandotte. Now families are asking to transfer their child to Wyandotte” (Stewart, 2004, p. 82).

Pathways to Success

Samuel Gompers Elementary School in Detroit, Michigan, houses approximately 350 students in an economically distressed urban neighborhood.¹ More than 90 percent of the students live at the poverty level. Students come to Gompers with basic needs for food, clothing, shelter, and security. Many have never visited a dentist or received their basic health immunizations before coming to school. Yet the school espouses an ambitious goal: to ensure “that our students have the skills to become contributing members of a global society.” To achieve that goal,

Our school will successfully educate all students in a clean, safe, and healthy learning environment. We will meet the needs of the whole child through the developmental pathways: cognitive-intellectual, physical, social-interactive, speech and language, moral, and psycho-emotional. (Samuel Gompers Elementary School, 2000, p. 9)

The developmental pathways that provide the structure to turn Gompers's hopes into reality are components of the Comer process—officially known as the School Development Program. This approach to school improvement rejects the belief that low-income parents cannot adequately prepare children for school and that low-income children cannot perform well in school. Instead, the Comer process assumes that teachers, principals, and other members of the school community are willing and able to ensure that students succeed. It also assumes that schools are concerned with the whole child—that fulfilling students' needs and providing a supportive climate create the essential conditions for academic learning (Comer, 1980).

In 1993, Gompers Elementary School committed to the assumptions underlying the Comer process. The staff put its faith into action through Comer's developmental pathways, which provide a research-based strategy for improvement.

- The *cognitive-intellectual pathway* emphasizes the ability to understand and use information and the ability to understand and change the environment. The school pursues this core pathway through hands-on teaching and learning, metacognitive learning, academic clubs, and after-school tutoring. One out of every three students received tutoring during the 2001–2002 school year. Students who fall behind attend a required Summer Learning Academy.
- The *physical pathway* stresses that each student will receive proper nutrition, be physically fit, and enjoy good health. Gompers ensures that its students have warm and clean clothes to wear. Groups such as the local post office and the National Association of Women Business Owners have supplied almost all students with new coats each winter (McDonald, 2003). The hum of a washing machine and dryer in the school is nearly continuous. Students are given “safe route” maps to follow in getting to school and back home again. Breakfast is served to all students in their classrooms.
- The *social-interactive pathway* emphasizes students' ability to be empathetic, to communicate in relationships, and to interact with others who differ from them. The school provides a full complement of sports, extracurricular clubs, peer mentoring, cross-age

reading parties, and other opportunities that encourage cooperative learning.

- The *speech and language pathway* emphasizes building communication skills across the curriculum. The school also addresses this pathway through a daily morning assembly, a variety of school productions, and speech and language workshops. The school invites parents with 2- and 3-year-old children to attend workshops designed to help them support their children's growing language skills.
- The *moral pathway* emphasizes respect for the rights and needs of others and addresses additional character development issues. For example, a weekly "Efficacy" class for 3rd, 4th, and 5th graders helps students make choices that respect the rights and interests of others.
- The *psycho-emotional pathway* addresses self-esteem issues and the ability to express emotion while respecting others. In an enriched co-curricular program, the school provides both intervention programs—such as anger management and living with ADHD—and enrichment programs, such as dance, art, and drama.

Hope at Gompers does not occur by accident; the school staff nurtures hope through a carefully planned, sustained school improvement effort. The developmental pathways outlined by the Comer process provide practical and successful means to address problems and improve conditions. Faith in the assumptions underlying the pathways gives Gompers staff members hope.

And their hope has become a reality. Gompers students have consistently improved their Metropolitan Achievement Test scores. In 2000, Gompers ranked 221 of 2,013 Michigan schools on the Michigan Educational Assessment, earning the highest scores in the state among schools in its size category (School Development Program, 2001). Test scores aside, the school earned the U.S. Department of Education's 1996 National Title I School Recognition Award for outstanding progress in compensatory education and was listed in 1995 as one of the 10 best schools in Detroit. The Department of Education selected Gompers as a Blue Ribbon School in 2000–2001.

From Hope to Action

Other schools have high hopes, too, but are not succeeding because they have no systematic process for transforming hope into action. As Snyder and colleagues (1991) write,

Individuals with high hope possess goals, find pathways to these goals, navigate around obstacles, and develop agency to reach their goals.

The process of turning hope into reality requires that we answer the following questions:

- What are our goals? (What do we hope for?)
- What are our pathways? (What routes will we take to realize our hopes?)
- What obstacles do we face?
- How committed are we to actually doing something to realize our hopes?
- Is efficacy present in sufficient strength? (Do we believe strongly enough that we can make a difference?)
- If our school's efficacy is low, how can we strengthen it?

The question of efficacy is crucial. The jury is still out on which view of human nature will prevail—optimistic or pessimistic. But I believe that leaders of hopeful school communities recognize the potential in people and in situations. To these hopeful leaders,

what people can achieve, or aspire to, is just as surely part of human nature, just as surely summoned by the human condition, as are more negative traits and dimensions. (Selznick, 2002, p. 70)

In a sense, moving from an ordinary school to a community of hope is a kind of psychological magic. But we can make this magic happen by identifying and committing to our key articles of faith, by establishing structures that translate our hopes into action, and by providing the context for both the school and the individual members of the school community to realize their full potential.

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Endnote

¹ Except where otherwise noted, the Gompers story is drawn from the school's 2000–2001 Blue Ribbon Program Application.

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