A Framework for Building Schoolwide Community

A first grade class waits with nervous anticipation at the front of the gym. As other classes file in, the music teacher begins playing "We're All Together Again," and the first graders start to sing. As students and adults enter, they add their voices, and the volume builds. With teacher assistance, students seat themselves in a horseshoe around the perimeter of the gym. Younger students wave excitedly to their older buddies. Smiles are exchanged.

The singing continues until all classes have arrived. When the last class is seated, the first graders raise their hands, the school's universal signal for quiet, and the room rapidly comes to attention. Nicole, the first speaker, stands and says confidently, "Welcome to our all-school meeting. Please rise for the Pledge of Allegiance … "

Gathering for all-school meetings was just one way that Penn Valley Elementary School, where I was principal for nine years, built a strong, caring school community. Holding all-school game days, family literacy nights, and establishing buddy classrooms are a few of the others.

Penn Valley's journey of building schoolwide community began when, after working as a staff to strengthen classroom communities, teachers expressed a desire to extend this sense of community outside their classrooms. They wanted their students to experience a safe, friendly environment not just in classrooms, but throughout the school and throughout the day.

When an entire school is infused with a sense of community, the effects of community building in classrooms are enhanced.

Children learn best in caring communities where they feel safe and significant. Schools can and should be such communities. Children who feel known and cared for at school are free to focus on learning. They are more able to face challenges with confidence. With the support of a school community, students are motivated to do their best, and teachers and curriculum become even more effective.

Since the classroom is the primary setting for a child's school life, it's incredibly important for children to feel safe and significant there. Good teachers have long understood the value of creating community at the classroom level. However, their efforts can only yield so much, and may even be undermined, if this sense of security is absent in other areas of the school: the hallways, the bus, assemblies, recess, lunch. By contrast, when an entire school is infused with a sense of community, the effects of community building in classrooms are enhanced.

This book is about building schoolwide community. It's made up of stories and examples from schools actively engaged in community-building work. For all of these schools, the journey toward community is a process that has challenged and rewarded as it has unfolded gradually. This journey requires collaboration and commitment from many people. It is hard work. However, when the efforts begin to pay off and a positive sense of community takes hold, the results are often profound.

That was my experience at Penn Valley Elementary School, a medium-sized K–5 public school in Levittown, Pennsylvania. Despite its hardworking teachers and capable students, when I was transferred there from a neighboring middle school in 1995, Penn Valley did not have a good reputation. Schoolwide, morale was poor. Student test scores were low, and many parents were frustrated. Teachers were disheartened because their work didn't seem to be yielding results. There were real problems with discipline. There was little sense of community.

It took nine years of deliberate, step-by-step work for Penn Valley staff, students, and families to build a stronger, more positive school community. During that time, we transformed our approach to teaching and to communication. We established a vision and goals for the school, and we developed schoolwide procedures and rou-

tines that reflected them. Then, building on that foundation, we created opportunities for students to work and play in mixed-age groups, developed events that brought the whole school together, and brought parents into the school as true partners.

This process transformed Penn Valley. By the time I retired in 2005, test scores had improved, behavior problems had dropped, and the faculty was strong and proud. Inspiring examples of student work filled the school's hallways; children and adults consistently treated each other with care and respect. In 2003, we were named a National School of Character, and one of our teachers was a finalist for Pennsylvania Teacher of the Year.

What happened at Penn Valley is happening in other elementary schools throughout the United States, with equally powerful results. Schoolwide community looks different at each place, of course, depending on the school's resources, vision, size, and other factors. The goal of this book is to show what schoolwide community looks like at a variety of schools. As you read, you'll find stories from schools in rural, suburban, and urban settings; small schools and large ones; public, private, magnet, and charter schools; schools serving a narrow range of grades (preK–2; 3–5) and a wide range (preK–8); schools that use traditional single grade groupings, and those with multi-age, looping, and bilingual classrooms.

Most of the schools featured in this book use the *Responsive Classroom*® approach to teaching. Developed by teachers and backed by independent research, the *Responsive Classroom* approach is based on the premise that children learn best when they have both academic and social-emotional skills. The approach therefore consists of classroom and schoolwide practices for deliberately helping children build academic and social-emotional competencies. Although using this approach is not a prerequisite for building schoolwide community, for my school and many others in this book, having a unified, philosophically consistent set of practices provides staff and students with a strong foundation for schoolwide work. Our shared experience with *Responsive Classroom* practices such as starting each day with Morning Meeting, involving students in rule creation, and using interactive modeling provided us with an important set of tools for our journey. (To learn more about the *Responsive Classroom* approach, see the Appendix.)

This book is not meant to be a how-to guide. Instead, by showing snapshots from the community-building process as it has unfolded at a variety of elementary schools, it's intended to spark your thinking and to give you ideas. You and your colleagues will need to work together to adapt these ideas for your school. The discussion and planning questions provided at the end of each section are offered as resources to help you work though this process.

