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Introduction

The most promising strategy for sustained, substantive school improvement is developing the ability of school personnel to function as professional learning communities.

That is the message of this book in a nutshell! Everything else provides context and details—but careful examination and constant probing of context and detail are critical elements in becoming a professional learning community.

Each word of the phrase “professional learning community” has been chosen purposefully. A “professional” is someone with expertise in a specialized field, an individual who has not only pursued advanced training to enter the field, but who is also expected to remain current in its evolving knowledge base. The knowledge base of education has expanded dramatically in the past quarter century, both in terms of research and in terms of the articulation of recommended standards for the profession. Although many school personnel are unaware of or are inattentive to emerging research and standards, educators in a *professional* learning community make these findings the basis of their collaborative investigation of how they can better achieve their goals.

“Learning” suggests ongoing action and perpetual curiosity. In Chinese, the term “learning” is represented by two characters: the first means “to study,” and the second means “to practice constantly.” Many schools operate as though their personnel know everything they will ever need to know the day they enter the profession. The school that operates as a professional *learning* community recognizes that its members must engage in the ongoing study and constant practice that characterize an organization committed to continuous improvement.

Much has been written about learning organizations, but we prefer the term “community.” An organization has been defined both as an “administrative and functional structure” (*Webster’s Dictionary*) and as “a systematic arrangement for a definite purpose” (*Oxford Dictionary*). In each case, the emphasis is on structure and efficiency. In contrast, however, the term “community” suggests a group linked by common interests. As Corrine McLaughlin and Gordon Davidson (1994) write:

Community means different things to different people. To some it is a safe haven where survival is assured through mutual cooperation. To others, it is a place of emotional support, with deep sharing and bonding with close friends. Some see community as an intense crucible for personal growth. For others, it is simply a place to pioneer their dreams. (p. 471)

In a professional learning *community*, all of these characteristics are evident. Educators create an environment that fosters mutual cooperation, emotional support, and personal growth as they work together to achieve what they cannot accomplish alone.

This book offers specific, practical recommendations for those who seek to transform their schools into professional learning communities. The recommendations we offer are based on research, evident in best practice, and consistent with standards of quality adopted by various national organizations. References to and brief summaries of standards for curriculum, teacher preparation and development, school leadership, professional development programs, school-parent partnerships, and assessment practices are provided throughout this book.

We have not, however, limited our study to research, practices, and standards in education. We also examine organizational development, change processes, leadership, and successful practices outside of education. We rely heavily on the work of Linda Darling-Hammond, Michael Fullan, Andy Hargreaves, Milbrey McLaughlin, Fred Newmann, Seymour Sarason, Phil Schlechty, Ted Sizer, Dennis Sparks, and others who have focused on steps that can be taken to improve public schools. But we also have sought out the lessons that can be found for educators in the work of Warren Bennis, James Champy, Steven Covey, Terry Deal, Peter Drucker, John Gardner, Rosabeth Moss Kanter, John Kotter, James Kouzes, Burt Nanus, Tom Peters, Barry Posner, Peter Senge, Robert Waterman, and others.

Some educators may object to any suggestion that schools could benefit from the lessons that have been learned in the private sector. These teachers and administrators are often quick to point out that they have no control

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over who their “customers” are or will be; that while the private sector can focus on finding its niche in the market or enhancing the quality of its processes, schools must take all students, regardless of their abilities or levels of support from parents and the community. It is certainly true that children are not products and that educators are not assembly line workers. There are many differences between schools and industry, and those differences should not be minimized.

Nevertheless, one characteristic of a learning organization is a willingness to learn from its external environment, and it is this willingness that most educators have not demonstrated. In his study of school cultures, Seymour Sarason (1996) concludes that school personnel are remarkably uninterested in issues outside of their daily routines: “It is as if they are only interested in what they do and are confronted with in their encapsulated classrooms in their encapsulated schools” (pp. 329–330). Educators have been too quick to dismiss as irrelevant the experience and insights gained by those outside of education. Over a decade of research has established that the most successful people in any area look outside their narrow field for fresh perspectives and new ideas (Kanter, 1997). We believe that school practitioners can and should learn from the organizations outside of education that have struggled with some of the same issues that public schools face today. The best of these organizations have struggled to find answers to the following questions:

- How can we clarify and communicate the purpose, vision, and values of our organization?
- How can we initiate, implement, and sustain a change process?
- How can we provide strong leadership at the same time that we empower those closest to the action?
- How can we shape organizational culture and provide structures that support the culture we seek?
- How can we create collaborative processes that result in both individual and organizational learning?
- How can we foster an environment that is results-oriented yet encourages experimentation?

This book attempts to summarize the important lessons successful organizations have learned as they have struggled to answer these questions. Thus, the book merges educational research with research from areas outside of education.

The book also represents a merger of another kind—a merger of theory and practice. Too often, researchers and practitioners have different interests,

speak different languages, and live in different worlds. This book attempts to bridge the chasm between theory and practice through the collaboration of its authors—the dean of a college of education whose background is in research and the superintendent of a nationally recognized school district. We have reviewed the research, but we have also worked in school districts in 40 states. We have observed and struggled with the perplexities of school improvement. Our experiences have given us insights into the practices that enable a school to function as a professional learning community and have helped us identify the obstacles a school must overcome in the pursuit of that goal.

Chapter Overviews

“Life,” Kierkegaard said, “must be lived forward, but it can be understood only backward.” While this book strives to describe a better future for public schools, it begins with a look backward. Chapter 1 provides a brief overview of educational reform efforts during the second half of the twentieth century with an emphasis on the Excellence Movement of the 1980s and the Restructuring Movement of the 1990s. It describes the reactions of despair and defiance that accompanied the failure of these movements to fulfill their promises of significant improvement in public education. It suggests the reasons for the failure and presents the assertion that the best hope for significant school improvement lies in transforming schools into professional learning communities.

Chapter 2 contrasts the factory model that has characterized the traditional school environment with the model of a professional learning community. It presents examples of the consistent research findings that have concluded that creating professional learning communities represents the best hope for sustained school improvement, and it specifies the characteristics of such communities. The chapter concludes with a scenario that describes one professional learning community at work.

Chapter 3 examines the complexity of the change process and the often confusing and contradictory advice that research on the change process seems to offer. It urges a realistic acceptance of the difficulty and complexity of substantive change and identifies common mistakes that are made when any organization attempts significant reform. It examines the assertion that a sense of urgency is a prerequisite for change and considers the possibilities for creating a sense of urgency in public schools.

Chapter 4 begins the examination of the four building blocks of a professional learning community—mission, vision, values, and goals. Each building block asks a question of the people in the school. When educators work together to answer these questions, they establish the foundation of a learning