

## Chapter 4: Teachers Talking Together

*What are the risks and rewards of transforming a faculty into a professional learning community?*

Last year I interviewed a prospective teacher, Jocelyn Bernard, for a science position. Jocelyn had taught for a year in another urban school system and had used the same engineering curriculum we were implementing. I was excited that Jocelyn had also worked as an engineer for a number of years, and that she was a young woman of color. But as the interview progressed, I was dismayed by the experiences she reported to us about her first year of teaching. Sadly, I felt that in her all-important first year she hadn't learned requisite teaching skills and that she would be joining us with lots of baggage to get rid of.

In her school Jocelyn had taught more than one hundred and fifty students a day, and although she benefited from a coach who visited her classroom every two weeks or so, no mentor teacher had been available to her. She was assigned to teach a science class that had a number of special education "behavioral students" in it, even though she had only taken one summer school class in special education. By law Jocelyn was supposed to have had a special education teacher co-teach this class with her, but this teacher was usually occupied with the testing of the special education students.

Jocelyn shared some of her successes and challenges with the engineering curriculum. "The resource kits never arrived at my school, and so every night I developed all the experiments myself from the textbook." She told us that she spent literally thousands of dollars of her own money purchasing materials.

“What about professional development?” Ms. Bautista, one of the BAA teachers on the interview team, asked her. She looked at us quizzically. Ms. Bautista expanded. “When did faculty meet together to plan curriculum? Did faculty observe one another teach?”

“Well, yes, we, the ninth-grade team, did meet together, almost every day,” Jocelyn explained. “But we didn’t plan curriculum or talk about lessons. There was never time for that. We had to talk about attendance and tardiness, since it was such a problem. There were always lots of forms to fill out since the administration was trying to get extra funds from central office to help with truancy. Also, we spent meeting time analyzing the quarterly city-wide tests and the state standardized tests, too. We had the scores from last year’s ninth-graders to go over—”

“I don’t get it,” Ms. Bautista interrupted. “You weren’t looking at the scores of your current students?”

“Well, we didn’t have those scores at the beginning of the year, so we looked at standardized tests in English, math, and science from the previous year to see how to improve our teaching.”

Then, we learned from Jocelyn, when the test scores came in for the current students, teachers would carefully analyze which items students did poorly on and map those back to the standards that the district expected them to have taught. The premise was that this would help teachers figure out ways to “improve” their teaching. The idea of analysis leading to improvement is well-intentioned in theory, but in practice it had created a kind of stifling “got you” system that created anything but good results. Although Jocelyn’s students had not done well on the science test, they had done better than students in the other Boston high schools. Her administrator had congratulated her, but the scores for the rest of the district were abysmal.

Jocelyn couldn't feel good about that. She told us, "There is just never time for an opportunity to talk about teaching since the analysis of test items is so time consuming."

During the term, a literacy coach had met with the whole ninth-grade team and reviewed strategies for incorporating literacy into all the content areas. While Jocelyn found the ideas very interesting, she didn't feel that she was yet familiar enough with her own curriculum to think about an additional strand, and she worried that since no one ever observed her teaching literacy in her engineering curriculum, she wasn't doing a good job. "The goal was for all of us to teach a literacy block, but that never happened, so we're just supposed to add it on to our primary content area. It's been a pretty overwhelming year. I guess I'm just looking for a school where I will get more support and where teachers actually talk about teaching instead of just about test results and forms that have to be submitted to another office."

When I heard this committed, creative young teacher talk in ways that suggested she was already burning out in a job she should have loved, what stood out to me was something that may not have been in any way obvious to her. Understandably, she was focused on herself. The system precluded anything else because of the relentless demands of her job. I, on the other hand, heard the underlying story of the failure of a professional learning community.

On the surface, Jocelyn was doing what school leaders ask all teachers to do: teach content in engaging ways to her students so that they could learn. Schools teach students, after all.

But the schools that work best and encourage teachers to do their best work—as BAA does, I would argue—are more than "content factories." They are what some educators call "professional learning communities." I embrace this concept, even if it can sound a little jargony,

as a profound and powerful ideal. A professional learning community exists in a school when the entire faculty and staff, including administration, works together toward a shared set of standards and assessments that are known to everyone, including the students.

Such a school is a learning environment not only for the students, but for all the adults. No one ever feels that they have “got it right,” that no more learning as a teacher is necessary. Teachers continue to examine the standards they have taught, and they retool assessments as students become more proficient. Teachers and principals know that in a professional learning community there is continual growth, risk-taking, and trust among and between everyone—teachers, administrators, and students. Certainly teachers have opportunities to learn content, but how and in what conditions they learn both individually and together, how they share their practices, and even how they disagree is what constitutes a vibrant learning community. No one rests on their laurels. Everyone supports one another. Critique is not something just for students but for adults, too.

