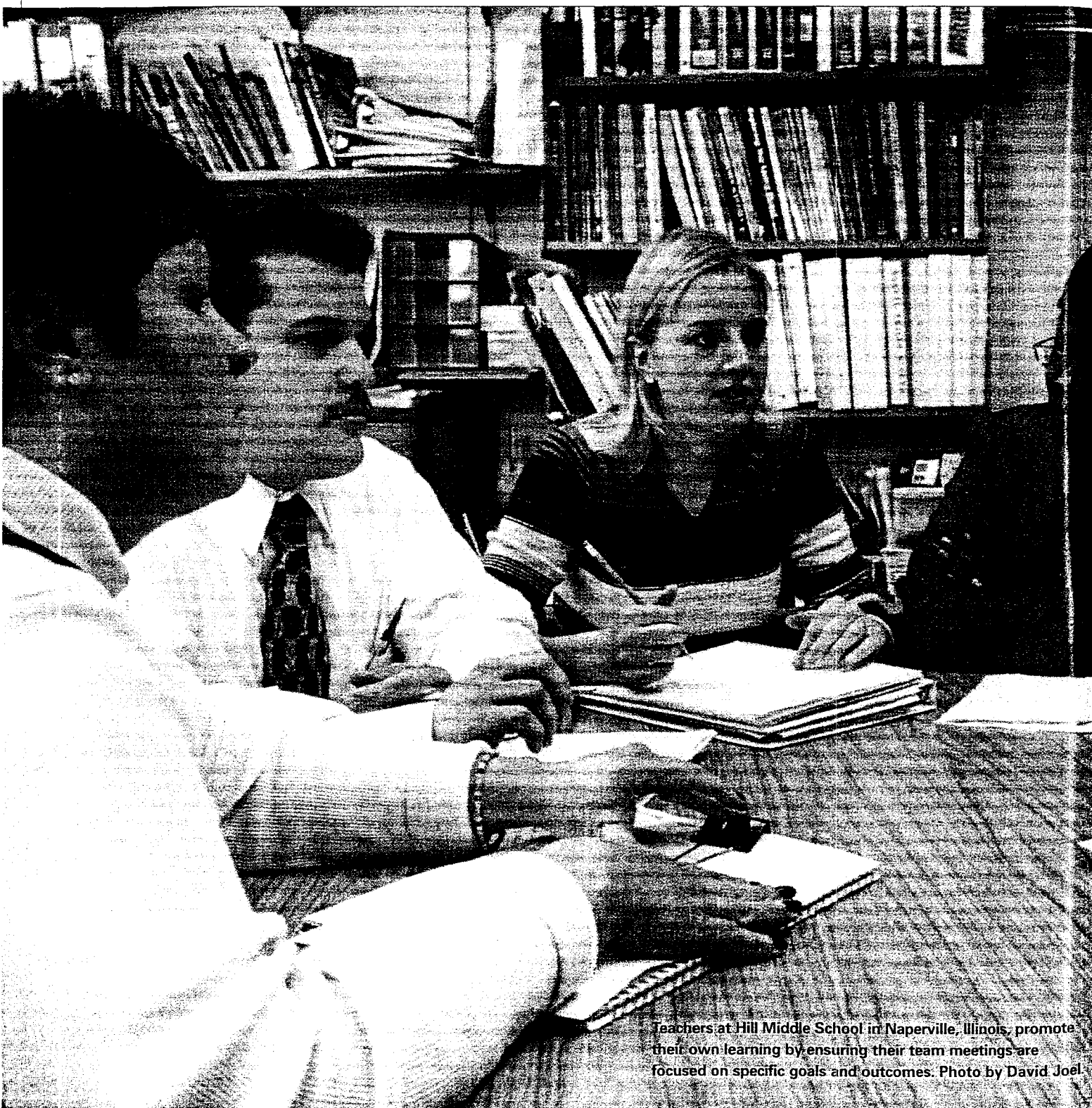


The Spirit of Teacher Learning

By Joan Maute



Teachers at Hill Middle School in Naperville, Illinois, promote their own learning by ensuring their team meetings are focused on specific goals and outcomes. Photo by David Joel

Teachers are learners by nature.

We enter the profession fresh with knowledge, ideas, and a passion to teach, share, and make a difference. Those of us who remain in the classroom quickly realize that those college programs were just the beginning of our quest for understanding. We seek out and find mentors: official mentors; curriculum or peer coaches; team, department, or administration support; and/or that all-important helpful teacher next door. We learn for our own professional growth; for our team, school, and district goals; and we learn "just enough, just in time."

Our learning takes place not only in graduate classes, workshops, conferences, institutes, and school improvement days, but also in team meetings, the hall, the lunchroom, the parking lot, on the phone, via e-mail, and most often, in our classroom. The minute we stop learning from and about our students, we're in big trouble.

