



## “COMMUNITY” IN SCHOOLS SHOULD BE MORE THAN A WORD

BY KELLY MATTHEWS

The word “community” is so ubiquitous in education that in certain contexts, it risks losing its meaning altogether. Small learning communities set the structure for faculty meetings, peer learning communities are scheduled as professional development, and in many middle and high schools, the “community meeting” has replaced the more traditional homeroom period that marks the start of each day.

But too often, these are communities in name only, and it’s important to remember their roots so that we can recommit ourselves to their stated intentions.

Much of the community-oriented terminology in today’s schools stems from the small schools movement of 40 years ago led by Deborah Meier, who founded several innovative public schools in New York City, beginning with Central Park East.

Meier staked her schools’ structure on the belief that community is a human need. In all schools everywhere, she said, kids will always find communities — friend groups, sports teams, even gangs — but if we are not careful, these communities may not include even a single adult.

To counter this phenomenon and enrich each child’s network of adult contact and support, Central Park East

schools are intentionally small, and at the elementary level, teachers stay with student cohorts for two years so that academic relationships can grow.

Among the historic definitions of “community,” the *Oxford English Dictionary* reminds us that a community fosters social cohesion, mutual support, affinity, and fellowship. Now might be a good time to examine our in-school communities and ask whether they uphold that definition. Does our daily “community meeting” offer social cohesion and mutual support? Do students leave the room feeling recognized, affirmed, and encouraged?

Similarly, do faculty in peer learning communities feel supported, valued, and inspired to take academic risks in their thinking and teaching?

Sometimes, we wear one another down in school buildings, and it’s easy to forget the importance of community, or the care needed to cultivate it. The ongoing pandemic has strained our stamina and sometimes leaves us too raw to be able to reach out and help others — or to ask for help when we need it.

In my work with student teachers during their full-time practicum semester, I often ask about the atmosphere of their school’s faculty

lunchroom. Do teachers share successes in the classroom, celebrate small victories in their work with individual students, brainstorm approaches to their next class? These are signs of vitality in a healthy community, one that nurtures growth for new teachers as well as their more seasoned colleagues.

If the lunchroom isn’t a site of community building, I coach my teacher candidates to seek out a supportive community elsewhere in the school, even if it’s a community of just a few open-minded educators who can help one another teach better. Find the most positive person in the building, I advise, and spend time in that person’s company when you can. Their optimistic spirit might rub off on you, and you’ll find that you can pass it on to others in your life, including — most importantly — your own students.



### KELLY MATTHEWS

(Framingham State University) is a professor of English at Framingham. A graduate of Harvard, Trinity College Dublin, Boston

University, and the University of Ulster, Matthews teaches English methods and supervises student teachers seeking the English 5-12 teaching license.