Of course this is an enormous undertaking. In already established schools, there may be resistance to teacher buy-in. Still it is worth all the efforts since in the end students will benefit.

*Ms. Miller's story: a math teacher learns from her colleagues and her students*

Early one fall, I met with Ms. Miller, a beginning math teacher at BAA, to check in with her about how she felt her classes were going. Ms. Miller had done her student teaching with us, and I had hired her happily when we had an opening. Everyone on the math team thought she was perfect for our school. Unlike Jocelyn who, sadly, had been damaged by the failure of her previous school's leadership when I met her, Ms. Miller had been “grown” at BAA.

“I don’t know,” she began, tentatively. “I don’t seem to ever be able to do enough for my students. It’s so much harder than last year.” Ms. Miller had been a confident, even ebullient, student teacher. She took everything in stride, even being tired. Now she seemed more fatigued and worried than I’d seen her before. “I didn’t think it would be so different. I know so many of the kids. But maybe it’s not having another teacher always there in the classroom and to always bounce ideas off of . . . I never go home before six or seven P.M. because there is so much to do. I’m either correcting assignments, planning lessons, contacting parents, or meeting with individual students after school. I guess I’m pretty overwhelmed.”

I understood that overwhelmed feeling. In fact, Ms. Miller’s story brought me back to my own early years teaching math—I might well have said some of these exact same things. I know the time involved in correcting papers, planning, and contacting parents and kids. I also notice that it’s the teachers who will be the best in a few years who are hardest on themselves in their first year: they see such a gap between what they *want* to do and what they *can* do. The young teachers who think they are doing fine are the ones I truly worry about. I could talk about some strategies with Ms. Miller, but now I wanted to focus on how she felt about classroom management. I’d observed her first-period class a few times and knew she wasn’t happy with her students’ lack of engagement. I smiled, leaned toward her, and said, “Tell me how your first period is going.” I always try to show teachers who work for me that I am there to help, not judge, them. Of course I must give them negative feedback at times, but if teachers view their principal as a scary “teaching cop,” their instincts are to conceal or deny their problems. At BAA, it’s very important that we reveal these problems to each other.

“It’s really hard,” Ms. Miller went on, sounding a little more sure of herself. “You know how I believe that students should work in groups for projects. I think that is such an important way to learn math. But this class is resisting it. My second period—it’s like night and day. They come in, form groups, and get down to business, but the first period . . . I don’t know. They have no enthusiasm. Maybe it’s because it is first thing in the morning . . . I even had some of these kids last year with Mr. Lonergan, but that doesn’t seem to help.”

“Can you give me an example of what happens?” I asked.

“Absolutely,” Ms. Miller said. “Here’s one day: I’m just finishing writing the ‘Do Now’ on the board, and Laura, you know the junior dancer, starts with: ‘Just give us the worksheets, Miss. I don’t want to be bothered working with Ian and Michaela.’” Ms. Miller and I laugh a little at her dead-on impersonation. I know Laura, and I can just picture her giving Ms. Miller attitude like this every day.

“In response,” Ms. Miller says, picking up the story, “I insist: ‘The point is to work on these problems together. You will be describing your work to the rest of the class in a group, too. I am interested in how you solve problems together, not just that you get the answer.’ I mean, if I was a student in my class *I’d* think this was more interesting than worksheets . . . but the class is dead, and resistant on top of that. Next week, it’s my turn to present a teaching dilemma at math team meeting. I’m ready. I have plenty!”

“That’s great. I’ll join you in that discussion. I bet some good ideas emerge.”

When Ms. Miller brought her disappointments about her first period class to her math team meeting, Mr. Lonergan, Ms. Baez, Mr. Gaynor, and the student teachers on the team all listened to her, ready to help brainstorm solutions or just to discuss frustrations. Some suggested

that she had to be stricter with the first period class. Mr. Lonergan, who had taught some of the students before, said, “Some of those kids are used to getting away with stuff—especially Laura. I had her two years ago. She’s a strong student, and she doesn’t ever like to slow down to explain anything to anyone. But she does want to get good grades. You have to remind her that this is part of her grade.” Ms. Baez suggested that she watch some of the kids in their arts class. “They are mostly dancers, right?”

Ms. Miller liked the idea of watching Ms. Chan’s dance class. I thought it was a great idea, too. “You’re right, many of my students take Ms. Chan’s modern class, and Ms. Chan and I are professional development partners anyway, so I need to watch her teach. This would be a great reason! I want to see how Laura behaves there.”

