

INTRODUCTION



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The profession of education includes both unique rewards and trying sacrifices. The nature of education—preparing young people for life—calls on the hearts, the minds, and the souls of those who work in schools and those who serve as leaders. The title of this multivolume series, *The Soul of Educational Leadership*, signals the deep work demanded of all who have committed their lives to children. From the beginning of this series, we have aimed to seek out contributions from leading thinkers and practitioners on the soul-work of educational leadership.

The theme of Volume 1, *Engaging EVERY Learner*, was selected to signal that every student matters deeply, to all of us in school and in our society. That theme was sounded by Alan M. Blankstein—editor of this series, together with myself and Paul D. Houston: “Saving young people from failure in school is equivalent to saving their lives!” Those powerful words set the tone for all that we hope to do in this series. We know how to do what needs doing, and we are enlisting the thinking of those who have led the way.

In Volume 2, *Out-of-the-Box Leadership*, Paul D. Houston observed that schools have been making incremental progress in an exponential environment, one in which “deteriorating social conditions surrounding families and children have confronted us with all sorts of new challenges.” He called for transformative leadership, which can come only by thinking differently about our problems.

Providing educators and educational leaders with such assistance is one overarching purpose of this series.

Our intent in Volume 3, *Sustaining Professional Learning Communities*, is to look beyond inclusiveness and transformation to the perilously difficult task of holding onto—and improving upon—valuable work once it has begun. The literature of education reform is, unfortunately, replete with examples of beneficial changes that failed the test of time. How can we work together to create learning communities that support enduring change?

In Chapter 1, “Communities Committed to Learning”: A Case Story of Building Sustainable Success, Nancy Shin Pascal and Alan M. Blankstein of the HOPE Foundation describe the culture of the Newport News, Virginia, schools—“a learning community with both lateral and vertical accountability intended to ensure the success of *all* children.” The story of Newport News, they tell us, illustrates the process of creating sustainable success through constancy of purpose. By means of creating a common vision, communicating expectations personally and persistently, engaging all stakeholders, and focusing on instruction, the district realized unprecedented gains in student achievement.

In Chapter 2, *Making the Promise a Reality*, Shirley M. Hord (Scholar Emerita, Southwest Educational Development Laboratory) and Stephanie A. Hirsh (executive director of the National Staff Development Council) return to the troubling disparity addressed in Volume 1 of this series: the gap between where we want all students to perform and where most are actually performing. How to close that gap? “The surest way,” they say, “to help teachers to help all students is to engage all teachers in professional learning communities.” Because all change and improvement depends on learning, they maintain, the professional learning community “provides the environment in which principals and teachers set about intentionally learning in order to increase their effectiveness—and, subsequently, increase student results.”

“After more than a decade of studying professional communities, I continue to be struck by the variety of ways in which they emerge—and by their fragility,” writes Karen Seashore Louis, Rodney Wallace Professor for the Advancement of Teaching and Learning at the University of Minnesota. (That very fragility led to the creation of this volume.) In Chapter 3, *Creating and Sustaining Professional Communities*, she observes that educators have an urgent sense that schools—and students—need more than benchmarks and tests if they are to

“COMMUNITIES
COMMITTED
TO LEARNING”

A Case Story of Building Sustainable Success



NANCY SHIN PASCAL AND
ALAN M. BLANKSTEIN

If you're too loose, you don't get the focus, but if you're too focused, you get prescription, and narrowness, and rebellion. . . . The holy grail of school reform on a large scale is large-scale ownership.

—Michael Fullan (*Leading in a Culture of Change*, 2001)

In districts we serve, there is often great disparity between the ethnic, socioeconomic, and—not surprisingly—academic achievement of students from one school to another. In the case of Newport News, Virginia, however, the district and school leadership decided that they would create conditions to sustain all of their students' success. The lessons learned from this 6-year-long journey are pertinent to all schools and districts.

scores conflicts with the core of PLCs, which involve trusting, shared solving of problems of classroom practice.



Appointing committees to analyze data and focusing on test score improvement as the goal of PLCs shift attention away from the core emphasis on how teachers can improve the connection between their daily instructional practice and student learning.

PLCs as Job Enlargement

A high school in an urban center was asked by the district office to consider designing small learning communities in addition to its recent implementation of a block schedule. As part of this effort, a major scheduling and curriculum reorganization was required, including an initiative to put teachers in touch with community partners who help to imple-

ment the themes that were chosen to create specialized foci for the new schools-within-a-school (SWS). Teachers were also asked to adapt their curriculum to ensure that core classes reflected the theme of their new SWS, and to take on increased advisory roles. At the same time, there was a clear expectation that the new SWS teacher clusters would also organize reflective PLCs in order to improve instruction.

Teachers in this school were willing but overwhelmed by the new roles that they were expected to play (only a few of which are described earlier), and by the huge demands of implementing so many new ideas simultaneously. Like many high school teachers, this experienced staff was inundated with multiple requirements, including new curriculum, new ways of relating to students, and increasing emphasis on meeting accountability demands for which preservice training had not prepared them. There is no question that teachers' work has changed over the past several decades—becoming increasingly complex even though the job descriptions have hardly changed at all. If PLCs are added to this increased workload, they are likely to be viewed as one more burden rather than as a way of solving pressing classroom issues.

PLCs or Professionalizing Individuals?

A recent case description of two urban secondary schools makes a different point. In the effort to try and counteract professional isolation, the PLC literature has ignored individual needs. Not all of these needs are pretty—people want to be outstanding and have

influence, they hope to gain perks for their classroom in the constant battle for scarce resources, and they have professional dreams that do not overlap with the collective will. If no explicit attention is paid to balancing individual and collective professionalization, micro-politics and behind-the-scenes competition may spiral and undermine the spirit of PLCs (Scribner, Hager, & Warn, 2002).

The point of this cautionary story is that school reform needs to balance individual and collective hopes, fears, and needs. Nearly 80 years ago, the father of modern management theory pointed out that on any given day, employees will come to work with a wide range of attitudes and preferences, not all of which are consistent across individuals, and not all of which can be met (Barnard, 1938). Administrators are as overworked as teachers, and it is easy to overlook the need for individual recognition, reward, and feedback in the effort to promote schoolwide success. Creating a balance between paying attention to individual and group needs requires constant adjustment. However, we know that no matter how well-entrenched PLCs become, most daily innovation and improvement in classroom practices (and consequently student learning) will come from individual reflection and adjustments—although the inspiration and “aha” moments may come in group discussion.

ANOTHER APPROACH: SHIFTING THE CULTURE OF THE SCHOOL

The core of the implementation problems outlined earlier is actually quite simple. The idea of professional community was developed as an effort to integrate two previously distinct concepts: professionalism (which is based on specialized knowledge and a focus on serving client needs) and community (which is based on caring, support, and mutual responsibility within a group). In implementation, the focus is too often on increasing professionalism, while ignoring the problem of community.

A number of studies have concluded that creating *structures* that support PLCs—such as time for teams to meet, giving teachers more influence and responsibilities (distributed leadership), and creating more opportunities for feedback on performance—is important to sustaining activities that are core elements of a professionalizing school (Bryk, Camburn, & Louis, 1999; Louis, Marks, & Kruse, 1996).