
Imagine . . .

All professionals—teachers, administrators, counselors, media specialists, librarians—in all schools (Grades K–5, 6–8, 9–12) engaged in continuous professional learning. In the professions, such as medicine and law, the membership is expected to review the journals of their field and to attend conferences. They observe each other at their work, offering feedback that leads to increased professional effectiveness. They are expected to examine and explore new methods and approaches to their work as well. Professionals, according to *Webster's*, are characterized by a codified knowledge base, which can be increased consistently through ongoing research that seeks new means by which to expand the effectiveness of its members—professionals maintain familiarity with the research.

Such study of one's profession, especially when done in community with others, where the learning is richer and deeper, has not been the norm of the education community. Educators have typically been isolated physically from others because of the structure of school facilities and the schedules that dominate the school day. This has resulted also in mental isolation, with no colleagues for interaction. However, knowledge is most fruitfully constructed in a social context. Providing the opportunities, the structures and schedules, for school-based educators to come together to learn in community is an important challenge.

School and district staff members understand that the most significant factors that determine whether students learn well are the *competence*, *caring*, and *commitment* of teachers and administrators. Their expertise, combined with their capacity for communicating and interacting meaningfully with students on their cognitive, intellectual, and emotional levels, results in powerful connections with students that enable them to learn at higher standards of quality and deeper layers of understanding. These educators have a deep commitment to their professionalism and a profound clarity about the purpose of their work. Such schools support their educators in continuous study, reflection, dialogue, and learning.

Adapted and used with permission of the National Staff Development Council, www.nsd.org, 2007. All rights reserved.

This book is offered as a means for addressing the challenge of providing for educators' continuous learning and improvement opportunities and increasing their professionalism. One is reminded of Peter Senge's *The Fifth Discipline* (1990), in which he advocates for the learning organization, where "people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning how to learn together" (p. 3).

In many schools, staff learning together is a very new endeavor. Some schools schedule time for grade level or subject matter teams to meet, assuming they are then a professional learning community. The majority of these meetings focus on management, a very legitimate purpose. These meetings are useful and necessary. But they are not typically characterized by professionals meeting together to learn deeper content knowledge, more powerful instructional strategies, or investigating the differentiated and sometimes unique ways that students learn. Unstructured time for human interaction does not assure learning (Kris Hipp, personal communication, January 2007) or productivity to result. The professional learning community label has preceded the concept. As it has spread across the nation, and around the globe, the idea of professional learning community has been translated into a wide array of definitions and descriptions—most of which miss the mark of educators in a school coming together to learn in order to become more effective so that students learn more successfully.

There are research reports, observations of exemplary practice, and good old-fashioned common sense, upon which we draw for this book. Our goal is to translate research-based concepts and exemplary school-based practices into the capacity, or capabilities, of the staff so they support their school in becoming a community of professional learners. The book's intentions are

To clarify what a professional learning community looks like, acts like, and the results to be gained for staff and students

To recognize the essential and critical role of the principal and other school leaders in working with the school staff to initiate, develop, and maintain an effective professional learning community, and

To offer ideas and suggestions about how leaders may successfully do this work

If these goals are of interest to you, please turn the page.

1

What Is a PLC?

Professional Learning Communities: Definition and Effects

You will not believe this. Our principal and AP invited the whole staff of 34 to participate in conducting a reading class each morning with our students, no matter what our own teaching subject matter is—and we're learning together how to do it. It's really exciting!

Middle school math department chair

Oh, my, I do wish that our school staff worked as a professional learning community like my cousin's in New Jersey. I feel so isolated with no one to talk to or solicit advice about my students' lack of attention in reading time.

Third grade elementary school teacher

Did you see last night's televised school board meeting? The board voted to provide early released time for students on Wednesday so school staffs can meet to learn new strategies for instruction—and this all happened because our principal persuaded other principals to submit a proposal.

Parent of high school student

Expectations

When there is a clear focus and a definite plan to reach quality implementation of the new work that the staff will adopt together, expectations are apparent to all. From these expectations the staff takes its clues about new content and instructional practices they need to learn. When a faculty undertakes new practices unsuccessfully, they often lack understanding of what the new practice will look like when it has been implemented well. Clarity of the focus for change and clear descriptions of what administrators, teachers, students, and others involved will be doing allows all to be informed about what is expected for all individuals with the new work that has been agreed upon. Having this shared vision that spells out the actions that will be taken decreases frustrations, annoyances, and disappointments. Being precise about expectations is a boon to be shared by all in the community. However, there will always be good reasons for changing the road map or the destination, so flexibility, as noted already, should be part of the journey.

Decision Making and Conflict Resolution

Most school staff members have not had the privilege of shared decision making and must learn how to exercise this important responsibility. One would not turn a first grade classroom loose to use learning centers without first providing instruction and practice about the appropriate way to “do” centers. Oftentimes it is assumed that faculty know how to make decisions. Don’t you just vote? Well, of course you could, but in using this decision-making process, some win and others lose. There are better ways to make decisions that preserve positive relationships among the staff.

In professional learning communities, members are expected to be open and to share opinions. In the community, “teachers tolerate (even encourage) debate, discussion and disagreement” (Wignall, 1992). When such openness occurs, there is bound to be an occasional conflict. At this point, the community uses the skill that it has developed for managing and resolving conflict. The wise leader does not wait for conflict to erupt before addressing processes for resolving conflict within the community. Perhaps there are teachers who have developed these skills, and they can instruct their colleagues on the processes.

Staff Development Opportunities and Restrictions

Collective learning is one of the five attributes of the professional learning community, and, as such, focuses squarely on the priority purpose of the