Professional Learning Communities: Guidance for High School Principals

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> If there is anything that the research community agrees on, it is this: The right kind of continuous, structured teacher collaboration improves the quality of teaching and pays big, often immediate, dividends in student learning and professional morale in virtually any setting. (But) … this image – of the true professional learning community – has yet to become the norm in most schools (Schmoker, 2005, p. xii).

The above quote is an example of the gap that often exists between what school leaders know is best practice and what is done in schools. This article will close the knowing-doing gap by providing suggestions for how principals can support the formation of a professional learning community (PLC) in the high school setting. It describes the key characteristics of an effective PLC and proposes an implementation strategy organized around research-based leadership responsibilities.

What is an Effective Professional Learning Community?

Transforming a school into a PLC is one strategy for continuously improving student achievement by increasing the learning capacity of building staff (Hord, 2003). The PLC is composed of collaborative teams whose members work interdependently to achieve building goals. The teams share a common understanding that learning, not teaching, is the central purpose of school and their work is organized around three critical questions:
    1) What is it we want all students to learn?
    2) How will we know when they have learned it?
    3) What will we do when some students learn it and others do not? (DuFour, 2000-01)

Two central characteristics of a PLC---the focus on learning as a cultural norm along with teachers accepting the collective responsibility for the learning of all students, have been identified as the factors having the most significant impact on teachers' ability to improve student performance (National High School Alliance, 2003).

PLC teams engage in a process of collective inquiry into best practice guided by data from multiple assessments of student learning. It is expected that reflective dialogue about instruction during team meetings will lead to action and experimentation in the classroom. All efforts are judged on the basis of the impact that activities have on learning. The intended outcome is continuous improvement, the creation of conditions for ongoing learning in the school (DuFour, 2000-01). De-privatization of practice and peer collaboration in problem solving and decision making are key components of effective PLCs (Bryk, Camburn, & Lewis, 1999).

The National High School Alliance published a site visit protocol that is a useful tool for observing and reflecting on the quality of professional learning communities. It includes a set of descriptors of a professional learning community and can be used as a self-assessment tool. The complete instrument is available at www.hsalliance.org/_downloads/learning/DC-Protocol.pdf

How do you get started?

A recent study of 11 North Carolina high schools with high performance on state assessments found that academic departments were the major vehicles for instructional improvement (Cooper, Ponder, Merritt, & Matthews, 2005). This finding indicates that principals can build on the departmental structure, already in existence in most high schools, as the basic framework for a PLC. In large schools, or systems with multiple high schools, teachers may be teamed by subject within a department. The departmental approach seems logical given the content focus of high schools but interdisciplinary approaches are also options. Principals should decide which approach to use given the readiness of the faculty. Teachers who are just learning to function as a team may be challenged if asked to think across disciplines.

Consider existing committees and task groups in the school for other possibilities. Generally it is better to incorporate what is already in place rather than create a new structure for the PLC. Remember that the focus of a PLC is on learning so groups that deal with administrative issues or building concerns should not be part of the final configuration.

How do I ensure success?

Richard Elmore (2002) argues that schools are prone to change "at the drop of a hat" (p. 5) but have not learned how to improve. One reason is that leaders often implement structural changes in schedules or other ways we organize our work without a deep understanding of how existing beliefs, values and norms may be oppositional. Making the transition from a focus on teaching to a focus on learning requires a major shift in thinking for most teachers as does the de-privatization of practice. Therefore, successful principals recognize that creating an effective PLC goes beyond assigning people to teams and requires changes in the very culture of the school.

Marzano, Waters & McNulty (2005) described two types of change that can help principals think about the challenges they face when forming a PLC. First order change characterizes those early efforts to reorganize a school and generally includes incremental program changes that are logical extensions of past efforts.

More substantive change was described as second order and involves more significant changes in school operations. It moves beyond changes in organization and addresses underlying issues of culture and norms. Marzano and colleagues (2005) describe second order change this way. It is

- Perceived as a break with the past
- Lies outside existing paradigms
- Conflicts with prevailing values and norms
- Requires the acquisition of new knowledge and skills
- Requires resources currently not available to those responsible for implementation
- May be resisted because only those who have a broad perspective of the school see the change as necessary" (p. 113).

Creating a PLC may be first order change in some settings and second order in others. Because the characteristics of an effective PLC are contrary to deep-seated norms in many schools, it is likely that implementation will be a form of second order change in most instances.

Regardless, Marzano, Waters & McNulty (2005) identified different sets of leadership responsibilities depending on the type of change involved. The proposed PLC implementation strategy that follows is organized around the seven leadership responsibilities they found were crucial to second order change. Many of the suggestions were adapted from ideas presented by the Marzano, Waters and McNulty.

Leadership roles for implementing and supporting a PLC

1) Know curriculum, instruction and assessment

This leadership responsibility refers to a principal's knowledge of how the establishment of a PLC is likely to affect current practice. It is probable, for example, that the curriculum will become more standardized as teachers work in teams and determine what students should know and be able to do in each content area. The development of common assessments and instructional innovation are also likely outcomes of PLC activity over time. Knowing what changes in practice will likely occur allows the principal to anticipate needs, concerns or problems and devise strategies to respond.

