

Chapter 1

Recurring Themes of Professional Learning Communities and the Assumptions They Challenge

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Victor Hugo once wrote, “There is one thing stronger than all the armies in the world, and that is an idea whose time has come” (Hugo, 1883–1884). Those committed to improving K–12 education should be heartened by Hugo’s assertion, for there has never been greater consensus regarding the most powerful strategy for sustained, substantive school improvement. Mike Schmoker (2004) has cited “a broad, even remarkable concurrence” among educational researchers and organizational theorists who have concluded that developing the capacity of educators to function as members of professional learning communities is the “best-known means by which we might achieve truly historic, wide-scale improvements in teaching and learning” (p. 432).

Educational organizations of all varieties have also endorsed the concept of professional learning communities (PLCs). The National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future (2003), created for the expressed purpose of developing strategies for recruiting, preparing, and supporting an exemplary teaching force, concludes that “quality teaching requires strong professional learning communities” (p. 17). Five “Core Propositions” guide the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, another organization created to advance the quality of teaching and learning. One of those propositions asserts that teachers must be members of “learning communities .

less to the *attained* curriculum (what students learn) (Marzano, 2003). Schools must also give teachers time to analyze and discuss state and district curriculum documents. More important, teacher conversations must quickly move beyond “What are we expected to teach?” to “How will we know when each student has learned?”

In addition, faculties must stop making excuses for failing to collaborate. Few educators publicly assert that working in isolation is the best strategy for improving schools. Instead, they give reasons why it is impossible for them to work together: “We just can’t find the time.” “Not everyone on the staff has endorsed the idea.” “We need more training in collaboration.” But the number of schools that have created truly collaborative cultures proves that such barriers are not insurmountable.

In the final analysis, building the collaborative culture of a professional learning community is a question of will. A group of staff members who are determined to work together will find a way.

Big Idea #3: A Focus on Results

Professional learning communities judge their effectiveness on the basis of results. Working together to improve student achievement becomes the routine work of everyone in the school. Every teacher team participates in an ongoing process of identifying the current level of student achievement, establishing a goal to improve the current level, working together to achieve that goal, and providing periodic evidence of progress. The focus of team goals shifts. Such goals as “We will adopt the Junior Great Books program” or “We will create three new labs for our science course” give way to “We will increase the percentage of students who meet the state standard in language arts from 83% to 90%” or “We will reduce the failure rate in our course by 50%.”

Schools and teachers typically suffer from the DRIP syndrome—Data Rich/Information Poor. The results-oriented professional learning community not only welcomes data but also turns data into useful and relevant information for staff. Teachers have never suffered from a lack of data. Even a teacher who works in isolation can easily establish the mean, mode, median, standard deviation, and percentage of students who demonstrate proficiency every time he or she administers a test. However, data will become a catalyst for improved teacher practice only if the teacher has a basis of comparison.

Then, as students travel the journey toward success over time, if we engage them in repeated self-assessments with standards of excellence held constant, they begin to see and feel in control of the gains in their own capabilities. We might, for example, have them build growth portfolios—not for accountability or grading, but to reflect continuously on their own improvement. This is another confidence builder. We help them say, “I am not there yet, but I am much closer than I was and, if I keep trying, I am going to get there.”

As they make progress and hopefully arrive at success, we then provide them with the opportunity to tell the story of their journey by presenting their evidence of improvement to classmates, their teachers, or in student-led parent teacher conferences. By doing so, we tap a wellspring of productive emotions that reside within each learner that we simply cannot tap merely by threatening Fs and promising As. If done well, this practice triggers a deep internal shift in the student’s sense of responsibility for her or his own success and a pride in accomplishment that forms an emotional foundation for success.

The Necessary Conditions

Four specific conditions must be satisfied in the classroom to tap the power of assessment FOR learning.

Teachers must understand and be prepared to satisfy the information needs of student decision makers. They must know and understand the specific instructional decisions that students make (and that teachers want them to make correctly) on their journey to academic success. Students and teachers must work in harmony as assessment users to promote maximum student confidence, motivation, and achievement.

Achievement expectations must be clear and appropriate. State and local achievement standards must be articulated and deconstructed into the enabling classroom achievement targets that form the scaffolding upon which students will climb on their journey to meet those standards. Further, teachers must be competent and confident masters of the achievement targets their students are expected to reach. Only then can they share student-friendly versions of those targets from the beginning of the learning and in ways that help students watch themselves grow.

Place lifelong learning in sight. It is one thing for the adults within the school to be learners; it is quite another for them to make their learning visible. Unfortunately, most of the time educators spend learning is out of sight of others. For instance, a teacher takes a course on weekends, attends a professional development conference, or reads the professional literature at home. Teachers such as this may indeed be lifelong learners, but only when they disclose their learning will they fully foster lifelong learning in others.

We are all familiar with the teacher who asks students to write an essay on “what I learned over the summer.” One principal in Oregon decided to devote the entire first issue of the school newsletter to teachers’ (and her own) learning. At the close of summer, she asked each staff member to write a few lines about “what I learned over the summer.”

All of a sudden an entire faculty came out of the closet as learners. Many who may not have learned very much of late suddenly engaged in learning activities. Many reflected on themselves as learners and on what they were learning. Needless to say, when the newsletter appeared, students, their parents, and other teachers devoured it with special interest. This was a most inventive form of staff development and a powerful way for the educators to convey the message that learning is what *important* people do. There is no more telling message for students to hear from adults.

If we are serious about young people becoming lifelong learners, then we first must become visible, lifelong learners ourselves. Wonderful things happen when teachers and administrators transform themselves from “the learned” who transmit their knowledge to “the learners” into leading citizens of a community of learners.

Enlist parental participation. One principal worked with his parent group to help transform the school culture into one of lifelong learning. Parents decided to modify their usual dinner table conversation with their children. Instead of asking, “What did you learn in school today?” they exclaimed, “Let me tell you what I learned at work today!” Parents talked about baking bread in a bakery, driving a bus, working in a biology lab, and so on. Students were fascinated, not only to learn more about their parents’ work life, but also to discover that their parents were learners—and still learning! Not surprisingly, parents reported that their children began to take learning and school much more seriously. So parents, like educators, can use their influential place as role models in young peoples’ lives to much effect.

Chapter 7

No Turning Back: The Ironclad Case for Professional Learning Communities

Mike Schmoker

School success depends, more than anything, on the quality of teaching we provide. Unfortunately, much of the instruction we provide is not what it should be. For one thing, the actual, taught curriculum varies widely from teacher to teacher; many students never even have the opportunity to learn essential knowledge and skills (Berliner, 1984; Marzano, Marzano, & Pickering, 2003). Teachers themselves agree that the actual quality of lessons in many areas is poor or inconsistent; they agree that the most fundamental elements of effective lessons, which most teachers know or have learned, are routinely left out. As a result, one representative study found that “in just one academic year, the top third of teachers produced as much as *six times* the learning growth of the bottom third” (Sparks, 2004, p. 47).

This lack of effectiveness is entirely unnecessary. We have the means to make teaching more effective and consistent than ever before and to create the kinds of schools students deserve. The place to begin is with a set of simple structures and practices that constitute what are now being called “learning communities.” As I will attempt to show, this is not a fad. On the contrary, it may represent the richest, most unprecedented culmination of the best we know about authentic school improvement.