The Challenge of Building Professional Learning Communities: Getting Started

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ABSTRACT

This article provides an overview of Professional Learning Communities, detailing the challenges of setting in motion the tasks and mindset necessary to create them. The rationale is that the culture changes from one of superficial assessments and requirements to one that emphasizes student learning. Discovering possible resistance, apprehensions, and genuine reservations of stakeholders can go a long way toward intelligent and successful establishment of a Professional Learning Community culture.
Introduction

In an effort to better understand what Professional Learning Communities are and how they can positively impact my campus the five bodies of literature were examined. These included: (1) What is a Professional Learning Community, (2) How do we develop a Professional Learning Community on our campus, (3) How will Professional Learning Communities affect students, (4) How Professional Learning Communities affect teachers, and (5) Professional Learning Communities in action.

Purpose of the Article

The purpose of this article is to provide an overview of Professional Learning Communities with a suggestion for successfully building a sustainable culture within a school campus setting. The authors discuss the challenges of setting in motion the mental mindset and tasks required to create them.

What is a Professional Learning Community?

The origin of learning communities dates back to 1927 when Alexander Meiklejohn formed the two year Experimental College at the University of Wisconsin (Kellogg, 2003). In the seventy or so years that the term Professional Learning Communities has been around it has been used to describe a host of different educational themes and ideas. DuFour (2004) argued that “Learning Community” has been used to describe a grade level teaching team, a school committee, a high school department, an entire school district, a state department of education, and even a national professional organization. This term has been used or misused so often and for so many different applications that it is in danger of losing its meaning altogether.

Professional learning Communities operate on the principle that students are not only taught but to ensure that they learn (Dufour, 2004a). This simple idea is profound, yet seems elusive. If teachers could shift emphasis from teaching to learning then students would have to be the center of attention. Gagnon & Collay (2001) state that the power of Professional Learning Communities rests in its potential to develop relationships, a commitment, and a positive attitude towards learning.

Most administrators would like a step by step recipe to use when building a PLC in their own school. Eaker, DuFour, & Burnette (2002) argued that no such recipe exists. Neither quick fixes nor fool-proof formulas are available to those interested in the PLC model. In essence, a Professional Learning Community is a system that promotes collaboration between all members of an organization in the compulsory learning of all
students. This may include subject based collaboration, cross curricular collaboration, or any other type that contributes to student success. DuFour (2004) stated that Professional Learning Communities do whatever it takes to respond when kids are not learning.

**How do we Develop a Professional Learning Community?**

There are several critical questions that an organization must ask and answer before attempting to build a professional learning community. What is our purpose? What must we do to fulfill that purpose? Finally, what collective commitments must we make to move our school in the direction we want it to go (Eaker, Dufour, & Burnette, 2002). When the members of an educational staff can agree on the answers to these questions and the answers are in line with the collective vision of the campus then the framework to build a professional learning community is present.

Once a school knows that the collective vision is focused in the right direction the next step in building a PLC is to establish collaborative teams. Teachers should contribute their ideas and expertise to colleagues so that the schools ability to teach students at a high level is enhanced. In essence, when teachers collaborate, the sum of each teacher’s expertise produces more than it could in isolation (DuFour, 2004a). Teachers work together to plan common assessments, analyze student achievement, and establish goals for their particular team.

Another important aspect of a professional learning community is the development a results-oriented culture (Eaker, DuFour, & Burnette, 2002). This means that the focus must be on student learning and not just on teaching. This means that a belief in the statement “All students can learn,” must be genuine. All improvement plans must analyze how they will affect student learning. To do this, a PLC must know what students need to learn, how they will know if the students are learning, and what will be done when students fail to learn.

Improving a school by transforming it into a professional learning community is a task that requires patience and persistence. There is no set of finite rules that will guarantee success. Only when all parties involved decide to do whatever it takes to ensure that all students learn will a campus truly be able to build a PLC.

**How will a Professional Learning Community Affect students?**

Stiggins (2002) states that confidence triggers optimism which in turn triggers the desire and energy needed to strive for success. When students are confident we see profound gains in achievement. A properly functioning professional learning community builds a culture of confident learners. When teachers break the mold and begin assessment for learning instead of assessment of learning students begin to gain
confidence. By using formative assessments on a continuous basis teachers can make changes in instruction when and where they are needed to ensure success. The old saying “success breeds success” could not be more true. When students see that teachers are not ever going to give up on them they are much more likely to strive for success. Even resistant students will soon see that a PLC is designed to do whatever it takes to ensure that all students learn at a high level. One example of this is a hierarchy of services that starts in the classroom and leads all the way to a one on one guided study hall if necessary. Studies have shown sharp increases in standardized test scores in schools that have developed a PLC even though the old standard of teaching to the test was not present (Stiggins, 2002). In short, in a professional learning community, students learn more at a higher level than they would in a conventional system that requires compulsory attendance but not compulsory learning.