At a subsequent meeting, Ms. Miller described her awe as she had watched her distracted math students excel in their modern dance classes. “First of all, Laura is the leader. She is right there in the front row in the middle. She is super awake and she gets the combinations faster than anyone, sort of like how quickly she solves equations in math.” Ms. Miller snapped her fingers for emphasis and went on.

“Ms. Chan explained to me that sometimes she puts Laura in a group with students who are as skilled as she is, and sometimes the groups are more mixed. The other interesting thing is that Ian and Michaela are in that same class, too. But Laura isn’t impatient with them there, even though they aren’t as good technically. They’re in a dance that Laura is choreographing, and she seems to appreciate their expressiveness and willingness to take risks. The whole feeling is different from math class.” Ms. Miller reported her observations energetically.

Ms. Miller shared her observations of how the dance class started with a set warm-up; then the students worked on some center floor routines; then, they did across-the-floor work. The last part of class is more group work. She wondered if she should make her math class much more predictable. Aloud she mused, “Almost set it up like dance class, and don’t start with the group work.”

She went on to consider how she could implement a similar structure in which students start individually and quite independently, and then she would introduce a new concept and then finally move to group work. “Maybe I won’t get quite as much group time, but I think I’ll have a more engaged class. Ms. Chan is coming in to visit my class next week. I’m sure we’ll have other ideas after that, too.” There was a real hopefulness in her tone that had been missing from the previous week’s meeting.

“We also talked about ways to think about graphing functions through movement. I would love to see how I might connect some of the algebra that we are working on with the choreography projects Ms. Chan is beginning. That got me thinking about where the process of choreography is like learning mathematics.”

The level of trust that BAA has worked hard to create among colleagues is responsible for Ms. Miller’s ultimate success with her students. Ms. Miller understood that she could admit to needing help without fear of negative repercussions from her administration or peers. Most team meetings are structured so that teachers can bring teaching dilemmas to the table. Teachers feed and support one another, both within and between disciplines. Teachers ask questions such as, “What can I do better to help my students become more successful mathematicians? Is there

anything in the arts, or another discipline, that will help guide me?” We have made it a priority to have time during the school day to talk and think critically together about teaching and student success. Once a week, students come later in the morning so that teachers can meet in small groups, and another day, students leave earlier so that the full faculty can meet together. Ms. Miller’s professional development partner, Ms. Chan, works with her as a coach and mentor, but not as an evaluator. After Ms. Miller visited Ms. Chan, Ms. Chan visited her classroom. “I’d move Laura up front,” Ms. Chan suggested. “Let her feel like the leader.” Mr. Lonergan also visited Ms. Miller and made some suggestions about pacing.

At BAA, teachers have access to at least two or three different views of the school. This is purposeful. Ms. Miller, for example, is a dance advisor as well as a math teacher and an instructor for the tenth-grade writing seminar team. A few weeks after the discussion in the math team meeting, Ms. Miller had the opportunity to participate in a dance class herself—an event that truly changed her students’ view of her and hers of them. She reported back to me what happened. “I couldn’t believe how energetic and creative Laura is. And my other students, too. You know what Gina said to me the next day in class? ‘Hey, Ms. Miller, you’re so willing to learn in our class, we gotta be better in your class.’ Now those were sweet words!” Ms. Miller smiled broadly.

*My story: learning about professional learning communities by building them*

I was fortunate enough to live through the genesis of a professional learning community at Fenway High School from the school’s beginnings in the mid-1980s, and I brought those experiences with me to BAA. Larry Myatt introduced us to the concept and set up the schedule

so that we could meet as a team. He modeled the importance of listening to students as well as adults, always with respect. At Fenway, we developed a core foundational course, Social Issues, which all teachers taught, no matter their primary content area. We agreed early on that we would all teach the same units more or less at the same pace, and that we would implement many engaging large and small group activities. We agreed to bring all of our two hundred students together regularly in the cafeteria to read together, and we invited guest speakers.

Social Issues was our shared endeavor. We planned and discussed both the content of the classes and how we would approach these controversial issues—in other words, we had to discuss our teaching with each other. We also had to evaluate our students together, since we shared the same unit tests—and this meant that we were essentially critiquing one another. If one teacher's students did uniformly well, we would ask: what did that teacher do to ensure such success with student learning? Conversely, we expressed concern if another teacher was less successful. This is by far the more difficult skill, of course. Mr. Myatt's signature sense of humor helped us practice it. Teachers are very sensitive about their work and very nervous about "stepping on toes." We had to learn to be honest with each other and to drop our defenses. We had to figure out how to support each other so that all our students were learning the material at more or less the same level of proficiency. Over time, Social Issues became the way we defined our professional learning community, and it became our entry into talking about a range of issues in our school.

