

CHAPTER ONE

The West Linn School District¹

It is 8:00 am, April 19, 2010, in Wilsonville, Oregon. As the parking lot fills, one can see smiling teachers making their way through the drizzle and into the main entrance of the high school. The banner in front of the building welcomes everyone to the 17th Annual Celebration of Inquiry.

Inside, the atmosphere is reminiscent of a top tier professional conference. Directional signs point to the exhibits area, the location of the continental breakfast, and the venue for the opening general session. The only thing that seems different from the ambience of other first-class professional conferences is that no one seems to be a stranger. In fact, observing the informal interactions of the attendees, one would guess that most of the people at the 17th Annual Celebration of Inquiry are already acquainted. As it turns out, that observation would be accurate. This is because over 90 percent of the educators attending this year's conference are members of the faculty at the fourteen schools that constitute the West Linn–Wilsonville School District.

The reason these educators appear so enthusiastic about spending eight hours at the Celebration of Inquiry isn't simply because this is an in-service day, a respite from their teaching duties. These are a group of dedicated educators, people who not only treasure every minute they have with their students in class but are jealous of each minute of available professional time. These teachers know what to expect from this conference. Most have attended Annual Celebrations of Inquiry before and provided the district with extensive

evaluations of the proceedings. Their assessments were overwhelmingly positive. Many teachers said this annual experience was among the best professional development programs they had ever attended. That is quite a powerful sentiment considering that the West Linn–Wilsonville School District provides its teachers with what might be considered among the richest arrays of professional development opportunities available anywhere (see Chapter 5 for an extended discussion of the professional development opportunities available to teachers in the district).

Why is it that educators from a district with a comprehensive professional development program, one that annually features everything from building-based programs, to support for travel to national and regional conferences, to a generous tuition reimbursement plan, find attending this local conference so meaningful? A look at the conference program tells the story. Each one of the eighty-five individual breakout sessions at this year's Celebration of Inquiry were presented by a teacher and/or a team of teachers currently employed in the district. Each presentation was focused on action research that had been conducted by or was currently being done by local educators in district schools and classrooms. It stands to reason that any conference built around professionals sharing with peers what they are currently concerned about, collaboratively studying, and learning from their work will be filled with relevant content. Being classroom teachers themselves, breakout session presenters tend to respect and appreciate the attention of their audience. This explains why most sessions are evaluated as meaningful and productive.

The enthusiastic and optimistic tone that permeated the 17th Annual Celebration of Inquiry might not have been all that surprising were it not for the fact that it took place in the midst of the worst financial downturn since the Great Depression. The impact of the financial crisis was rocking the public sector throughout the United States and devastating public education in the state of Oregon. Budget cuts were having a profound impact on virtually every one of Oregon's school districts (in Oregon, the state provides over 50 percent of all public school funding). So while the West Linn teachers were happily attending this conference, newspapers throughout Oregon were reporting on school days being shaved off the school year, veteran teachers were being laid off, and class sizes were growing to intolerable levels. This was an ugly time for public education in Oregon and most of the rest of the country. Yet in this district—on this day—teachers could be seen celebrating and sharing what they

had learned through their practice as well as sharing their optimistic belief that student performance, which they believed was already strong, could become even stronger as a result of their collegial inquiries and professional interactions.

The positive attitude on display this rainy April day by the faculty of this school district did not occur by accident. The collegial culture and the shared “action research mind-set” didn’t result from the adoption of some innovative new approach to professional development nor did it arise from the inspirational words of a charismatic speaker. The value of investing in the development of the collective capacity (Fullan, 2010) of the professional staff as the primary strategy for fostering continuous improvement in student performance wasn’t the result of a high stakes accountability plan implemented by a iron-fisted, take-no-prisoners superintendent. It was none of those things.

What was going on this rainy April day was the inevitable result of more than thirty years of a consistent commitment to the realization of a shared vision. Perhaps more important, for thirty years the district has been guided by a philosophy and set of values on how best to realize that vision. The West Linn District’s approach to school improvement, the *people strategy*, is an example of what Michael Fullan referred to as collective capacity (Fullan, 2010). Fullan reports that collective capacity is a phenomenon that “enables ordinary people to accomplish extraordinary things” (p. 72). Over time in West Linn, consistent investments in collective capacity built what organizational theorists would appropriately label as a functioning “professional learning community.”

In West Linn–Wilsonville, the phrase “professional learning community” was never a name given to a program; rather it was simply the description of the places where educators worked. While the creation of these communities wasn’t the product of a packaged program or the adoption of a high profile school improvement process, it also didn’t occur by accident. The powerful professional culture that was on display at the 17th Annual Celebration of Inquiry was the result of three decades of consistent and continuous adherence to a set of principles district leaders aptly named the *people strategy*.

