




In the Real World: Professional Learning Communities—It’s Not About “My Class”

One principal describes the importance of collective responsibility in student learning.

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by Christopher Peal

Not long ago, phrases such as “my classroom,” “my school,” “my students,” and “my business” prevailed within educational institutions. From classroom teachers to school principals, issues of personal turf and ownership reigned commonplace in practice and in conversations, reflecting the adage: Once the bell rings, classroom doors close and each person does his or her own thing.

The onset of professional learning community (PLC) philosophies brought about a subtle change among educators, with their language shifting toward a greater sense of collective ownership. As a result, principals have begun to talk about “our school” and teachers have started to refer to “our curriculum” and “our students.” In a field where personal domain has reigned, this sense of shared responsibility is a welcomed shift, with students reaping the rewards.

A number of factors most likely contributed to educators’ brand of closed-door professionalism. From the moment most principals and teachers graduated from school, they were pointed toward their office or classroom and told to “go forth and do a good job.” Minimal time within the school day was allowed for collaboration with others, and meeting times beyond the school day were sporadic and more socially oriented. Equally influential was the notion that soliciting help was an obvious sign of inadequacy and weakness.

This culture persisted for the majority of the 20th century, with the educational system meeting the needs of most students, evidenced by the fact that students could exit the system at any given point and still productively secure employment and a good lifestyle. Somewhere along the line—perhaps due to state-mandated testing and the national and state grade-level content requirements—the condition of education changed. Currently, educating children is more complex and challenging.

What is encouraging is that need often is the catalyst for change. For educators, this development transformed the solitary work ethic in favor of PLCs. At the heart of PLCs is the need to ply our trade in open, collaborative, nondefensive, and student-focused ways. There must be an essential willingness to let go of fear and power issues and to embrace the idea that putting our heads together attains greater results than thinking all by ourselves.

Most state-mandated academic programs are wide-ranging; thus, the ability of even the most talented of educators to fully grasp their entirety is dim. When district or building teachers and administrators collaboratively share ideas and success stories around a curriculum that is commonly agreed upon, it becomes easier to understand the complexities of a given course or content area. Through assessment and the sharing of student-assessment results, teams can focus on what worked for whom and what did not.

Of note is the fact that PLCs are not about niceties and enhanced mission statements. The work remains difficult and personalities brought to the table still exist. However, the focus is not on individual educators or on who does what, but rather on how well students are learning.

PLCs take time and sustained effort. Although there are innumerable ways to begin or enhance them, some distinguishing characteristics include:

- Empowering grade-level teams to make decisions that affect their classes;
- Providing time for PLC teams to meet;

- Keeping discussions focused on student achievement;
- Being open and listening to others' ideas;
- Assuring common curricular standards for all students;
- Watching established teams practice PLC strategies during meetings; and
- Admitting to not knowing all of the answers.

Working in a PLC inherently assumes a changed perspective about schooling and about working collaboratively with others toward a specified end. After all, shouldn't we be focused on ensuring a high level of education for all students instead of just those in "my class" ?

From the field,

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