

# Conversations

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TURNING POINTS TRANSFORMING MIDDLE SCHOOLS

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## Cultivating a Culture of Inquiry: The Initial Steps

*by Amy Mednick*

Your six-year-old daughter, Jesse, drags herself into the kitchen Monday morning and collapses into the nearest chair. "I feel yucky," she moans. Immediately, you spring into action. Your hand reaches for Jesse's forehead. You evaluate how she looks: Any fever? Coughing? Nose running? A few quick questions: "How's your stomach? Do you have a sore throat? Any earache?" Based on the information collected, you decide whether Jesse should go to school and consider how to juggle the rest of the day. Then, you either tuck her back in bed and call work, or send her off to the bus stop.

We gather *data* in order to make decisions such as this every day. In school settings, however, the fast pace and the tendency to react quickly to crises often prevent us from making informed decisions based on data. For example, if reading scores decline, a new reading program often appeals to school leaders as the easiest and quickest fix. Schools that adopt a culture of inquiry take the time to ask questions and investigate the underlying causes of a problem before making a

major decision such as spending valuable resources on a new reading program. Teachers, administrators, students, parents, and community members work together to examine issues more thoroughly, analyze a range of related information, and develop action plans to address them. This process addresses the underlying causes of issues, and helps teachers and schools create lasting improvements.

Schools that have established a culture of inquiry recognize that their work does not end with a few lasting improvements. They know that "improving teaching and learning is an intentional and ongoing process," according to Sharon F. Rallis and Margaret M. MacMullen in their article "Inquiry-Minded Schools: Opening Doors for Accountability" (Kappan, June 2000). These schools find that answering difficult questions leads to action and that action leads to new questions. This ongoing *cycle of inquiry* establishes a more thoughtful approach to improving teaching and learning schoolwide. Turning Points facilitators, principals, and school change coaches say that

**Reflective inquiry builds trust among staff, improves teachers' practice, and empowers staff to take more significant leadership roles.**

reflective inquiry builds trust among staff, improves teachers' practice, and empowers staff to take more significant leadership roles. As outlined in the *Turning Points Guide to Data-Based Inquiry and Decision Making*, the cycle includes:

- Setting a vision
- Collecting and analyzing data from a variety of sources
- Identifying strengths and challenges, and investigating underlying causes of problems
- Creating and implementing action plans to address priorities within the challenge areas
- Setting annual goals and assessing progress

Turning Points schools build a culture of inquiry over time and begin the process with many different approaches: at one school, a teaching team might begin looking at student work to explore new teaching strategies; another school might take a hard look at student achievement data and change their approach to staff development schoolwide; at a third school, an inquiry group might interview students of color about why they did not sign up for a difficult math class. "It's really about creating a culture of inquiry, of asking questions, and of probing some of the deep dilemmas that face us every day in our schools," says Dan French, executive director of the Center for Collaborative Education in Boston, the

National Turning Points Center. "As part of that, we want people to answer those questions in an informed way. You can't just go by your past experience because it often leads down the wrong path. You look for information that helps guide. Almost everything around us is data."



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## Demystifying Data

People often freeze when they think of collecting or analyzing data. But even the simple dictionary definition of *data*, from the on-line *Merriam-Webster Collegiate Dictionary*, helps demystify this process: *1. factual information used as a basis for reasoning, discussion, or calculation.*

Inquiry-minded schools are discovering *data are everywhere*. Data are simply any type of information that middle schools use to better understand the challenges they confront. Data can be student work, teachers' attendance records, enrollment records, test scores, written reflections, interviews, or formal surveys. Even careful listening during informal conversations with students can generate informed decisions. For example, teachers at the Bartlett Middle School, in Lowell, Massachusetts were disheartened when they found out through informal conversations that many of their Cambodian students did not have access to books or read at home. After further inquiry, teachers found that traditionally, Cambodian parents expect schools to take care of all the students' educational needs. "They didn't know that as part of our culture, we expect parent support," says Nancy O'Loughlin, an instructional specialist. In response, the school developed an outreach program that would help increase parent involvement. Once each spring on a Sunday morning, teachers, parents, and students invite local Buddhist monks to the school. In a special ceremony, the monks bless the relationship between the school and the

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## Students Make Meaning of Data

A couple of months after the September 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center, a map of the world greeted visitors to Clarence Edwards Middle School in Charlestown, Massachusetts. As the curious approached the large map, they could make out many colorful sticky notes covering all parts of the world. The sticky notes represented, at a glance, places that students called home. The sixth-grade class had collected the information and created a visual testament to the diversity of the school.

