



Thank you

FOR YOUR
INTEREST IN
CORWIN

Please enjoy this complimentary excerpt from *Spirit Work and the Science of Collaboration*, by Michael Fullan and Mark Edwards.

LEARN MORE about this title!

4

EAST COAST DISTRICTS (UNITED STATES) IN ACTION

ITHACA CITY SCHOOL DISTRICT (NEW YORK)

ALL YOU NEED IS LOVE

. . . and he went back to meet the fox. “Goodbye,” he said. “Goodbye,” said the fox. “And now here is my secret, a very simple secret: It is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye.” “What is essential is invisible to the eye,” the little prince repeated, so that he would be sure to remember.

—*The Little Prince* (Saint-Exupery, 1943)

Each of our eight cases represents a major press forward in learning for all students under current conditions, and as such captures what can be accomplished through deep leadership. The foundation idea for Ithaca City School District is that one “sees rightly” only with the heart. In education reform, nice-sounding phrases are plentiful. The key question is: *How do powerful ideas come alive in day-to-day practice?* In Ithaca, you would not have to tell students or teachers what the fox meant by explaining that you can only see rightly with the heart. Dr. Luvelle Brown, the superintendent since 2011, has spread the word about the importance of leading with your heart. He believes deeply that every student needs to know that they are loved and cared for. He has been leading learning in this small



Dr. Luvelle Brown

but complex district for a decade and has been relentlessly consistent in insisting and imploring all staff to teach with love and care. His constant smile and warm affect have set the tone for leaders, teachers, and students to follow and emulate. Brown has listened and interacted with all groups to develop a systemwide commitment to exemplifying and integrating care and learning. This is clearly and consistently the spirit work that permeates the district.

How do powerful ideas come alive in day-to-day practice?

The Ithaca City School District is located in upstate New York and serves approximately 5,500 students, spread over 155 square miles and 12 schools. The Ithaca community is home to Cornell University, Ithaca College, and Tompkins Cortland Community College. The diverse student population is an equal mix of urban, suburban, and rural communities.

The school district's commitment to anti-racism has resulted in significant initiatives focused on revamping board of education policies, district curriculum, and instructional practices. Examples include the implementation of anti-marginalization units of study, de-tracking at middle schools and high schools, revision of the code of conduct, and transformation of grading and attendance practices.

Brown has received numerous awards and recognitions, including the 2017 New York State Superintendent of the Year, and is widely recognized as one of the nation's top educators and

thought leaders. Brown had been recognized by the National School Boards Association with the prestigious Twenty to Watch Award and the Difference Maker Award. He also received the Center for Digital Education Top 30 Award and eSchool News Tech-Savvy Superintendent Award.

Brown is a highly regarded speaker and workshop facilitator, addressing a wide range of topics for local, regional, and national audiences. He has published numerous articles and is the author of *Culture of Love: Cultivating a Transformative and Positive Organizational Culture* (2018).

SPIRIT CONSTRUCTION IN ITHACA

A decade ago, Ithaca City School District was struggling: graduation rates were mediocre and academic proficiency was lagging in many areas, but in particular with low socioeconomic students, students with special needs, and students of color. Brown committed to addressing those needs not just by focusing on improving test scores but also on relationships, building trust, and conversations—lots of conversations. The work started with teachers, principals and administrators, parents and community leaders, and, most importantly, with students. As he put it, “We needed to build trust in each other, and that had to start with transparency and a whole lot of listening.” Brown established his presence early and often in schools, classrooms, and the community. “We build trust by spending time together and learning from our conversations with each other.” Focusing on cultural foundations soon resulted in a firm and emerging foundation based on trust and faith in each other. The superintendents’ actions matched his words, and, in turn, the beginning work of spirit construction was taking stride.

Brown emphasized the need for openness and kindness toward each other. “We didn’t look at this as a project or initiative, but as creating the conditions where students would learn best and teachers would thrive with their instructional endeavor.” So often the prevailing work for school improvement is

centered on test scores and misses the key to success for students and teachers: *relationships and trust*.

If we talk about faith and trust, it's natural to move on to talking about love within schools and classrooms. As we noted earlier, the word *love* is a tricky concept because it is used in so many ways, including superficially. Increasingly (and our book is a testament to this), the stakes for learning have become much more personal and emotional, given growing and extreme inequality and ambiguity about the future. The concepts of well-being and learning have become more closely connected. In the process, love—the way we use it as central to spirit work—is very much part of the emotions of learning to survive and thrive in the 21st century.

