

CREATING A PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITY

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ABSTRACT

School leaders foster a school's/school district's improvement, enhance its overall effectiveness, and promote student learning and success by developing the capacity of staff to function as a professional learning community. In this article, I discuss the relative importance of school leaders, who play a vital role in the creation of professional learning communities. They begin by bringing stakeholders together to engage in a four-step process: creating a mission statement, developing a vision, developing value statements, and establishing goals.

Since their inception, schools have continually sought to improve, whether in response to demands from teachers, administrators, parents, policymakers, or legislators. When we look at the research on improving schools over a long period of time and examine what the keys to school improvement are, invariably it boils down to the ability of the people within the school to function as a professional learning community (Bowgren & Sever, 2010; Blankstein, Houston, & Cole, 2008; DuFour, DuFour, & Eaker, 2009; DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Katz, Earl, & Ben Jaafar, 2009; Graham & Ferriter, 2010).

A professional learning community shares a vision. School faculty working in a professional learning community share a common understanding of how to go about getting to that vision, and they share a common commitment to the vision. When you walk into a school that is functioning as a professional learning community, you have a sense that people understand what is important, what the priorities are; and they are working together in a collaborative way to advance the school toward those goals and priorities. For example, when a school is functioning as a professional learning community, you can walk around the building on any given day and see teachers talking to one another, discussing curriculum goals, discussing what activities they are going to engage in that day. There is an attitude of cooperation. There is never fear of asking for help. It is obvious that the support participants feel is systemic (Senge, 2001, 2006). The ability to explore, to ask questions, ask peers, ask supervisors is only possible when it comes from the top; that is, successful learning communities require support from the superintendent (Lunenburg & Ornstein, 2008).

The whole philosophy of a professional learning community is people working together. Each member of the professional learning community wants to help the other succeed in daily interactions with all school stakeholders. Members work together to achieve the goals they have for themselves - what they want to become. All stakeholders - board of education,

superintendent, faculty, support staff - move together to achieve that shared vision. Teachers are empowered to do what is best for their students. Involving others in decision-making processes and empowering them to act on their ideas is one of the most significant and effective strategies used by capable leaders (English, 2008; Northouse, 2010).

The school principal plays a vital role in the creation of a professional learning community. The principal begins by bringing people together to engage in a four-step process: (1) creating a mission statement, (2) developing a vision, (3) developing value statements, and (4) establishing goals (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, 2009; DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2007; DuFour & Eaker, 1998; DuFour, Eaker, & DuFour, 2006). Each one will be discussed in turn.

Creating a Mission Statement

The first step is to create a mission statement that identifies the school's purpose. The first question that the faculty needs to consider is: What is our mission, our fundamental purpose? For example, the school's purpose may be how to identify proven strategies to teach children how to learn (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). That captures something that people can hold in their minds and hearts as they perform their duties (Leithwood & Beatty, 2008). It helps to begin to have an influence on the day-to-day teaching and learning that takes place in the school.

To make the mission statement relevant, the principal must engage the faculty in a deeper discussion; for example, why do we exist? Typically, the response will be that we exist to help all students learn. For example, successful professional learning communities believe that all students can learn. That statement will only become meaningful, if faculty are willing to engage in some deeper questions. For example, if we believe that all students can learn, we expect them to learn. How will faculty respond when students do not learn (DuFour & Eaker 2005; DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Karhanek, 2010)? Other deeper questions that faculty must engage in to create a mission statement include: What does it mean to help students learn how to learn (Bellanca & Brandt, 2010)? That goes beyond reading and mathematics to how do students organize their time and their materials? How do they work together? A professional learning community involves all stakeholders working together, including students. What kind of skills do students have to work together? What kind of skills do they have to understand themselves, their own learning style, and being able to evaluate themselves? How good are they in applying their learning to other contexts in the school and outside? And how do students use technology and other resources in order to learn on their own?

Developing a Vision

After clarifying the school's mission, the next step is to develop a vision. A vision is an attempt to describe the school that faculty members are hoping to become. In an exemplary school, students (a) accept responsibility for their learning, decisions, and actions; (b) develop skills to become more self-directed learners as they progress through the grades; and (c) actively engage in and give effort to academic and extracurricular pursuits (Bulach, Lunenburg, & Potter, 2008; Lunenburg & Irby, 2006).