How will a Professional Learning Community Affect Teachers?

When looking at professional learning communities it is obvious that students enjoy many benefits from the Whatever-It-Takes approach. Teachers are no exception. Faculty that teach in learning communities reveal that they become re-energized and feel empowered. They feel as if their opinions are valued and the rich teaching experience allows them to be creative and much more effective (Kellogg, 2003). Teachers in a PLC often state that they have a greater sense of accomplishment that is related to higher student achievement. At first glance it might seem that a teacher’s already busy schedule would suffer from the implementation of a new system. Initially there might be an adjustment period; however, once a collaborative system is in place a group of teachers can share the burden of planning common assessments and ensuring that students are learning. Overall, teachers that work in a PLC report that they are happier and less stressed than they were in a conventional educational system.

Professional Learning Communities in Action

Many school districts across the country have implemented professional learning communities successfully in all levels of education. Elementary, middle school, and high school campuses have used this educational style to boost student achievement. Consider the following examples of successful implementations by key writers in the area of Professional Learning Communities:

1. Rebecca DuFour is the principal at Boones Mill Elementary. When she first got the job she met with different groups of teachers throughout the summer changes that came were mostly teacher directed and included large blocks of
uninterrupted teaching times and daily special activities to allow teachers common planning periods. Some of the innovative ideas they used included the 5th grade-Kindergarten peer mentoring program. Each grade level team was asked to analyze data on student achievement, identify strengths and weaknesses of student performance, and identify goals to enhance student achievement. They even developed a program called project PASS to respond to students who are not learning (Eaker, DuFour, & Burnett, 2002).

2. Freeport Intermediate School has transformed itself from one of the lowest-performing schools in Texas to a national model for academic achievement (DuFour, 2004a). Principal Clara Davis believes that the first crucial step in that transformation was to honestly confront data on student achievement and work together to make improvements. Freeport Intermediate gives teachers 90 minutes daily to work in collaborative groups to clarify goals and standards for achievement. They also use frequent (once a week) assessment to ensure that student learning is taking place at the appropriate levels. Teachers share their results on these assessments so that any teacher that has had particular success can share their techniques and strategies to be used by all team members.

3. At Stevenson High School students simply cannot fall through the cracks. There are too many systems in place to monitor academic progress and general well being and too many concerned adults involved in those systems (DuFour, 2004b). Students learn quickly that a lack of performance will be met with a barrage of intervention. Some of the strategies used include 3 week progress reports, counselor watch, a Good Friend mentor program, student support teams, tutoring, and guided study programs. Every time a student is not successful there is always another step available to ensure that no one falls through the cracks. Stevenson High School is one of only three schools in the nation to receive the United States Department of Education Blue Ribbon Awards on four separate occasions (DuFour, 2004b).

**PCL Unplugged**

The authors of this article recently observed a less than successful attempt to introduce PLC to three large school districts simultaneously. Over 6,000 teachers gathered in a large auditorium to listen to a parade of experts speak about implementing Professional Learning Communities. The setting was uncomfortable and the technology malfunctioned during the presentation. Following the presentation teachers on individual campuses went about setting up classrooms, planning in the usual manner, engaging in polarizing and alienating behaviors without any deep appreciation of the richness that PLC could bring to their respective campuses. The authors doubt that this is the norm for
PLC implementation but on this particular day it appeared that the teachers saw this as just the latest educational fad to be endured for a few days prior to getting down to the “real work” of retreating to their classrooms to begin another school year. The missed opportunity was one of introduction. We believe that the PCL concept as a culture building process can be very powerful and engaging when properly introduced and carried out.

**Concluding Remarks**

When building any new culture that involves changes in thinking from traditional ways of doing things, any apprehension, misconception, or resistance must be identified and neutralized. In order to implement a professional learning community on any campus it would be important to bring to the surface any unstated feelings or ways of thinking that could undermine the initiative. A proven and well-established approach that is both practical and efficient is the “concerns-based” approach to assessment of the culture (Glickman, 2002). This approach would guide the school leader in addressing misunderstandings, genuine reservations teachers or parents may have, and provide an emotional climate that will be conducive to greater risk-taking and innovation. In simple, modified form of the Concerns-Based Adoption Model, the principal or designated facilitator/leader would pose a question in this form: “Based on what you know about Professional Learning Communities and things you know about our campus, what concerns you the most regarding plans to implement a Professional Learning Community here?” An invitation to frankness and unreserved expression can set the tone for unleashing resistance, negativity, or even apathy in a way that can prevent these qualities from undermining change initiatives. The information generated can help the administrator plan for a successful implementation of a true professional learning community.

**References**