“The district’s evolution as a reflective organization has been key to the cultural growth and the emergence of a sense of spirit that lifts each of us.” —**Dr. Luvelle Brown**

This significant spirit leadership work takes time and commitment. Leaders who understand the power of consistency embrace it with gusto. Ithaca teachers could see the value in a relational-based improvement effort, and early momentum could be felt by the Ithaca community. Brown suggests that the district’s evolution as a reflective organization has been key to the cultural growth and the emergence of a sense of spirit that lifts each of us. Ithaca School District’s policies have been modified to represent a caring, loving, and inclusive community. The culture has evolved with a constant focus on making sure students are heard and respected and that teachers are provided the resources and encouragement needed to succeed. As Brown notes, “We posted photographs of our students in the halls because we wanted them to know that they were ‘home’ in their school.”

The school district in recent years has provided a level of focus to create a culture of love. This effort has resulted in policy changes that are representative of this effort. Discipline policies are now centered on corrective action and language rather than on punitive steps. Students and teachers are encouraged and supported in engaging in continuous dialogue about solving problems together and learning to work through issues. The district has embraced the voice of students as part of the decision-making process, and students serve on numerous committees as well as on the school board. Mary Grover, Ithaca School District inclusion officer, put it this way: “Two years ago we made a commitment and priority to include students in the development of their individualized education plans (IEPs), and we invited them to be active members in their Committee of Special Education Meetings. The beauty of this is that we hear and listen directly to students about what they need, not just what we think they need. One student shared after one of the first meetings that they didn’t like the idea that they had not been involved earlier.” Ithaca School District is now working on being a nonracist culture and is involved in reflective work to end any racist or misogynistic practices.

When we observe the elements of spirit (trust, respect, love) and combine them with the consistent, thoughtful reflection that Ithaca City School District leaders and employees have embraced and utilized, it results in a prevailing sense of hope. “We believe in each other, and we believe in ourselves” is what one teacher said about the major result of the culture in Ithaca. In Chapter 7, we will pick up a theme that cuts across all our districts. Instead of handling misbehavior with escalating levels of punishment (that amounts to further and further exclusion), successful districts draw troubled students in with greater and greater mutual commitment. Supportive love and coordinated team effort have left an indelible mark on the Ithaca culture.

THE SCIENCE OF COLLABORATION

Fullan and Gallagher (2021) conclude that deep sustainable change across a school system happens when staff at all levels experience learning together (as is the case in Ithaca). We think of science as the study of life, so we believe that the science of collaboration is the study of the life of collaboration. Ithaca has created professional development that is built around collaborative enterprise. Brown elaborates (all quotes are from our interviews in 2021):

We believe it is important to look beyond grades but to think forward to graduation and life. We are constantly fine-tuning collaborative practices, creating protocols and look-fors and then consistently utilizing teacher input to improve the entire process. When we hire teachers and principals, we are looking for those who embrace collaboration and are deeply vested as lifelong learners who believe in continuous improvement.

Brown continues:

Students prefer to learn with other students and our best teachers are all about using this as a motivator to develop the learning mojo in classes. Ithaca has made a major effort over several years with professional development to grow their understanding of collaboration and what really works. They also believe that when students collaborate, it is an example of a relevance-forward phenomenon and is getting them ready for life and . . . they get it. Dialogue, conversations, and group and individual reflection are part of the foundation of our instructional practice. In most classrooms, you may not notice the teacher, because students help lead and engage the instruction to the level and needs of students.

As Brown states: “This doesn’t happen overnight; we have spent years building capacity of both teachers and students

to effectively grow the collaborative network in their classrooms.”

This theme is echoed by Daniel Breiman, former ISD principal and district leader:

Early in my work as a principal, teacher leaders suggested and promoted the idea of learning from peers as an essential instructional strategy. It was clear that teachers were ready and willing to break out of their classrooms and observe and learn from one another. The energy and spirit from joining forces to create shared knowledge and practices had an impact. Our faculty and the power of their collaboration helped me understand just how important peer-to-peer observation and reflection could be.

It is no coincidence that teachers who embrace collaborative and collegial work see their students do the same, and of course, the reverse is also true. Ithaca has developed digital resources in the district to provide each student a laptop and has employed a collaborative approach to professional development for effective use. This approach has been a key for students and teachers to know and experience learning together in a nurturing environment. Ithaca takes the success of their students very seriously and has improved learning outcomes for most students. The percent of students graduating has increased by 20% over several years and is now at 94%.

