

The Importance of Professional Learning Communities for School Improvement

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In this article, we begin with a discussion of the development and sustaining of professional learning communities. We proposed that PLCs can be an effective form of professional development for teachers. This professional development can be facilitated by the principal. The necessary cultural components for effective professional learning communities are also included. Embedded in the discussion is the role of the principal in facilitating the PLCs and facilitating the positive culture.

Keywords: Professional Learning Communities; School Improvement; Professional Development

Introduction

Professional Learning Communities are difficult to define because they are NOT new prescriptions, programs, models; nor innovations. Like many concepts in education, PLCs have different interpretations and levels of implementation for different professionals. There are frequently many initiatives and programs implemented in K-12 schools and College of Education/Teacher Preparation programs to target school improvement and student achievement. Teachers and school leaders are at the core of, student learning, achievement, and school improvement. One of the reasons PLCs in any implementation level is viable is because they are means to engage educators especially school leaders and teachers within the work environment.

In the perspectives of PLCs cited by the Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement (<http://www.centerforscris.org>), terms like “ongoing,” “collaboration” and “student learning/achievement” are repeated which validates the potential principles of PLCs to inform practice through collegiality. PLCs involve infrastructure changes that lead to continuous school improvement (Hord, 1997). The ultimate benefit for professional learning communities is improved instructional practices which lead to improved student achievement.

In this article, we begin with a discussion of the development and sustaining of professional learning communities. We proposed that PLCs can be an effective form of professional development for teachers. This professional development can be facilitated by the principal. The necessary cultural components for effective professional learning communities are also included. Embedded in the discussion is the role of the principal in facilitating the PLCs and facilitating the positive culture.

Developing and Sustaining Professional Learning Communities (PLCs as Professional Development)

There are obvious challenges to developing and sustaining

professional learning communities. According to Fullan (2009) in his observations of schools, many educators suggest that their schools have professional learning communities, and the cultures in the schools are not reflective of sharing and other essential attributes. Collaboration and collegiality are obviously necessary attributes of learning communities.

It is more important for concepts like professional learning teams to be applied in schools rather than quickly using the verbiage. Unfortunately, the conceptualization and thinking do not travel as rapidly as the verbiage in most professional settings. Dufour and Colleagues (2006) suggest in the second edition of the *Learning by Doing: A Handbook for Professional Learning Communities at Work* that the terms—professional learning communities have been used too loosely recently to describe any “loose coupling of individuals who share a common interest in education.” The concept of professional learning communities initiated in business.

The verbiage “learning organization” was first used by Senge in 1990 for the purposes of businesses. The educational context was translated by Sergiovanni in 1994 from Senge’s work. It was not until 1997 that Shirley Hord used the terms—professional learning communities aligned with her work with the Southern Educational Research Laboratories (SEDL). The following are the five descriptors of Professional Learning Communities suggested by Hord:

- Supportive and shared leadership;
- Shared values and vision;
- Collective learning and application;
- Shared personal practice; and
- Supportive conditions.

Hipp & Huffman (2010) elaborated on Hord’s perspective of professional learning communities and define each of the previously cited components. Since 1990, multiple perspectives of learning communities have been presented. The assertions made by the Dufour & Colleagues (2006) about characteristics of learning communities are emphasized in the perspective of

Blankstien. Blankstien (2010) suggests that there are six principles essential in schools with Professional Learning Communities:

- Principle 1—Common mission, vision, values, and goals;
- Principle 2—Ensuring achievement for all students;
- Principle 3—Collaborative teaming focused on teaching and learning;
- Principle 4—Using data to guide decision making and continuous improvement;
- Principle 5—Gaining active engagement from family and community; and
- Principle 6—Building sustainable leadership capacity.

Dufour and colleagues (2006) contend that commitment to the learning of each student is key in learning communities. This notion parallels Blankstien's (2010) Principle two. Principle four reflects the need for educators to use data to inform practice (Blankstien, 2010). It has been our experience that there is a great deal of data prevalent in schools. The challenge for educators is using the data in relevant ways. Student data must be used to inform instructional decisions of educators.

A second noted principle by Dufour and Colleagues (2006) is that there is a shift of focus from teaching to learning. Teacher behaviors were once a focus in classrooms. When observations were conducted by supervisors of teachers in the 90s; supervisors noted the behaviors and dispositions of teachers. Engaging students has become the critical focus. This notion corresponds with Principle three of Blankstien (2010).

There is so much value in teachers collaborating as it relates to instructional strategies and practices focusing on the needs of learners. School leaders play a critical role in creating the cultures for the collaboration to take place. In some instances, school leaders should facilitate the collaboration.

