

EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP

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Moment to Moment at The Met

At The Met high school, the vision of a community of learners resides in the everyday life of the school.

**Dennis Littky, Nancy Diaz, Danique Dolly, Chris Hempel,
Charlie Plant, Phil Price, and Sam Grabelle**

How do you foster a school community that views nearly everything that goes on—every day, every moment—as an authentic learning experience, a problem to solve, or a possibility for growth? At The Met high school in Providence, Rhode Island, we have created such a community by redefining learning more broadly: Learning is everywhere; learning is personal; learning is not about memorizing, but about thinking; learning is for everyone; learning is doing real work; learning is about being mindful; learning is problem solving, alone and with others; learning is using the resources and people around you; learning can happen every minute of every day for every person; and learning is a lifelong process.

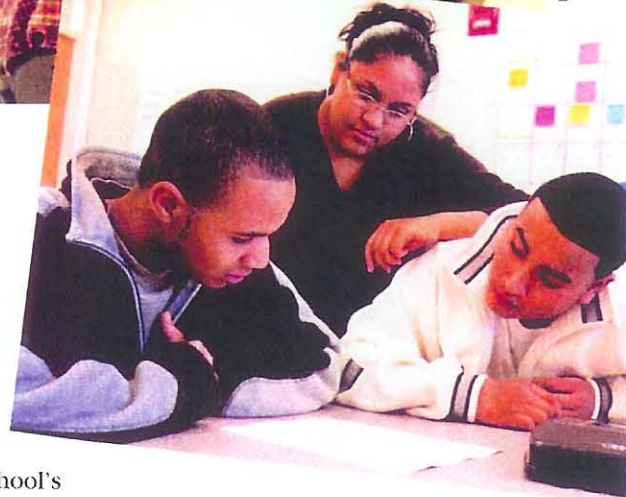
At The Met, everything we do reflects this redefinition of learning and helps us sustain a school culture in which we are more than a school—we are a community of learners. In fact, this article itself is a product of our community of learners because we, the administrators of The Met, discussed the ideas that the article would tackle at our weekly meetings and wrote it together. Although The Met design is unique, we believe that any school with the commitment to keep the focus on learning can develop the elements necessary to become a



Photos by Cally Wolk

community of learners.

The Met is made up of six separate buildings, each with its own principal and approximately 110 students. Every Met student meets quarterly with his or her learning team—composed of advisor, parents, and workplace mentor—to develop a personalized Learning Plan based on the student's own interests and the school's common Learning Goals: empirical reasoning, quantitative reasoning, communication, social reasoning, and personal qualities. As part of his or her



In a community of learners, students feel comfortable sharing their learning and discussing their results with one another.

Learning Plan, every student secures an internship with a site mentor two days a week in an area of interest. Each student's learning is assessed through multiple measures, including quarterly exhibitions and portfolios. The Met is also developed around the advisory system, in which each student stays with the same teacher and small group of students throughout the four years of high school.

Small school size, advisories, internships, personalized Learning Plans, exhibitions, and portfolios are some of the visible and concrete ways in which The Met implements its vision of learning and its commitment to creating a community of learners. The broader and deeper expression of that vision and commitment, however, does not reside in specific programs or activities but rather in the everyday life of the school—in the individual moments when a teacher talks with another teacher in the hall, when a parent walks into the building, or when a principal listens to a student.

Equity and Inclusion Are More Than Words

New students come to The Met every year from 15 different middle schools and from a variety of cultural, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds. At the start of each year, we hold a series of workshops that proactively address our diversity. Many other schools conduct such programs. But more important than what a school does in the workshops is what happens afterward. If schools track students and therefore segregate them by race and class, the sense of community will fade away. To create a community of learners, the celebration of diversity and the insistence on inclusiveness must suffuse the school's daily life.

