What Matters Most: Teaching for America’s Future by the National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future tells us that teacher quality is the single most important factor in determining student achievement, so principals are wise to put their efforts into improving teaching in their schools. However, principals do not need to take on that burden themselves, but rather they can share the work of improving instruction with every teacher in the school. Principals can do so by establishing professional learning communities (PLCs) in which teachers and administrators work toward the common goal of improving student achievement.

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In these communities, the most effective teachers not only get to share best practices with their colleagues, but they also have an opportunity to learn about other effective techniques to continue to improve their own teaching. Likewise, new teachers can learn from veteran teachers’ wisdom of practice as well as contribute their own fresh perspectives. Veteran teachers and new teachers each have different skills and knowledge to bring to the table and share. PLCs improve the practice of all teachers in the school and ensure that students are being prepared to function in a 21st century economy.

Why Professional Learning Communities?

Every industry has moved to a culture of teaming and collaboration to develop a sustainable and effective work force, using structures such as health care teams, legal teams, fire and rescue teams, and corporate teams. But teaching remains a stand-alone job. A majority of public schools today are designed as teaching organizations, where the goal is to maximize teaching efficiency with monolithic curriculum and instruction. In these circumstances, roughly one-third of students thrive, one-third survive, and one-third dropout—not coincidentally, the same percentages also hold true for teachers operating under this scenario. This model was acceptable in the industrial era when students prepared for a job they would do for the next 30 years. But we have moved from an industrial age into a learning age in which the work force must be flexible and collaborative to adapt to an ever-changing economy. In short: Now, learning is the job.

To prepare students to participate in the 21st century work force, schools must become learning organizations. In learning organizations, the goal is to maximize learning effectiveness with customized learning for every community member: students, teachers, and administrators. When a culture of learning is established in a school, teachers not only expect students to learn in a collaborative environment but also expect to model that collaborative learning for their students. So where does the principal fit into this equation? According to the New Teacher Center, strong principals “see themselves as Chief Promoter of Learning as well as Chief Learner.” The principal is a key member of the school’s learning team.

Research demonstrates the positive effects teaming has on the morale, effectiveness, and retention of teachers. In Successful School Restructuring, Fred Newmann and Gary Wehlage report that “A shared sense of intellectual

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purpose and a sense of collective responsibility for student learning were associated with a narrowing of achievement gaps in math and science among low- and middle-income students.” However, the more powerful change comes in teachers’ own views of their ability to teach and students’ abilities to learn. When teachers work together with the common goal of raising achievement in all students, they can change long-held attitudes about their own role as a teacher. A study out of LessonLab Research Institute reveals that “Teachers in learning communities learn to draw causal connections between their work and student learning. They move from the mindset of ‘I planned and taught the lesson, but they didn’t get it’ to ‘you haven’t taught until they’ve learned.’” Learning communities also lessen the burden on a school when teachers leave because they have had a chance to share their wisdom of practice with their colleagues so that knowledge does not walk out the door with them.

Key Elements
With all of that said, right now it seems that “professional learning community” has become a catchphrase thrown around in education. Ask 10 people what a PLC looks like and you are likely to get 10 different answers. While it isn’t important to have the exact definition or model agreed upon, because each community must meet the needs of its members and reflect its school culture, there are several key components to a community that effectively improves teaching practices and student achievement:

_Establish a clearly identified problem around which the learning team has come together._ If there is no focal point and goal for a learning community, meetings can easily go off course and become about such topics as administrative duties and behavioral problems. The ideal goal should be improvement in student achievement, but each community can decide the area/type of achievement it is looking for, what path it will take, and what success looks like.

_Meetings must focus on the problem._ The learning that takes place in team meetings must be both focused and intentional, not simply an unintended result of collaborative time. The agenda of each meeting should focus on the agreed-upon goal of the community. Meetings should involve strategies for addressing the problem in members’ classrooms, including discussion, implementation, and reflection/feedback loops.