Teachers who embrace collaborative and collegial work see their students do the same.

You don't see the constant focus on test results by the Ithaca team, but what you do see is learning improving and more and more students being successful. Luvelle Brown stresses, “We

believe you teach happiness and a lot of that has to do with creating an environment where students' voices and choices are a major part of the work. Our focus is on getting students ready for life . . . not just a test." Ithaca has navigated the pandemic and school opening with a focus on transparency and community dialogue and input.

It is important to note that the deep sense of individual and collective spirit extends to all employees of the district. Recently, the district website featured a big tribute to the custodial and maintenance staff for their efforts to make sure every school is safe and clean. When employees know they are respected, they usually respond with spirit!

We interviewed Dr. Brown about his work. He asserted that the central driving force was love and that the core work is about changing culture. He called it "real equity work" (they have, in fact, mostly eliminated achievement gaps and increased success rates substantially). Brown has a grasp of what we call the "nuance of change" (Fullan, 2019). He said that what they are doing is hard work: "We connect in a loving way to do hard work." He captured one of the great insights about change leadership: "What we do is get specificity without imposing it." Brown showed a rare quality of understanding context while staying focused on mobilizing all groups and individuals to accomplish deep and lasting change in culture and related behaviors. The key words Brown uses to characterize the Ithaca culture include *honest, caring, trusting, selfless, forgiving, patient, committed*. Our mission, he stresses, "is what we do over and over again."

In sum, Ithaca is a district that has established love, respect, caring, and relationships as a key to its success. They have done this for a decade now, connecting it to learning, well-being, and overall success. Commitment to learning and to each other is deeply embedded: it shows in their values related, for example, to character and citizenship, and it shows in their

success in completing high school as they proceed to postsecondary prospects.

VIRGINIA BEACH SCHOOLS

WHAT'S JOY GOT TO DO WITH IT?

In most vital organizations, there is a common bond of interdependence, mutual interest, interlocking contributions, and simple joy.

—*Leadership Is an Art* (Depree, 2004)

Virginia Beach Schools (VBS) understands the importance of joy and has focused a lot of effort and work to establish a culture and relationships that inculcate well-being and happiness among employees and students. Dr. Aaron Spence, appointed in 2014, has developed a leadership team and requisite systemic belief to build a new culture that would create an excellent place to work and learn. At the heart of the work in VBS is a constant focus on building the effectiveness and the ubiquitous nature of collaboration in the district. “We understand the importance and value of collaboration and devote time and energy to our effort to improve our work in this area,” Spence shared with affirmation.



Dr. Aaron Spence

Virginia Beach Public Schools (VBPS) serves over 67,000 students in 86 different schools. This second-largest district in Virginia is a sprawling system that encompasses both urban and suburban areas and is adjacent to one of the largest military installations in the United States. The district appears to have been well managed over the years, with

growing student enrollment and the need for additional schools and space. The area is a tourist attraction with its beaches and has prospered over the years with a focus on family and controlled growth. VBPS has been recognized as a national leader in digital innovation and has grown their resources for students and teachers over the last few years and provides a device for all students and teachers.

Spence previously served as superintendent of Moore County North Carolina Schools, where he led a major technology effort. He also served as assistant superintendent of Houston ISD. Earlier in his career, Spence was a principal in Henrico County, Virginia, and led one of the country's first one-to-one laptop programs at Deep Run High School. During his tenure at VBPS, every school received full accreditation for four years in a row; the graduation rate is at an all-time high. Spence was named the Virginia Superintendent of the Year in 2018 and the 2020 Digital Superintendent of the Year by the Consortium for School Networking. In 2021, he was named the AASA National Digital Superintendent of the Year. Spence grew up in Virginia Beach and his commitment to and for the community stems in part from his reflection of what the school system meant to him over the years. The district's recent leadership focus has been on equity and innovation, as exemplified by VBPS's partnership with the Chesapeake Foundation Environmental Education.

SCAFFOLDING SPIRIT WORK

Virginia Beach Schools leaders emphasize three things that they want for all students:

1. To be cared for emotionally
2. To learn every day
3. To be loved

Aaron Spence and the Virginia Beach team have led with a focus on building trust and a sense of community. "I tell our leaders I love them every day. We have to lift each other. Our

actions must reflect our beliefs. Teachers are respected and loved,” Spence shares as keys to spirit scaffolding.

