Preface

The purpose of this book is to provide beginning and veteran school principals with a practical, how-to guide to help you transform your school into an effective learning community. It may also be helpful for individuals who are preparing for a future career in school leadership and who want to create schools that are truly focused on making the needs of students the center of all who work in and around schools.

In our view, a learning community exists in a school when the talents, skills, insights, and abilities of all who work in and around that school are focused on a single, unifying task. That task is always the improvement of learning by every student enrolled in a school. It is the responsibility of a leader who wishes to create a learning community to recognize the knowledge and talents that exist in all of those who work in a school and also the potential contributions that can be made by parents and community members surrounding the school. After these attributes are acknowledged, it then becomes a task to focus skills and abilities on improving learning for all.

The past 25 years have seen a great deal of literature describing the most effective strategies that should be used in leading organizations toward greater effectiveness. Two of the issues that are repeated consistently in all work on this subject are the importance of an effective leader and the importance of understanding the nature of community in the organization. The work of Tom Peters and Robert Waterman in the early 1980s indicated that the best organizations have the best leaders. In a similar vein, the work by Peter Senge throughout the 1990s has made it clear that the more that a sense of internal focus toward a common vision can be linked with a harmonious relationship with an external environment, the more likely it will be that an organization will achieve success by creating community. The ideal is clear. This book is written to give insights into the ways that you as the leader can take the ideal to a practical level. Senge refers to the importance of systemic thinking (realizing the interconnections of many people who see the "whole" and not just "parts"). Leadership and community building are important ingredients in a huge,

multinational organization, a hospital, or more to our interests, a school. The job of an effective principal is to find the talents that are needed to realize the vision of a school where all children learn. This is truly the driving force of any school as it interacts with many different individuals and groups. This book will help you address and overcome common barriers to creating communities in many schools.

School principals today face many challenges. At the same time, they are limited by a reality faced by all leaders who seek to improve their organizations. Each day has only 24 hours and at times, it seems that the expectations facing school leaders is based on a 25-hour (or more) clock. The issue of professional overload of principals is certainly an increasingly serious concern for all school leaders. As a result, the call for leaders to commit themselves to the creation of learning communities might be viewed as unrealistic. Our effort in this book is to assist you in your efforts to transform the culture of a school from one where isolation among people reigns to one where people work together to achieve common goals for learners.

ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK

Through the chapters in this book, we look at many of the issues and people that can be recruited to help you in your transformative efforts. Chapter 1 begins with what may well be the most critical actor to be involved with promoting any significant change in a school—you as the leader. It specifically centers on the need for a leader to become attuned to her or his personal values as they relate to the principles of developing a sense of community in a school. Chapter 2 builds upon the issue of the values of a leader as it lays out the steps for creating an effective mission statement derived from a leader's vision of a school focused on shared values. Chapter 3 presents a brief review of some of the thinking that has gone into the current creation of efforts to promote community development in schools.

Chapter 4 explores how to create a culture that promotes community building and collaboration. Using the "Four Cs Model" for analyzing culture, this chapter shows leaders how to move staff and others toward a goal of collaboration. Chapter 5 focuses on the impact of the external community—parents, the neighborhood, community members—on a school and shows leaders how to analyze their community to understand its potential influences on the practices of the school. Chapter 6 offers insights into effective strategies to increase positive involvement by members of the external community to work with parents and others with a

direct interest in what takes place in your school. Another group often forgotten in discussions of building community in schools is considered in Chapter 7. This group is collectively described as the invisible heroes in your school, and it includes such community members as custodians, security officers, office staff, and food service workers who need to be included as important contributors to your school community. In Chapter 8, we look at the importance of increasing your awareness of a variety of social service agencies which exist in your community and which may provide numerous needed services to your students and their families. Finally, Chapter 9 suggests the ways in which you might be able to work with key members of the central administration in your district who need to be included in your efforts to bring about change to a learning community.

UNIQUE FEATURES OF THE BOOK

The overall goal of this book is to provide practical strategies and tips to assist you in your work of creating a more effective school. Each chapter begins with a **brief scenario** based on actual experiences we have witnessed over the years in real schools by real principals and others. This short case is meant to illustrate some of the fundamental issues that face a leader in terms of the topic for each chapter. No real names are used because the situations described, while based on real events, are but composite representations of a variety of behaviors and events that we have witnessed at different points in our careers. Next, there are **Points to Ponder,** inserted at various points in each chapter to promote some additional reflection on your part regarding the practical ways in which ideas presented in each chapter may be implemented in the reality of your school. **Tips for Practice** help you consider strategies that you may wish to follow in the unique reality of your own school as you move toward creating an effective learning community. Finally, summarizing each chapter are **Points for Practice,** which highlight key chapter concepts that are critical to building effective learning communities.

We wish you well in your important work to provide students with the best quality of educational programs available. We know that your time is limited and so are other resources, but we hope that what you read here will help you serve learners even more effectively in the future.