DISTRICT CONTEXT

The West Linn–Wilsonville School District² has been in operation nearly as long as there have been public schools in Oregon. In 1978,

when Dealous Cox was hired to be Superintendent, the district was facing numerous challenges. After having one superintendent for over twenty years, the district had gone through three superintendents in four years. This turnover in leadership wasn't of much concern for many on the teaching staff. They had seen leaders come and go. In the view of most of the professional staff, new leaders might be expected to make some noise, but basically things would continue just as they had in the past. While the various neighborhoods and communities served by the West Linn School District were slowly growing, inside the buildings no one sensed any compelling pressure for change.

One particularly salient aspect of the district's culture was the degree to which it was tradition bound. The average tenure of the district's building principals at this time was well over ten years. Tradition was maintained in many ways. Consider that in 1980, 20 percent of the teachers at the district's one high school were alumni. The principal of the high school, considered a relative newcomer to the district, had been in his position for seven years. By contrast, his administrative team consisted of two vice-principals and an athletic director—each of whom had worked at West Linn High School for more than twenty-five years. It was a similar situation at the other district schools. West Linn was considered a good place to live and bring up one's family. Consequently, when teachers and administrators came to West Linn from outside they tended to move their families into the community, put their children through the local schools, establish roots, and continue to teach in the district until retirement. The majority of the school district's faculty and staff either had children who had graduated from West Linn High School or were currently enrolled in district schools. As a consequence of this stability, there was general support for and contentment amongst the staff.

A sense of tradition was visible wherever one looked. The halls of the high school were adorned with pictures of every graduating class for the past fifty years. The Lion's Club, Rotary, and the other service clubs were largely made up of long-term local male residents who had been rabid boosters of the West Linn "Lions" for as long as anyone could remember. As a rule, student behavior was considered good in the district schools. This was no doubt due to a variety of factors. Certainly one reason was because the same administrator who was charged with administering

discipline had taught the student's parents. Consequently, a call home wasn't coming from an anonymous administrator; it was coming from someone with whom the parent may well have had a long, positive relationship.

There were, however, other interpretations for the positive student behavior. A significant number of veteran teachers believed that the reason West Linn students behaved as well as they did was because of the student's fear of the paddle. There may be no better evidence of how tradition governed the West Linn schools at this time than the fact that in the last quarter of the twentieth century, corporal punishment was not only still permitted but widely accepted (by many teachers and parents) as appropriate.

For most of the past century, the two paper mills that faced each other across the Willamette River were the largest employers of district residents. Although the district is only a half-hour drive from downtown Portland, the West Linn and Wilsonville communities had historically viewed themselves as self-contained, rural, working-class hamlets. Longtime residents saw Portland as practically another universe. This fact became apparent to Dick (Richard) Sagor shortly after he became high school principal. He was preparing a proposal for a federal grant. In the preamble, he mentioned that West Linn was a "semi-rural, suburban community." When the principal's secretary, a woman who had been a lifelong resident of West Linn, read that sentence, she took great offense. Dick vividly recalls her correcting his wording asserting, "We are not a suburban community!"

Across the district, academic performance was mediocre, with student achievement largely corresponding to family background. The curriculum was traditional with considerable ability grouping and tracking in all academic subjects. Most of the district's high school graduates didn't pursue education beyond high school, and of those who went on to higher education, the greatest number enrolled at the local community college. The high school continued its tradition of offering a large and comprehensive vocational program, which when threatened was vigorously supported by the veteran faculty who would argue persuasively, "One needs to be realistic, most of these kids are never going to go to college."

That was the nature of the district in 1978 when the school board interviewed Dealous Cox to replace the previous superintendent

who had resigned to assume a position at the Army War College. Dea distinctly remembers the board chair telling him this:

“Dea, you have a reputation of turning around athletic programs and getting a lot of federal funds. You need to know that neither one of those are priorities in this district.” I said, “Okay, what are your priorities?” and she said, “We’re tired of playing second fiddle to our suburban neighbors.”

While that might have been the attitude of the school board, it was far from the unanimous perspective of the community and certainly wasn’t the perspective of the majority of the district’s faculty and administration.

It has now been thirty-two years since that superintendent search. In that time, there have been two superintendents: Dea Cox for fourteen years followed by Roger Woehl for eighteen years. Also during that time, every single tax levy or bond issue presented to the West Linn–Wilsonville community has received voter approval. Student performance has showed continuous improvement and by all reasonable measures the quality of the faculty has become exemplary. How was this turnaround achieved? The central purpose of this book is to explore the answer to that question.

Notes

1. The West Linn (Oregon) School District serves the communities of West Linn, Wilsonville, and the surrounding unincorporated areas. In 1991, the district changed its name to the West Linn–Wilsonville School District.

2. In 1990, the school board formally changed the name of the district to include the city of Wilsonville. Prior to that it had been known as the West Linn School District.