2) Optimize Conditions

To fulfill this responsibility, the principal must become the driving force behind the creation of a PLC and do everything in his/her power to ensure successful implementation. This includes actions that inspire others to actively participate in the work of collaborative teams and the establishment of the supportive conditions required to make them successful. Providing time for PLC work and the development of trust among the faculty are two conditions that are critical.

<u>Find the time</u>

It is not surprising that time is a significant issue for faculties that decide to work together collaboratively. Managing time as a resource is a critical part of the optimizer responsibility. Principals are usually in a position to reallocate existing meeting time for PLC activities and can advocate for additional time through administrative channels. There are numerous examples of how other schools have addressed this issue and the following links are three excellent sources of ideas.

http://www.ncrel.org/sdrs/areas/issues/educatrs/profdevl/pd300.htm
NCREL suggestions on how to find time for professional development

http://www.nsdc.org/library/publications/jsd/murphy183.cfm
An article from the Journal of Staff Development that addresses how to find time for faculty study groups

Article by Linda Darling-Hammond on how schools are restructuring and changing practice to find time

Develop trust

Studies indicate that a high degree of trust and mutual respect among teachers is critical to the successful implementation of learning communities (Bryk, Camburn & Louis 1999, Gruenert, 2005). It is logical that a lack of trust would make it unlikely that teachers will engage in meaningful conversation and expose their practice to peers.
Hoy and Miskel (2005) cited recent evidence that faculty trust emerges when teachers interact in professional, supportive ways and develop a sense of solidarity and affiliation with each other. Thus, trust in colleagues is not built by the principal but by the teachers themselves.

Because much of the work of the PLC occurs in small groups it is important to ensure that at least one person on each team has the knowledge and skills to facilitate the development of trust and respect among the members. There may be people within the school system who can provide training in group facilitation skills. Some universities offer classes in these areas and state education agencies may also be able to help.

The Journal for Staff Development publication titled, *Transforming your group into a team* is a good place to start. It can be found at http://www.nsdc.org/members/tools/tools11-05.pdf

3) Stimulate Intellectual Curiosity and Conversation

Principals meet this responsibility by stimulating the intellectual curiosity of faculty regarding PLCs and encouraging the exploration of research and theory in the area through reading and discussion. In addition to providing opportunities for teachers to learn, principals need to ensure they have a plan for enhancing their own learning and understanding in this area.

If the PLC concept is new to you, the references in this article can serve as a starting point. Novices and veterans alike can benefit from inviting other principals who have a PLC in their school to form a study or action research group. Participants can meet face-to-face or conduct virtual meetings using various technologies.

4) Serve as a Change Agent

A principal fulfills the responsibility of change agent by inspiring faculty and staff to be involved, take risks, stretch their professional competence and to perform at their best. It is important to help people understand that the development of a PLC in the complex setting of most high schools takes time and there will be ups and downs in the process. Principals should demonstrate a high tolerance for ambiguity as the details get worked out and keep everyone focused on the three key questions that are addressed by a PLC. Look for ways to show that progress is being made and celebrate accomplishments.

The literature asserts that the supportive conditions for effective PLCs are most likely to emerge in smaller schools and in schools that use a communal, rather than bureaucratic, decision making process (National High School Alliance, 2003). Part of the change agent responsibility for high school principals is a close examination of current practice with an eye toward making the entire organization more supportive of the PLC concept.

5) Monitor and Evaluate Impact

This responsibility involves careful monitoring of the effects of the PLC on learning in the school. The PLC inquiry process is continuous. Each cycle of action and experimentation should be followed by a team examination of data and an evaluation of results. It is also important for the faculty to examine the collective impact that the PLC has on the school, monitor how teams are functioning, and assess the degree of trust that is emerging among team members. Principals should develop a specific plan for obtaining feedback on group process and collecting other data to share on a regular basis. Use multiple data sources and emphasize formative evaluation strategies.

6) Model Flexibility

Principals demonstrate flexibility when they anticipate concerns and are ready to adjust plans as needed. This responsibility supports the adoption of a situational and collaborative leadership style. At times the principal may need to provide information about the research on PLCs and student achievement. At other times it may be necessary to encourage others to take a risk and ensure there will be support if things do not turn out as expected. Some times allowing teachers to work things out on their own is the most effective approach.

7) Articulate Beliefs

This responsibility refers to the need to help faculty and staff understand that the work of a PLC is consistent with the belief that learning for all students is the purpose of schooling. To do this, the principal must consistently communicate a personal belief that reflective discussions around student data by faculty and staff will result in increased achievement. Use both formal and informal channels to speak about how a PLC will improve learning and build leadership capacity in your school.

The principal is also responsible for pointing out instances when practices and behaviors do not align with the ideas and beliefs that guide PLC activity. Meeting the responsibility of ideas and beliefs effectively will help with the development of a shared vision.

Concluding Remarks

There is mounting evidence that leadership makes a difference in student achievement. Researchers also agree that an effective professional learning community enhances instructional practice in the school and increases student learning. While there are various structures for professional learning communities, principals can create a school climate where professional conversation about teaching and learning is paramount.

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