We have utilized Teacher Forums to focus on listening. It sounds simple enough, but we have to respond with action to what we hear, to solve problems. We also take this opportunity and others to constantly affirm the work of our teachers and to lift them up. We use our daily interactions to recognize teachers who are leading and to promote their work in our schools and classrooms.

Another aspect of building the cultural structure of the district is embracing the importance of talking to one another. “I visit every school every year and walk around with the principal. My work is centered on listening and affirming the principal, teachers, students, and employees. Our central office and school leaders have employed similar daily efforts and we keep this ongoing dialogue about our work and how we are doing.” With the challenge of the pandemic and the importance of clear information, Spence initiated “desk chats” where he would Zoom cast an update for the entire staff and offer straight talk from the heart about what was going on. “Sure, we have bumps and some bruises getting through the challenges of virtual instruction and when and how to reopen, but we have to keep working on it. We have to.”

Conviction is one of the attributes that Spence seeks in all VBPS leaders to demonstrate as role models. He stresses that “caring and loving for students undergirds everything we do. Everything! We have high expectations for students and adults and believe that it is a key to school improvement. We have to know our kids, really know them. We have to know their names. Students need to hear their names from all teachers. We know that relationships are vital. As we struggle with difficult challenges, we need each other more than ever before. We need everybody’s creativity and caring and open hearts to find our way through. We can help one another by trusting and believing in each other. We can’t get there alone, we can’t get there without each other.” Such deep commitment reminds us of the core of Meg Wheatley’s work (Wheatley, 2009).

“We can help one another by trusting and believing in each other. We can’t get there alone; we can’t get there without each other.” —Dr. Aaron Spence

TRUST AND FAITH

Relationships are at the heart of VBPS classrooms and the single most important ingredient in building trust and, ultimately, faith in each other. Spence emphasizes,

Our students need to have a great day, every day. We have to start each day with that sense that “we can make it happen today.” We have morning meetings in our classrooms to get to know each other but also to build belief in one another. We want our classrooms to be responsive to students. We are learning how to get to know each other and to build connections not as some ancillary thing, but as one of the most important things we do. We have to leverage this time to our collective good.

Fullan describes this as *nuanced leadership*: “Nuanced leaders are obsessed with making an impact . . . they unlock, mobilize, and create collective care” (2019). VBPS leaders have become thoughtful and creative in their efforts to create conversations and trust with families. With the challenge of the pandemic, Green Run High School leaders were initiating “family voice” to use conversations to build relationships and communication. Family Voice Empowerment Groups (small chat rooms) became a true evolution of collaboration with families, students, and our outreach staff. Spence states that

Our goal is to create safe and sustainable dialogue with families where they can share concerns, needs, or ideas. We focus on listening to understand our families. We analyze trends as a catalyst for improvements and problem solving.

As our Family Voice Groups have grown in number, we are reminded of the need for patience and perseverance, which are key ingredients to our trust-building efforts. These relationships are not built overnight, but rather one conversation at a time. Through consistency and shared vulnerability, we are creating conditions for sharing and trusting. When our families feel loved, encouraged, and respected, they understand that their voices matter and will be heard. Leslie Riccio and Rachel Thompson are leading this work with conviction for VBPS families.

The relentless consistency is key to VBPS's success:

To build on trust and to create faith in each other, we have to step up and do what we say. We have to demonstrate our efforts to grow our community and to value every employee. We have worked hard at developing meaningful professional development and modeling how we want to treat each other as we learn and grow together. Humor and laughter are vital parts of our classrooms and schools. We have to stay human, poke fun at ourselves, and have fun. Smiling and laughter should be prevalent in schools and classrooms. Students want to have fun when they are learning and they really do like to learn with each other. They understand that if a teacher has a sense of spirit (trust, faith, laughter), they are in a good place to learn. Virginia Beach Schools has established Joy Ambassadors to promote joy in schools. What does joy have to do with schools . . . ? Everything, in good schools.

SCIENTISTS OF COLLABORATION

Virginia Beach gets that collaboration is key. Spence explains,

We have established a culture of collaboration that took years to create. Teachers, students, specialists, and administrators coach each other up about collaboration. We use design principles to solve problems and part of those design

principles is a focus on continuous improvement. We have continuous dialogue about how students learn in classrooms and how they learn with one another and, most importantly, how we learn together as educators.