We all taught the class at the same time—first period—and all students took it. Fifty percent of the curriculum focused on issues such as the civil rights movement, busing in Boston, the war in El Salvador, and nuclear proliferation. The other 50 percent, designed by students,

dealt with issues of adolescent development such as violence, sexuality, music, or friendship. Since the topics engaged our students, we offered the class first period as a way to “hook” them into arriving at school on time (we had a terrible tardiness problem). Our strategy worked pretty well and attendance increased. Students didn’t want to miss the discussions, especially those that dealt directly with “their” issues.

We had to agree on how we would present content, such as the notorious school desegregation case in Boston, which was still very raw for many families and teachers. And we needed to be very thoughtful and strategic about lessons related to HIV/AIDS, since this was in the mid-1980s when the epidemic was just beginning. We were a very diverse group of teachers from many different religious, social class, and racial backgrounds, and it wasn’t easy to construct common units and the accompanying assessments that we could all do together. Although we only had two forty-minute periods a week to plan the curriculum and assessments, many of us stayed late in the afternoon to ensure that our lessons were well-crafted. Furthermore, we knew we needed the time together to talk about how our students were faring.

A professional learning community needs nurturing and leadership. At Fenway I was in charge of the development of the Social Issues curriculum. This meant that I prepared materials for the rest of the team to critique and adapt at our weekly meetings. I also volunteered to be videotaped teaching a lesson. (Even though teachers generally enjoy being up in front of our students, being videotaped is usually an excruciating experience. Many of us are videotaped when we are student teachers and vow to never, ever let it happen again!) I would be ahead of the others so that they could critique my lesson first, before teaching it themselves. I felt nervous at first being the “guinea pig,” but if I was willing to put myself out there, it would make it easier

for everyone else to be vulnerable in this way. Eventually, other teachers offered to have their lessons videotaped.

The majority of students in all ten Social Issues classes performed similarly on unit assessments. But there was one class where the students always did poorly. The closeness the faculty had developed by working together on Social Issues and the systems for sharing information and observing each other helped us figure out why.

We noticed that this teacher, Mr. Donnelley, who had been assigned to the school and who was nearing the end of his career, regularly missed school days during horse-racing season. He owned a racetrack and many horses, and essentially, it turned out, had two jobs. Although he always had doctors' notes excusing his absences, they were very disruptive for students and for the school, needless to say. His Social Issues class was often left without a teacher, and the students were angry since they had become invested in the topics. We tried to make do with substitute teachers, but that was not a reliable solution. Sometimes I would merge his class with mine, but it was difficult to have a sustained conversation with fifty students in the room. We tried to talk with the absentee teacher about ways to improve Mr. Donnelley's attendance. We wanted him to understand how his behavior was eroding our professional learning community and the students' fledgling sense of community as well as their achievement. His students were the least prepared for the end-of-unit exams and the least engaged in the curriculum, since their classroom discussions were so erratic.

I talked to a couple of teachers about a somewhat radical idea. What if we asked his student teacher to take over his class and the school to provide the student teacher with a stipend? (I had a small grant to support the curriculum development for Social Issues and asked

the grant maker if we could divert the money this way.) Although this would mean that none of the teachers would receive a stipend to continue our after-school planning work, when I brought the idea to the entire team, all the teachers preferred working voluntarily in order to ensure that all students had their own consistent teacher. It was more of a hardship for us to have an unprepared substitute teacher, or to combine two classes, than to forego the extra money.

It is surely possible that in another situation, teachers would never agree to this kind of intervention. But in our context at that specific time and place in our school's history, it seemed like the best decision. I was pleased that we could all acknowledge what a drain and a strain it was on the rest of us and on the students. It was my job to talk to the absentee teacher, and I was a bit worried about it. Would he be offended? Embarrassed? To my surprise, he didn't seem particularly bothered by the decision. From his perspective, it wasn't really his problem that he was out so much. He couldn't help it, he said. And, he had the doctors' notes to prove it.

At Fenway, I was very fortunate to have colleagues who decided with me that we did not have to allow an external situation that seemed beyond our control to destroy either our community or our students' achievements. The professional learning community provided a structure that both revealed a problem that might have lain undiscovered at another school, and at the same time provided the path to a solution.

So many principals have encountered similar situations. The question is always: what can you do? Sometimes you *cannot* do what you know is best for students and even for other teachers. Sometimes you just have to wait the situation out. Sometimes you cannot rock the boat. While there are many reasons why our intervention might not have worked at another school, it also rarely works to be victimized or to assume that something is beyond your control. Often,

those of us in leadership positions feel we have to figure everything out by ourselves. Sometimes we cannot share personnel issues with others, but I am glad I made the decision to talk to my colleagues about the absentee teacher; otherwise, I'm not sure we would have collectively made any decision that helped kids.

