

INCREASING STUDENT LEARNING

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Despite the popularity of the term professional learning community, the practices of a PLC continue to be the road less traveled in public education. Many of us prefer the familiarity of our current path, even when that path does not lead to our desired destination. Professional Learning Communities remains the undeniable, research-affirmed process for continuous, substantive school improvement. Notwithstanding the significant change in the education landscape, the three big ideas and four critical questions key to transforming a school is Professional Learning Communities. This is what works to keep educators focused on the right strategies and daily practices to get results.

WHAT ARE THE THREE BIG IDEAS?

- A focus on learning
- A collaborative culture and collective responsibility
- A results orientation

WHAT ARE THE FOUR CRITICAL QUESTIONS?

- What do we want students to learn?
- How will we know when each student has acquired the essential knowledge and skills?
- How will we respond when some students do not learn?
- How will we extend the learning for students who are already proficient?

HISTORY ON HOW PLC'S CAME TO BE

The initial phrase professional learning community began to be used in the 1990s after Peter Senge's book, *The Fifth Discipline* (1990). Charles B. Myers and Lynn K. Myers used the phrase professional learning community in relation to schools in their 1995 book *The Professional Educator: A New Introduction to Teaching and Schools*, and a year later Charles B. Myers presented a paper at the annual meeting of the American Education Research Association titled, "Beyond the PD: Schools as professional

learning communities. In 1997, Shirley M. Hord issued a white paper titled “Professional Learning Communities: Communities of Continuous Inquiry and Improvement. And, a year later, Richard DuFour and Robert E. Eaker published the book many of us are well familiar with Professional Learning Communities at Work. Since the late 1990s, a large literature collection on PLCs has been published.

Since that time, schools from across the country have embarked on the journey to implement effective professional learning communities in an effort to increase student learning.

SUPPORTING CONDITIONS FOR SUCCESS

PROFESSIONAL CULTURE IN SCHOOLS				
CRITICAL ELEMENTS				
REFLECTIVE DIALOGUE	DE-PRIVATIZATION OF PRACTICE	COLLECTIVE FOCUS ON STUDENT LEARNING	COLLABORATION	SHARED NORMS AND VALUES
SUPPORTING CONDITIONS				
STRUCTURAL CONDITIONS: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● TIME TO MEET AND TALK ● PHYSICAL PROXIMITY ● INTERDEPENDENT TEACHING ROLES ● COMMUNICATION STRUCTURES ● TEACHER EMPOWERMENT AND SCHOOL AUTONOMY 		SOCIAL AND HUMAN RESOURCES <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● OPENNESS TO IMPROVEMENT ● TRUST AND RESPECT ● COGNITIVE AND SKILL BASE ● SUPPORTIVE LEADERSHIP ● SOCIALIZATION 		

4 BENEFITS OF AN ACTIVE PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITY

1. PLCs allow educators opportunities to directly influence student learning by improving their practice:

PLCs allow teachers an easy way to share best practices and brainstorm innovative ways to improve learning and drive student achievement. Good communication is key so that educators can share opinions and feel that what they are doing in the classroom matters and gets intended results. Once they see the value and impact on student achievement, they are hooked!

2. PLCs build strong and cohesive professional relationships between team members. The very essence of a PLC is a focus on and a commitment to student learning. Meeting weekly is essential. This structured weekly meeting creates a bond and builds a team of leaders with the school that eventually expands beyond the classroom. To build a strong team, it’s important to

define roles and relationships of team members. This starts with identifying individual strengths within the grade level or department.

In the book, the Multiplier Effect, we learn that finding people's native genius is a journey worth taking. Asking a few questions will help team members arrive at a place of understanding and begin to find the genius within their team. These questions are:

- What do they do better than anything else they do?
- What do they do better than the people around them?
- What do they do without effort?
- What do they do without being asked?
- What do they do readily without being paid?

Enhancing the strengths of others builds trust and makes relationships come to fruition. When mutual respect for each other's opinions is developed within the team, all members of the team become leaders within the group, creating synergy.

3. PLCs fosters a daily habit of working together

The greatest insight gained in the work of PLCs is that when schools actually take the plunge and begin doing the work of a PLC, they are able to develop the capacity to help all student learn at high levels far more effectively than schools that spend years preparing to become PLCs through reading or even attending training after training. Developing the collective capacity to create high performing schools will create the collective efficacy of each team member. It is the daily habit of *working together*, which can't be learned by simply attending a workshop or participating in a course. You need to learn by doing! So, jump in and get started.

4. PLCs help teachers reflect on ideas.

Learning from team members in a PLC allows you to reflect on ways to enhance your teaching and to adjust your practice. The more minds that come together from different backgrounds, the more likely you are to add value and purpose to the field of education. Superintendent Dan Linford, in the Davis School District, has often shared the quote in its many variations, "The smartest person in the room, is the room" meaning there is great wisdom in surrounding yourself with people who are intelligent or, in some regards, challenge you to "level up."

Is your school ready to become a professional learning community? Of course! There is no such thing as a perfect method and there is no ending point or sense of, "we've arrived". It is a commitment and belief in students, all students!

THE ROLE OF THE PRINCIPAL

The success of a professional learning community is firmly related with the role of the principal and their leadership style. Administrators should exercise a more flexible leadership style that gives teachers more control over their educational practices. A strict hierarchical approach where the principal makes all or most of the decisions is detrimental to environment of collaboration.

Principals should encourage a school culture where everyone is concerned, and cares about all students and colleagues. Moreover, principals should prioritize and dedicate collaboration time where clear and

open communication can be expressed where teachers will feel safe to express themselves. Their role is one of support for teachers' individual and collective needs. They are there to provide resources where needed, support and sustain a schedule for collaboration, and then take a step back and let teachers create the magic.