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# *Preface*

## THE RATIONALE

There seems to be an intuitive notion that “together is better,” especially when it comes to professional learning. The concept of professional learning networks, with built-in ideas like commonality of purpose, reciprocity, exchange, and so on, seems to be a good fit for taking up the capacity-building challenges in education. Indeed, the educational landscape is well populated with professional learning communities (PLCs) of various sorts. The problem is that the pace of takeup of PLCs as a “good idea” far exceeds the evidence we have about their effectiveness. When we work with groups of educators—even very large ones—a favorite question of ours is to ask who is in a PLC. Without exception, a very healthy majority of hands go up. Where things get complicated is when we start to dig a little deeper and ask what being in a PLC actually means. What we find is that it means everything to everybody—voluntary “lunch and learns,” after-school book studies, scheduled grade and division team encounters, focused lesson studies, and much, much more. And because being “in it together” makes such good intuitive sense, appealing to a basic need for affiliation as human beings, very few people push forward to ask the critical question, Does it translate into changed classroom practice and improved student learning and achievement?

What we find when we look at the research on professional learning collectives of various sorts is that together *can* be better—but it can also make no difference at all or even make things worse. It can preserve the status quo and make change more difficult. Our impetus for writing this book was to draw on our professional development and research experience to unpack the kinds of collaborative professional learning opportunities that can impact positively on student learning and achievement. You will see that these kinds of PLCs work by ratcheting up the quality of classroom practice in focused ways. They do so by building new understandings that are the foundations of impactful practice. And you will see that

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## *How Networked Learning Communities Work*

### **WHAT ARE NETWORKED LEARNING COMMUNITIES?**

The concept of networks is a pretty broad and all-encompassing one. Search the Internet and you'll find networks used to describe everything that includes a dimension of interconnectivity—computers, telephones, and of course people. Most leaders, regardless of their field, will tell you that effective collaboration is essential to an organization's success. And they will tell you that they strive to create opportunities for collaboration. However, as Cross and Parker (2004) explain, such efforts—though expensive in resource terms—often yield few or no results. Why? Because bringing people together does not necessarily produce better outcomes, unless the collaborative work is organized to engage people in the process and is supported to move them beyond their established patterns. Cross and Parker (2004) cite popular organizational examples of managers implementing collaborative technologies with the vague notion that they will help employees interact more seamlessly and that this will automatically enhance the quality of their work, only to find that this kind of contrived collaboration (A. Hargreaves, 1994) has done little beyond being experienced

The troubling nature of activity traps is that you don't know when you're in one. The combination of good intentions and hard work constructs a convincing delusion. We had occasion to spend time in a school not that long ago that had a showcase anti-bullying program in place. It comprised a dazzling array of dispute-resolution mechanisms from peer mediators to conflict resolution rooms. Only one thing was missing—a bullying problem in the first place. Simply put, there was no evidence of a bullying problem that required remediation. As it turned out, several staff had attended an anti-bullying workshop on the district's mandatory professional development day. The guest speaker was captivating and the program materials were readily available and cheap. And so they were off . . . right into an activity trap, victims of the disease we might call "initiativitis."

Economists talk about "opportunity cost"—what is lost when the most valuable alternative is not implemented. This notion explains why "initiativitis" is such a dangerous disease. When you're in an activity trap, what you are doing keeps you from doing other things. There's somewhere else you can't be, and that somewhere is precisely the place you need to be. The operative word here is *need*. Establishing need is about focus. It is about aiming before you fire—though this doesn't mean that you never fire; it just means you aim first! It is the antithesis of the shotgun approach to improvement.

**Initiativitis** (n): The disease of the initiative.

*Symptoms:* Typically include the unexpected arrival of a new three-ring materials binder with multiple colored tabs.

*Prognosis:* Unless treated, results in an activity trap and stalled school improvement progress.

*Prescription:* Can be prevented by a carefully chosen, needs-based improvement focus.

*Carl wanted to ensure that the principals reflected strategically on the current information they each had about their schools to identify an explicit shared focus before deciding on activities.*

*He explained that the network effort must be focused and useful for the schools so that it did not become one giant "activity trap" that drained resources without making a difference. He asked the group what they might do to ensure that they did indeed share a common, needs-based focus.*

*Charles:* I think that we should review our school assessment results together to figure out the priority issue that should be our focus.

*Elsie:* That is a good idea, but that is a lot of work and we already know that we all have issues with literacy. Carl even said so earlier.

