

Reach the Highest Standard in Professional Learning: Learning Communities

Editors

Shirley M. Hord

Patricia Roy

Contributors

Ann Lieberman

Lynne Miller

Valerie von Frank



Contents

Introduction to the Series	v
<i>Stephanie Hirsh</i>	
The Learning Forward Standards for Professional Learning	ix
The Learning Communities Standard	xi
About the Series Editors	xv
About the Contributors	xvii
1. Unpacking Professional Learning Communities: Getting From Here to There	1
<i>Ann Lieberman and Lynne Miller</i>	
Professional Learning Communities: Why Now?	2
What We Know About Professional Learning Communities	4
Professional Learning Communities in Practice	8
References	16
2. Creating Learning Communities	19
<i>Shirley M. Hord and Patricia Roy</i>	
The Urgent Problem	19
The Attributes of Professional Learning Communities: HOW Do Members of a Learning Community Interact and Work?	22
The Cycle of Continuous Improvement: What Do Members of a Learning Community Do?	28
Conclusion	56
References	59

3. The Case Study	61
<i>Valerie von Frank</i>	
Strategic Planning	63
Resources	77
Resource A. What are SMART goals?	79
Resource B. Innovation Configuration Map for the Professional Learning Community	83
Resource C. Survey: Use of the Cycle of Continuous Improvement	91
Index	97

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES: WHY NOW?

Policymakers, across the political spectrum, agree that in a globalized world, schools have to ensure high-quality education for all students and to narrow the achievement gap between minority and majority students and between the well off and the poor. What has been and continues to be under contention is how to get from here to there. McGuinn (2010) identified two competing narratives that underlie education policy initiatives: the equity narrative that views poverty as the barrier to reform and the accountability narrative that views inadequate standards for students and teachers as the problem.

Rooted in the civil rights movement and antipoverty initiatives of the 1960s, the equity narrative gained credence in Title One of the Elementary and Secondary School Act of 1965, which provided direct funding to schools with poor and underachieving students. The Coleman Report of 1966, which concluded that student disparities in achievement were due to conditions of poverty and that schools made little difference, further legitimized this view. Later iterations of the equity narrative included policies regarding gender, disabilities, and limited English proficiency.

The accountability narrative, on the other hand, places its emphasis on changing schools and teaching rather than on alleviating poverty and focuses on measurable outcomes for both students and teachers as remedies. This narrative was memorably articulated in *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983), whose opening statement was a call to arms.

If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war. . . . We have, in effect, been committing an act of unthinking, unilateral educational disarmament. (p. 8)

The clear message was that if the United States were to remain a world power, it had to hold teachers and schools accountable to higher standards. The report's recommendations looked to the input/output accountability measures of business as the model. The current iteration of this narrative is evident in the No Child Left Behind Act of 2000 and the recent revisions proposed under the Department of Education waiver process, whose provisions call for increased standardized testing, a standards-based curriculum and assessment

(Continued)

- identify educator learning needs based on research, best practice, educator standards, and member knowledge
- identify each teacher's own learning needs related to student learning needs
- develop trusting relationships among learning community membership

Table 2.2 Sample KASAB

Knowledge <i>Know . . .</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Knowledge of different types of higher-level questions • Knowledge of how to analyze questions within curricular materials to determine appropriateness • Knowledge of how to develop appropriate higher-level questions matched to student learning outcomes • Knowledge about instructional scaffolding
Attitude <i>Believe that . . .</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All students can learn to answer higher-level questions • Teachers can support all students to answer higher-level questions • Instructional scaffolding is essential to help all students answer higher-level questions
Skills <i>Can . . .</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use wait time during instruction • Analyze and identify levels of existing questions within curricular materials • Develop additional higher-level questions for existing curricular units • Develop new curricular materials that include higher-level questions matching student learning outcomes • Develop instructional scaffolding skills
Aspirations <i>Desires to . . .</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A desire to use wait time during instruction and small-group work to encourage student engagement • A desire to use instructional scaffolding to support learning of <i>all</i> students, especially those who struggle
Behaviors <i>Consistently uses . . .</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Higher-level questions during instruction • Wait time during instruction • Support for all students to answer higher-level questions • Instructional scaffolding to support all students to answer higher-level questions

Source: Killion, 2008. Used with permission.

