

# DEFINING A PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITY

## A LITERATURE REVIEW

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### SUMMARY

*Summarizing a nonexhaustive review of the literature, the following definition is suggested for a*

*professional learning community:*

*A professional learning community is made up of team members who regularly collaborate toward continued improvement in meeting learner needs through a shared curricular-focused vision. Facilitating this effort are:*

- *supportive leadership and structural conditions,*
- *collective challenging, questioning, and reflecting on team-designed lessons and instructional practices/experiences, and*
- *team decisions on essential learning outcomes and intervention/enrichment activities based on results of common formative student assessments.*

### BACKGROUND

Today's educators, including those in the Wake County Public School System (WCPSS), are on a compelling quest to find ways to hold higher expectations for students, improve instructional practices, and increase student learning and achievement outcomes. Much is being made known of the value of professional learning communities (PLCs) in schools. The school system's superintendent, Dr. Del Burns, has established four strategic directives, one of which focuses on teaching and learning. For this initiative, a key emphasis has been placed on development and implementation of PLCs in schools. The first step in achieving this goal is to gain a clear understanding of the characteristics, elements, and attributes of PLCs. Therefore, a systemwide PLC definition is being established. This document provides a summary of how professional literature defines PLCs, which will, in turn, help the district in forming a definition of the term.

### MAJOR THEMES

#### **Shared Mission, Vision, Values, and Goals**

An effective PLC strongly adheres to a vision of student learning, a vision that acts as a consistently articulated and referenced guidepost in making decisions about teaching and learning (Hord, 1997). "The mission or purpose of a PLC team is to ensure that all students learn through the collaborative, interdependent practice of teachers" (Peel, J. personal communication, October 20, 2006).

- DuFour & Eaker (1998) termed this element

as a synergy of efforts in which staff members are committed to principles each believes in and works toward implementing.

- Based on a review of the curriculum, essential learning outcomes are agreed upon for all students, assuring the teaching of the curriculum in a way that is workable and well-planned (Langston, 2006).

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- Staff members hold a shared mission, vision, values, and goals; a transparency exists concerning what students must know and be able to do (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2006).

#### **Commitment to Continuous Improvement**

Teams are engaged in an ongoing cycle of continuous improvement (DuFour, 2003), committed to and continuously reaching toward the organization's ideal mission and vision (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). Such a commitment is placed:

- within a context in which the collective synergy, imagination, spirit, inspiration, and continuous learning of teachers lean toward improving teaching skills (Calderon, as cited in Huffman, Hipp, Pankake, & Moller, 2001, p. 452), and
- as one where people constantly expand their competence to produce their desired outcomes (Senge, as cited in Bierema, 1999, p. 51).

#### **Collaborative Culture**

The literature stresses that evidence must exist of an embedded structural and collaborative culture among educators (Shellard, 2002) with a focus on learning for all. Such a culture involves:

- a systematic, goal-directed learning process in which people work together in grade level, vertical, special topic, or subject matter teams to analyze and impact professional practice in order to improve individual and collective results for students (Peel, J. personal communication, October 20, 2006);
- shared responsibility for student learning (Haar, 2003) through regular teacher team meetings for learning, investigation, development, and implementation of research-based teacher practices (SERVE, n.d.);
- working together toward common purpose, all the while learning together and continually improving (DuFour & Eaker, 1998); and
- self-management and organization of teacher teams around the same courses and/or group of students

taught (Langston, 2006).

### **Collective Inquiry**

Reflective dialogue and collective inquiry into best practices were found to be another major attribute of professional learning communities. This component is evident when team members:

- dialogue on curriculum, common formative assessments, instruction, and needed jobembedded professional development (Peel, J. personal communication, October 20, 2006) on lesson study and effective instructional strategies (Langston, 2006),
- challenge and question each other's practice in spirited but optimistic ways (Sparks, 2004),
- collectively problem solve and learn through applying new ideas and information that address student needs (Hord, 1997),
- analyze current practices in relation to student results, experiment with new practices, and assess the relationship between practice and the effects of practice (Mitchell & Sackney, as cited in Huffman, Hipp, Pankake, & Moller, 2001, p. 1), and
- work together to question, search, analyze, develop, test, and evaluate new skills, strategies, awareness, attitudes, and beliefs that promote student learning (DuFour & Eaker, 1998).

### **Supportive and Shared Leadership**

A strong professional learning community has a leader who facilitates the learning of all staff members (Pedler, Burgoyne, Boydell, as cited in Bierema, 1999, p. 51). Others also mention this attribute as a priority characteristic.

- The school leader is also a learner attending professional staff development and is friendly and facilitative in sharing leadership, power, and authority through giving staff decisionmaking input (Hord, 1997).
- Leadership is shared among both formal and informal leaders (Phillips, 2003).
- Trust, respect, and an openness to improvement exist (Kruse, Louis, & Bryk, 1994).
- Opportunities are present for staff members to influence the school's activities and policies (King & Newmann, 2000).

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### **Supportive Conditions**

The literature states that consideration of the circumstances and environment of the school context is

imperative (Phillips, 2003). A school-wide plan that provides extra time and support for (a) student mastery and (b) common planning time for teachers (Langston, 2006) may call for structural and cultural changes.

- Kruse, Louis, & Bryk (as cited in Roberts & Pruitt, 2003, p. 8) advocate the necessity of time for teams to meet and talk, physical proximity, and communication structures.
- Hord (1997) stipulates that required supportive conditions, especially time, include (a) reduced staff isolation, (b) increased staff capacity, (c) provision of a caring, productive environment, and (d) improved quality of student programs.
- Students are guaranteed to receive additional time and support for learning through the development and implementation of systematic interventions (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2006).
- Peel (personal communication, October 20, 2006), purports the necessity of having mechanisms in place for warehousing the knowledge that has been created (lessons learned) so it can be continuously used and improved.

### **Results Orientation**

A staff working as a professional learning community subjects initiatives, strategies, and practices to assessment (DuFour & Eaker, 1998).

- The effectiveness of the teaching is assessed on the basis of student results (DuFour, 2003); results show whether students have or have not learned the essential curriculum (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2006).
- Results of common formative assessments are shared among team members (Langston, 2006).
- Ongoing common formative assessments are used and scored in consistent ways to facilitate improvement. Results reveal areas for student intervention and enrichment activities and areas where future instructional experiences can be improved (Peel, J. personal communication, October 20, 2006).

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