The advantages of including professional learning communities have been well documented in the literature since the 80s. There have been varying ways to approach the concept of professional learning communities and adjustments to the concept since the 80s. It is also noteworthy that several professional associations have noted the importance of professional learning communities including the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, the National Education Association, The American Federal of Teachers, and the National Association of Elementary School Principals.

According to the Anneberg Institute (2003,) the following are the key benefits of professional learning communities:

- Building productive relationships that are required to collaborate, partner, reflect, and act to carry out school-improvement programs;
- Engaging educators at all levels in collective, consistent and context-specific learning;
- Addressing inequities in teaching and learning opportunities by supporting teachers who work with students requiring the most assistance; and
- Promoting efforts to improve results in terms of schools and system culture, teacher practice and learning.

Brady and McColl (2010) noted the relevance of educators shifting their thinking to the learning of students. To truly use data well while focusing on learning, educators should have clear definitions of assessments with clear purposes of assessments. There is a tendency for teachers to constantly test and/or assess students. Assessments should be meaningful with clear expectations for students.

Obviously, the fundamentals of professional learning com-

munities must be present for the communities to function and to be sustained. Professional development facilitated by school leaders can be the most effective form of professional development. Darling-Hammond and colleagues (2009) suggest that professional learning communities work when they are sustained, school-based and embedded in the daily work of teachers.

Providing opportunities for effective professional development is one manner for school leaders to begin to build learning communities. Hord (1997) emphasizes the role of the leader in sharing decision-making with teachers. Professional development can be most effective when the school leader involves teachers in setting individual goals rather than dictating the parameters for teachers. Leaders must also share power and authority with teachers (Hord, 1997).

One example of a need to embed professional development in the daily work of teachers is that during informal conversations and class discussions with practicing teachers, many suggest that professional development in their districts is not necessarily linked to the needs of the teachers. Some district leadership have sponsored huge professional development initiatives at the beginning of the school year where all teachers across all grade levels and disciplines meet in an auditorium for an entire day with an expert on a relevant issue for the district that may not be specific enough to meet the needs of teachers at a challenged school or the individual needs of teachers. There is so much information in the literature on differentiating instructional needs for students. It is also important to differentiate the professional development needs for teachers.

Experience has taught us that the following concepts are critical for meaningful professional development: time and organization, relevance, follow-up. Many districts have the first days of school calendars designated for professional development. Although this may appear as an appropriate and logical time, most teachers are most concerned with classroom organization, the classes that they will be teaching, etc. Therefore, the focus on the professional development becomes rather limited. Timing is so critical.

There are other instances when professional development is scheduled at the end of the work day when teachers have been frustrated by the complexity of challenges of the day. The most effective time for professional development is during working hours particularly when teachers are energetic and can work. Effective professional development planning should allow time during the instructional day for teachers to discuss the critical components of lesson planning; what is working and what is not working; and pertinent issues linked to the needs of the students.

Previously, we cited and discussed the need for the shift to occur in the thinking of educators with a focus on learning. As educators focus on the learning of students, it is fundamental for educators to observe assessment data. Scheduling Professional learning communities during the school day is an excellent opportunity for educators to analyze and re-direct instruction based on the findings of data. There is an important component of data analyses for focusing on individual students, and there is a component for focusing on whole class performances.

Many schools and school districts are beginning to use data rooms or data walls. Typically, there are more forms of assessments in elementary schools. In data rooms or on data walls, teachers can view the scores of an entire class on EAGLE or DIBELS. When an entire class is under-performing on a skill, this is an indication for the teacher to re-teach the skill in comparison to one or two students in a class under-performing.

Schmoker (2011) discusses the importance for educators in the teaching and learning process for/of students as simplicity, clarity, and priority in *Focus*. He feels that there are three elements that educators should approach with diligence and simplicity—what is taught; how it is taught; and authentic literacy. We raise these notions because Schmoker (2011) specifically emphasizes the importance of learning communities for educators as educators focus on what is taught, how it is taught, and authentic literacy.

Assessments for educators of students in the learning process of what is taught and how it is taught are so crucial. Educators must collect data and/or reflect on the prior knowledge levels of learners, learning styles of learners, and other pertinent variables. This information must also be used in the how it is taught.

Schmoker (2011) discusses the—what is taught as the curriculum. He notes that the curriculum should be coherent with topics and standards. The Common Core is presently being adopted in many states across the country, and the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) assessments are the standardized measures of the Common Core. Grade level expectations are currently in place in many states. One of the premises of the Common Core is to “raise the bar” on what is taught at each grade level. Competencies that were in fifth grade are in third grade for the Common Core (<http://www.corestandards.org/>).