The work of collaboration science never ends and needs constant nurturance, as do all living things. Investing heavily in developing staff to build capacity, focusing on skills and dispositions that help people collaborate, and promoting the need for continuous learning and reflection are part of a proven formula (see also Fullan & Edwards, 2017). Spence notes that

Personal reflection on our experience is how we learn. Reflection contributes to the refinement of subsequent action and the building of professional craft and knowledge. And, of course, reflecting on practice—by observing practice, by writing about practice, by engaging in conversation about practice, by embracing the differences we encounter in practice—builds a school culture hospitable to both learning and community.

Once again, we note that spirit work and collaboration are heavily grounded in specific day-to-day work. Casey Conger, principal of Cooke Elementary, shares how spirit work is built into daily interaction:

Cooke staff have created four houses that correspond with the four pillars of the district: respect, kindness, responsibility, and safety. Every staff member and every student are members of a house where they lead efforts to promote and contribute to the spirit and hope for everyone. When you are a new student at Cooke, the minute you walk into the class, students are cheering you on. In a school community that is over 50% transient, creating a space where students feel seen, accepted, and valued is an absolute top priority.

In collaborative cultures, educators plan, teach, assess, and reflect on a constant basis. One of the first lessons of

collaborative science is that everyone is a teacher, and everyone is a student learning from one another. Spence stresses that in such cultures, it is crystal clear that students need to learn with each other. He notes that they “have looked at learning landscape and have built collaborative spaces to enhance how we work, and to support collaborative endeavors.” In the last couple of years, the district has focused on deeper learning concepts: students define their learning goals and their dispositions (working with one another and listening) and balance this with academic goals. The ultimate focus is on students becoming learning leaders. Spence notes, “The new pedagogies goal is for students to become independent learners who manage and design the learning process effectively.”

There has been considerable success since their journey began in 2014. The norm of “specific introspection” is firmly embedded and reinforced daily: as Spence says, “When we meet with our teacher forum, we use breakout groups for dialogue, collaboration, sharing and being vulnerable, and for coaching. We understand we have a lot to learn, and we have decided to do it together.” Once more, we see that spirit and collaboration are explicit, feed on each other, and are continually practiced.

Finally, we see in Virginia Beach the dynamic role of the pandemic. As we have observed in other situations, organizations that had strong spirit values and related collaborative cultures from the start were much more able to handle the disruption. In the case of VBPS, the spirit culture strength also led to even deeper innovation for the future. This became clear in an interview we did with Superintendent Spence, who starts by saying, “If you like leadership and enjoy the muck and morass of leadership, then this past year was for you.” He continues, “I mentor folks around the country in leadership, and I realized that leaders are or should be built for these moments of crisis. Emotionally, it is really draining, and the collaborative piece we had served us well. From Day 1, on March 13, 2020, when the governor announced school closure, you knew that this was going to be different.”

Organizations that had strong spirit values and related collaborative cultures from the start were much more able to handle the disruption.

Spence describes in some detail what happened:

We began immediately with our senior team, and met every day (virtually), seven days a week for six months. As we were meeting, we began to realize the typical hierarchical leadership, even when it is consultative, would not work. Decisions had to be made so quickly, and the issues were so complex, we needed everyone's best thinking and we needed it all the time. We expanded beyond the senior team and put 40 to 60 people in the Zoom room, seven days a week for several months, until we realized we were burning people out. But the beautiful part of that is that we had deconstructed the hierarchy with many more people at all levels, getting a say about the best decisions in the moment. Because we had a strong collaborative culture to begin with, we did not lose control as we extended collaboration. It became a regular check-in about who needs to put something on the table.

Again, as we are seeing in other cases, it is not just that collaborative cultures cope better in the short run, but also that *after the extreme pressure of the pandemic, people do not want to go back to the old ways*. Rather, they want to innovate! They want to go beyond what they were doing in pre-COVID-19 days. "We need a retreat," says Spence. "What have we started doing better that has proven to be a strength, that we need to keep? What can we do without and need to drop? We are going to have to be a lot more flexible than ever before as we assess proof-of-concept."

Spence went on to say that he worries about people who are focusing only on learning loss, as in a deficit model. He says it has become much clearer how to organize learning in context:

“Once you put your core values in order you can focus on basic skills in literacy and numeracy, and then organize content in a way that accelerates learning.”