We share what we've read in journals and books, what we've heard at conferences and classes, and what we've just tried. Learning becomes so embedded in our lives that we forget to recognize it IS learning and therefore don't look critically at what and how much we ARE learning.

To get the most bang for our learning buck, we must consider the contexts in which we learn and the strategies to optimize our learning.

The Context for Learning

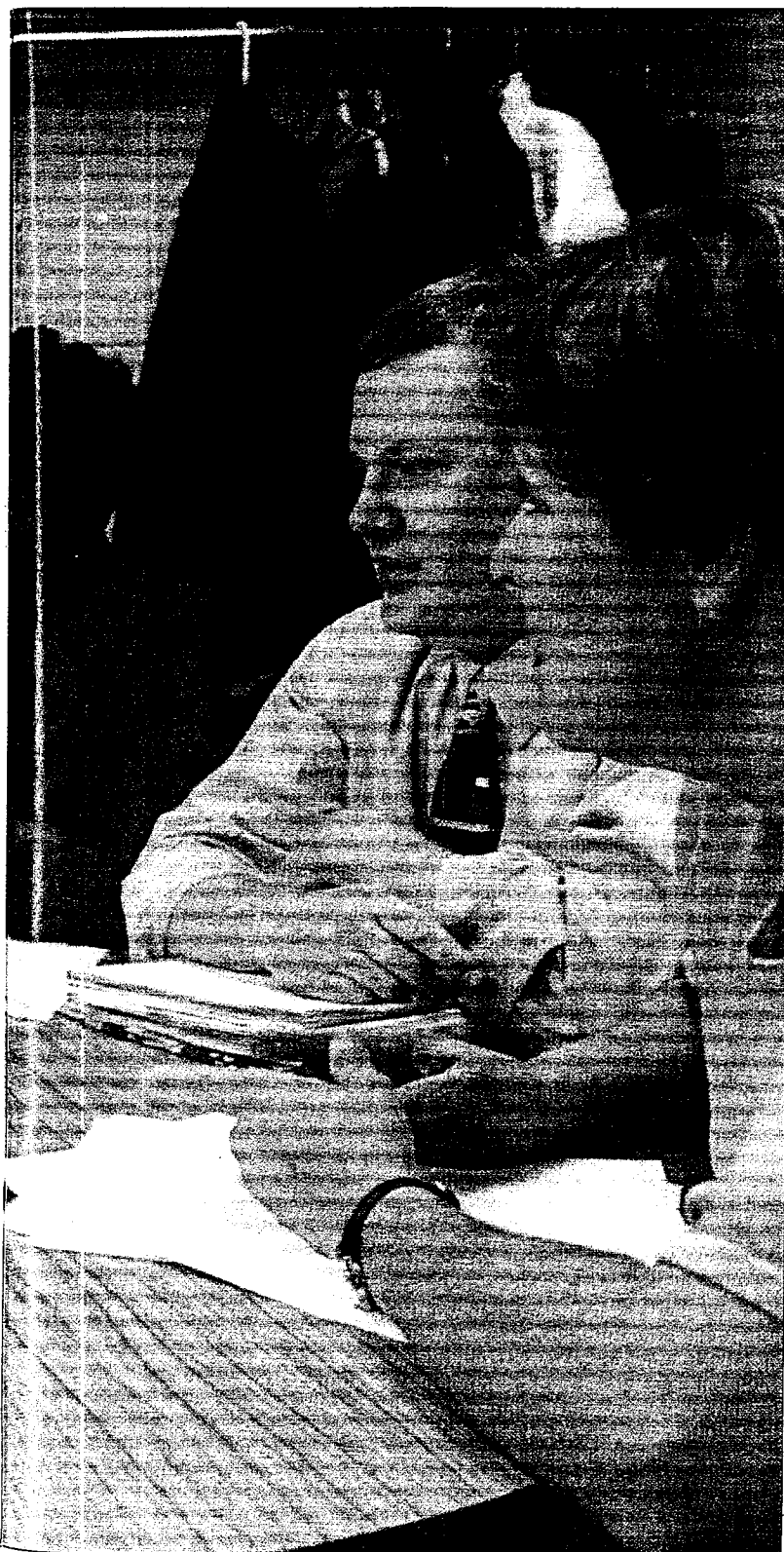
We all know the demands of teaching. As I write this article, it is the end of the quarter. I must enter grades for 170 eighth grade students into the district system during the next 48 hours.

Tomorrow I'll be focusing on six classes of students. If I can't see a connection between my formal or informal learning and the students I teach, I really don't have time for it right now. In the day-to-day life of a teacher, the primary focus must be on the immediate. Long-term sometimes means third period, not next semester, next year, or three years down the road.

