Research Brief

Professional Learning Communities

Question: What do we know about creating and sustaining a professional learning community?

Summary of Findings:
The term, "professional learning community" has become so common place in schools that it is used to refer to almost any type of collaborative work. But the "professional learning community" suggested first in the early 1990's described a school where teachers and administrators continuously worked to learn and then act upon what they learned. The overall goal was to improve school effectiveness by focusing on improving the learning of students.

Professional learning communities have several benefits for staff. They include reduced isolation, higher satisfaction, higher morale, and a greater commitment to the mission and goals of the school.

Characteristics of Professional Learning Communities

School reform recommendations emphasize greater professionalism for teachers and other school personnel. While discipline-based reform projects and efforts of professional organizations can provide limited support for local initiatives, there is a growing recognition that when a school faculty comes together around a shared vision and a collective commitment to change, that the results are more meaningful and long-lasting.

Five elements of professional community have been identified (Garmston & Wellman, 1999; Kruse, Seashore-Louis, 2009). They include:
- *Shared Norms and Values* – Values are central to teacher' and administrators' work. They shape their view of children, their ability to learn, and the priorities that control the use of time and space. Developing awareness about norms and values is key to community building.
- *A Focus on Student Learning* – Professional communities focus on student learning on the "end" and teaching as the "means." They talk about student work, discuss the characteristics of good work and high quality assignments. They are comfortable discussing complex issues related to student learning. The focus is always on the output---student learning, rather than the input---teaching.
- *Reflective Dialogue* – In professional communities teachers become aware of their practice and its impact. Professional practice becomes much more public through activities like learning walks or discussion of student work. Reflective dialogue is a norm, providing an opportunity to developed shared understanding of things like the purpose of learning.
- *Public Practice* – For reflective dialogue to be successful, it must be accompanied by a collective commitment to open discussion about individual teaching practices. It provides an opportunity to learn from one another, to plan and interact collaboratively.
- *Collaboration* – Professional communities are characterized by the collaborative endeavors of teachers and administrator. This is not collegiality, but the sharing of expertise and perspectives

on teaching, a willingness to share data about student learning, and to develop a shared responsibility and commitment to effective instruction.

Several essential components of a professional learning community have been identified. They include:
- Collective Inquiry: Working collaboratively to examine data about student learning and developing a plan to address students' needs.
- Supportive and Shared Leadership: Power and authority shared by inviting teachers and families to provide input into decision making about improving student learning;
- Action Orientation: A willingness to try new things and adopt a "whatever it takes" stance in support of student learning;
- Focus on Continuous Improvement: Recognition of the value of routinely examining practice and making changes when appropriate;
- Results Orientation – Clarity about outcomes with a "laser light" focus on achieving the desired results.

Role of the Principal

Transforming a school into a professional learning community can only occur with the sanction and support of the principal. In order to build a successful learning community the principal must abandon the traditional position of authority and recognize that their role must include that of "learner," working with teachers and other school staff to investigate and seek solutions that will improve student learning.

From . . .	Toward . . .
Solitary decision maker	Participant in learning process
Expert	Learner
Director	Facilitator
Dominating leader	Participating leader

Creating and Sustaining Professional Learning Communities

There are structures that you can use to nurture and sustain a professional learning community. First, create a schedule and other organizational structures that provide time for teachers to work together and reduce isolation. Common planning time, teaching or departmental teams and location of classrooms are a few examples. Locate a room where teams can meet and hold their discussion about students and student learning.

Next, incorporate policies that promote greater autonomy, foster collaboration and improve communication. In one school, every department level policy had to be shared with the other departments so that consideration could be given to its impact. This proved helpful to the design of more broadly accepted policies.

Third, provide time for professional development at a variety of times both during the school day and at other scheduled times. Many schools convert their staff meetings into opportunities for professional dialogue and collaborative work.

Fourth, when there is an opportunity to hire new staff, look for teachers who are comfortable accepting feedback, looking at their practice, and who share your commitment to improved student learning.

Finally, be transparent about your own learning and encourage those around you to do the same. Be inquisitive. Read widely, Work to create an atmosphere of trust and respect among all school personnel.

Online Resources:

Center for Adaptive Schools (www.adaptiveschools.com) – This site provides numerous resources for how to build professional community including nurturing and sustaining the work of collaborative groups. The site includes two useful tools: This Week's Skill Builder (check out the archive) and the Seven Norms of Collaboration Toolkit (http://www.adaptiveschools.com/inventories.htm or http://csi.boisestate.edu/Improvement/7%20Norms.pdf)

Professional Learning Communities – This article by Richard DuFour, perhaps the most recognized proponent of professional learning communities, appeared in *Educational Leadership* in May 2004 and describes the "big ideas" of PLC's.
http://pdonline.ascd.org/pd_online/secondary_reading/el200405_dufour.html

Professional Learning Communiites: What Are They? – This article from the Southwest Educational Development Lab describes professional learning communities and how they can benefit schools.
 http://www.sedl.org/change/issues/issues61.html

Learning Policy Center Brief on Professional Learning Communities – This brief provides information to inform decisions about the design and implementation of professional learning communities (http://www.lpc.pitt.edu/index.php/content/view/briefs). Scroll down to the June 2008 brief "Getting the Most out of Professional Learning Communities. It may be downloaded as a PDF file.

School Change Rubric – This site provided by Employers for Education Excellence provides a comprehensive set of readings and other online resources including a self-assessment tool that can be used to guide the creation of a professional learning community.
http://www.e3smallschools.org/resources_program.html)

Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (www.nwrel.org) - The lab provides many school improvement resources including Structured Reflection Protocol that can be used to gather data and frame thoughtful conversations.
(www.nwrel.org/scpd/scc/studentvoices/srp.shtml)

Annenberg Institute for School Reform (www.annenberginstitute.org) – This site includes a set of Tools for School Improvement Planning that can be used to sustain a professional community. There are multiple tools for each task. Link to the section labeled *Tool Collection.*
(www.annenberginstitute.org/tools/index.php)

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Coalition of Essential Schools (www.essentialschools.org) - The Coalitions' Change Lab provides access to information and tools from participating schools. A free registration is required to access the site. (www.ceschangelab.org/cs/clpub/print/cl_docs/10)

The Principals' Partnership Research Briefs (www.principalspartnership.com) – This site includes over 250 Research Briefs with several related to professional learning communities.
   Leadership Teams – www.principalspartnership.com/leadershipteams.pdf
Dynamics of Change - www.principalspartnership.com/dynamicsofchange.pdf

Print Resources
The following print resources can help with creating and sustaining professional learning communities.

National Association of Secondary School Principals (2009) (www.principals.org) - *Breaking Ranks: A Field Guide for Leading Change*. Reston, VA: NASSP.

Hord, Shirley & Sommers, William (2008). *Leading Professional Learning Communities*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Eaker, Robert., DuFour, Richard & DuFour, Rebecca (2002). *Getting Started: Reculturing Schools to Become Professional Learning Communities*. Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree.

DuFour, Richard, DuFour, Rebecca, Eaker, Robert & Many, Thomas (2006). *Learning by Doing: A Handbook for Professional Learning Communities at Work*. Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree.

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http://www.educationpartnerships.org/