Fundamentals of Schoolwide Community

Before you move on to reading the schools' stories, though, I want to share some of what I've learned about the fundamentals of building schoolwide community, based on my own experience at Penn Valley and the experiences of other school leaders I've met along the way.

Qualities of Strong School Communities

Schools that have achieved a positive, enduring sense of community generally share certain broad qualities:

- Staff, students, and their families feel as if they belong at the school and the school belongs to them. Everyone plays a part in making the school feel safe and welcoming for all.

- Adults in the school feel a shared sense of responsibility for children's academic, social, physical, and emotional welfare. Students feel safe and significant wherever they are in the school.

- There are agreed-upon standards for student behavior and learning throughout the school. Adults coordinate their efforts to help students learn to meet those expectations.

- Adults in the school interact with each other in a genuinely caring and respectful manner. Adult relationships within the school community are a model for the friendly, cooperative behavior that's expected of students.

- School staff and families feel they are united in a common enterprise: to support children's optimal learning. School staff and families see themselves as partners, each making vital contributions to children's well-being and success.

Conditions for Building Schoolwide Community

Certain conditions are vital to the growth of community in schools. Although schools often begin work before these conditions are firmly in place, taking steps to create and sustain them is a key to building an enduring schoolwide community.

Strong, Focused Leadership School leaders must provide clear direction, support, and encouragement for community building. They do this by identifying ways to strengthen community in their schools, by setting priorities, by documenting progress, and by celebrating successes. School leaders are role models for students and staff. They set the tone and expectations for the community. While teachers focus on nurturing a particular class's academic and social growth, school leaders must take primary responsibility for building and sustaining the development of the community as a whole.

Commitment from Staff Even the most enthusiastic principal can't build community alone. All adults throughout the building need to see themselves as stakeholders who are making genuine contributions to the change process. The staff must be willing (and in many cases, must learn how) to work together and to coordinate their approach to communicating and interacting with students.

Shared Vision School staff must have a shared vision of what they are trying to achieve—what the school will be like when its sense of community is strong. This vision serves as inspiration and guide for everything that follows. It should be unique, and it may be quite specific.

At Penn Valley, our vision for schoolwide community was inspired by the community-building work that was taking place in classrooms. As classrooms using the *Responsive Classroom* approach became safer and friendlier, and students began thriving academically and socially, we envisioned what it would be like if all areas of our school—including hallways, auditorium, cafeteria, playground, buses, and bathrooms—felt safer and friendlier. For each area, we thought and talked about how people would act and interact, what we would see, and what we would hear. The positive images that emerged became our vision.

The Process of Building Schoolwide Community

The stories in this book describe community-building projects, programs, and events that students participate in directly. As you read, keep in mind that student-centered programs such as these typically require a significant amount of behind-the-scenes work by adults in the school. In each section, you'll learn about how teams of adults approached the process of planning, implementing, and sustaining specific activities at their schools. You'll also find a focused set of discussion and planning questions at the end of each section; these are a resource for your school to use or adapt as you develop your own projects. The discussion and planning questions for the sections are derived from the following guidelines for the process of schoolwide community building:

Assess Take stock of your school's strengths and weaknesses. Spend time observing. How do people act and interact? What do you notice? Listen to how teachers speak to each other, to the children they teach, and to other students. Notice how children treat others: their peers, older and younger children, teachers,

and other school staff. Spend time in the cafeteria, on the playground, and in the halls at arrival and dismissal time. Pay attention to what's going well, as well as what could use improvement. Use the information you gather to help you decide what to work on.

Establish schoolwide procedures Small things do matter. For everyday life at school to feel safe, respectful, and friendly, students (and adults) need to know how to do a host of mundane-seeming things. For instance, they need to know how to walk in a crowded hallway, how to sit in a group, how to use an "inside" voice, and how to know when their attention is required. Don't assume that children know what to do—teach these things.

For instance, at Penn Valley, the whole school uses the same visual signal to call for a group's attention: If someone raises a hand, all those who see it immediately raise their hands, stop talking, and look at the person who has given the signal. This technique for quieting a room is taught in every classroom, and used by every teacher many times a day. All the other adults at Penn Valley have learned to use it too, and they have stopped using other ways of calling for attention, such as shushing or yelling. Our commitment to using a universal signal means that in our school, anyone—the principal, a teacher, the custodian, or a first grader—can call a group of any size to order.

Focus Concentrate on improving one area at a time. Don't try to change everything at once, and don't feel obligated to tackle your worst area first. Move slowly and develop a plan before going to work. Try to anticipate problems that might come up before they occur, and allow time for fine-tuning and addressing unforeseen glitches.

Be purposeful Make sure you have a clear, specific reason for undertaking each new initiative before you commit time and resources to it. This will help you choose projects that make sense for your school at the present time and that are aligned with your vision. Once you've committed to a project, having a clear sense of its purpose will guide your planning and will help you monitor your progress.

