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Build the infrastructure first

I still hear many principals voice surprise when hearing that learning communities are not just one of the NSDC standards for staff development but the first one! Isn't the goal of professional development to improve the skills and knowledge of individual teachers, they reason? What does the structure and inner workings of the school have to do with that goal, they ask?

I recently heard Robert Marzano describe factors that influence student achievement. Schools, he said, need to develop a professional culture of collegiality and professionalism that promotes teachers' conversation about their work. Next to a highly effective teacher, the second most powerful factor in increased student achievement is an effective school.

Further, a culture of expertise evolves, according to Marzano, when there is continuous and focused feedback on teaching. Yet, those types of conversations are rare in most of the schools where he works. According to work about school culture, talking about instruction is a conversation that is *close to the bone* for most teachers (Lortie, 1975). So, a principal must do more than merely create the space for such conversations among faculty; he or she must also build an infrastructure that will support these powerful professional conversations.

The principal first needs to **prepare teachers for skillful collaboration**. Collaboration is still not a commonplace behavior among most faculties. Many teachers continue to report that their interactions with other faculty remain relegated to the lounge, by the mail boxes, and near copying machines. Staff members need to

learn about collaboration as well as conflict resolution skills. While effective groups accomplish their goals, they also learn how to disagree with each other while maintaining working relationships.

Since most of this collegial work will occur in small groups, the principal **provides training and support to develop faculty members to be skilled facilitators who provide support during whole**

school and learning team meetings. The knowledge and skills these facilitators develop include knowing about group process, group dynamics, the stages of group development and group decision making. Many times, adult groups need a trained facilitator who helps them do their best work and also teaches them how to work together effectively.

Secondly, the principal **ensures that the role of group facilitator becomes the responsibility of everyone and it rotates among members as the skill level of group members increases**. The principal increases the faculty's capacity to understand how to work as a group and develops shared leadership capacities within the faculty by asking everyone to serve as a group facilitator. This shared leadership strategy also builds collaborative relationships because no group member seems to have more power or influence as a result of being facilitator.

Building this infrastructure of collaborative skills is the first step in supporting teaching and learning. This background work creates a structure that supports professionalism and collaboration.

Learn more about the NSDC standards at www.nsd.org/standards/index.cfm.

Learning Communities

Staff development that improves the learning of all students organizes adults into learning communities whose goals are aligned with those of the school and district.

REFERENCES

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