

# **Professional Learning Communities: What Are They And Why Are They Important? *Issues... about Change, Vol. 6, No. 1 (1997)***

## **Introduction**

In education circles, the term *learning community* has become commonplace. It is being used to mean any number of things, such as extending classroom practice into the community; bringing community personnel into the school to enhance the curriculum and learning tasks for students; or engaging students, teachers, and administrators simultaneously in learning - to suggest just a few.

This paper focuses on what Astuto and colleagues (1993) label *the professional community of learners*, in which the teachers in a school and its administrators continuously seek and share learning and then act on what they learn. The goal of their actions is to enhance their effectiveness as professionals so that students benefit. This arrangement has also been termed *communities of continuous inquiry and improvement*.

As an organizational arrangement, the professional learning community is seen as a powerful staff development approach and a potent strategy for school change and improvement. Thus, persons at all levels of the educational system concerned about school improvement - state department personnel, intermediate service agency staff, district and campus administrators, teacher leaders, key parents and local school community members - should find this paper of interest.

This paper represents an abbreviation of Hord's review of the literature (1997), which explored the concept and operationalization of professional learning communities and their outcomes for staff and students.

## **Professional Learning Communities: What Are They And Why Are They Important?**

### **The Beginnings of Professional Learning Community**

During the eighties, Rosenholtz (1989) brought teachers' workplace factors into the discussion of teaching quality, maintaining that teachers who felt supported in their own ongoing learning and classroom practice were more committed and effective than those who did not receive such confirmation. Support by means of teacher networks, cooperation among colleagues, and expanded professional roles increased teacher efficacy in meeting students' needs. Further, Rosenholtz found that teachers with a high sense of their own efficacy were more likely to adopt new classroom behaviors and also more likely to stay in the profession.

McLaughlin and Talbert (1993) confirmed Rosenholtz's findings, suggesting that when teachers had opportunities for collaborative inquiry and the learning related to it, they were able to develop and share a body of wisdom gleaned from their experience. Adding to the discussion, Darling-Hammond (1996) cited shared decision making as a factor in curriculum reform and the transformation of teaching roles in some schools. In such schools, structured time is provided for teachers to work together in planning instruction, observing each other's classrooms, and sharing feedback. These and other attributes characterize professional learning communities.

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### **Attributes of Professional Learning Communities**

The literature on professional learning communities repeatedly gives attention to five attributes of such organizational arrangements:

- supportive and shared leadership,
- collective creativity,
- shared values and vision,
- supportive conditions, and
- shared personal practice.

Each of these is discussed briefly in this paper.

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## Supportive and Shared Leadership

The school change and educational leadership literatures clearly recognize the role and influence of the campus administrator (principal, and sometimes assistant principal) on whether change will occur in the school. It seems clear that transforming a school organization into a learning community can be done only with the sanction of the leaders and the active nurturing of the entire staff's development as a community. Thus, a look at the principal of a school whose staff is a professional learning community seems a good starting point for describing what these learning communities look like and how the principal "accepts a collegial relationship with teachers" (D. Rainey, personal communication, March 13, 1997) to share leadership, power, and decision making.

Lucianne Carmichael, the first resident principal of the Harvard University Principal Center and a principal who nurtured a professional community of learners in her own school, discusses the position of authority and power typically held by principals, in which the staff views them as all-wise and all-competent (1982). Principals have internalized this "omnicompetence," Carmichael asserts. Others in the school reinforce it, making it difficult for principals to admit that they themselves can benefit from professional development opportunities, or to recognize the dynamic potential of staff contributions to decision making. Furthermore, when the principal's position is so thoroughly dominant, it is difficult for staff to propose divergent views or ideas about the school's effectiveness.

Carmichael proposes that the notion of principals' omnicompetence be "ditched" in favor of their participation in their own professional development. Kleine-Kracht (1993) concurs and suggests that administrators, along with teachers, must be learners too, "questioning, investigating, and seeking solutions" (p. 393) for school improvement. The traditional pattern that "teachers teach, students learn, and administrators manage is completely altered . . . [There is] no longer a hierarchy of who knows more than someone else, but rather the need for everyone to contribute" (p. 393).

This new relationship forged between administrators and teachers

leads to shared and collegial leadership in the school, where all grow professionally and learn to view themselves (to use an athletic metaphor) as "all playing on the same team and working toward the same goal: a better school" (Hoerr, 1996, p. 381).

Louis and Kruse (1995) identify the supportive leadership of principals as one of the necessary human resources for restructuring staff into school-based professional communities. The authors refer to these principals as "post-heroic leaders who do not view themselves as the architects of school effectiveness" (p. 234). Prestine (1993) also defines characteristics of principals in schools that undertake school restructuring: a willingness to share authority, the capacity to facilitate the work of staff, and the ability to participate without dominating.