### *Building a professional learning community at BAA*

When I had the chance to open BAA, I wanted everyone to teach a core class as we had done at Fenway. In the spring before BAA officially opened with students, I held a series of meetings with a range of participants—artists, academics, community members, parents, college students. I asked the same question at each meeting: what should BAA graduates know and be able to do? I felt that by asking a generative question such as this I would both garner community support and involvement for the school and I would, of course, hear good ideas. Although a range of answers always surfaced, there was always one common response. “BAA graduates had to know how to write a grant. Artists live and die by grants.” That was our motivation to begin our school-wide approach to writing. Teaching writing would be the foundation of our own professional learning community.

We decided that all teachers would coteach writing seminar, and all students would take it, and at the same time of the day. This would be our core course. Co-teaching would create a natural pairing for professional development partners. Teachers would observe one another in writing class and then also in the teacher's primary subject area. Seminar became the place to develop and practice a school-wide approach to teaching and assessment.

Anne Clark, our curriculum coordinator, helped us create our grade level writing seminar class, which became the central place for professional development. When I hired Anne we agreed that she would be our first teacher leader. I know how important it is to have many teacher leaders on a faculty, and my job has always been to ensure that I am providing enough opportunities for teachers to grow as leaders. In defining Anne's role, I suggested that she should teach a class herself as she worked to guide other teachers. I knew her role was particularly important for our emerging professional learning community, and that teachers needed to see her as a teacher first. She was, and is, an excellent teacher. She was our resident literacy "expert," and knew all the current educational literature about how to improve students' literacy skills. Her job was to plan lessons with and for teachers; watch teachers teach and then give critical feedback; and teach a particular lesson or skill that a teacher felt unsure about how to introduce. She was always open and eager to have teachers critique her as well.

Ms. Clark also helped us wrestle with teacher accountability. She convened and led discussions about seminar so we could create a school-wide rubric (or list of criteria) for judging good writing, and also connect that rubric to our Habits of the Graduate and RICO. Anne provided examples of good student writing so that we could agree on what constituted proficient writing. By scoring student writing individually as teachers, as co-teaching pairs, and finally as grade-level teams, we developed shared teacher accountability.

Accountability has now become a buzz word in the education reform literature, where it is often code for judging teachers, principals, and schools based on test scores. For us, it means being accountable to each other in the ways in which we assess student work. We had to learn to question why one teacher could give a student a very high grade on the writing rubric while

another did not. If a teaching pair didn't share similar views on what constituted good writing, that wasn't fair to students. We spent many hours collaboratively grading work and then discussing why we had given a certain grade. Over time, we would reach consensus. Ms. Torres and I taught seminar in the early years, and we struggled along with the teachers, leaning as they did on Ms. Clark's expert assistance. It was important that we, too, could admit frustration and failure.

I always looked forward to those faculty meetings (which, by the way, is a radical statement; most teachers and principals look forward to faculty meetings as much they look forward to root canal work), because I loved seeing how we would come to consensus. Sometimes, in the beginning, we needed Anne's help. She could always be the "outside expert," and deferring to her judgment felt natural. Now, I'm happy to say, the teams are pretty independent.

Here's an example of how this collaborative work actually happens: Morgaen and I team-taught ninth-grade seminar. We each read one of our student's autobiographies—an early assignment. We discussed our grading process and our scores. She had given the student a 2.5 (out of a possible 4.0 points); I had given her a 3.0, because I felt that her use of descriptive language was very strong. After a brief discussion, I agreed that I had been, perhaps, too generous. Then, we met with Ligia and Paul, two other teachers reading the same ninth-grade student's assignment. They had both given the student 4.0. We were surprised that our scores were so far apart. We listened to their reasoning. They, too, felt she had strong descriptive language, but also that she used a strong voice and had well-developed paragraphs. We disagreed. The four of us went back and forth and eventually called Anne over to help settle our

dispute. Anne explained why she felt that the paper was not a 4.0 but closer to a 2.8 or even a 3.0. We agreed on a 3.0 after a lengthy discussion. Now, for anyone used to the traditional way of grading, this could look like a disastrous waste of time. If it had been me grading alone, I would have given the paper a 3.0 after perhaps fifteen or twenty minutes of consideration. Instead, four people spent well over an hour in order to arrive at the same conclusion!

But the four of us saw it differently. We all learned a lot from the exercise. Our disagreements had been healthy and primed us to look more specifically for real evidence of descriptive language. We also discussed in more detail what a well-developed paragraph looks like. The following month when we did the same activity with a different assignment, the four of us scored the piece almost identically. Among the four of us, none of us were certified English teachers. Morgaen, as a history teacher, had the most experience with writing. Ligia, a world language teacher, had an excellent grasp of writing in Spanish and, Paul, a music teacher, had never really assigned or graded written work before like this.