Here are some tips for developing a vision for your school that professional learning community advocates recommend (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many (2007); Graham & Ferriter, 2010). Engage the faculty in a general agreement about what they hope their school will become. Enlist a faculty task force to identify the major findings of research studies on school improvement. Share the research findings with the faculty. Conduct small-group discussion sessions that enable the faculty to review the research and discuss their hopes for the future of the school. Discussions should also include criticisms of the traditional structure and culture of schools.

A traditional obstacle to schools moving forward is the inherent tradition of teacher isolation in schools (Elmore, 2005; Senge, 2001, 2006). This must be addressed and overcome in order for a school to become a professional learning community. At all levels of the system, isolation is seen as the enemy of school improvement. Thus, most day-to-day activities in the school need to be specifically designed to connect teachers, principals, and district administrators with one another and with outside experts in regard to school improvement (Fullan, 2010a). The fact that schools are very often run as top-down hierarchies, where faculty are not given a voice in decision making is another tradition (Kruse & Louis, 2009; Senge, 2006). Faculty need to address these structural and cultural traditions in schools that present obstacles and barriers to substantive improvements.

Using this formula, gradually the faculty should be able to identify commonalities, a school all stakeholders can endorse. With the vision statement, with the ability to describe the school all participants are trying to create; the principal will then need to work with students, teachers, parents, and others to discover or invent the structures, policies, and processes that will enable the school to move in that direction (Lunenburg & Irby, 2006).

It should be noted that, while the principal remains a valued participant in the development of a vision, vision is embodied by the process rather than by individuals (Kruse & Louis, 2009). Principals must help to keep their colleagues from narrowing their vision and assisting the school to maintain “a broader perspective” (Fullan, 2010b). Excellence is a moving target; therefore, the vision should be revisited periodically to ensure that the vision remains relevant. Principals, in a sense, are keepers of the vision. The principal’s modeling and reinforcing vision-related behaviors appear critical to the success of the professional learning community (DuFour, Eaker, & DuFour, 2006).

Developing Value Statements

The next stage in the process is to develop value statements. At this point, the members of another faculty task force might begin to work with their colleagues to identify shared values - the attitudes, behaviors, and commitments - all teachers would pledge to demonstrate so as to move the school closer to their shared vision. The board of education, support staff, administrative team, students, parents, and community members, also engage in discussions of the attitudes, behaviors, and commitments the school needs from them to advance the vision. For example, what attitudes, behaviors, and commitments must the board of education make to enable the school to achieve the vision statement? What attitudes, behaviors, and commitments must the parents make to become contributors toward creating the school that is described in the vision statement? The process continues until all stakeholders are addressed.

DuFour and Eaker (1998) recommend a process for developing shared value statements. Each group begins by examining the vision statement and identifying what each group must do to bring it into existence. For example, what can the board of education, the superintendent, the principal, the teachers, the parents, and the students do to advance the school toward the vision statement? Each group works in two teams of five. When all the ideas are listed, the five members review each individual idea. The ideas are shared between the two teams in each group. All ideas generated by each group are then broken down into four, five, or six general themes or categories. The groups do not need to have hundreds of value statements. A handful of value statements is most effective. Throughout this process, it is more powerful to articulate behaviors than beliefs (DuFour, DuFour, & Eaker, 2009). It is more important that each group articulate what they are prepared to do than what they believe.

The challenge for each group as they go through the process is to get them to understand that they need to focus on themselves. What attitudes, behaviors, and commitments are we individually prepared to make to move this school forward. After every group engages in this discussion, each articulates the commitments they are prepared to make. At this point, the school has reached its first important milestone in the improvement process (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). Then a school can become more specific in terms of where they go from there.

Establishing Goals

To achieve the school's vision, school stakeholders must establish goals based on the adopted value statements. Goals are the results that a school tries to achieve (Locke & Latham, 1995). This definition implies at least three relationships between goals and the school/school district leader. First, in terms of laying a foundation for a professional learning community, goals represent the implementation phase of school improvement. The determination of school goals is a primary responsibility of principals. In a professional learning community, faculty are active and valued participants in establishing goals with the principal and other stakeholders. Goals become guideposts in defining standards of school improvement efforts. Without clearly stated goals, no means exist to determine if acceptable standards of school improvement have been met (Bulach, Lunenburg & Potter, 2008).

