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# THE LEARNING Principal®

FOR A DYNAMIC COMMUNITY OF SCHOOL LEADERS ENSURING SUCCESS FOR ALL STUDENTS

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## DYNAMIC GROUPS

Teachers harness the power of professional learning communities

BY JOAN RICHARDSON

**A**lgebra teacher Heidi Wise felt overwhelmed when she heard that her district was introducing professional learning communities. "Initially, I thought it was just another thing that I had to do, like how you feel when you hear about new graduation requirements," she said.

After almost two years of experience with PLCs, however, she feels very positive about working with her math department colleagues. "This is just the best group. People are always helping each other. We're not just a group that has fun at lunch. We all want our kids to do well

and we all want to improve our practice. What we do helps us build relationships with each other," she said.

Carman-Ainsworth Community Schools in Flint, Mich. is betting that school-based learning teams is the best option for providing job-embedded, results-driven professional development for teachers. "School-based learning teams is a priority for this district," said Dave Swierpel, the district's director of professional development.

In 2006-07, Carman-Ainsworth largely abandoned the traditional model of "inservices"

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Deborah Childs-Bowen is the director of the Institute for Teaching and Student Achievement and assistant professor in the School of Education at Samford University in Birmingham, Ala.

See the Spring 2007 issue of *JSD* for more articles about using time effectively for professional learning.

## Effective schools maximize time, people

**I**ncreasing the power of your organization depends on enhancing two of the most precious instructional resources at hand: people and time. Effective leaders continuously ask themselves if their vision and educational goals can be accomplished with the existing structure and use of resources. If not, they know that they may need to redefine their use of people and time.

Effective leaders can use school-based learning teams to develop people resources by:

- Encouraging group collaboration and building strong interpersonal relationships between colleagues;
- Ensuring systematic collaboration by identifying teachers with similar goals and interests;
- Creating a culture of collective responsibility for teaching, learning, and student success, and creating opportunities for peer feedback and discussions;
- Using data to open communication and problem solving while avoiding blaming;
- Identifying and making available to team members, the people, research and materials necessary to inform group learning and decision making;
- Encouraging experimentation to determine best practices;
- Identifying and celebrating success of teams with group-driven data of student success;
- Building the capacity of new teachers through high-quality induction programs aligned with the vision and goals;
- Creating a shared vision, educational strategy, goals, and benchmarks among the teams; and
- Expanding the learning of teams to full faculty through multiple and open methods of communication and dialogue.

Most, if not all, of the strategies that

maximize the people resources require paying attention to that other precious instructional resource, time. Effective leaders analyze and restructure aspects of time to enhance teaching and learning. They examine the allocated time or number of days of school annually; the actual time that students are engaged in learning; and common professional learning time in which staff is involved in job-embedded collegial learning opportunities related to school goals. Increasing the time spent on academic subjects, adopting alternative scheduling, and increasing time for collaborative learning and planning are all research supported strategies to enhance student learning and the quality of teaching.

Effective leaders enhance their use of time by:

- Providing protected time for team meetings;
- Accessing and providing resources and materials that advance the learning by the group;
- Providing access to school leadership officials and administrative or secretarial support;
- Creating opportunities for professional development, such as study groups, grade-level meetings, action research, attending targeted conferences, visiting other schools, and/or working with consultants;
- Facilitating opportunities and encouraging communication within and between teams in the school;
- Explicitly, delineating the authority and power of the team; and
- Adapting the master schedule to increase instructional time and professional learning in vertical, grade-level and subject-area teams.

Reallocating resources to build capacity and knowledge for change are critical to effective leadership. Mining, refining, and protecting the instructional resources of people and time will determine the success of an organization devoted to teaching and learning.



Pat Roy is co-author of *Moving NSDC's Staff Development Standards Into Practice: Innovation Configurations* (NSDC, 2003).

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Learn more about NSDC's standards, [www.nsd.org/standards/index.cfm](http://www.nsd.org/standards/index.cfm)

## You can't launch it and leave it!

Most principals I know can recite, almost as a mantra, that effective staff development requires follow-up, multiple sessions, and ongoing support. They know that this axiom is true, but they don't always know what to do next to help support consistent use of new classroom practices. Just as we expect teachers to collect classroom data and adjust instruction to meet the needs of students, so the principal needs to collect a variety of school-based data and adjust professional development to meet the needs of teachers.