Sergiovanni explains that "the sources of authority for leadership are embedded in shared ideas" (1994b, p. 214), not in the power of position. Snyder, Acker-Hocevar, and Snyder (1996) assert that it is also important that the principal believe that teachers have the capacity to respond to the needs of students, that this belief "provides moral strength for principals to meet difficult political and educational challenges along the way" (p. 19). Senge (quoted by O'Neil, 1995) adds that the principal's job is to create an environment in which the staff can learn continuously; "[t]hen in turn, . . . the job of the superintendent is to find principals and support [such] principals" (p. 21) who create this environment.

An additional dimension, then, is a chief executive of the school district who supports and encourages continuous learning of its professionals. This observation suggests that no longer can leaders be thought of as top-down agents of change or seen as the visionaries of the corporation; instead leaders must be regarded as democratic teachers.

## **Collective Creativity**

In 1990, Peter Senge's book *The Fifth Discipline* arrived in bookstores and began popping up in the boardrooms of corporate America. Over the next year or so, the book and its description of *learning organizations*, which might serve to increase organizational capacity and creativity, moved into the educational environment. The idea of a 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) caught the attention of educators who were struggling to plan and implement reform in the nation's schools. As Senge's paradigm shift was explored by educators and shared in educational journals, the label became *learning communities*.

In schools, the learning community is demonstrated by people from multiple constituencies, at all levels, collaboratively and continually working together (Louis & Kruse, 1995). Such collaborative work is grounded in what Newmann (reported by Brandt, 1995) and Louis and Kruse label reflective dialogue, in which staff conduct conversations about students and teaching and learning, identifying related issues and problems. Griffin (cited by Sergiovanni, 1994a, p. 154) refers to these activities as *inquiry*, and

believes that as principals and teachers inquire together they create community. Inquiry helps them to overcome chasms caused by various specializations of grade level and subject matter. Inquiry forces debate among teachers about what is important. Inquiry promotes understanding and appreciation for the work of others. . . . And inquiry helps principals and teachers create the ties that bond them together as a special group and that bind them to a shared set of ideas. Inquiry, in other words, helps principals and teachers become a community of learners.

Participants in such conversations learn to apply new ideas and information to problem solving and therefore are able to create new conditions for students. Key tools in this process are shared values and vision; supportive physical, temporal, and social conditions; and a shared personal practice. We will look at each of these in turn.

### **Shared Values and Vision**

"Vision is a trite term these days, and at various times it refers to mission, purpose, goals, objectives, or a sheet of paper posted near the principal's office" (Isaacson & Bamberg, 1992, p. 42). Sharing vision is not just agreeing with a good idea; it is a particular mental

image of what is important to an individual and to an organization. Staff are encouraged not only to be involved in the process of developing a shared vision but to use that vision as a guidepost in making decisions about teaching and learning in the school (ibid.).

A core characteristic of the vision is an undeviating focus on student learning, maintains Louis and Kruse (1995), in which each student's potential achievement is carefully considered. These shared values and vision lead to binding norms of behavior that the staff supports.

In such a community, the individual staff member is responsible for his/her actions, but the common good is placed on a par with personal ambition. The relationships between individuals are described as caring. Such caring is supported by open communication, made possible by trust (Fawcett, 1996).

### **Supportive Conditions**

Several kinds of factors determine *when*, *where*, and *how* the staff can regularly come together as a unit to do the learning, decision making, problem solving, and creative work that characterize a professional learning community. In order for learning communities to function productively, the physical or structural conditions and the human qualities and capacities of the people involved must be optimal (Boyd, 1992; Louis & Kruse, 1995).

**Physical conditions.** Louis and Kruse identify the following physical factors that support learning communities: time to meet and talk, small school size and physical proximity of the staff to one another, interdependent teaching roles, well-developed communication structures, school autonomy, and teacher empowerment. An additional factor is the staff's input in selecting teachers and administrators for the school, and even encouraging staff who are not in tune with the program to find work elsewhere.

Boyd presents a similar list of physical factors that result in an environment conducive to school change and improvement: the availability of resources; schedules and structures that reduce isolation; policies that encourage greater autonomy, foster collaboration, enhance effective communication, and provide for staff

development. Time is clearly a resource: "Time, or more properly lack of it, is one of the most difficult problems faced by schools and districts." (Watts & Castle, 1993, p. 306). Time is a significant issue for faculties who wish to work together collegially, and it has been cited as both a barrier (when it is not available) and a supportive factor (when it is available) by staffs engaging in school improvement.

**People capacities.** One of the first characteristics cited by Louis and Kruse (1995) of individuals in a productive learning community is a willingness to accept feedback and to work toward improvement. In addition, the following qualities are needed: respect and trust among colleagues at the school and district level, possession of an appropriate cognitive and skill base that enables effective teaching and learning, supportive leadership from administrators and others in key roles, and relatively intensive socialization processes.

