

*What Matters Most* by Vic Montemurro

At the beginning of the last school year, 2003-2004, the district's teachers received a shot in the arm, opening day workshop from learning and professional development expert Richard Strong, author of *Teaching What Matters Most*. His ideas about teaching and learning are powerful, research-based and were delivered on that first day of school for teachers with both common sense and humor. Strong's opening remarks and initial demeanor, including his comic insistence of using *Tr.* before his name to signify and garner respect for the role of teacher, seemed eccentric and downright nutty judging by audience response.

Strong quickly came to a serious point without losing humor and personality. He claimed that his goal is to find a way to be helpful. Contrary to the notion that "when one dies, whoever has the most toys wins," Strong believes that when one dies whoever was the most help wins.

Being helpful in a school community is a worthy goal, but who receives the help and who provides the help? What groups are part of the school community of helpers and those helped? Certainly it is easy to say the purpose of the school is to help the children become learners and students and then, at the end of their high school careers, to become adults. Does needing help extend to teachers, administrators, parents, and elected officials who have legal responsibility for the schools system? Or are these members of these groups only helpers?

Strong went on to say he was not interested the *re*'s that permeate discussions about school such as reform, re-engineering, or restructuring. The only *re* of interest to Richard Strong develops from the notion of a professional learning community: respect for teaching. The purpose of professional collaboration among colleagues in a small learning community is to restore respect to teaching.

Why not start with how teachers refer to themselves, allowing others to call them a staff rather than a faculty? All teachers need professional development as a teaching faculty. Teachers never need *training* or *staff* development but too often we hear these terms loosely used. Teachers need time for meaningful professional development especially beginning teachers who are under the many pressures especially state mandates. What the teaching faculty doesn't need is what has been referred to as *drive by staff development*. A last minute or poorly planned meeting with articles handed out at the end of a challenging teaching day is inappropriate and insufficient. An informational faculty meeting at the end of the day is not the place for professional development. Teachers, and those who would help teachers, need to find the right time for meaningful professional development.

Fortunately, the professional activity period, release time from classroom teaching or from administrative duty, as in the case of mentors and beginning teachers, and workshops or conferences out of the building are structures that can work for professional development. But these opportunities work only if a shared vision and shared values are held by all teachers and all stakeholders interested in helping teachers collaborate and grow.

Why bother? What is the point of professional development? Why should time be taken from the teaching day? Good questions like these might very well be asked by parents, community members and school board members. It is not enough to argue that research has demonstrated that when teachers collaborate and learn with their colleagues and their students, everyone gains. Teaching improves; effective instructional strategies are developed and shared. Student learning increases and gains are shown on tests.

The fact that the very best schools are collaborative and constructive with teachers being asked to have input into their professional development is strong argument for small learning

communities. Values and assumptions need to be examined by everyone involved in helping students and teachers learn and grow. Teachers need to face the challenge of ongoing learning with their students and colleagues. Community members need to accept responsibility for helping their teachers who, in turn, help the youngest members of the community. The school is a vital part of the community and as such, the community needs to be willing to help the school and its members change and grow. Everyone shares a common goal: learning how to be helpful.