We know the standards and standardized testing demands from the state. We know that No Child Left Behind will continue to make a huge impact on what we are expected to do.

But we also know that first period tomorrow will come, and we'd better be ready for it.

We know how students' characteristics affect their ability to learn and achieve. We also should realize our own learning characteristics. Like our students, we want to see application for our learning. And sometimes like



our students, we want the answers quickly and concisely.

In reality, the current issues we are struggling with do not have quick and easy answers. Teaching to standards is here to stay, and we need to commit to ongoing discussions, readings, presentations, sharing, and learning to provide our students with a variety of ways to meet those standards.

Strategies for Teacher Learning

Teachers can and should be learning all the time. It's what we do and what we model. It's our spirit. Some strategies that help teachers learn and grow include the following:

- **Work together.** Teachers and administrators need to collaborate to define and meet local goals.
- **Evaluate and reflect on what is.** We must honestly and clearly understand where we are before we can

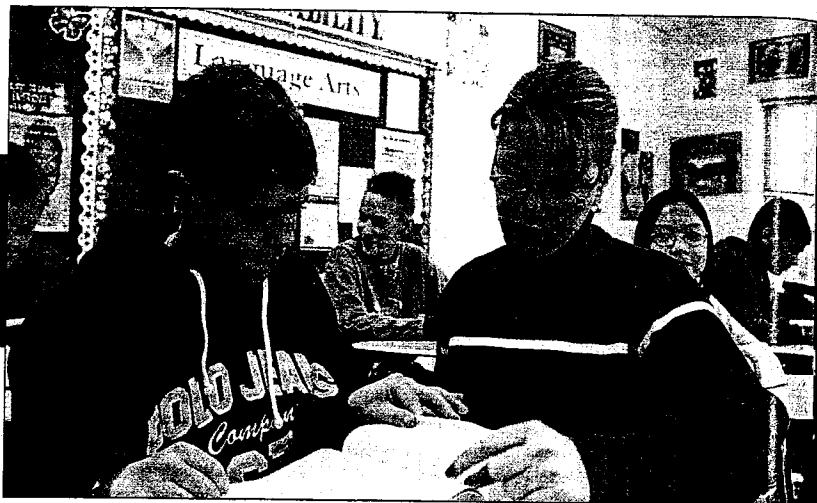
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begin to think about where we need to go. Data (class, team, school, district, and standardized) should drive our goals for learning. Where are the gaps in our students' achievement? What is the current teacher practice? What will help us close those gaps?

- **Narrow the focus.** There is so much to learn and too little time. Select a focus, define one goal, and let that permeate your team and staff meetings, school improvement workshops, conference and institute sessions, and professional readings. If we truly are a community of learners, let's concentrate our learning so together we learn more.
- **Plan ahead.** Effective schools devote time (typically in the summer) to plan a year or more in advance for teacher learning. Professional development should be a journey, not an event. Connect school or district workshops or school improvement time with a common theme or goal so they build on each other.
- **Explore research and best practice.** As you begin to address your goal, let research and best practice guide you.
- **Think big, learn small.** We need to think big, to look down the road to the one major goal, but to learn small. Take 10 minutes of a meeting, or one meeting a week or month, and meld that with other activities to build the time block needed to address the goal. Perhaps one team meeting per month can be dedicated to sharing something you have learned or read about the designated topic. (See page 13 for tips on using team time for learning.)
- **Don't waste valuable time.** Time for teams, departments,

and schools to meet together is gold. Don't waste it discussing information that can be distributed via e-mail or memo.

- **If it's working, check it out.** Teams, schools, and districts are at various places in their understandings and applications. If there are others around who are successfully addressing some of your challenges, learn from them. The value of school visits cannot be underestimated. If you find a school or team that has a practice that may work for you, get out and see it in action. Go armed with a list of questions and work with the host school or team to arrange time to talk with teachers, administrators, and students. (See page 14 for tips for effective



Keeping student needs at the forefront guides teachers in their daily learning. Photo by David Joel.

school visits.)

- **Grow your own.** Don't depend solely on outside help to help you meet your goals. Teacher leaders can learn to bring the learning back to the school where it can be shared in a flexible time frame.
- **Be patient and flexible.** We are dealing with complex demands and issues. They won't be solved quickly, but they can be solved. Set reasonable short-term and long-term goals, reevaluate as necessary, and always honor and model the great middle school hallmark: flexibility.

The spirit of teacher learning is alive and well. Sometimes we overdose on learning or scatter it in so many directions that we can't see results. We are making progress. We will continue to make decisions based on what is good and right for kids.

Take a minute to look at all the learning we do and celebrate who and what we are. We teach our students to learn and we must do the same. Learning never ends.

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