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Teacher meetings do not make a community

If a school doesn't have professional learning communities, it is considered out of touch with current practice. Yet, the variations of professional learning communities are extensive and not all variations fall within acceptable parameters of professional learning communities. NSDC clarifies the critical attributes of learning communities in its Standards for Staff Development.

Learning communities or communities of practice that impact student achievement have several distinct attributes.

First, members work together at least several times a week to learn with and from one another.

Their sole purpose is to improve teaching and student learning. They engage in problem solving regarding teaching and learning. They jointly plan instructional units and lessons, common assessments, and student learning resources. Teams of five to eight teachers and sometimes their administrators meet to determine how to reflect on their practices, to improve their practice, and to increase student achievement. These frequent meetings are designed by members, facilitated by members, focused on their joint work, and measured in terms of student academic success. Members of a learning team share students, curriculum responsibility, or common interests related to teaching and learning.

Second, learning communities are guided by shared goals and norms of continuous improvement and experimentation. They work as a team of peers rather than as an expert-driven team. Judith Warren Little stresses the importance of joint work as a characteristic of sophisticated teacher teams. Joint work can be best described as teachers co-developing new products, processes, or strategies to use to address specifically

defined targets or goals. Warren Little distinguishes joint work from shared work. Shared work is more common in teacher teams. Shared work occurs when teachers bring products, lessons, units, assessments, etc., to share with their colleagues. Different from joint work, this process might suggest that the one sharing is more expert than others. Joint work eliminates the subtleties of perceived or assumed expertise within a team by asking all members to bring their expertise, experiences, and knowledge to the table. The table is a blank slate, and all members contribute to the design of something that reflects the entire team rather than some of the team.

Third, learning communities are often confused with school committees and other work within a school. School improvement teams, faculty meetings, department or grade-level business meetings, or other such committees or meetings are not learning communities. **Learning communities set goals about student learning and focus exclusively on the**

day-to-day work of teachers and address issues such as understanding curriculum standards, assessment for and of learning, instructional strategies, especially to differentiate instruction for students, to support students who are not meeting with academic success, and to assist team members in meeting their goals.

Fourth, learning communities have strategies and structures to guide their work. Members share leadership of the team. They receive training in facilitation skills and have a clearly defined set of norms to guide their work. They understand a wide range of designs for their learning such as examining student work, lesson study, action research, case study, etc., to guide the work of the team. Team members engage in

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.

For more information about the NSDC Standards for Staff Development, see www.nsd.org/standards/index.cfm

ongoing evaluation of their work, the achievement of their goals, and their work as a team. They maintain records of their work and report regularly to school administrators and to other teams about their work.

School-based staff developers have several responsibilities to ensure all learning communities have these attributes. They can help team members learn the essential strategies and structures that contribute to their success. They can also assist teams to evaluate their work, model facilitation, and teach teams strategies to use to achieve their goals. School-based staff developers

serve teams best when they do not facilitate teams, but rather help teams learn how to facilitate their own proceedings. Their mission is building the capacity of all teachers to be productive and contributing members of a learning community.

Learning communities, when they have these four essential attributes, engage teachers in genuine collaboration that is professionally respectful, relevant to their day-to-day work, and aligned with their professional responsibilities and goals. ♦

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