Our original premise, which I think still holds true, was that it is less threatening for teachers to develop a set of shared expectations and practices for a course that everyone teaches but that is no one's primary content area. Very few of us were writing experts. What mattered for our students' success was that we all grew to share an understanding of what constituted good work in writing and how to teach the necessary skills. For me (and I think I'm typical of many teachers), the idea of scoring work with others was initially intimidating. I was nervous when I first shared my scores with Morgaen. What if she thought I was too soft? Or too hard? What if I thought that of her? I had to get beyond the fear in order to trust my colleagues—that no one would belittle anyone else, but that we would also work together to understand why a teacher

gave a particular score, and then we would argue with evidence if we felt that our score was the correct one. We all committed to the process and to consensus. In this way, we all grew as teachers and colleagues.

Because of this intense working together for writing seminar, we learned to transfer these skills to other content areas. Mike, Ligia, and Morgaen all began to develop department-wide rubrics in their content areas and everyone practiced scoring work together.

Now that we had a structure around which to build our professional community, we could explore what that community could do. We found that it allowed us to do several distinct things: as well as developing a shared accountability system, we could diagnose our students' weaknesses, as well as the gaps in our own teaching; we learned to critique one another's practice; and we found ways to get to know our students beyond the classroom.

### *Taking risks*

Ms. Jong sat slumped and exhausted in Ms. Torres's office. "I just feel like nothing I do is right. I can't get through to Ashley. I'm not sure I can get through to Janet either." Her face was crestfallen. Her shoulders were hunched and she looked like she carried too much pain for her twenty-five years. Ms. Jong's despair reverberates with that of many young idealistic teachers who try and teach a great lesson and fail. What was different in this case is how Ms. Torres, her administrator, handled it.

Both girls had been suspended because, following Ms. Jong's science class experiment with cell phones and what materials might block a cell phone signal, a brawl had broken out after

school. Earlier in the day, Ms. Jong had participated in Janet's suspension hearing. "I didn't think for a minute that the activity would lead to so much drama. When Jeff [a security officer] came to me and explained that he had both girls in separate Student Support team offices because they had gone at it after class, I was just shocked."

Jeff had told Ms. Jong that since BAA doesn't allow the use of cell phones in school, the class had been an opportunity to see whose numbers each one had on her call lists, and sure enough, both lists included Angel and that caused suspicion, and then a whole he said-she said thing, which turned into a fight. Ms. Jong had heard something in class about Ashley explaining to Janet why she had Angel's number, but she didn't think anything about it. She was just excited that everyone was engaged in the experiment using tinfoil.

"I didn't realize it would cause such controversy and eruptions later. I feel so terrible. This was really my fault." She sighed dispiritedly.

"Maybe I just don't know how to connect with this population. I didn't grow up with any of the pressures that Ashley or Janet has." She explained that she would have probably been thrown out of her house if she'd ever even thought of hitting another kid in school or anywhere else. "Play an instrument, respect the teacher, do well in school, go to college—the values of a stereotypical Asian family. Maybe I just don't understand Janet and Ashley. I sometimes wonder if I'm what they need as a teacher. They may have beautiful voices, but how will they ever do in college? They haven't even turned in any lab reports. They are failing my class!"

Ms. Torres listened and calmed Ms. Jong down. "You are the right teacher for our kids, Emily. You are an excellent teacher. You are incredibly creative. You know your content. Now, maybe I wouldn't have used cell phones as an experiment, given that we say kids can't have their

cell phones visible in school, but you couldn't have known that they would fight. Sure, maybe you should have been more attuned to the culture of that class, and the tensions brewing, but you did your best. That is the most we can all ask from ourselves." Then she outlined the plan of action to address the violation of "community with social responsibility": first, a mediation for the girls when they come back from suspension; second, a behavioral contract; and finally, a letter of apology. "It's not okay to interrupt the learning of others. Ever. They are both on the Student Support team's radar as kids we need to watch. We know that there are lots of other issues going on with both of them individually. I can't even get a parent up here for Ashley's hearing."

Ms. Jong despaired. "I'm just embarrassed that I can't control my own class."

Ms. Torres responded firmly. "You can. This was a difficult situation. You are still learning about classroom management. I'll bring Janet back into class on Friday, and see that everything goes smoothly. A Student Support team member will also stop by every day through the end of the week. This isn't for you to solve alone. That's why I'm here, and Student Support, and even Ms. Montes, Janet's advisor. This is something we all will work on together."