This sixth-grade project inspired bilingual education math teacher Teresa Keung to direct her eighth-grade students in a survey of the entire school population on the origin of all the students and teachers. Percentage is part of the mathematics curriculum and this activity allowed Keung's students to learn the math and begin to understand themselves and their classmates, she says. The students found that students and teachers represented at least 43 different countries of the world. With that information, the class created bar graphs and pictographs. "My students are bilingual," Keung says. "Sometimes they don't understand American culture. We tried to use this opportunity to let the kids understand each other. We're all under one roof."

Principal Elaine T. Koury says these math projects, conducted at every grade level, taught many other lessons as well such as:

- how math can tell us interesting information about ourselves
- how to display data visually
- how to display similar data in different ways
- how, by working together, students can create a project too large for any one student.

Involving students in the inquiry process, Koury says, teaches them not only reason and the practice of science, but the habit of mind of backing up opinions with fact. "Students could see that our school is a microcosm of the world," she says. "By naming November our Month of Compassion, we made the connection between ourselves on a little street in Charlestown and the world. We asked students—and ourselves—to realize that we are the world. It is, therefore, our responsibility to be compassionate to everyone in the world."

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## Overview of the Components

### 1. Setting the Vision

A school's vision is based upon the Turning Points principles and what students should know and be able to do upon exiting the school.

### 2. Collecting and Analyzing Data from a Variety of Sources

Data is collected and analyzed from a variety of sources including the School Improvement Self-Study, sampling of student work, and standardized achievement test data.

### 3. Identifying Challenge Areas

Schools identify challenges by analyzing the data collected using the Turning Points benchmarks to guide the analysis.

### 4. Action Planning

Schools identify challenges and develop action plans for those areas that have the most impact on learning, teaching and assessment.

### 5. Annual and Ongoing Assessment

Initially, the Leadership Team, and in subsequent years the entire faculty, uses the Turning Points benchmarks to conduct an assessment of the school's progress and to set annual measurable goals for improving learning, teaching and assessment.

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**It is critical to find one or two people in the building who are not intimidated by the process of gathering, organizing, and methodically analyzing data.**

home. Each child leaves with several books donated by community members.

#### *Taking It Slowly*

Bob Steffes, principal of Lewis and Clark Middle School, a large middle school in Jefferson City, Missouri, introduces staff members to the idea of using information to promote change. It is critical, Steffes says, to find one or two people in the building who are not intimidated by the process of gathering, organizing, and methodically analyzing data. Steffes believes it is best to then concentrate on one or two pieces of data at a time so that the staff has time to digest the information and respond in an informed way. "We make sure we

share everything and then we slowly walk our way through it and discuss what's most important for us in our life as a school," Steffes says. By working with the data in many different venues, eventually the whole staff is drawn into the process.

*"Numbers are intimidating to a lot of folks," Reinert says. "Keeping it simple and making sure the data is interpreted as part of the big picture is my key role."*

Each year, about one-third of the staff attends a voluntary weekend leadership retreat where they discuss some of the larger issues that emerge from data. At a faculty roundtable, Steffes might share a graph that illustrates a point and have the group discuss it. Soon after, he will meet with teams in a more informal setting to get feedback on what teachers think of the topic. In each of his newsletters to the staff, Steffes highlights one aspect of the school's Self-Study, a comprehensive survey of the school's performance given to Turning Points schools.

New Mark Middle School in nearby Kansas City, Missouri is in its first year as a Turning Points school. As an initial step in helping parents and teachers become less intimidated by test scores, assistant principal Joyce Reinert is making the scores more accessible. Reinert composes letters to each parent that "decode" their child's state test results. In the letter, Reinert connects the information to the school's instructional goals and informs the parents of the high stakes involved for both the school and the individual students.