*Laila:* Well, not all of us. I have a math issue in my school. Our literacy scores are fine.

*Rita:* That is true, but the rest of us are struggling with literacy in our schools.

## ROLES OF INFORMAL LEADERS

While formal leadership is defined by role and position, informal leadership is activity based and thus broadens the conception of what counts as leadership in important ways. Spillane (2006) makes the case that leadership in schools (and, we would add, networks) is not connected to role or position but to activities and practices that are stretched over many people in a system of interactions. This portrayal of leadership allows many people to perform leadership work to influence the core of schooling: curriculum, teaching, and learning. And this is the crux of the contribution informal leadership makes as a key building block of capacity in focused *instructional* leadership—that critical enabler of focused professional learning. To the extent that informal leadership is defined as such, because the relevant leadership practices are inscribed in activity and expertise that is based in content competencies, both the “focused” and the “instructional” dimensions of the requisite capacity are underscored.

*The next meeting demonstrated that, as formal leaders, the principals had collaborated to construct a focused network. The next step was to create conditions for informal leadership in the network.*

*As Joan sat in the meeting, she recognized that a real sense of trust and excitement had formed in the group. They were not just exchanging stories or talking about superficial school issues, they were focused on exchanging ideas about what they were doing in their schools and figuring out how to make things work together. This was the depth of conversation she had sought, but they had not really reached the point that addressed the reason for her first call to Carl—moving her “stuck” school forward. As a team, they had identified the area of student learning that was shared as an issue amongst the schools—making inferences in reading comprehension. But they still did not have an effective solution. She thought about the conversation she had with Rita and realized that this was the moment that she needed to share their concerns with the group.*

*Joan:* I think that we are at the point where we really need to consider a joint strategy for the focus now. We have been talking about how to lead the focus as principals. Now that we are on the same page with that, we need to move into changing the literacy strategies being used in our classrooms. I have heard several suggestions that sound reasonable, but sounding reasonable is not good enough. The initiatives that I supported over the last three years all sounded reasonable, but my student literacy scores did not improve! I don't want to continue investing time and money and not making a difference that has results.

*Rikard:* I agree—it is frustrating. We don't have a shortage of strategy ideas.

*Elsie:* Maybe we need to find out about the strategies we are already using in our schools and put them beside our student achievement data to see whether we can identify two or three that are most effective. We can all agree to use those

At this point, the inevitable question we get asked is where schools find the time for this kind of ongoing, job-embedded professional learning. This is precisely why getting the focus right is so important. The lack of focus that characterizes many school-based PLCs that they often become expensive activity traps with significant opportunity costs attached to them. We've made a big deal about the focus—about getting to it and about sticking to it until there is evidence to suggest it is time to move on—because the focus should reflect a sense of priority and urgency that is unequalled when it comes to setting the improvement agenda. As it turns out, schools are right in that a shortage of time is experienced. However, it often isn't a case of finding more time (a good thing, since this isn't an option!); rather, it means being more efficient and intentional with the available time. Educators are often surprised when we share the results of some of the various studies that have been done about "where the time goes." They are surprised to learn, for example, that out of over 1,000 hours per year of mandated time by the state, only about 300 of those hours end up as quality academic learning time. The rest of time goes to things like absences, lunch, recess, transitions, and all of the other "activities" that take up class time (Weinstein & Mignano, 2003). We are not saying that things like recess and lunch are unimportant. But less than one-third of the time that we think we have is actually dedicated to student learning. The remaining time isn't lost in big chunks. Instead, time drifts away in minutes—five minutes here, fifteen minutes there. But these small incremental losses add up. That's why it is important to be intentional and efficient in controlling how time is used.

The most successful networks we know privilege within-school focused professional learning time to the extent that all of the schools in the network actually timetable it in, just as they would with, say, a literacy block. That is, they build opportunities for structured collaborative inquiry, like CASL, right into the school day. They do it by separating professional learning from operational issues at staff meetings; if an operational issue can go in a memo, it does. They do it by using the staffroom for operational conversations and then moving professional learning opportunities into classrooms as reminders of what it is that they are there for. And they do it by using grade team and divisional meetings to move the focus forward.

### Time for Reflection

How could you adapt the "critical friend interview" for use in your context?

Brainstorm a list of activities in which you have been engaged that you would call instructional leadership, and give your reasoning for choosing these activities.

Plan some activities (and strategies) to ensure that ideas get uploaded and downloaded between the schools and the network.