The principal's role in the data-driven standard, according to the Innovation Configuration maps, is to **analyze relevant data to design teacher professional development** (Roy & Hord, 2003).

One type of data that is useful in designing follow-up is

**support data from teacher concern surveys**, such as Stages of Concern (Hord, Rutherford, Huling, & Hall, 2004). This model helps principals identify predominant concerns of staff related to the use of an innovation or classroom practices. For example, teachers might express that a major obstacle to implementing a new mathematics program is that students are misusing and misplacing manipulatives used in the lessons. This example is typical of a Stage 3 management concern. An appropriate follow-up could include holding a problem-solving conversation among teachers, arranging a classroom visitation with a teacher who has conquered this issue, or finding an expert who has written about this issue and sharing that information. Stages of Concern helps a principal

pinpoint major concerns that can block the use of new practices and identify ways to resolve those concerns. These concerns can be collected through **informal conversations** sometimes referred to as one-legged interviews because they take a short amount of time to conduct. There is also a formal 35-question survey that can be used for large groups (Hord, *et.al* p. 47-51).

Other useful data-collecting strategies are **classroom observations** and **walk-throughs**.

The principal and teams of teachers can quickly collect data to determine current use of new classroom practices and new programs through direct observation. The observation form needs to identify specifically what practices are expected for *high-fidelity* implementation. High-fidelity practices describe what the new program looks like when it's done with high-quality or ideal implementation. This classroom data can be compiled to identify components that are currently being used and which components are not being addressed. The components not being used can then become the focus of future staff development activities and team meetings.

Using data to design professional development underscores the responsibility that administrators have to staff when they embark on a change initiative. If principals expect implementation of new programs and practices, they cannot *launch them and leave them* (Kanter, 2004). Principals do have school-based data available to them that can help them design the follow-up and ongoing support essential to the use of new practices.

#### Data-Driven:

Staff development that improves the learning of all students uses disaggregated student data to determine adult learning priorities, monitor progress, and help sustain continuous improvement.

## ASSESSING YOUR ROLE AS INSTRUCTIONAL LEADER

**Jeffrey Glanz** developed this questionnaire for understanding teaching based on current research. The first two domains of the survey were published in the February issue of *The Learning Principal*.

**SCORING GUIDE:**

**SA:** Strongly Agree  
("For the most part, yes.")

**A:** Agree ("Yes, but...")

**D:** Disagree ("No, but...")

**SD:** Strongly Disagree ("For the most part, no.")

**Domain III: Instruction**

This domain assesses the ability to work with teachers to communicate with clarity, use questioning and discussion techniques, engage students in learning, provide feedback to students, and demonstrate flexibility and responsiveness to students' instructional needs.

