



The Elements of a Professional Learning Community

Professional learning communities will change how you and your staff view learning.

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by Lillie G. Jessie

The research is replete with cries for principals to become instructional leaders in their buildings. Many principals, originally hired as administrative leaders, are now faced with the increased accountability through No Child Left Behind and must chart a new course. The new course shifts the focus to meeting mandated instructional benchmarks established by the local, state, and national education agencies. My first introduction to the research on instructional leadership was through Ron Edmonds' work on effective schools. Then I saw the video *Professional Learning Communities at Work: Best Practices for Enhancing Student Achievement* by Richard DuFour and Robert Eaker, and I remember saying, "This is it! This is the most common-sense, cost-effective process for achieving student achievement that I had seen in my more than 30 years in this business."

I agree with the many noted educators and researchers who have stated that forming a professional learning community (PLC) is one of the most powerful ways to improve student performance. As evidence, Elizabeth Vaughan Elementary, a Title I school that was elevated from being a nonaccredited school to being a School of Excellence, was nationally recognized for closing the achievement gap largely because of its decision to become a PLC.

What makes a true PLC is the way that educators respond to the needs of their particular school. An idea embraced by teachers and parents at one school may not be one that will be embraced by the members of another staff. The PLC concept is often misused or simplified to describe a committee or any weekly data meeting; but a PLC can more accurately be understood as a process. DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, and Many (2006) describe three important elements of a successful PLC: focus on learning, collaborative culture, and results-oriented thinking.

Focus on Learning

A PLC focuses on learning instead of on teaching, drastically changing the role of the principal. Principals continue to observe instruction, discussing issues such as pacing, instructional data, support needed, and student efficacy. But the focus is on the instructional results instead of on the instruction itself. Using a block schedule allows me the opportunity to meet with grade-level teams once a week to discuss the results of their instruction and its effect on student learning. Even if weekly observations are not possible, principals must find a way to prioritize the systematic discussion of learning. Year-end test results will never be a surprise if principals spend less time reviewing what teachers plan to do and more time on what they actually do.

Professional learning is embedded in the culture of a PLC as staff members learn from one another and attend workshops and other outside professional development offerings, operating on the premise that no one of them individually is smarter than all of them collectively.

A Collaborative Culture

DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, and Many (2006) write about the difference between a PLC's collaborative culture and a team. The difference is the interdependence that exists within a PLC. A PLC meeting is more than teachers getting together to share data—it is a group of individuals who meet to achieve common goals for their grade level and for the school. Instead of sharing data, they respond to data, which requires a sense of mutual accountability and changing classroom practices.

For example, one year my school had a large number of teachers take temporary leave for

various reasons. Because teachers had enough data about the classes and a sense of collectivity, they were able to take over the classrooms during the teachers' absence, refusing to leave the classes to substitutes. These teachers volunteered to have the students placed in their classroom instead saying, "We can't have a stranger teaching 'our' kids." This would not have happened in a traditional school because teachers would not have the necessary data or the level of trust needed.

Building and maintaining a collaborative culture is one of the most difficult aspects of a PLC. There are events that one cannot always anticipate, such as illnesses, sudden family transfers, personnel issues, and divorces, that can become toxic to the collaborative process. The schoolwide collaboration that comes with a PLC is a thing of beauty, often resulting in teachers jumping in to champion the school's mission.

Results-Oriented Thinking

In a PLC the focus is not on what one intends to do but, rather, the results of actions. There must be an ongoing assessment of programs and initiatives in the school, and common formative assessments are vital. Teachers in my school meet with me and share status reports of their common assessments on a weekly basis. The difference between a PLC and a traditional school is in the response to data. During our sharing sessions, the focus is not necessarily on the teacher whose performance indicators are low but on creating an atmosphere where the success of others can be shared and replicated. We celebrate data results in the form of luncheons and brag sessions that, to my surprise, bring out the best in teachers. Teachers are like any other professional; they love sharing their successes.

DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, and Many (2006) remind us of the need for frequent recognition. Your role in a PLC is to find people's talents, aspirations, and skills, and showcase them. The goal is to "leave a legacy of leaders," not to create a legacy for yourself.

Principals in PLC schools have the courage to deal with what the DuFours and Eaker (2006) refer to as the "current reality" of the data. I call it courage because my experience tells me that it is not a matter of knowing what is going wrong, but often more at stake is the ability to confront those not carrying their part of the load. It is easy to be more concerned about personal popularity than with student performance, but responding to student data over a period of time has a way of eliminating that need, reminding educators of their true purpose.

References

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Lillie G. Jessie is principal of Elizabeth Vaughan Elementary in Woodbridge, Virginia. Her e-mail address is jessiel@pwcs.edu.

On the Same Page

Here are suggested questions that principals and teachers can use to spark discussion about how to apply the points made in this article to their particular schools.

1. What are the three elements common in PLCs?
2. How can our faculty focus more on student learning?
3. What professional development topics does our faculty need more of?

4. In what ways does our faculty model a collaborative culture? In what ways can we improve collaboration?

5. What role should assessments play in improving the teaching and learning that goes on in our school?