_Dedicate time to meet consistently._

**WEB RESOURCES**

The National Commission on Teaching & America’s Future has two useful sites. On the first, [www.learningteams.org](http://www.learningteams.org), read what other states, districts, and schools are doing to enhance the teaching profession through learning teams. And at [www.nctaf.org/videos.htm](http://www.nctaf.org/videos.htm), view successful PLCs in action by watching videos of four schools that are implementing PLCs in innovative and effective ways.

Pearson Learning Teams is dedicated to helping districts establish learning teams that improve student learning. Read about Pearson’s implementation model and link to LessonLab’s research on PLCs. [www.pearsonlt.com](http://www.pearsonlt.com)

The National Staff Development Council believes in PLCs as a part of job-embedded professional development and a key to continuous instructional improvement. Read about its Learning Communities, Collaboration Skills, and Leadership standards. [www.nsdc.org](http://www.nsdc.org)
PLC time must be consistent and sacrosanct. If that time is taken over for other reasons, even occasionally, it affects the timing of feedback on community activities and leads to a less effective process.

*Share and appropriately differentiate responsibility as well as mutual accountability.* Each member of the community has a different area of expertise and experience level that can be leveraged. By assigning appropriate roles and responsibilities, the entire community can capitalize on the strengths of each individual member.

*Establish a climate of trust where teachers can be open about their concerns and weaknesses.* Most of the discussion that happens in a PLC is focused on how well students are learning, which correlates to how well teachers are teaching. If there is not a climate of trust, where negative recriminations are taken off the table, an open sharing of problems and solutions will be stifled.

“The learning that takes place in team meetings must be both focused and intentional.”

The Principal's Role
A major determining factor in whether a school creates a successful or unsuccessful PLC is the active support of the principal. Without support from the building leader, learning teams struggle. The first and most critical responsibility that falls on the principal is to create and nurture a culture of collaboration in your school community. Unfortunately, this is also the most difficult to accomplish and often takes time and patience. Because teachers are not prepared to teach in a collaborative environment, and veteran teachers have not often been given the opportunity to do so during their time as teachers, the idea of collaborating with other teachers can be daunting. If they are not focused on student achievement, the meetings can feel like another responsibility tacked on to an already overflowing workload.

A principal who establishes a climate where collaboration is both encouraged and expected has the best chance of success. Ease your teachers into their communities; show them that there are not negative repercussions to admitting they are not experts in every area. This often means participating in meetings and admitting your own areas of weakness. Be willing to be as open as you expect your teachers to be.
Administratively, the principal has the power of establishing the schedule to enable learning communities to meet. This takes some juggling, but will pay off as teachers have a committed time when they are expected to convene. When asked where and how they were able to make time for teams to meet, principals often say, “We just did it.” These principals are truly dedicated to learning communities and use all available resources to make success possible. It also provides you with the ability to attend meetings because they are consistently held during the committed time. Particularly in the early days of a community, you can be there to help jump-start their activities and ensure that meetings are focused on student achievement. You help to usher your teachers from behavioral accountability, showing up to meetings because they have to, to intellectual accountability where they understand the benefits of the collaboration on their practice and in their students’ learning. There is a careful balance that must take place during this time to be supportive of the community, but not overbearing or prescriptive.

As roles are established and the wheels begin moving, control of the group is left in the hands of its members, and your role shifts to responding to each team’s needs. You can be a liaison to the school district for what your teams need, such as specific professional development and schedule adjustments/flexibility to allow for collaboration. Even the most experienced content-based team hits a limit in what they know about their area, so you can bring in outside experts to deepen their understanding and continue their growth. Respond as teams describe obstacles to their success. By remaining an active supporter of your learning communities, you can help them continue to improve their practice over the long haul.

Over time, with established communities and a climate of collaboration entrenched in your school, you can recruit new teachers who are open to the school culture. Ultimately, you will have a wonderful selling point that many schools do not. New teachers in your school will not be alone; they will have a support team ready to welcome them.

“A principal who establishes a climate where collaboration is both encouraged and expected has the best chance of success.”

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–Kris Wells, Keshena Primary School, Keshena, WI.

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