In the past, students' scores were kept in a file in the office and teachers would not have time to look at them. With this in mind, Reinert writes a letter to teachers about their students' scores, including a statistical analysis comparing last year's and this year's students. "Numbers are intimidating to a lot of folks," Reinert says. "Keeping it simple and making sure the data is interpreted as part of the big picture is my key role."

### ***Learning to Crack the Self-Study***

Every school in the Turning Points network administers the Self-Study Survey to teachers, students, administrators, and (optionally) to parents. The Self-Study Survey creates a comprehensive profile of many aspects of a school's performance. The data contained in this profile provide valuable information that schools can use to track their progress and guide further improvement. The Center for Prevention Research and Development (CPRD) at the University of Illinois produces and analyzes these surveys. Dawn Carpenter, coordinator of Research Programs for CPRD, gives workshops at Turning Points schools teaching staff how to select the relevant data that will help them understand their school improvement goals. This workshop is devoted to making the staff feel more comfortable and confident about working with data and stresses the importance of using the information judiciously in conjunction with school improvement efforts.

During the workshop, Carpenter introduces a seven-step process for looking at the data. The process begins with showing teachers and administrators how to read and interpret the Self-Study

Survey charts and tables on a basic level, and it ends with the staff setting its own goals and monitoring its progress toward them. Along the way, teachers and administrators use a sample problem to help them learn that the data in the binder is interconnected. Most schools then review their School Improvement Plan, select a goal, and use Self-Study statistics to assist them in making informed decisions. "Once schools start to do this, it becomes a way of life and they start to make every decision based on data rather than informed intuition," Carpenter says. The goal is for the entire school community, including students and parents, to have access to the Self-Study Survey and the decision-making process.

### ***The Power of Data***

Once teachers and administrators begin to regularly use a cycle of inquiry, they also learn to use the data to gain support from reluctant staff members and to seek community or district resources. Mound Middle School in Decatur, Illinois has been on the state academic watch list for two years due to low test scores. In-house facilitator Debi Kwasny and computer teacher Bill Reiter took the time to analyze students' reading levels and found sixth-grade students were reading two to three years below grade level. After some additional research, Kwasny and Reiter presented a proposal to their district leadership team to use Title I funds to fund a new reading program. Their proposal included:

- National recommendations on the need to teach reading to adolescents, and

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# Collecting and Analyzing Students' Work

*A collaborative process to collect and analyze a sampling of student work to gain an authentic perspective on how students are doing in school*

## Process

- 1. Decide on what to measure:** A team of teachers meets to decide on what skills, content, and habits of mind are appropriate measures of learning achievement for a particular grade level and discipline.
- 2. Create an assessment:** Teachers in the team develop an assessment to determine students' current level of performance, skill, or knowledge. They reach a common understanding on scoring and possibly develop a new rubric or adapt an existing school, district, or state rubric.
- 3. Have students complete an initial assessment task:** All students undertake an initial assessment at the beginning of the new school year.
- 4. Score the assessment and collect data:** The teachers collaboratively score the assessment, compile the students' scores, collate and record the scores to compare with data from assessments conducted at other times in the year. Teams analyze aggregate and individual data to identify trends or patterns, and they decide on instructional strategies to address them.
- 5. Re-administer the same or a similar task:** Administer a similar but different assignment two or three times a year. The team analyzes the data for strengths, gaps, and progress made from the last assessment administered.
- 6. Feedback:** In team study groups, use analysis of the data, including actual student work, to address problems and give feedback to students to help them improve their performance.

*Adapted from Turning Points Guide to Data-Based Inquiry and Decision Making. The Guide also includes a worksheet to help teams with collecting and analyzing student work.*

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statistics on national trends correlating to the needs of Mound students

■  
Mound test scores showing the number of students that read below grade level

■  
The strong connection between inability to read and high school drop out rates, particularly among students of color

■  
Kwasny's survey finding that 18 of 20 regional middle schools have a reading class as well as an English class

After Kwasny and Reiter presented their proposal, school change coach Schelli Kirby says the superintendent praised the team for their use of data. "I think they have seen the power in data," Kirby says. Indeed, Reiter says, conducting the necessary research to generate the proposal for the board was an eye-opener. "We knew that reading was the problem, but until we sat down and made graphs and looked at the data, we didn't realize how much of a problem we had. It's one thing to feel something is true, and another thing entirely to see it in black and white," Reiter says.

