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Professional Learning Community

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Professional Learning Community

"All for one and one for all" was a grand rallying cry for the Three Musketeers. Likewise, teachers and other staff members must work together toward the common goal of improved student achievement. When everyone works collectively to seek and share learning and act on that learning to improve their effectiveness as professionals so that students benefit, they are functioning as a professional learning community (Hord, 1997). This collective focus and collaboration leads to well-coordinated activities and practices and a sense of connection, belonging, and support (Fullan, 1999). As a result, there is more capacity for sustaining improvements and the core values and beliefs behind them.

Key Elements

Schools that function successfully as professional learning communities are able to readily acclimate and respond to new policies and other changes. In a professional learning community, teachers and administrators (1) share a vision focused on student learning, (2) share leadership and decision making, and (3) work and learn together as they continually examine instructional practices — all of which are supported by strong personal and professional relationships, time for collaboration, and good communication.

Shared Vision

In a school that is sustaining improvement, an effective vision is more than a collection of statements on paper — it paints a picture of what the school hopes to become. In a professional learning community, teachers, administrators, and others "commit to" rather than "buy into" the vision because it was developed by them rather than by only the principal or a small group. Effective schools use the vision as a context for decision making about instructional practice and collaborative learning efforts and as a guide for carrying out their work. They monitor how members interact with students, teach and assess, and allocate resources to

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make certain that the vision continues to reflect the school's common values and goals for improvement. In addition, they periodically review the vision to determine if the standards it sets forth are ambitious yet attainable and if it continues to focus closely on the diverse needs of students served by the school (Eaker, DuFour, & Burnette, 2002).

Shared Leadership and Decision Making

In a professional learning community, administrators are committed to sharing decision making with staff and providing opportunities for teachers to serve as leaders. For example, teachers may lead decision-making efforts related to goals, staff development, curriculum and instructional materials, budgets, personnel, and the implementation and monitoring of improvement strategies (Quellmalz, Shields, & Knapp, 1995). Collective decision making results in increased morale, ownership, understanding about the direction and processes of change, shared responsibility for student learning, and a sense of professionalism, all of which help to sustain improvement efforts.

Shared Practice and Collective Inquiry

The dynamic interaction of shared practice and collective inquiry is perhaps the most essential aspect of a professional learning community. This critical ingredient involves teachers using the same practices and opening individual teaching practices to scrutiny through activities such as peer coaching. It also involves teachers continually evaluating the effectiveness of their teaching strategies in light of new programs and practices and the needs, interests, and skills of their students (Northeast and Islands Regional Educational Laboratory, 2000). Their inquiry efforts are guided by the school vision and improvement plan and a desire to expand their expertise.

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Shared practice and collective inquiry help sustain improvement by strengthening connections among teachers, stimulating discussion about professional practice, and helping teachers to build on one another's expertise. Ongoing questioning and investigation of practice help staff members stay well informed and develop a body of knowledge that can be used to improve student learning. Teachers and administrators maintain a culture of ongoing inquiry in a variety of ways — by participating in study groups, pilot-testing new programs, sharing insights gained from workshops or conferences, and joining professional associations (U.S. Department of Education, 1995).

The success of a professional learning community depends on supportive relationships that have room for honest discussion and examination of professional practices. Supportive relationships flourish in an environment that builds trust by strengthening connections through a variety of social and professional activities — from the faculty picnic to dialogue sessions on books. In combination, these activities create a foundation that sustains improvement over the hills and valleys of change.

In schools that successfully sustain improvement, time, teams, and other school structures support shared practice and inquiry. For example, classes are scheduled to create common planning periods, particular school days are extended to bank time for professional learning, formal opportunities are available for teachers to observe and provide feedback to one another, and teams coordinate activities such as science fairs or service learning projects. A variety of communication structures (e.g., meetings to discuss problem areas and new ideas, school-wide announcements and distribution of information) are used to keep everyone informed and involved. Even the physical arrangement of the school — for example, where teachers' classrooms are in relation to one another — is maximized to reduce isolation and increase teacher interaction (Hord, 1997).

What the School Leadership Team Can Do

One of the main roles of the school leadership team is to support the collaborative, coordinated efforts to improve student learning that are key in a professional learning community. For example, the team should monitor how well formal collaborative structures — teacher pairings for observation, coaching, and mentoring; grade-level or cross-grade teams; regular planning and problem-solving meetings; and committees and leadership councils — are working. The team should ask to what extent these structures help teachers exchange feedback about instructional practices and if they focus on positively affecting student outcomes (Eaker et al., 2002). The team should also ensure that hiring and induction processes help new employees become part of the school's collaborative culture.

Another primary role for the school leadership team is to monitor whether daily practices and behaviors align with the goals and objectives established in the vision. They might determine, for example, whether teachers are investigating and implementing new research-based programs or engaging in professional development activities that support student learning. They might seek evidence that the vision is guiding decision making around instructional practices that affect student learning. The leadership team also can ensure that the vision continues to play its focusing role by referencing it during meetings and other school events, and making a point to consistently celebrate successes that move the school closer to realizing the vision (Eaker et al., 2002). These efforts, and others, will help ensure the all-important alignment of programs and practices with the school vision.

