

Building Professional Learning Communities

From the presentation by **Cathy Berlinger-Gustafson** on May 3, 2004
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What is a Professional Learning Community?

A school that operates as a “professional learning community” engages the entire group of professionals in coming together for learning within a supportive, self-created community. Teacher and administrator learning is more complex, deeper, and more fruitful in a social setting, where participants can interact, test their ideas, challenge their inferences and interpretations, and process new information with each other. When new ideas are processed in interaction with others, multiple sources of knowledge and expertise expand and test the new concepts as part the learning experience. The professional learning community provides a setting that is richer and more stimulating.

Melanie S. Morrissey, Professional Learning Communities: An Ongoing Exploration, SEDL.

Professional learning communities can be a powerful staff development approach and a potent strategy for school change and improvement.

Attributes of Learning Communities: Five Dimensions

- **Supportive and Shared Leadership.** The collegial and facilitative participation of the principal, who shares leadership, has the ability to facilitate the work of staff, and the ability to participate without dominating
- **Shared Values and Vision.** A shared vision that is developed from staff’s unswerving commitment to students’ learning and that is consistently articulated and referenced for the staff’s work
- **Collective Learning and Application of Learning (Collective Creativity).** Collective learning among staff and application of that learning to solutions that focus on students’ learning, move beyond procedure to strategies for improvement based on high standards, best practices, and that are shared, public and applied
- **Supportive Conditions.** The conditions determine when and where and how the staff regularly come together as a unit to do the learning, decision making, problem solving and creative work
- **Physical conditions and human capacities that support such an operation**
 - Time to meet and talk
 - Small size of the school
 - Physical proximity of the staff to one another
 - Teaching roles that are interdependent
 - Communication structures
 - School autonomy
 - Teacher empowerment

Guiding Principals of Organizational Culture

- Organizations adopt change; individuals implement change
- The organizational culture influences the work of the individual
- Organizations must value and support individuals in the change efforts
- There are identifiable factors that describe the context of the learning organizations
- Leadership for change facilitation is shared among all participants of a professional learning community

- The unceasing quest for increased effectiveness drives the professional learning community

Processes for Developing Learning Communities

- Core group
- Environment conducive to change
- Shared vision
- Action research
- Boundary reduction
- Study groups
- Staff development
- Rituals

Procedures for Developing Learning Communities

Collaboration embedded into daily work-

- purposeful
- structured
- facilitated
- accountability

Training in collaboration

Collective work-shared lessons, student work

Protecting shared values

Celebrating progress-individual and collective

Reflective dialogue

Curricular focus-

- collaborative adoption process
- research-based, use of data assessment model
- commitment to continuous improvement

Role of leadership-

- be fixated on results,
- focus on learning rather than teaching,
- shared decision making

First Steps

- Determine school and staff readiness
- Consider the use of an external change facilitator
- Identify barriers and boosters
- Begin with the learning

Common Mistakes

- Too much complacency
- Failing to develop a powerful and passionate leadership team
- Underestimate the power of the team
- Failing to celebrate and create short term gains
- Neglecting the culture

Results of Professional Learning Communities in Action for Teachers

- Reduction of teacher isolation
- Increased commitment to the mission and goals of the school
- Shared responsibility for the total development of students and their success
- Creation of new knowledge and beliefs about teaching and learners
- Higher likelihood that teachers will be well informed, professionally renewed, and inspired to inspire students
- More satisfaction, higher morale, and lower rates of absenteeism

Results of Professional Learning Communities for Students

- Decreased dropout rate and fewer classes “skipped”
- Lower rates of absenteeism
- Greater academic gains in math, science, history, and reading than in traditional schools
- Smaller achievement gaps between students from different backgrounds

For additional resources on this topic visit the following web sites:

National Staff Development Council:

<http://www.nsd.org/standards/learningcommunities.cfm>

SEDL: <http://www.sedl.org/pubs/change34/>