

# LEARNER LEADER

By Stephanie Hirsh and Shirley M. Hord

## PREVIEW

Principals benefit from schoolwide professional learning communities (PLCs) with their teachers so that everyone is learning and working toward the same goal.

Principals also find value in joining administrator PLCs to work on their leadership and learning skills.

Timely topics, such as investigating student performance data, are powerful organizing elements.



One of the most powerful ways for principals to extend their learning is to participate in professional learning communities (PLCs), forums that are explicitly designed to convene educators for learning so that students perform at higher levels. Principals can use PLCs to their professional advantage in two significant ways: by participating with teachers in PLCs that are designed for schoolwide learning and by working with other principals to learn specifically about school leadership and other topics.

### Schoolwide PLCs

Principal leadership and participation are key to establishing schoolwide PLCs. To support learning for administrators, teachers, and students, PLCs share five research-based dimensions: shared and supportive leadership; a shared vision; supportive structural and relational conditions; intentional, collegial learning; and shared practice.

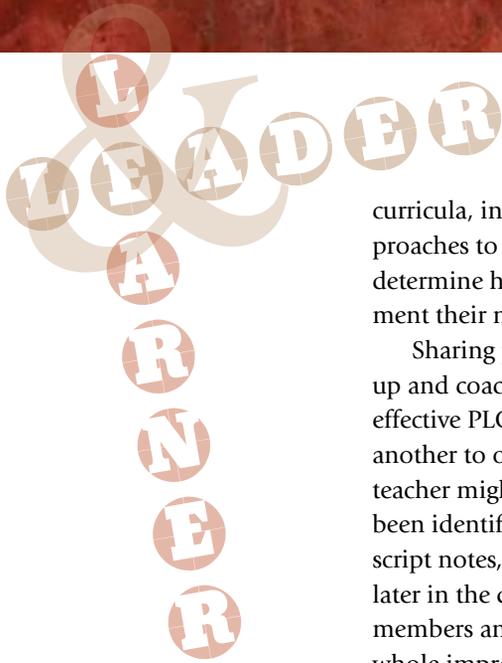
Although the principal is responsible for launching a PLC, successful principals plan how they will share guidance and leadership with the staff from its inception. Ultimately, the PLC should be a self-governing entity in which democratic participation is the norm and the principal feels comfortable sharing leadership because the PLC reflects the shared beliefs that constitute the school's vision, the second research-based element. That vision includes the purpose for which the school exists, how its members fit within that purpose, and the values upon which it is founded. Working with parents and staff members to develop a shared vision for decision making and referencing that vision often is the principal's responsibility.

The third research-based dimension is establishing supportive structural and relational conditions. At the initiation of the PLC, the principal, with staff members' cooperation, must identify the time and location where the community will meet to do its work. Finding time to meet is a real challenge, and schools and districts far and wide have found creative ways to change schedules or time useage. Another supportive condition addresses relationships—successful PLCs operate within schools where administrators, teachers, parents, and students respect, positively esteem, and trust one another. The principal has the power to solve logistical problems and provide structures to build relationships.

Establishing these structures and conditions positions the principal and staff members to focus on the work of the community. That work is just what the PLC label indicates—the professionals at the campus come together in a group, a community, for intentional, collegial learning, the fourth research-based dimension. The community must begin its work by determining what it will learn together. The staff examines multiple sources of student and staff member data to determine where they can celebrate high student performance and where unsatisfactory performance begs attention. The community of professional learners determines where they need to give time and effort to *their* learning, which might include new

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curricula, instructional strategies, and approaches to student motivation, and they also determine how they will acquire and implement their new learning.

Sharing personal practice through follow up and coaching is the fifth dimension of an effective PLC. The staff members visit one another to observe. A principal or a visiting teacher might observe the practices that have been identified by a host teacher, carefully script notes, and follow up with the teacher later in the day. In this way, individual staff members and the school organization as a whole improve.

### **Principals' Roles in the PLC**

The principal plays a strong directing role at the initiation of the PLC, then steps back to support leadership opportunities and leadership development of the staff. Sharing the power, authority, and decision making with the staff can be challenging for some principals. But those who have accomplished this transition have found it highly satisfying to have colleagues who share in the responsibilities of and accountability for improving instruction for the students of the school. One does not, of course, just turn over new roles to staff members without preparing them. From the inception of PLCs, the principal orchestrates how staff members will be prepared for new leadership roles. The principal might take full responsibility for PLC development or share it with other district administrators.

Principals' levels of participation in a PLC vary. Teachers take notice of the different levels. They observe the principal who ceremoniously launches learning communities but fails to invest any individual time in the effort, they observe the principal who attends the meetings but whose actions do not demonstrate an individual investment, and they observe the principal who engages as an equal member of the community and ensures the full effect of the PLC on staff members and students.

When the PLC principal shifts from serving as the director and authority source to an individual who rolls up his or her sleeves and participates with the teaching staff, the principal has the opportunity to become a

learner as opposed to solely a facilitator. When principals learn in this environment, there are additional benefits. The principal is viewed as the "head learner" who is engaged in learning and encouraging others to do likewise. He or she gains valued colleagues while discussing instructional issues that focus on students. In addition, staff involvement in school decisions and actions provides the principal with partners who help in managing and leading the school.

