Building School-Based Teacher Learning Communities: Professional Strategies to Improve Student Achievement

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Building School-Based Teacher Learning Communities: Professional Strategies to Improve Student Achievement, by Milbrey W. McLaughlin and Joan E. Talbert, outlines the resources and supports necessary to build and sustain a long-term, school-based teacher professional community. In the author’s view, teachers need a professional culture that requires their active involvement in a school-based learning community. They write, “Even the highest-quality professional development resources will falter unless teachers can work together on new ideas and reflect on practices and their implications for students’ learning.”

Their discussion sees teacher learning communities as serving several functions for schools; they help to:

**Build and manage knowledge to improve practice.** Two types of knowledge inform practice: knowledge of practice (information about student performance) and knowledge for practice (information about best practice). As teachers collaboratively inquire into students’ work and explore connections between practices and outcomes, they create knowledge of practice. As teachers gain formal knowledge and theory to use to improve their practice, knowledge for practice is essential.

**Create shared language, vision, and standards for practice.** Such shared elements promote professional norms for ongoing learning and critical reflection, and teachers have clear, shared understandings of one another’s classroom work. However, teachers still have autonomy—the ability to act on their professional best judgment as they work with students—because community norms and expectations are clearly understood.

**Sustain school culture.** A teacher learning community supports long-term instructional consistency by keeping the school focused on agreed-upon expectations and practices. In addition, it helps socialize new teachers by reinforcing norms of practice among faculty and affirming expectations for teachers’ ongoing learning and growth.

In addition to identifying what a teacher learning community can do for the school, McLaughlin and Talbert talk about elements that support the development of such a community. Consider what, as principal, you can do to provide these preconditions:

- A teacher community of practice develops through joint work on instruction, usually starting with a focus on one facet of instruction—subject content, students, or assessment of student learning.
- Teacher learning in a community depends upon how well the joint work is designed and guided, or the extent to which an effective learning environment is created for the teachers.
- Teacher learning community development, spread, and sustenance depends upon proactive administrator support and broad teacher leadership.

While part of the text discusses district-level and other support for the development of teacher learning communities, the building-based examples and discussions included would be helpful to principals who want to go beyond learning about the practice to developing an action plan.