In short, spirit work and related collaboration put you in good stead all the time and soon lead to the press for more effective innovation. Spirit and collaboration are *generative capacities*. They keep on giving, all the more so in times of difficulty.

ROWAN-SALISBURY SCHOOL SYSTEM (NORTH CAROLINA)



Dr. Lynn Moody

HERE WE GROW!

In collaboration with other teachers and instructional leaders, the teacher is constantly monitoring and making adjustments. The teacher has to be more, not less, creative than in traditional teaching . . . he or she is now engaged in intentional mindfulness.

—*The Six Secrets of Change* (Fullan, 2008)

Rowan-Salisbury School System has embraced becoming a learning organization in which students are respected and have

a clear voice in the instructional process. Superintendent Dr. Lynn Moody—appointed in 2014, retired in 2020—has provided opportunities for teachers and administrators to “go and grow” with visits to other school districts to find the best examples available to learn from. Rowan-Salisbury Schools leaders have evolved with nuanced dispositions, meaning that they

1. See their role as a leader in a broad manner that extends outside of the school.
2. Understand their role as being part of a variety of external networks.
3. Develop abilities to engage others inside and outside the school in partnerships.
4. Use technology to expand and manage a network of resources. (Fullan, 2019)

The district has faced some significant learning deficiencies for students and has recently adopted a renewal system to focus attention and effort on improvement and recognizing students for their unique talents as well as all teachers for their leadership.

The Rowan-Salisbury School District serves around 20,000 students, K–12, in Salisbury, North Carolina. The district has 37 schools and employs over 3,000 staff members. The district has a 65% poverty rate of students and has experienced a growth of diversity in recent years. The community is about 20 miles northeast of Charlotte, North Carolina, and has rural, suburban, and some urban elements in the community demographics. Without significant industry, the local economy has suffered, and significant numbers of families struggle to make ends meet.

Moody previously served as superintendent of Rock Hill, South Carolina, School District and led a significant technology effort there to provide each student with their own digital device. As she started her work in Rowan-Salisbury, one of her first major initiatives was to provide all students digital access with

their own devices. The digital divide and a lack of equity for student resources made this a priority—one that the community embraced. Moody knew the district had much work to do to improve student success and teacher productivity, and she initiated a new focus on professional development. As the district grew the efforts to enhance academic performance, Moody focused on building the culture and inculcating a new team spirit and trust:

We believe our community deserves an education system with schools that are encouraged to create an engaging and personalized learning environment where students and teachers enjoy their work. In our schools, teachers are treated like the experts they are. We want our teachers to be leaders, designers, and creators of instruction.

Building professional trust is foundational to the district. Moody set out to demonstrate the conviction that everyone matters and that their respective voices must be heard: “When teachers know you really listen to them . . . then they usually will listen to you. The idea of shared and participatory leadership is the direction we are going in. Building trust and a shared spirit about the work is not a position to be adopted, but begins with a deep belief in the potential of each other.” Moody stresses that “this kind of trust or spirit building comes from our hearts and out of our collective philosophy about people.”

“Building trust and a shared spirit about the work is not a position to be adopted but begins with a deep belief in the potential of each other.” —**Dr. Lynn Moody**

With the pandemic, the district had a real divide about when and how to open school, but in the end, pulled together and made it work. Moody attributes the successful transition to the collective and problem-solving capacity that the district developed over the past six years: “We are continuing to learn

and grow how to problem solve and how to get things done. Over the years we have built in time for dialogue, time to talk things over, figuring out what we believe, and time to know each other as professionals.” A good example of connecting spirit to collaboration is described by Dr. Kelly Withers, who served as principal at South Rowan High School:

We had the good fortune of having our leadership team travel to observe several outstanding models in several different states. We planned time for our team to reflect and have discussions about building our vision for the school and our understanding and commitment to collaboration. We had great discussions and spirited debates but evolved with a clear understanding of our mutual belief and love for our students and love for each other.

As Margaret Wheatley (2002) has stated, “Human conversation is the most ancient and easiest way to cultivate the conditions for change, personal change, community change, and organizational change. If we can sit together and talk about what’s important to us, we begin to come alive.” Rowan-Salisbury staff have studied a lot of districts and other communities and have embraced some cultural standards to guide the work with all students. Moody observes, “We know academic success for each student is a must and have to dedicate ourselves to each student’s learning. Interpersonal skills are equally important, and we focus on creativity, leadership, teamwork, civility, work ethic, communication, and problem solving. We also are emphasizing unique life goals for each student and ask them to think about their personal passions and life aspirations. We have had hundreds of conversations with teachers to create a sense of family and to build a sense of faith in each other.”