### **Principals' PLCs**

Principals have other opportunities to engage in PLCs beyond their own schools. Some of these opportunities may be offered by the school system, and others are offered by external organizations. When central office staff members design professional learning for principals, they consider the context, process, and content that are most likely to address the district and individual school priorities and achieve the desired outcomes of the participants. Some districts may choose to organize principals by school demographics or experience levels. Other districts may organize PLCs by content needs or interests.

The most powerful organizer for PLCs is student performance. Principals examine data to determine specific student performance goals. Simulating the process they facilitate within their own schools, they identify what they must learn to address performance challenges. They determine a process for learning that will enable them to apply new knowledge and skills back in their schools. They create strategies for ensuring on-the-job support when needed. They identify how they will be accountable for their actions and how they will help others be accountable as well. They assess whether members are getting what they need from one another. Finally, they take time to celebrate their results and to continue a cycle of reflective planning that leads to constant improvement.

One of the better known examples of PLCs for principals focused on improved instructional practice and student learning was implemented by Anthony Alvarado in New York City (Elmore, 1997). Alvarado organized principals into PLCs to develop expertise in

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teaching literacy and help teachers improve their instructional skills, which led to a steady climb in student achievement over 10 years (Haycock, 1998). The process enabled the principals to facilitate instructional improvement in classrooms. Alvarado moved on to San Diego, CA, and in a study of that district, Hightower (2002) wrote:

Alvarado's belief in the crucial role of principals as linchpins for change within schools led almost immediately to the dismantling of the area superintendent arrangement and the creation of seven heterogeneous working groups of about 25 principals each, known as Learning Communities. These were headed by principals selected for their strong instructional leadership. These instructional leaders worked closely together to design their new roles and plan their coaching work with principals. They received training from the Learning Research and Development Center (LRDC) at the University of Pittsburgh, linking them with efforts in other urban districts around the country. (p. 3)

External assistance agencies also offer principals PLC options. Some act as facilitators for one school system, and others invite principals from several school systems. External assistance facilitators help participants define their own agendas. Although the most compelling purpose is always student learning, how each group organizes adult learning can differ. Some groups may opt for book studies. Other groups may determine a learning agenda, such as literacy; develop an action plan; conduct ongoing assessments; and discuss the impact of learning on practice. In either case, the external facilitator has a responsibility to see that ground rules are established, to ensure that all members feel that the group is serving their needs, to help hold individual members accountable for the commitments they make to the other members, to provide the resources the group requires to continue its work, and to celebrate the progress of individual members with the group.

When No Child Left Behind (NCLB) was introduced in 2002, the National Staff Development Council (NSDC) launched a network of school leadership teams that were referred to affectionately as "12 under 12." Twelve schools (4 elementary, 4 middle level, and 4 high schools) convened to take a pledge to close the achievement gap in their schools—in fact, to exceed the expectations of NCLB in less than 12 years (hence 12 schools under 12 years). Twelve principals and selected teacher leaders commit to support one another in this effort. NSDC's role is not to establish the learning agenda or structure an improvement process, but to engage the participants in a facilitated process of mutual accountability. The facilitator guides them through a process of determining their schools' needs, writing measurable student goals, establishing their learning agenda, hosting semi-annual presentations on their progress, facilitating cross-school visits, and reporting results to their systems.

Eight of the original schools are still part of the network. Departing schools have been replaced by others. It is noteworthy that two principals who left their schools have rejoined the network as the principals of new schools. Two principals who were promoted in their systems have supported new principals in the network. Only two principals from the original 12 remain at their schools, yet participation has been sustained by the leadership teams. When asked what contributes to the high retention of those network members, the members report that it's the accountability and responsibility they feel toward the other members who have taken the pledge with them: knowing that their sister schools are facing similar challenges and committed to similar results; knowing that each month they have the opportunity to share their success as well as their challenges with their colleagues in "safe" conference calls; and knowing they are not in the boat alone, but are learning from a talented group of colleagues. Holding one another mutually accountable for results and learning has been the real key to this success.

### **Direct and Indirect Benefits**

PLC structures offer tremendous benefits to

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principals. When principals convene PLCs, the typical isolation of staff members is reduced and they gain collegiality and the help and support of other educators in solving the hard problems of challenged learners. Most important, schools with PLCs report significant benefits for students, including lower rates of absenteeism and decreased drop-out rates. In schools with PLCs, students have exhibited greater academic gains in math, science, history, and reading than in traditional schools. And, for students of all educators who are striving to reduce the gap between students from different language, cultural, and socio-economic backgrounds, student achievement gaps are narrowed.

Principals can find immense satisfaction in having all staff members assume collective responsibility for the success of all students. Everyone becomes aware of the significant influence they have on the learning outcomes of students and the roles they play in helping all students achieve expectations. Whether

the principal participates in a school-based, a district-based, or a community-based PLC, the benefits will include increased satisfaction, higher efficacy, professional renewal, and support for student improvement. **PL**

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