For instance, when Penn Valley staff learned about the all-school meetings held by other schools using the *Responsive Classroom* approach, we were immediately excited about bringing this community-building tradition to our school. Those all-school meetings adapted elements of daily Morning Meetings held in classrooms for use in regularly occurring gatherings for the whole school. (To learn more about classroom Morning Meetings, see *The Morning Meeting Book* by Roxann Kriete, NEFC, 2002.)

However, we didn't decide to start having all-school meetings at Penn Valley just because other schools were doing it. Before we committed to working together towards this goal, we thought about what the purpose of all-school meetings at Penn Valley would be. We decided that we wanted to create a time when the whole school would share successes and celebrate accomplishments. Gathering for that purpose would enhance students' sense of belonging to a larger school community, would strengthen academic and social connections across grade levels, and would help students get to know and be known by more people in the school.

We also decided on a second purpose: to provide leadership opportunities for students. Each class, including our special needs classes, would be responsible for organizing and running one meeting each year. Every student would experience playing a part in planning and orchestrating a meeting for 350 people.

Deliberating about our purposes not only convinced us that it was worthwhile to commit to a goal of holding all-school meetings in the future—it helped us envision what we wanted them to look and feel like at our school.

> Choose projects that make sense for your school at the present time and that are aligned with your vision.

Identify and build prerequisite skills To participate successfully in any activity, adults and children need to be prepared. Teaching or reviewing necessary skills should be a part of your plan.

For example, with the image of Penn Valley's all-school meetings as joyful, student-led celebrations firmly in mind, we thought about what skills students would need to make it work. It was a pretty long list. For example, just to begin, students had to know how to be a respectful audience and how to enter and exit the gym in an orderly fashion. To sing together, we needed a common repertoire of school songs. And in order to lead all-school meetings, students needed to practice speaking in front of large groups and using our schoolwide signal for attention.

We invested in building these and other prerequisite skills, first in classrooms, and then in progressively larger group gatherings, until finally we were confident that everyone in the school would be able to do them together. As a result, when we started holding student-led all-school meetings, nearly three years after we first started thinking about them, everything went smoothly. Students and staff felt proud and successful.

Start small When you launch a new project, establish a manageable timeline and limit the scope at first if you can. Many of the activities in this book were piloted initially with a few classes and later expanded to include the whole school. You may be able to find other ways to start small. For example, the first year we held all-school meetings at Penn Valley, we only had two, and I led them both. The following year, each class was asked to take responsibility for one meeting during the year, using a scripted format. I provided a model by leading the first one.

Reflect The importance of this step cannot be overestimated. Pause to evaluate each activity, not just after the first time you do it, but periodically. Be sure to celebrate what's going well in addition to thinking about areas you'd like to improve.

Take time to review and update on a regular basis so that expectations stay consistent and skills remain sharp.

This sort of reflection doesn't have to be formal or time-consuming. At Penn Valley, administrators and teachers sometimes used a regularly scheduled lunch meeting time to discuss things we'd noticed about all-school meeting, such as a bottleneck caused by the way the classes entered, or how much better the singing went when the music teacher played the piano. As a result, we changed the traffic flow in and out of the gym, and we made sure the music teacher was available to play the piano at all of our meetings.

Review As procedures and activities become part of a school's culture, their original purpose may be forgotten. People may slip back into old habits. Changes to programs or schedules may require new procedures. Activities that were once lively and vital may become stale. Take time to review and update on a regular basis so that expectations stay consistent and skills remain sharp. Doing this will also help new staff and students learn about how things are done in your school.

Contents of the Book

The projects and events you'll read about in this book were developed by real schools that are committed to building and strengthening their sense of schoolwide community. In the pages that follow, you'll read about everyday routines, special events, new ways of approaching traditional activities, and many other ways of building, nurturing, and sustaining community in elementary schools. The book is organized this way:

The "Common Knowledge" and "Routines" sections feature stories from schools working on building the foundations of strong, positive community. They focus on topics that apply to daily life at school.

"Gatherings," "Yearly Events," and "Involving Families" describe projects that build on the foundations of common knowledge and schoolwide routines. Gatherings occur regularly and take place during the school day, while yearly events are special occasions. The final section features examples that focus particularly on family participation.

I hope that learning about the schools featured in this book will be as inspiring and exciting for you as it has been for me. Given all that is required in schools today, creating community can easily take a backseat to other issues, and I see the commitment these schools have made and the results of their work as signs of great hope. I hope you will join us, and for that reason, I urge you not to dismiss ideas you read about here because a featured school is very different from yours. It's all too easy to think: "That's nice, but we could never do it. Our school is too … Our students would never … Teachers here don't have … "

Instead, try to make connections. Think about what your school can do, and what you have in common with the schools featured here. Creating community is hard work, but the rewards are many. As you embark on this journey, I wish you courage and joy.

—Karen L. Casto, EdD