Moody shares a story about a student in Rowan-Salisbury Schools who was part of the evolving spirit culture:

Sampson was a special needs student who was mentored by a custodian in his school in a career technical education

(CTE) work experience class. He had the opportunity to work side by side with the custodian and others. His mentor was kind and encouraging, which motivated Sampson to work hard and learn some skills. When he graduated, his principal recommended that he be hired as a custodian. I had met him a few times when he was a student, and invited him to a community breakfast and asked him to sit in the front row. He told me he was so excited to be invited to the breakfast that he went to the Goodwill Store and bought a suit to wear. He brought me a decorative candle that he had asked some students to sign to thank me. A few months later, we had an employee discussion group and he attended. Afterward, he came up to me and said he wanted to share something with me. He said that he and his custodian colleagues would like to have shirts like the maintenance team had. He also shared that the steel-toed work boots were almost \$75, and they couldn't afford them. He said his work friends knew he had a connection with the superintendent and she needed to know. Sampson said, "They helped me and so I wanted to help." Sampson's experience led to the custodians receiving the shirts they wanted and to a local store that offered the boots for less than \$25.

A large number of Rowan-Salisbury students come from tough environments. The district has worked to establish a clear understanding that they have to look at the total well-being of students. Teaching good health and personal wellness is taken seriously. The district has worked explicitly at overcoming punitive compared to supportive reactions to problems. Therese Pierce, Rowan Teacher of the Year, notes that "When you go to the doctor, you want a personalized diagnosis. That is what we are doing for every student, personalizing their education." Moody and the leadership team recognized a lack of progress in student academic success and the need for serious work and direction. Even after a major focus on academics and data review, student academic performance remained flat for several years and below the state average

in most areas. One significant bright spot had been a small but consistent improvement in the graduation rate over the last several years, rising to 85%. The Rowan-Salisbury Schools decided to embark on a new and innovative systemic approach to teaching and learning that would move from a primary focus on testing and academics to a renewal directional system in 2018. The renewal system identifies three areas of focus for student success:

1. Interpersonal skills with a focus on communication, teamwork, creativity, and civility
2. Unique life goals with personal and career interests as the key drivers
3. Academic skills integrated with analyzing and solving real-world problems

This sense of encompassing spirit work extends beyond the classroom and beyond instructional staff. Dr. Jason Gardner, assistant superintendent, shares a great example of the merger of spirit and collaboration with support staff leaders stepping up. The school nutrition and transportation staff brainstormed about a way to support students during the summer and came up with the advent of the Yum Yum Bus, which traveled to families and communities in need. Child nutrition director Lisa Altman describes the work:

The bus distributed meals and books as well as other curriculum materials for students and families. There were also abundant hugs and smiles for students. Seeing our school nutrition staff reach out to help meant so much. Seeing the smiles and happiness of our families when the Yum Yum Bus would arrive was an inspiration to many and confirmation of our spirit and love for our students.

We mentioned that Superintendent Moody retired in 2020. We asked her what she had learned about leadership and learning. First, she said, “it is essential to identify, connect with, and

listen to the people you work with; then it is much easier to lead.” And that “if you don’t take the time to connect in the first place, you will have to trudge through most things. You can’t really lead people until they want to be led by you.”

On another dimension, we got the impression that Moody wished that she was just starting her career, having concluded that certain innovations in learning are needed. “Now that I am retired,” she said, “I have time to think about learner-centered design. Students need to develop their passions, interests, and their unique talents in this world . . . there should be a lot less standardizing children.”

CONCLUSION

As we study these eight districts, we think that the combination of spirit and collaboration, plus the COVID-19 disruption and its fallout, have put innovation and system change on the table—a theme we will take up in the final chapter. Our main conclusion remains: certain districts are discovering that going deep into spirit and collaboration is essential for the short run, and may be the best route for even deeper transformation.

Let’s extend this proposition to two large districts.

Spirit Work and the Science of Collaboration by Michael Fullan and Mark Edwards. Copyright © 2022 by Corwin Press, Inc. All rights reserved.