Note the strong parallel with the people or human factors identified by Boyd (1992): positive teacher attitudes toward schooling, students, and change; students' heightened interest and engagement with learning (which could be construed as both an outcome and an input, it seems); norms of continuous critical inquiry and continuous improvement; a widely shared vision or sense of purpose; a norm of involvement in decision making; collegial relationships among teachers; positive, caring student-teacher-administrator relationships; a sense of community in the school; and two factors beyond the school staff - supportive community attitudes and parents and community members as partners and allies.

Boyd (1992) points out that the physical and people factors are highly interactive, many of them influencing the others. Boyd and Hord (1994) clustered the factors into four overarching functions that help build a context conducive to change and improvement: reducing staff isolation, increasing staff capacity, providing a caring and productive environment, and improving the quality of the school's programs for students.

### **Shared Personal Practice**

Review of a teacher's behavior by colleagues is the norm in the professional learning community (Louis & Kruse, 1995). This practice

is not evaluative but is part of the "peers helping peers" process. Such review is conducted regularly by teachers, who visit each other's classrooms to observe, script notes, and discuss their observations with the visited peer. The process is based on the desire for individual and community improvement and is enabled by the mutual respect and trustworthiness of staff members.

Wignall (1992) describes a high school in which teachers share their practice and enjoy a high level of collaboration in their daily work life. Mutual respect and understanding are the fundamental requirements for this kind of workplace culture. Teachers find help, support, and trust as a result of developing warm relationships with each other. "Teachers tolerate (even encourage) debate, discussion and disagreement. They are comfortable sharing both their successes and their failures. They praise and recognize one another's triumphs, and offer empathy and support for each other's troubles" (p. 18). One of the conditions that supports such a culture is the involvement of the teachers in interviewing, selecting, and hiring new teachers. They feel a commitment to their selections and to ensuring the effectiveness of the entire staff.

One goal of reform is to provide appropriate learning environments for students. Teachers, too, need "an environment that values and supports hard work, the acceptance of challenging tasks, risk taking, and the promotion of growth" (Midgley & Wood, 1993, p. 252). Sharing their personal practice contributes to creating such a setting.

## **Summary of Attributes**

**Reports in the literature are quite clear about what successful professional learning communities look like and act like. The requirements necessary for such organizational arrangements include:**

- the collegial and facilitative participation of the principal, who shares leadership - and thus, power and authority - through inviting staff input in decision making**
- a shared vision that is developed from staff's unswerving commitment to students' learning and that is consistently articulated and referenced for the staff's work**

**collective learning among staff and application of that learning to solutions that address students' needs**  
**the visitation and review of each teacher's classroom behavior by peers as a feedback and assistance activity to support individual and community improvement and physical conditions and human capacities that support such an operation**

### **Outcomes of Professional Learning Communities for Staff and Students**

What difference does it make if staff are communally organized? What results, if any, might be gained from this kind of arrangement? An abbreviated report of staff and student outcomes in schools where staff are engaged together in professional learning communities follows. This report comes from the summary of results included in the literature review noted above (Hord, 1997, p. 27).

For staff, the following results have been observed:

- reduction of isolation of teachers
- increased commitment to the mission and goals of the school and increased vigor in working to strengthen the mission
- shared responsibility for the total development of students and collective responsibility for students' success
- powerful learning that defines good teaching and classroom practice and that creates new knowledge and beliefs about teaching and learners
- increased meaning and understanding of the content that teachers teach and the roles they play in helping all students achieve expectations
- higher likelihood that teachers will be well informed, professionally renewed, and inspired to inspire students
- more satisfaction, higher morale, and lower rates of absenteeism
- significant advances in adapting teaching to the students, accomplished more quickly than in traditional schools

commitment to making significant and lasting changes and higher likelihood of undertaking fundamental systemic change (p. 27).

For students, the results include:

decreased dropout rate and fewer classes "skipped"

lower rates of absenteeism

increased learning that is distributed more equitably in the smaller high schools

greater academic gains in math, science, history, and reading than in traditional schools and

smaller achievement gaps between students from different backgrounds (p. 28).

For more information about these important professional learning community outcomes, please refer to the literature review (Hord, 1997).

## **In Conclusion**

If strong results such as the above are linked to teachers and administrators working in professional learning communities, how might the frequency of such communities in schools be increased? A paradigm shift is needed both by the public and by teachers themselves, about what the role of teacher entails. Many in the public and in the profession believe that the only legitimate use of teachers' time is standing in front of the class, working directly with students. In studies comparing how teachers around the globe spend their time, it is clear that in countries such as Japan, teachers teach fewer classes and use a greater portion of their time to plan, confer with colleagues, work with students individually, visit other classrooms, and engage in other professional development activities (Darling-Hammond, 1994, 1996). Bringing about changes in perspective that will enable the public and the profession to understand and value teachers' professional development will require focused and concerted effort. As Lucianne Carmichael has said, "Teachers are the first learners." Through their participation in a professional learning community, teachers become more effective, and student outcomes increase - a goal upon which we can all agree.

## **Professional Learning Communities: What**

## Are They And Why Are They Important?

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