Second, goals are influenced by the aspirations of a school district's key administrators (Marzano & Waters, 2010). For example, the goal of a school to be connected to the internet; to have a computer lab in every school; to have computers in every classroom; and to provide professional development for faculty assumes that the district has or can obtain adequate resources to achieve the goal, and the goal is desired by the top administrators of the school district. This is more likely to happen in a professional learning community, since all stakeholders were involved in developing a mission statement, vision, values, and goals.

Third, goals reflect a desired end result of school actions - that which they wish to accomplish. It is important when formulating goals that we don't confuse means with ends (DuFour, DuFour, & Eaker, 2009). A powerful goal, and appropriate one for school improvement, would be that "every student in the school will be reading at grade level by third grade." It is direct. It is stating exactly what you want to accomplish. It is measurable. It is an end. It should be noted that because the vision statement is rather broad and tends to point to lots of different areas in the school, the principal and faculty are not going to be able to attack every

area at once. There has to be some decision about which areas will take priority (Foster, 2009; Wallach, 2008).

The focus may need to be narrowed, and goals help us narrow focus. Principals can provide a faculty with parameters in identifying goals that directly impact teaching and learning. And learning has to be the focus. Reading, writing, mathematics, and helping students learn how to learn are worthy goals. The next step is to plan activities and monitor progress on the stated goals.

The presence of explicit goals benefit all stakeholders by fostering commitment, providing performance standards, providing targets, and enhancing motivation (Wallach, 2008). Each one will be discussed in turn.

Commitment

Goal statements describe the school's purpose to participants. The process of getting participants to agree to pursue a specific goal gives those individuals a personal stake in the outcome. Thus, goals are helpful in encouraging personal commitment to collective ends.

Standards

Because goals define desired outcomes for the school, they also serve as performance criteria. When appraising performance, principals need goals as an established standard against which they can measure performance. Clearly defined goals enable principals to weigh performance objectively on the basis of accomplishment rather than subjectively on the basis of personality. For example, if a school wishes to increase the percentage of students passing state-mandated tests by 10% and the actual increase is 20%, the principal and faculty have exceeded the prescribed standard.

Targets

School goals provide principals with specific targets and direct collegial efforts toward given outcomes. People tend to pursue their own ends in the absence of formal organizational goals.

Motivation

In addition to serving as targets, standards, and commitment, goals perform a role in encouraging colleagues to perform at their highest levels. Moreover, goals give principals a rational basis for rewarding performance. If colleagues receive rewards equal to their levels of performance, they should continue to exert high levels of effort.

To make the school's mission, vision, values, and goals something more than words on paper, the principal needs to communicate and model them so that they are embedded in the daily life of the school. The principal is the keeper of the vision and is the one who keeps articulating it, and when people are at the point where they say they can't go anymore, the principal is the one who comes out and says: "Let me remind you why we can do it." It is repeating messages over and over again. It is reminding people: "This is where we started; this

is where we are now; and this is where we're headed." This is done in a variety of different venues: writing about it in the weekly newsletter, talking about it at Parent Teacher Organizations and faculty meetings, so that the school community sees that this is the way we do business in this school.

That's important but it's not enough. The thing that is necessary is the day-to-day work (Lunenburg & Irby, 2006). It means when a principal sits down with a faculty member to talk about a lesson observed, she may bring up the mission and how the lesson connects to that mission. The principal may bring up the mission when the budget is discussed with faculty. When the principal is hiring faculty or making faculty changes, or if the principal is engaged in curriculum changes or implementing new courses, she is always using the vision as the filter. When the principal is doing that, the people involved in a professional learning community - students, parents, faculty, district office administrators - can see through the principal's behavior and actions that what is most important is the school's stated mission. Thus, the principal, as a change agent, helps to create new programs and procedures that evolve from the shared mission, vision, values, and goals.

Conclusion

School leaders foster a school's/school district's improvement, enhance its overall effectiveness, and promote student learning and success by developing the capacity of staff to function as a professional learning community. School leaders play a vital role in the creation of professional learning communities. They begin by bringing stakeholders together to engage in a four-step process: creating a mission statement, developing a vision, developing value statements, and establishing goals.

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