## Reflective Inquiry Changes Teaching and Learning

### *Learning from Student Work*

Jay Feldman and Rosann Tung, researchers at the Center for Collaborative Education in Boston, studied six Turning Points schools for their article "Using Data-Based Inquiry and Decision-Making to Improve Instruction" (*ERS Spectrum*, Summer 2001). They found that as teachers became more comfortable with the inquiry process, they were better able to step back and reflect on their next move. "Rather than attribute failure to causes external to their control, teachers began to collect data on the problem. They slowed their reaction down and allowed themselves to be open-minded about the issue," Feldman

and Tung write. Reflecting on data began to influence other practices as well and, rather than guess at the students' progress, teachers began to look more deeply at student work.

Overland Trail Middle School has 620 students with 40 percent of them receiving free and reduced lunch, and is located in Brighton, Colorado, a rural, farming community north of Denver. In just their first year working with Turning Points, grade-level teams at Overland Trail have taken the initiative to look at student work as a way to deepen their understanding of issues affecting individual students and entire grade levels. The two seventh-grade teams at Overland Trail spent part of a professional development day examining their students' writing. Each teacher brought a sample of student work, and, in teams, they evaluated what worked well and what did not in each piece. Together, the teams picked two or three elements of writing that all the teachers would work on with their students in each discipline. They decided to focus on organization, ideas, and content in the students' writing within each subject area. This empowered teachers who ordinarily do not teach writing to begin to work on particular aspects of writing in their content area, says Susan Herll, the school's in-house facilitator. For example, science teacher Marcia Aden discovered that her students needed guidance on how to do analysis within the context of science writing. In the ensuing weeks, the teams followed up by examining student work in which the teacher had accentuated these elements of writing with the students.

### ***A Schoolwide Focus***

The inquiry process occurs at many levels in the school. An individual teacher might go to her team with a question such as, "How might I achieve a better balance between teacher-directed activities and student-centered activities?" At a team level, teachers might meet to look at student work and agree on how to improve instruction in their classrooms. Groups of teachers from different grade levels and subject areas form inquiry groups that work on schoolwide challenges. Together, these three levels of inquiry—classroom, team, and schoolwide—lead to action and create systemic change.

At the Bartlett Middle School, a Title I school with approximately 600 students in Lowell, Massachusetts, Principal Jackie Travers brings the staff together on a Saturday morning every year soon after the release of the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) test results. The staff looks at the data to identify areas of strength and weakness, and identifies effective teaching strategies schoolwide.

They discuss how to apply effective teaching strategies to the areas of weakness. In the 1999–2000 school year, the staff found that children did well on open-ended questions when they had learned through active learning. But as they began to implement more hands-on activities, teachers discovered that the traditional schedule created too many interruptions and made it difficult to teach in this way. When teachers voiced their concerns, Travers set up a study group on block scheduling. After investigating the new schedule idea thoroughly

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and presenting it to the entire faculty, the staff agreed to try block scheduling. This new approach has worked out well for Bartlett and has allowed teachers time to use active learning strategies.

### ***Test Scores: Digging Deeper***

While data should be gathered from a variety of sources, the high stakes of state testing means that test scores take on an overwhelming importance in schools today. But Turning Points schools are attempting to turn that pressure to their own advantage, by gaining knowledge from their test scores, disaggregating this data, and using it to better understand their challenges and successes in order to improve teaching and learning. “Turning Points schools know that test scores are only one of many measures of student learning and achievement,” says Ben Lummis, co-director of National Turning Points. “Pulling apart test scores can help teachers learn how their students are doing, but Turning Points teachers dig deeper and use additional measures of student learning before drawing conclusions and changing practices.”