At The Met, students see diverse staff members working together as colleagues and friends. All staff members—secretaries, teachers, maintenance workers, and others—participate in whole-school retreats and discussions about students and learning. We make a

conscious effort to hire staff who share the students' ethnicities and who even come from the same neighborhoods. Incidents of racism, sexism, or homophobia are handled in a way that emphasizes learning more than discipline.

For example, recently a white, gay male staff member reprimanded a group of students when a fire alarm was pulled without cause. A black female student responded aggressively with homophobic and racist remarks. The principal called the girl's mother to set up an immediate meeting. At the meeting, the principal, the student's teacher, the

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to become a community of learners.**

student's mother, and the student developed a mutually agreed-on plan. First, the student would stay out of school for one week, during which time she was to discuss issues surrounding homophobia at a meeting with the director of Youth Pride, a local nonprofit organization that supports and advocates for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning youth. Second, the student would spend one afternoon a week with a black female staff member who would serve as a role model. Third, the student would meet several times with the program director of the National Conference for Community and Justice (NCCJ). Finally, the student would apologize to the staff member she verbally abused and to her entire school.

Since this incident, the student has formed a close relationship with the NCCJ program director and has assisted him with several presentations on racism in the workplace. The student's behavior at school has improved considerably. The goals of helping her learn through the disciplinary process were definitely achieved.

Adults Model Lifelong Learning

Staff members at The Met view themselves as participants in every facet of

the learning cycle. We recognize that, as professionals, we will always have room for improvement, and we model good learning habits through our daily interactions. Met staff members share and discuss articles in front of students, and all fully participate in the silent reading time instituted in each building for a segment of the day.

Like students, Met staff members have Learning Plans in which they identify their personal and professional goals and create plans of action to address those goals. Staff members also create narrative self-evaluations similar to those

assigned to students each quarter. As members of a learning community, staff members model what they expect from students. We strive for a workplace where the custodian carries a book in his back pocket, the secretary answers students' questions about their projects, and the principal frequently visits internship sites to learn more about the topics that interest students.

The Learning Through Internships curriculum provides another opportunity for students to see that adults continue to learn throughout their lives. Each student is matched with a mentor at that student's internship site who oversees the student's work, coaches the student at the workplace, and meets regularly with the student's teacher to reflect on the student's progress and plans for continued learning. Working closely with the mentor, the student is exposed to the workplace staff's own learning experiences, which include readings, meetings, and conferences. The student learns that workplaces can be communities of learners.

The internship also gives teachers another context in which they can demonstrate their role as lifelong learners. Because no teacher knows everything about the work done at all of

his or her students' internships, teachers must learn from each mentor, often right before the student's eyes. Met teachers also learn new strategies for working with individual students from the mentors, who often approach the same student in a completely different way. For example, by watching one of his student's interactions with his mentor at a welding company, David realized that his student had difficulty expressing himself succinctly and needed extra time to get his ideas and creativity across to others. Previously, David had been frustrated by the student's inability to get to the point and sometimes cut him off. Since observing the student's learning style in this new context, David has learned to be more patient and encourage the student's creative expression.

Parents Are Partners

Our greatest strength in building a community of learners comes from our students' families. At The Met, we consider parents to be our most valuable resource because they know their child best. As we say, "We don't just enroll students; we enroll families."

We ask parents, as well as their child, to write an essay as part of the application for admission to the Met. When their child is enrolled, we require parents to sign an agreement stating that they will support the teacher in understanding and supporting their child, provide at least 10 hours of community service to the school each year, and participate in all of our formal curriculum-building activities for their child. Parents come to school at least eight times a year: four times to help develop their child's quarterly Learning Plans and another four times to serve as active panel members at their child's exhibitions.

Parents are welcomed into our buildings at any time. Every year, The Met's small schools find more ways to involve students' families as learners in our community. This year, one school hosted a Grandparents' Breakfast after discov-

ering that many of the students are being raised by their grandparents. The program was a success, and we believe that it will lead to grandparents feeling even more welcome. Already the grandparents' attendance at their grandchildren's exhibitions has increased.