This Step in Action: During the previous school year, the Lincoln Middle School faculty had engaged in six sessions to learn how to review, analyze, understand, and interpret student learning results. Most teachers were comfortable with the process but welcomed a

Step 4: Select and Implement New Practices

Step 4 focuses on selecting and implementing appropriate evidence-based strategies (new practices) to achieve educator learning goals and, consequently, student learning goals.

A major consideration for the LC will be to identify strategies, processes, and learning designs to help and support each team member to implement these new strategies. The transition from knowing about a new strategy to actually using that strategy with quality and agility is difficult. This has been called the knowing-doing gap (Pfeffer & Sutton, 2000), and it exists in all walks of life. There is a wide gulf between knowing about a new practice and actually putting that practice into operation on a consistent basis. Creating a new habit is complicated; for most adults this involves eliminating a current practice and replacing it with a new one. Most adults need support, assistance, and attention to take a new set of behaviors and transform them into a natural routine. This reality might explain the existence of a myriad of support groups for everything from weight control to grief counseling.

Collaborative professional learning strategies, which support the use of new practices, are necessary. While workshops and training build the knowledge base, collaborative work within the LC is required to ensure teachers apply their new knowledge daily to lesson and unit development and receive ongoing support and assistance in implementing new strategies. Collaborative strategies necessitate developing productive relationships among colleagues so that they can learn from and with each other to enhance their own skills and incorporate new practices to improve student learning. This kind of shared decision making, along with collegial assistance and support, is a building block for collective responsibility among LC members. Collective responsibility entails peer accountability for improving student learning undergirded by support that team members commit to each other to accomplish the goal collaboratively.

Some collaborative professional learning strategies that can support implementation include the following:

- **Peer observations:** A structured visit between colleagues in which the visiting teacher can view the use of a new strategy or become another set of eyes and ears for the classroom teacher, observing student and teacher behaviors and engag-

felt more comfortable, and saw the connection between the strategies and student needs. As a result, the learning team created partnerships—one experienced member with another who has less experience—and asked them to plan together, observe and debrief lessons, and reflect on the new practice. Some partners even decided to coplan and coteach for additional support. This professional learning strategy is an appropriate response to the analysis of monitoring data. It also requires a high level of trust among LC members so that the focus is on supporting each other to learn new strategies rather than comparing differences.

A second issue to consider in Step 6 is the need for high-fidelity implementation of new practices. Have you heard of a program that was wildly successful in a neighboring district, but when brought to a new district, it did not fulfill its promise of higher scores and better test results? Those who have studied implementation of new practices and programs report one clear finding: High-quality implementation by a majority of staff members is required to make the highest gains in student results (Reeves, 2010). Reeves (2010) found a 13% improvement when high-fidelity practice was achieved. High-fidelity implementation of new strategies, therefore, becomes a component of educators' learning goals.

In Step 6, an effective learning community will

- identify and define high-quality use of new classroom practices
- monitor the level of quality of implementation by colleagues
- use monitoring data to refine classroom practice
- support each other's continued refinement of new strategies and practices

High-fidelity implementation of new practices requires identifying and focusing on the critical components identified in research (Marzano, Pickering, & Pollock, 2001). Some aspects of a new instructional practice are critical; others are nice but not necessary. For example, high-fidelity use of higher-order questioning, an aspect of the Common Core, involves developing appropriate questions, determining the appropriate time to ask questions, providing think and wait time for student reflecting, and scaffolding learning so that students are ready and skilled at

For Blue Valley, that has meant making sure every child is proficient, including subgroups such as special education students, those from homes in lower socioeconomic brackets, and those whose first language is not English. Beyond that, it's meant continually increasing the number of students not just meeting or exceeding expectations on the state assessment but moving into the top category of exemplary.