In Decatur, two schools formed a study group to focus on their students’ critical thinking skills. The Steven Decatur Middle School and Mound Middle School, which are on the state’s academic warning or watch lists, worked in teams to pinpoint where their own students had the most trouble on the Illinois Student Achievement Test. According to Schelli Kirby, their Turning Points coach, they realized that many of their students were one or two points from meeting the state standard in each area tested. After learning that

60 percent of the questions on the state exam asked students to apply knowledge, the study group began to wonder how often teachers asked their students to apply what they had learned during the school day.

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The teachers thought if they improved students’ higher level thinking skills, this improvement would be reflected in improved test scores. With the goal of getting students to apply more of their knowledge, Kirby introduced a tool that would help teachers instruct students in the critical thinking skills emphasized on the exam. The tool, based on Bloom’s Taxonomy of Educational Objectives, divided questions that teachers ask into four basic levels: knowledge (Level 1), comprehension (Level 2), application (Level 3), and evaluation (Level 4). For example, Level 2 questions ask students to show their knowledge and respond to cues such as “summarize, describe, interpret, contrast, predict, associate, distinguish, estimate, differentiate, discuss, or

extend.” Level 3 questions ask students to apply their knowledge and respond to cues such as “apply, demonstrate, calculate, complete, illustrate, show, solve, examine, modify, relate, change, classify, experiment, or discover.”

The teams then analyzed their textbooks using Bloom’s Taxonomy. They combed the textbooks and tallied each time there was a question in the book and the level it represented. “It turned out that the questions in the textbook were all at the knowledge and comprehension levels. So in classes where teachers were only using textbooks and supplemental materials, the kids would never meet state standards,” Kirby says. This gave teachers a concrete step for improving instruction: less reliance on textbook learning and a greater focus on using questions that ask students to apply information and evaluate it.

Until this year, teachers attempted to make educated guesses on how to improve scores, and felt more and more disheartened in the process, Kirby says. “The study group tried to take the shroud of mystery out of the state testing so that they could get actual data that showed what they needed to work on.”

## **Inquiry and Equity**

In their study, Feldman and Tung find that in schools that build a culture of inquiry, teachers begin to probe more deeply to find answers to many layers of tough questions. The cycle of inquiry also offers a safe process for discussing difficult issues such as equity of student achievement and access to programs. One teacher commented on the benefits of using reflective inquiry to discuss

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## **Computers for Kids**

**At Lewis and Clark Middle School in Jefferson City, Missouri, looking at data to improve equity is a top priority, according to Bob Steffes, the principal. For example, analysis of one piece of data collected in the Self Study Survey has spawned a program to improve equity at the school, which has 970 students of whom 28 percent are on free or reduced lunch programs. The study found that 98 percent of students who are not on the free or reduced lunch program have access to computers at home, whereas only 67 percent of students who are on the free or reduced lunch program have access to computers at home. Lewis and Clark places a strong emphasis on technology. Therefore, the School Reform Committee identified it as a priority for each child to have access to a computer at home. The committee started a program in which students on free or reduced lunch who do not have computers will receive a donated computer, that includes software donated by Scholastic, Inc. The students will be taught the basics of computer use. The program, “Computers for Kids,” is a partnership between the school, its partner in education, Central Bank, and Scholastic, Inc., which is headquartered in Jefferson City.**

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how to meet the goal of equity: “Rather than an accusation or a general statement, it helps us pinpoint where we have inequities. Data-based inquiry is a way of trying to democratize the solution planning so that everyone gets invested in a process of working to confront, face up to, and figure out how to change both our practices and our structures to meet the needs of everybody in a democratic way.”

