



School Learning Laboratory

Livermore Falls Middle School MSAD #36

Livermore Falls Middle School (LFMS) in MSAD #36 serves 300 students in grades 6-8 and is located in the small, working class community of Livermore Falls in western Maine. This community has a very low number of parents with post secondary education and its students typically score below the state average on the Maine Educational Assessment. The school has 19 teachers who are structured in middle school teams and the principal is currently in his second year in that role. He follows a string of nine principals in the last 15 years. There is a “Teacher Leadership Committee” in place that is working with a middle school consultant. There are other initiatives in the early stages of development in the school, and the staff is supportive of the directions that the school is undertaking, although changing well engrained practices is often difficult. There is an ambitious building program in place with a new middle school and community arts center envisioned to open in 2006.

The Need

As a result of the SLL Assessment Day and the Collaborative Review, the LFMS Team identified the need to build and support a three-year exploratory arts program that culminated with the opening of the new school facility. The school had recently completed a program funded and led by the Foothills Arts Center and had great student participation and staff engagement. The LFMS Staff felt their involvement in SLL was an opportunity to extend the blossoming interest in the arts, meet a need not being met by the basic curriculum and engage the services of two SuperEd members: the Maine Alliance for the Arts and the KIDS Consortium. The RFP sent to both service providers was to 1) work with the school to map out a long-term plan and 2) help plan and carry out the first event in that plan. The hoped-for outcomes were a greater feeling of community and pride in the school as a creative learning environment and classroom instruction that reflected the position: Arts & Artists – Everyday. Everywhere. Everyone! This effort was chosen among a series of needs as a new school building was being planned and a 500 to 800 seat performing arts center had been proposed as a major piece of the construction project and promoting the arts fit was seen as a means of engaging staff, students and the community in a unifying, forward-thinking effort.

The Intervention

The RFP was sent to the service providers in January 2005 and there the project stalled. Numerous phone calls and e-mails were exchanged trying to get the three parties to the table for discussion but long periods of time elapsed between communication and the entire project lost steam. The LFMS Principal was quietly replaced and during this transition the SLL Facilitator was unaware of the change in leadership for some time. Once aware, the SLL Facilitator met with the new Principal, provided background material, and promoted the next steps of, once again, getting the service providers to the table with the school in order to get agreement on a specific project definition, scope and charter. This meeting never took place.

Noticeable Results & Learnings

The SLL Facilitator interviewed the Principal, members of the school Teacher Leadership Committee (TLC) and the two service providers. Key Learnings were as follows:

1. Change in school leadership mid-project caused the de-railing of the timeline and the enthusiasm. The school’s continuously shifting leadership (10 Principals in 16 years) did not encourage staff empowerment, the TLC structure had only been in place one year and was still focused on basic meeting management skills – no decentralization of power or distribution of authority had taken place. With the change in school Principal we needed to start back at the very beginning to bring him up to speed.
2. The school culture in place at the time of the proposed project demonstrated a top-down leadership style and had not developed the capacity for independent action by the staff. The Principal set all meeting agendas and managed the content.



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3. With the closing of the previous arts project there was a sense of finality rather than a sense of transition or continuity to a new effort – the teacher leading that project saw this effort as completely separate and felt little ownership.
4. LFMS runs in an economically, socially and academically challenged world and there was a belief that funding and support could be had for this project. Few people on the TLC team had a vision of how this could have the proposed positive impacts and therefore little enthusiasm for leading the charge.
5. The Superintendent was not directly involved as the LFMS Team wanted to be seen as “doing it themselves” and only the school Principal who subsequently left the project, had direct communication with the Superintendent.
6. The service providers were a bit stumped at the broad project scope and the limited SLL budget. While the school seemed willing to pursue other funding sources once a plan was in place there seemed to be reluctance on the part of the service providers to jump in to what was perceived as an under-funded project. There were always more important, bigger projects to be working on.
7. The lack of energy, enthusiasm and leadership on the part of any of the three players clearly caused the demise of this project. If any one of the three had stepped up, it appears the project could have advanced. This signals the need, in future projects, to clearly identify ownership and accountability for advancing the next steps and challenging participants to make it happen!