The school leadership team should support the learning community in other ways as well. For example, team members might take the lead in staying up-to-date with professional organizations and other groups that offer relevant, useful instructional materials. They might evaluate current partnerships, identify potential new partnerships, and steer individuals with grant-writing abilities toward potential funding sources. The leadership team also should monitor collaborative efforts to ensure that faculty members have appropriate access to information and resources to carry out leadership or team responsibilities.

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What Does the Professional Learning Community Look Like in Our School?

The following continuum of sustainability strategies can be used to assess the adequacy of the learning community in your building. Schools that take the actions described in the right-hand column are more likely to sustain improvement.

Least Effective	Somewhat Effective	Most Effective
Shared Vision		
Only a few people are familiar with the vision because it was developed primarily by the principal or a small group. The vision includes high expectations for all students, but it may not be clear enough to guide day-to-day work and interactions.	Everyone is familiar with the vision because it was developed based on input and feedback from a wide range of individuals. The vision is clear and specific and includes high expectations for all students. It guides day-to-day work and interactions.	Everyone is familiar with and committed to the vision because they were involved in developing it. The vision reflects high standards for all students and guides all decisions that affect teaching practices and goals for student learning. Teachers, administrators, and others regularly revisit the vision and values behind it.
Shared Leadership & Decision Making		
The principal values teacher input but bears final responsibility for most decisions. Some teachers serve in leadership roles but are not involved in decisions that affect the whole school. There are limited resources and few structures to support teachers' involvement in decision making.	The principal provides opportunities and resources to support teachers' involvement in some schoolwide decision-making processes, but teachers may not have adequate access to the information or resources they need to carry out decision-making responsibilities. Leadership councils and other structures that facilitate decision making are in place, but they may not be effective.	Most teachers act as leaders in some area and are routinely involved in schoolwide decision-making processes. Leadership councils and other structures that facilitate decision making are in place. Teachers have appropriate access to the information and resources needed to carry out decision-making responsibilities.
Shared Practice and Collective Inquiry		
There is little or no communication among teachers about their instructional experiences. Social relationships support shared practice, but physical structures may not (e.g., time for teachers to plan and learn together is an add-on to the school schedule).	There are structured opportunities for teachers to share their instructional practices and learn about new ones (e.g., observation and discussion of classroom practices). Social relationships and physical structures provide support for shared practice (e.g., time for teachers to plan and learn together is built into the school schedule).	There are informal and formal ways for teachers to provide one another with feedback regarding observed instructional practices. Social relationships and physical structures (e.g., time) maximize opportunities for interaction, collaboration, and learning.

From the Field

Lewis and Clark Middle School
Jefferson City, Missouri

Becoming a professional learning community is what Lewis and Clark Middle School is all about — not as an end in itself, but as a way of increasing student learning. For nearly 10 years, Lewis and Clark teachers have worked collaboratively to boost their repertoire of instructional strategies to engage students in learning and increase their performance.

After analyzing data from an audit of classroom instructional practices conducted by a visiting team from the University of Missouri, teachers realized that the level of "active teaching and learning" in classrooms was lower than they expected. As a result, in the fall of 2000, the School Reform Committee implemented a system of Professional Development Strands to address the issue of student engagement. Each strand incorporates instructional content or methodology designed to increase student engagement and, ultimately, student achievement. The study groups for specific strands focus on different themes: creating classrooms that make good use of the latest brain research; differentiating the curriculum in a way that challenges all students; and better meeting the needs of at-risk students. Participants in each strand meet with a teacher-facilitator throughout the school year, sometimes over several years, to gain expertise and learn best practices. Teachers also have the option to join other study groups.

The staff subscribes to the Japanese concept of Kaizen, which translates as "better way." This means the staff is committed to continuous improvement. For example, Lewis and Clark staff members conduct classroom observations to assess the progress of school-wide efforts. Since implementing the Professional Development Strands, student disengagement has decreased and teacher-led instruction has increased. (See table.) State test data also bear out the program's success: from 1992–2002, student performance increased significantly. For example, students scoring in the upper two quintiles on the science test rose from 13 to 23 percent; those scoring in the lower two quintiles fell from 59 to 46 percent.

These results reflect the commitment of the Lewis and Clark staff to the elements that make up a successful professional learning community. High expectations are met with equally high levels of support, and staff members share a commitment to improving student achievement. Many have taken notice: visitors to the school often comment on the high degree of collegiality they observe — most certainly a reflection of the school's strong professional learning community.

Contact: Principal Bob Steffes 573.659.3200
bob.steffes@jcps.k12.mo.us

Changes in Student Disengagement & Teacher-Led Instruction

	2000	2002
Student disengagement in core areas	8%	0%
Student disengagement in exploratory areas	29%	7%
Teacher-led instruction — core classes	35%	48%
Teacher-led instruction — exploratory classes	21%	25%

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