At one Boston school, written reflections helped bring to light issues around race and culture in the classroom soon after September 11, says Loretta Goodwin, National Turning Points co-director and school change coach. Teachers started the conversation with Goodwin because they felt discipline problems might stem from racial tension. The conversation got tense when some of their colleagues said they did not have

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## Examples of Sources of Data

- **Student work, running records or profiles—sampling of student work assessed by a schoolwide rubric or a list of assessment criteria**
- **The Turning Points Self-Study Survey**
- **Standardized tests**
- **Quantitative measures such as dropout, suspension, course failure, and retention rates, attendance records, enrollment in special education and high-level classes, all disaggregated by race, gender, and income status**
- **Curriculum materials**
- **Student self-assessments**
- **Professional development calendar or schedule**
- **Leadership Team and Academic Team meeting minutes**
- **Number and type of parent involvement activities, and the number of parents attending**
- **Budget information and analysis**
- **Focus groups**
- **Evidence of teachers' planning—curriculum and assessment design**
- **School and team rubrics or lists of assessment criteria**

*From the Turning Points' Guide to Data-Based Inquiry and Decision Making*

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those problems in their classrooms. At that point, Goodwin suggested that teachers write their reflections on this issue. This writing helped all the teachers begin to acknowledge and consider some

of the discrimination Asian students faced at the school. The teachers began to generate data that Goodwin believes will help the school move toward equity. “This conversation was something that touched a nerve. It’s about personal prejudice and people don’t want to be seen as having that prejudice,” she says. “Collecting the data was the initial step that opened the door to further discussion about teacher expectations, but the process has been a slow one, dependent on a high level of trust among colleagues and in the coach. However, now that this conversation is happening, it is pushing teachers to consider issues of race and equity as they work with students.”

*“Collecting the data was the initial step that opened the door to further discussion about teacher expectations...now that this conversation is happening, it is pushing teachers to consider issues of race and equity as they work with students.”*

At the Lewis and Clark School, looking at data to improve equity is a top priority, according to Steffes, the principal. Recently, Steffes says, the School Reform Committee has begun to grapple with the fact that this year, only one of the 90 students enrolled in the upper level, eighth-grade algebra classes is a student of color. With students of color making up 12 percent of the student body, Steffes believes this situation is unacceptable. The committee has recently created a plan to determine why students of color are not enrolling in advanced math classes and what can

be done about it. They have started to interview eighth graders of color who are doing well in math about why they did not enroll in the upper level class. At the same time, committee members are talking with seventh graders of color who excel in math and are encouraging them to register for the class.

While they have made strides in closing the achievement gap between White students and students of color, the committee also discovered that many of the students did not have the necessary skills to qualify for the algebra class. This has led math teachers to look at the skill levels of their own students by ethnicity. After a test, one teacher simply separated into stacks the work of the students of color and the White students. According to Steffes, the teacher was very distraught when she found that the students of color in her class had done poorly. This has generated many questions about teaching and learning styles, the need for improving homework skills, and trying new teaching strategies. Until the data emerged, the faculty thought they were doing a good job of meeting the needs of students of color, Steffes says. Now teachers are more consciously encouraging students of color to succeed and focusing on changing their instructional strategies so they can better prepare students of color for advanced math classes.

## A Culture of Inquiry Focuses a School's Work

“By themselves, these data say little or nothing that is useful in shaping school practices. They are simply words and numbers, waiting to be organized into

meaningful patterns,” Rallis and MacMullen write. As school communities begin to fine-tune the questions, these well-developed questions will more naturally lead to the data that will supply the answers. These answers, in a school with a culture of inquiry, will spawn new investigations. As schools become more conversant in the process, faculties establish greater trust.

At Bartlett Middle School, O’Loughlin reports that teachers no longer bring only their best work when teams examine student work. They trust teachers will be nonjudgmental and that they will learn more by bringing work that needs improvement. Once this level of trust is established, schools begin to find they have a common goal that revolves more around the students than ever before. In its first year, the Mound Middle School Leadership Team spent most of its time discussing administrative details like the use of whistles, snacks at testing, and how to tape the hallway floors, Kirby says. This year, every item on the agenda focuses on the school’s two major goals: improving teaching and learning and parent involvement. “We all have a common goal and we’re all moving forward,” says Debi Kwasny, in-house facilitator. “The faculty as a whole has always been very open and direct. The difference now is that we are getting to the point where we’re looking at what’s best for kids. I think that’s been the biggest change.”



*Amy Mednick, an education writer and editor based in Rochester, New York, is the writer of Conversations, newsletter of the Turning Points National Network.*

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