Our students' family members are incredible resources in many ways. Some serve as internship mentors for other students; some discuss their careers or interests at whole-school assemblies; some teach music workshops. Many parents take evening courses at The Met to enhance their

sion making, and day-to-day running of our schools. Each Met principal holds a vision of his or her school as a place where students and staff share responsibility for creating policies, listening to one another, compromising, trusting, stumbling, learning, talking, talking, talking, and doing.

For example, one Met school holds regular Town Meetings for which a committee of students with a staff sponsor develops an agenda and facilitates whole-school discussions on topics of concern to the students and staff. From the beginning of this program, we



skills in computers, English, or Spanish. To reinforce the valuable role of families as members of our learning community, we are exploring a partnership with the local community college through which Met parents could earn college credit for the learning they do while supporting their children's education.

Students Share in School Decisions

Students believe that they are a part of a community of learners when they participate in creating and sustaining that community. To create a sense of ownership, we work hard to provide students with real, concrete ways to take part in the problem solving, deci-

were determined that the students would do more than just plan dances and school spirit weeks. Students have led Town Meeting discussions on such topics as gossip, cell phone use, school lunches, theft, violence, and sex. One student committee asked to have a closed-door Town Meeting—students only—to talk about drugs. This request was a powerful testament to the students' sense that the school was *theirs*.

These discussions provide incredible opportunities for staff and students to learn how other people feel and think in the small community that is their daily world. The Town Meetings also provide an exercise in the democratic

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process by enabling students to go from being concerned about something to taking their concerns to the community to working—and persevering—through the necessary process to effect change.

The effort to involve students in decision making even expands to hiring: Both students and teachers interview teaching candidates and fill out feedback forms after observing each candidate teach a lesson. If a candidate seems uncomfortable relating to the students as individuals or too full of the buzzwords rampant in the education field, then our students know that he or she is not “Met material.” Through the students’ eyes, we get a fuller perspective on each candidate’s competence as a teacher.

Students Support One Another’s Learning

Developing a community of learners means creating an environment in which students feel comfortable talking about their own and others’ learning and work. Students must view their peers as valuable resources in supporting their own learning and success.

Our advisory system, structured so that small groups of students stay together throughout their four years, creates Small Learning Communities within our larger one. In advisories, students solve problems, make decisions, and share the growing and learning process in a safe environment where they know one another well.

The quarterly student exhibitions provide an opportunity for students to give one another concrete feedback on their work and offer advice on how to improve and proceed during the next quarter. The Met requires students to attend a certain number of their peers’ exhibitions. We try to schedule exhibi-

tions so that seniors can serve as panel members at younger students’ exhibitions and provide valuable role modeling, and so that younger students can observe older students demonstrate their seasoned skills at everything from public speaking to portfolio development to graciously receiving constructive criticism from their panel.

Communities of Learners

The Met’s structure is unique, but the philosophy is grounded in what we all know is best for kids. Schools based on The Met design are creating similarly successful communities of learners across the United States. With support from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, The Big Picture Company (founder of The Met) has started schools in Chicago, Illinois; Denver, Colorado; Detroit, Michigan; El Dorado, California; Federal Way, Washington; Oakland, California; and Sacramento, California. During the next few years, Big Picture Schools will open in many additional cities.

We believe that the philosophy of The Met could be adapted in nearly any school. The key is to educate one student at a time within a community of learners where all kinds of learning can take place for all kinds of people—both young people and adults—naturally and transparently. ■

Dennis Littky is Director of The Met and Cofounder of The Big Picture Company. **Nancy Diaz, Danique Dolly, Chris Hempel, Charlie Plant,** and **Phil Price** are Met Principals. **Sam Grabelle** is Assistant to the Director for The Met Center and The Big Picture Company. For more information, visit www.bigpicture.org or www.metcenter.org, or e-mail Sam Grabelle at sgrabelle@bigpicture.org.

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