The district has produced a video it's dubbed the "dancing dots" that plots math and reading scores on the state assessment on a grid from 2000 onward and shows the progression from a scattering of dots in the early years of around 60% and clustering at 80% then moving rapidly after 2008 for all schools to 95% or higher for both math and reading at every school and remaining at those levels.

The upward trend also has meant maintaining composite ACT scores of nearly 25 even as the number of students taking the exam increased 1.5 times over a decade. And it's meant tripling the number of AP exams students have taken while still having 82% score 3 or above.

Trigg said the district began to improve when it put in place a strategic plan, focused on its mission, and structured ongoing staff development in professional learning communities (PLCs).

STRATEGIC PLANNING

When Trigg became superintendent in 2005, he fine-tuned the strategic plan, holding a town hall meeting to get community input on what district priorities should be. The strategic plan creates targets that leaders can use to set specific, measurable goals that they then review annually and report progress on publicly.

The district's 2010 through 2015 strategic plan includes seven succinct performance targets:

Performance Target 1: All schools and all grade levels will achieve the Standard of Excellence on the Kansas State Assessments. On each state assessment, special focus will continue to be placed on the performance of identifiable subgroups as well as the percentage of students scoring at the exemplary level.

Performance Target 2: K–8 students will participate in Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) testing in order to provide diagnostic and progress data.

THE VIEW FROM THREE LEVELS

JASON PERES, Blue Valley High School social studies department chairperson

The PLC model is about getting creative with the schedule and creating time for teachers to make a difference. And the other thing is, the professional learning community itself has to establish a purpose and it has to have autonomy.

A lot of districts struggle with giving teachers autonomy because they think teachers won't do the work. I've found when you give people autonomy, they're more motivated to work and they'll produce a higher-quality product. You have to have some data to show students are learning. It can't all be anecdotal. But the teachers at Blue Valley feel they have autonomy in their PLC time to do what they think is going to make the difference for student learning. The accountability does not come from the principal looking over our shoulders. Through our PLC, we collaborate and hold each other accountable. We share so much that we immediately see the expectations, and there's pressure to do a good job because our peers see what we're doing.

Some schools think that PLC time is teachers sitting down and talking about who needs supplies—who needs pens and pencils and construction paper. That's not what PLCs are about. PLCs are about what we want kids to know, how we will know that kids are learning it, what we will do when they don't learn, and what we will do if they already know it. If you're talking about something in a PLC that doesn't address those four questions, you're probably off task.

My responsibility is to make sure our department is meeting the school goals and executing our own plan at the same time. We generate a purpose for our department in our PLC and we execute our own purpose, and then we share that out with the rest of the school so that we all get on the same page.

There's value in professionals sitting down and talking about what we see in our classrooms and our observations. When you have those conversations, you give teachers professional respect. That's the beauty of the professional learning community. We talk about learning and best strategies, and data are the measure.

If I don't have colleagues to bounce ideas off of, I just keep doing the same thing year after year. With professional learning communities, we have all these discussions about what it is we do.



Component F: Participates in the development and application of relationship factors in support of the PLC's work				
1	2	3	4	5
Approaches the initial PLC meetings eagerly with an open (and receiving) mind and heart; articulates and endorses team/PLC learning in order to become more effective; promotes positive PLC relationships through both pleasant and productive interactions; exhibits trustworthiness through delivering on promises; demonstrates regard for colleagues and respect for their ideas and suggestions	Encourages colleagues enthusiastically regarding the initial meetings and endorses their potential for increased teacher effectiveness, student learning, and staff morale; increases positive PLC relationships through consistent pleasant and productive conversations and activity; delivers on promises and demonstrates trustworthiness; expresses regard for colleagues	Promotes colleagues' attendance and participation at meetings through persistent but pleasant reminders of the potential benefits and pleasurable interactions; shares pleasant conversations focused on adult and student learning to promote harmony; serves as a buffer when conversations veer unpleasantly; congratulates colleagues on both large and small "conquests"	Demonstrates pleasant interactions and exemplifies reliability, dependability, and transparency	
Evidence				

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