It is distressing that in many schools, teachers like Ms. Jong would never feel comfortable enough going to their administrator for help, but Ms. Jong and Ms. Torres cotaught writing seminar together the previous year, and Ms. Jong has also seen Ms. Torres struggle to reach a student. Whatever the reasons for the lack of support in many schools, too often the Ashleys and Janets end up right back in the classroom after a brief suspension, with little

progress having been made to resolve the disagreements with each other that brought about the suspension.

When I was a new teacher and had a discipline problem like this, the last person I wanted to go to was my principal. I would have been too worried about being judged as “bad.” In the too few after-school meetings or professional development days we had, the principal and assistants just barked out statements about how to maintain appropriate behavior in our classrooms and the importance of discipline, almost at all costs. If there was any professional learning community, it was on the sidelines and just with a few teachers who came together to support one another individually.

Ms. Torres may not have agreed with Ms. Jong’s choice of a lesson for her students, but she certainly doesn’t blame Ms. Jong for trying a new idea. She may question Ms. Jong’s judgment, and wish that she had consulted with her or others on her team about her “innovative lesson,” but Ms. Torres is committed to creating a culture in which teaching practices are seen as continuing endeavors in improvement. If teachers (and students) don’t feel encouraged to try new techniques or assignments, readings, or lab experiments that might not work the first time, why would teachers or students, or parents for that matter, ever trust that they had a stake or responsibility in the outcomes of any decisions?

Ms. Jong is a new teacher who has learned that taking risks and being vulnerable about her practice is accepted and expected. Veteran teachers like Ms. Clark, Mr. Ali, or Ms. Chan are also willing to make mistakes and share their challenges with their peers. The strength of Boston Arts Academy is that no matter how seasoned a teacher you are, everyone is always learning. That is what risk-taking is about—pushing one’s own learning to another level and being willing

to try something different that just might be terrifically successful—or not. As Ms. Jong has said, “Part of what makes risk-taking possible is knowing that your colleagues and administration will ‘have your back,’ that you will not be out in the cold, left to figure out both lesson planning and classroom management on your own.”

Asking for help began as an expectation in writing seminar at BAA; this expectation then permeated the rest of our teaching practices. None of us were experts. None of us could do it alone. We had to keep asking one another, in meeting after meeting, were we sharing our worries and frustrations and still making plans for tomorrow? How does a school leader create the environment for that delicate balance?

Still, not every teacher is as willing and open to sharing as Ms. Jong was. Mr. Nichols, a music teacher at BAA, found little use for a professional learning community. He and Ms. Clark cotaught writing seminar and worked together on the eleventh-grade team. They planned together and graded together, but Ms. Clark continued to feel that she was carrying the fuller load. She asked me to read some of his comments on his students’ concert reviews, and I was disappointed that he gave so little feedback. He certainly could get his students in his jazz ensemble to sound great together, but he assigned very little work that involved writing, analysis, or even composition. His passion was for performance. Whenever I complimented him after a concert, his response would be something like, “You see it takes a lot of practice to put on something like that. We can’t spend all our time on written work!”

Both Ms. Clark and I tried to explain that it wasn’t an either-or. We just felt that his students would benefit from some more rigor in the curriculum. Yes, performance was important, but so was reflection and learning to critique someone else’s concert, and a well-

developed music vocabulary. Even after the entire music department developed a clear assessment rubric for all students to use when reviewing a concert, Mr. Nichols's students did rather perfunctory work. I began to think that Mr. Nichols's resistance had to do with his own fears of writing. Even though we were a "writing school," as the students liked to say, we couldn't get Mr. Nichols to participate.

A professional learning community that embraces everyone, such as we have struggled to create at BAA, can be a lifeline for veteran and beginning teachers, administrators, students, and even parents. But what do you do, as with the case of Mr. Nichols, when it's not making much of a difference? Mr. Nichols was a tenured teacher, and short of eliminating his job, there really wasn't much I could do. At Ms. Clark's urging, I finally met again with him and explained that we had worked on these issues for almost a year and that I would now have to move into an evaluative mode. I knew he had received only good evaluations in his career and that this would be devastating to him. "I know you are a good music teacher. I know you have always been a good music teacher. But what I need you to do here is much more than you have ever done before. I feel that BAA has given you all sorts of supports to grow and change, but I don't see you excited or willing to try anything new." I had the painful job of explaining that neither did his teammates or colleagues.

Fortunately for BAA, Mr. Nichols resigned at the end of the year. He is now the head of a music department in a large comprehensive high school, and he has a show choir that is the darling of the school. I often hear comments about how great his choir is. I'm glad for him. I'm glad it worked elsewhere and that we didn't get into a protracted battle. Usually the choices aren't easy for principals. Do you ignore a less than excellent teacher hoping he'll leave? Do you

turn up the heat, as I did, hoping that he'll change? And, if he doesn't change, and doesn't leave, what then? The answers to these questions are as complicated as each individual teacher.