Schmoker (2011) describes *The How We Teach* as “ordinary, structurally sound lessons that employ the same basic formula that educators have known for decades but few implement consistently.” Again, it is important for educators to use data pertinent to students needs to inform methodology.

Revisiting the concept of professional development at the beginning of the school year—relevance is always such a critical variable. When all the teachers and other professional staff gather at one location, it is very difficult to have the individuals focus on what is relevant for the school year. Teachers are most distracted by re-acquainting with colleagues after the summer break. We have experienced many district-wide initiatives like the adopting of reading programs, special education programs, and computer-based programs. However, it is difficult for a district-wide training to be facilitated that is relevant for all teachers across disciplines and/or grade levels. There is typically a great need for specificity for schools and teachers.

To ensure effectiveness with implementation of professional development, it is so vital to have follow-up. The most practical kind of follow-up is for professionals in the building or at minimum within the district to be able to answer pertinent questions for teachers. It does not matter how effectively professional development is facilitated; teachers will have questions as implementation is occurring. And, it is necessary for teachers to be able to obtain feedback quickly.

The research findings of Fullan (2009) support the dis-connectivity of the work of teachers with their professional development. He suggests that only ten to twenty percent of teachers experience meaningful professional development. Furthermore, ninety percent of teachers have participated in short term conferences or workshops. Engaging teachers in meaningful discussions linked to practices based on the pertinent student populations is a challenge for professional learning communities.

Schlager & Fusco (2003) made similar assertions regarding school based professional development. They suggest that mis-aligned pedagogical content can be a challenge when teachers

are unable to connect the professional development with teacher practices. It is so important for planning to accompany professional development so that there are not gaps and redundancies in training. We note that the school leader as an instructional leader plays a critical role in ensuring that the professional development is aligned with teacher practices; is meaningful and organized; and that the relevant follow-up occurs.

The Necessary Culture for Professional Learning Communities

Previously we cited that the verbiage of professional learning communities is often used and referred to any “loose coupling of individuals who share a common interest in education.” We have also cited principles and characteristics that are essential for true professional learning communities to exist. Olivier, Hipp, & Huffman (2003) revised and used extensively an instrument to measure the extent to which professional learning communities exist in schools and school districts. The assessment is a 52-item instrument that assesses shared and supportive leadership, shared values and vision, collective learning and application, shared personal practice, supportive conditions—both structural and relationship based.

There are theorists who note the role of the school leader as critical to instructional leadership and to facilitating the culture for true professional learning communities. Schools with strong cultures have ten attributes as suggested by Smith and Andrews (1989). Those attributes are:

- Places priority of curriculum and instruction issues;
- Is dedicated to the goals of the school and school district;
- Is able to rally and mobilize resources to accomplish the goals of the district and school;
- Creates a climate of high expectations in the school, characterized by a tone of respect for teachers, students, parents, and the community;
- Functions as a leader with direct involvement in instructional policy;
- Continually monitors student progress toward school achievement and teacher effectiveness;
- Demonstrates commitment to academic goals, shown by the ability to develop and articulate a clear vision or long-term goals for the school;
- Effectively consults with others by involving the faculty and other groups in the school decision processes;
- Effectively and efficiently mobilizes resources such as materials, time, and support to enable the school and its personnel to most effectively meet academic goals;
- Recognize time as a scarce resource and creates order and discipline by minimizing factors that may disrupt the learning process.

Wagner and Phillips (2003) note that the two most important variables in school culture are collegiality and efficacy. They feel that professional collaboration is essential. That is, staff members should work together regarding professional issues. Indicators of the presence of collegiality are when people feel included, when people feel valued, and when a sense of community is prevalent.

There are also clear indicators when collegiality does not exist. When individuals in the work environment play the “blame game”, collegiality is not present. There is a tendency in K-12 environments for some educators to blame other educators for the under-performance of students. Teachers in critical testing

grades will often suggest that the teachers of the lower testing grades are responsible for the skills that students lack.

Kennedy (2003) discusses the need for teachers to collaborate and the value of collaboration pertinent to school improvement. In some instances, competitive spirits exist that create competition among colleagues that is not positive. Collegiality does not exist when participants operate in isolation. Teamwork is essential for positive cultures and for professional learning communities.

Efficacy is present when participants feel ownership in the work environment. Ownership from employees is so valuable to both promoting positive cultures and to sustaining professional learning communities. In schools where efficacy is present, employees also feel that they can influence important decisions; participants are proactive; and participants are problem solvers.

