



Stephen Greene, Ph.D., *Coordinator of Professional Development* :: (919) 807-3278

Professional Learning Communities

The most successful organization of the future will be a learning organization where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire. (Senge, 1991).

How to manage, guide, and lead change in schools has been an enduring question. During the eighties, research clearly indicated that the role principals played was of great importance. However, in the nineties, an emerging literature began to report a more democratic and participatory approach, one that invited all professionals on the school staff into inclusive leadership focused on school change and improvement. School staffs operating in this way are known as professional learning communities or more commonly called, PLCs (Hord, 1997).

What are Professional Learning Communities? There are four common building blocks in the foundation of a professional learning community. They are: shared mission, vision, values and goals. The common characteristics of a professional learning community include: collective inquiry, action orientation, collaborative teams, continuous improvement and results. A "PLC" is a school that is oriented towards learning, rather than teaching, and is focused on results rather than process. PLCs differ from "traditional" schools in that, in a PLC, administrators



and teachers make a commitment to work together in a culture devoted to "our kids." Every student is expected to learn; every teacher is expected to make sure that learning is happening and everyone is expected and empowered to work together in the service of learning. "Staff development that improves the learning of all students organizes adults into learning communities whose goals are aligned with those of the school and district." (North Carolina Professional Development standard) Further differences are listed in the chart below:

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING TEAM	TRADITIONAL TEACHER TEAMS
Have regular meetings focused specifically on student learning and only on student learning.	Have regular meetings that may be focused on student learning but not usually.
Have high levels of trust between group members, allowing for productive conflict to occur in a safe environment. This level of trust leads to consensus and commitment on the part of all team members.	Have inconsistent levels of trust between team members. Teachers may engage in collegial conversations, but tend to avoid conflict.
Seek to identify and amplify instructional strategies that work. Members are willing to rethink what it is that they do in the classroom based on the collective work of the group.	Rarely expose teachers to the instructional practices of their peers. Members tend to rely on their own professional experiences when making decisions for their students.
Members see themselves as interdependent, sharing ownership for the success of all students.	Members see themselves as loosely connected colleagues. While they may share a common group of students, teachers largely act as individuals when making instructional decisions.

Professional Learning Communities continued

A professional learning community provides staff development that has as its goal high levels of learning for all students, teachers, and administrators. It is a form of professional learning that is quite different from the workshop-driven approach. This powerful form of staff development occurs in ongoing teams that meet on a regular basis, preferably several times a week, for the purposes of learning, joint lesson planning and problem solving. These teams, often called learning communities or communities of practice, operate with a commitment to the norms of continuous improvement and experimentation and engage their members in improving their daily work to advance the achievement of school district and school goals for student learning.

In a PLC, teachers and administrators are oriented toward action and results and have made a commitment to continuous improvement. Learning is the number one focus. To that end, teachers meet regularly during the school day to discuss student learning. The school's culture evolves around some of the following questions:

- Does every teacher understand what each student should know and be able to do after

completing the unit of instruction, course, grade level?

- What systems are in place to monitor each student's learning on a timely basis?
- What happens when a student is not learning?
- What systems are in place to provide these students additional time and support?

PLCs require that the school schedule will be organized in such a way that grade levels or department teachers have common planning time to meet during the school day. This is a challenging but effective way to structure school schedules. This structure provides teachers the needed time to review student assessment and design student assistance strategies. By providing regular common planning time to teachers, they can focus on student learning. Conversations between teachers in a PLC reflect on instructional practices that are successful. There is openness and a willingness to rethink what it is that they do in their classrooms based on the work of their colleagues and on student achievement data (both formal and informal) gathered throughout the school year. A culture of inquiry and an action orientation define the best PLCs.

PLCs in the Triangle

High Five, the regional partnership for high school excellence, is making the PLCs the cornerstone of its five-year mission to improve Triangle high schools so that, by 2013, all students graduate well prepared for higher education and the career of their choice. High Five is presenting PLC Coaching Academy sessions for school teams, sponsoring a PLC Advisory Council and bringing in nationally known experts to help launch and sustain the effort.

The five participating school districts are: Durham, Orange, Chapel Hill-Carrboro, Wake, and Johnston. These school systems have been working together since 2004 to improve their high school programs. Each school system has strategic plans that vary in degrees; however, one consistent reform strategy is implementing PLCs.

With the help of nationally known Rick and Becky Dufour to provide the training, these five school districts have worked hard to implement PLCs in their schools. Along with principals and teachers, superintendents have all provided the supports necessary to implement this reform. These supports are varied, but most require a change in school structure, culture and leadership.

Why PLCs? Recent research shows that PLCs are our best hope for improving high schools. *Creating conditions for professional learning communities offers the most powerful opportunity for reform... The path to change in the classroom lies within and through teachers' professional communities.* (McLaughlin 1993.) Showers, Joyce, Senge, Hord, Sparks, Covey and Dufour, to name just a few, have written extensively over the past few years

PLCs in the Triangle continued

about collaboration in the school work place. All agree that teachers and administrators who are focused on improving student achievement do so in cultures that are communities of learning.

Through its 1997 review of the literature regarding PLCs (Hord, 1997), the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory had come to understand the substantial benefits PLC schools provided for both teachers and students. In PLCs, staff experience reduced isolation (Lieberman, 1995; McLaughlin, 1993); increased commitment and vigor to the mission and goals of the school (Lee, Smith & Croninger, 1995; McLaughlin, 1993); greater commitment to change (Bryk, Easton, Kerbow, Rollow & Sebring, 1993); higher levels of trust (Kruse & Louis, 1995); and greater opportunities for professional development that connect individual needs with the school's collective mission.

Students in PLC schools had decreased dropout rates and fewer classes "skipped;" lower rates of absenteeism; and greater academic gains in

reading, math, science, and history than did students in traditional schools (Lee, Smith, & Croninger, 1995). These researchers also found smaller achievement gaps between students from different backgrounds in PLC schools.

The work of PLCs supports The North Carolina Professional Development Standards in many areas, in particular, the Context Standards. Look for an update from the High Five school districts in the next issue of our DPI Professional Development Newsletter.



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