One of my colleagues often tells me that if she only had one or two Mr. Nicholsons, she'd do what I did: turn up the heat. But she has too many. For some, she just has to wait for them to retire. She doesn't have enough administrative personnel even to deal with all the Mr. Nicholsons in her school. Her first priority is to create an administrative team that understands how to support teachers to become better. At the same time, she is overrun by student altercations. She has too many students in her school to deal with each case carefully and thoughtfully; there is not enough student support or administrative personnel to provide helpful interventions; there are too few alternatives for students who need a different kind of classroom environment. She has young teachers, too, like Ms. Jong, but she can only sporadically provide support for them. She knows that this is partially why good teachers, like her, leave the profession prematurely. There just isn't the time, money, or resources to create a vibrant professional learning community.

### *Conclusion*

Each year we refine our school-wide goals. These are the underpinnings of our professional learning community. Unlike typical district mandates that might change given the political winds, BAA's goals have consistently focused on our efforts to increase student achievement across racial, gender, and socioeconomic backgrounds. The vocabulary we use may shift from year to year, but the intentions have remained the same since we opened our doors—improved student achievement, and access to quality higher education and professional careers. Our entire professional learning community concentrates on these school-wide goals. Teachers

write individual professional development plans using them. Before teachers do their peer observations, they review one another's professional development plans and try to connect their observations to the areas in which their partner wants to improve. Even students and parents/caregivers discuss these goals. Including them in the dialogue about how to increase student achievement can ensure that all constituents feel part of a school's professional learning community.

Schools often get derailed in their pursuit of increased student achievement and the advancement of a professional learning community because the buy-in on the part of all teachers is lacking. My colleagues in other schools talk about their disappointments at the ways in which small groups of teachers can filibuster to such an extent that decisions or action steps that would improve achievement for the majority of students never occur. Just the other day, a principal colleague described how his faculty nearly voted in a new schedule that would have provided time for an advisory block and a weekly planning period for it. He had led the faculty in discussions all year about the benefits of an advisory program. Teachers had visited other schools with advisory; they had read articles; students had been enthusiastic as well as parents. Teachers had genuinely understood the importance of personalized attention (advisory) for each student in order to increase student success in school. However, a small group of teachers managed to create enough dissension and discomfort within the whole faculty that they eroded the faith of the majority of the faculty and the proposed schedule lost by one vote. It's intensely frustrating to almost have a majority and then lose a key vote, but it is something we all must reckon with. How can we keep the faith that next time the good idea will be voted on? This was the threat we faced at Fenway in the early stages of the school's development when we had to

deal with the horse-owning teacher whose negative behavior nearly toppled all of our work. We worked creatively and hard to figure out a way to marginalize his impact on our students. In retrospect, I think the time we had spent really growing the professional learning community played a crucial part in our success.

School leaders can consider multiple strategies that increase trust among teachers. School-wide courses and experiences, taught by all teachers, offer one way to build a professional learning community. It doesn't have to be a writing or Social Issues course. Many schools are now broken into small learning communities (SLC), many of which are organized around particular themes such as media, technology, or health. The intention of SLC is that by breaking down the size of a school, and giving it a unifying focus, there will be more opportunities for teachers to share a common curriculum, meet together to discuss similar projects, and align their assessments. The prevailing notion is that small is better because teaching (and thus learning) will be more personalized for students. I don't believe that small by itself is a panacea, although certainly it is important to reduce the number of students that any one teacher works with in the course of a day and week. Again, simply offering an array of courses in a particular field, no matter how relevant to students' experiences, doesn't create a professional learning community. How can small learning communities go further and institute a core course that is taken by all students and taught and discussed by all faculty? In my experience, improvements in student achievement might then be more evident. I have witnessed the positive results of inclusive core courses at both Fenway and BAA. I offer a core course as a possible solution, but the key is for every school to find its own solution for how teachers can effectively create and sustain a professional learning community.

How can school leaders and teachers keep the weight of the logistics of just “doing school” at bay and keep asking the hard questions necessary for the creation and survival of a professional learning community? There is so much pressure from school districts to respond to the demands of standardized test data and to improve student scores by “any means necessary.” Many schools provide time for teachers to see which questions students got wrong on a variety of standardized tests, but the time to ask *why* students made those errors is never sufficient. *Why* questions are usually more complicated, more nuanced, and the answers may require developing different strategies to reach those students. Too often we succumb to time pressure and just deal with the *what* questions. But if we are committed to raising student achievement, pushing ourselves to keep asking better and more complex questions is essential to a healthy school.