The language used by educators is a clear indication of the absence of efficacy. When staff members use phrases like “I don’t know, I only work here;” “somebody should do something about this;” “we might make it through the year;” “we could never do that;” and “I can stick it out until I retire;” these are clear indicators that efficacy is not prevalent in the work environment.

Many of the knowledge, skill, and dispositions necessary for leaders to exhibit are indicators on the revised professional learning communities’ assessment. For the shared and supportive leadership section of the instrument, many of these attributes are directly linked to the school leader facilitating a strong culture. Involving staff members in decision making by school leaders is so critical to having staff members feel empowered. The involvement also requires that the school leaders provide information to staff members and incorporates the advice from staff members in decision making.

It is so vital for school leaders to commit to involving teachers in decision-making. The concept of participatory decision-making is often verbalized but not used to the extent that it could be across teacher committees within schools especially as it relates to classroom practices. There are often specific curricula issues that staff members should be involved in to initiate change that is advantageous for student learning. It is important to reiterate that there must be strong emphases on meeting the needs of learners.

The powerful notion regarding staff empowerment and involving teachers in decision-making is an opportunity for educators to have ownership in school buildings if provided. When teachers are involved for instance in selecting the curriculum or something as simple as a strategy, the teachers will work harder at implementation of the curriculum or strategy. Furthermore, educators will take responsibility in the process and hold themselves as well as others accountable.

A possible unintended impact which is very positive takes place as well through the involvement of the leader of teachers in decision-making. When this practice is implemented multiple times, leadership capacity is established—which obviously facilitates the collegiality, collaboration, and other attributes in schools associated with strong cultures. The obvious benefit of strong cultures is higher performing teachers which ultimately lead to higher performing students. All educators know that there is strong interrelationship between/among teacher motivation and student motivation. Greater teacher motivation impacts student motivation.

On the second section of the Professional Learning Communities Assessment—Revised, shared values and vision are ad-

ressed. There are different perspectives about the visioning process and the role of the school leader in the process. However, we feel that the vision may originate within teachers or any staff members, but the principal has the responsibility in the facilitating, communicating, and providing the opportunity for growth. The principal must also be an instructional leader and a curricular leader.

Developing a vision is a critical component of school improvement for school leaders. A vision is much more than the articulation of statements and beliefs. It reflects the continuous reflection, action, re-evaluation, and communication among the principal and staff. It is essential for school leaders to have visions for schools that are communicated and shared by the faculty, staff, students, parents, and school community. Inclusive of the school goals, the vision provides a realistic perception of present functional levels of students-academic, disciplinary, and all other aspects deemed critical for school improvement.

The vision becomes critical for school improvement because it also includes the desired functional levels—providing the framework for action steps toward improvement. Therefore, the short and long term goals are established based on the present levels of academic, behavioral, and other pertinent variables revealed in data analyses.

It was stated as early as 1998, that the readiness for vision must be created in schools (Lashway, 1998). The principal must create a culture and climate for change. All participants should have the opportunity to examine their thinking which can be achieved through forming study groups, visiting schools that have restructured, or collecting data that challenges present assumptions. Guiding characteristics and action steps regarding the vision may originate by teachers, but the principal must play the greatest role in helping to facilitate.

The shared vision “sets the stage” for many aspects in the school community particularly aligned to the culture. The programs and policies must be aligned with the vision—specifically, programs and policies that impact achievement because of the important link to school improvement driven by the vision. Ultimately, all decision-making has to align with the values of the school and the vision.

Conclusion

We previously discussed the notion that terms are often used frequently in professional settings; however, the conceptualization and thinking are not internalized at the levels they should be. Fullan (2009) noted that this is a large scale problem of reform. Many school employees suggest that professional learning communities are in place when fragmented components are included. Professional Learning Communities are systemic in that the infrastructure in schools must change.

The challenge of establishing and sustaining professional learning communities is coupled with the notion that educators are involved with many complex responsibilities affiliated with the jobs of meeting the needs of students.

With a considerable amount of clarity and improved cultures, educators in professional learning communities report that the job becomes easier when learning communities are in place. However, there are no short routes to creating professional learning communities. Consistency with the common goals for staff is critical.

It is also critical for the practices and beliefs, assumptions, and expectations of Professional Learning Communities to be em-

braced for true transformation. The structural changes like policies, procedures, and programs provide the foundation. The new competencies and commitment exhibited by teachers are keys for sustainability of Professional Learning Communities.

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