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| <p>1. I expect that teachers' directions to students will be clear and not confusing.<br/><b>SA      A      D      SD</b></p> <p>2. My directives to teachers about instruction are clear.<br/><b>SA      A      D      SD</b></p> <p>3. My spoken language as a teacher was clear and appropriate according to the grade level of my students.<br/><b>SA      A      D      SD</b></p> <p>4. I believe that teacher questioning techniques are among the most critical skills needed to promote pupil learning, and I feel comfortable helping teachers frame good questions.<br/><b>SA      A      D      SD</b></p> <p>5. Teacher questions must be of uniformly high quality.<br/><b>SA      A      D      SD</b></p> <p>6. From my experience, teachers mostly lecture (talk) to students without enough student participation.<br/><b>SA      A      D      SD</b></p> <p>7. I encourage teachers to encourage students to participate and prefer for students to take an active role in learning.<br/><b>SA      A      D      SD</b></p> <p>8. I can provide a workshop for teachers on giving assignments that are appropriate to students and that engage students mentally.<br/><b>SA      A      D      SD</b></p> | <p>9. I don't know how to group students appropriately for instruction.<br/><b>SA      A      D      SD</b></p> <p>10. I am very familiar with grouping strategies to promote instruction.<br/><b>SA      A      D      SD</b></p> <p>11. I can advise teachers on how best to select appropriate and effective instructional materials and resources.<br/><b>SA      A      D      SD</b></p> <p>12. My demo lessons to teachers are highly coherent, and my pacing is consistent and appropriate.<br/><b>SA      A      D      SD</b></p> <p>13. I rarely provide appropriate feedback to my teachers.<br/><b>SA      A      D      SD</b></p> <p>14. Feedback to my teachers is consistent, appropriate, and of high quality.<br/><b>SA      A      D      SD</b></p> <p>15. I expect my teachers to rely heavily on the teacher's manual for instruction.<br/><b>SA      A      D      SD</b></p> <p>16. I consistently encourage teachers to seek my advice on teaching and learning matters.<br/><b>SA      A      D      SD</b></p> <p>17. I encourage teachers to use wait time effectively.<br/><b>SA      A      D      SD</b></p> <p>18. I feel competent enough to give a workshop to teachers on effective use of wait time.<br/><b>SA      A      D      SD</b></p> |
|--|---|

19. I consider myself an instructional leader.

SA      A      D      SD

20. Teachers perceive me as an instructional leader.

SA      A      D      SD

**After reviewing your responses to the statements in this domain, overall, how would you respond to the following statement:**

I am satisfied that my knowledge and skills of instruction are satisfactory.

SA      A      D      SD

## Domain IV: Professional responsibilities

This domain assesses the degree to which you encourage teachers to reflect on teaching, maintain accurate records, communicate with parents, contribute to the school and district, grow and develop professionally, and show professionalism.

1. I have difficulty assessing the effectiveness of teachers.

SA      A      D      SD

2. I can accurately assess how well I am doing as an instructional leader.

SA      A      D      SD

3. I really don't know how to improve teaching skills.

SA      A      D      SD

4. I am aware of what I need to do in order to become an effective instructional leader.

SA      A      D      SD

5. I rarely encourage parents to become involved in instructional matters.

SA      A      D      SD

6. I actively and consistently engage parents to visit classrooms.

SA      A      D      SD

7. I feel comfortable giving workshops to parents on curricular and instructional matters.

SA      A      D      SD

8. I have difficulty relating to my colleagues in a cordial and professional manner.

SA      A      D      SD

9. I collaborate with my colleagues in a cordial and professional manner.

SA      A      D      SD

10. I avoid becoming involved in school and district projects.

SA      A      D      SD

11. I rarely encourage teachers to engage in professional development activities.

SA      A      D      SD

12. I seek opportunities for professional development to enhance my pedagogical skills.

SA      A      D      SD

13. I am rarely alert to teachers' instructional needs.

SA      A      D      SD

14. I serve teachers.

SA      A      D      SD

15. I am an advocate for students' rights.

SA      A      D      SD

16. I am an advocate for teachers' rights.

SA      A      D      SD

17. I rarely encourage teachers to serve on a school-based committee.

SA      A      D      SD

18. I enjoy working with teachers collaboratively on instructional matters.

SA      A      D      SD

**After reviewing your responses to the statements in this domain, overall, how would you respond to the following statement:**

I am satisfied that I am professionally responsible.

SA      A      D      SD

**Source:** *What Every Principal Should Know about Instructional Leadership*, by Jeffrey Glanz. Corwin, 2006. Pages 101-108. Reprinted with permission.

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# Teachers harness the power of professional learning communities

**"I always said I needed more time to work with other teachers. Now, I've got it. I wish we'd done this a long time ago."**

— *English teacher  
Michael Stewart*

*Continued from p. 1*

in favor of restructuring its school calendar to provide 75 minutes every Wednesday morning at every school for professional learning communities. Students begin school an hour later than usual on Wednesdays, and teachers arrive 15 minutes earlier than usual in order to create this block of time. Teachers meet as grade-level teams at the elementary schools, by subject area at the middle school, and either by course or subject area at the high school.

The time was negotiated into the calendar and approved by teachers as a way to provide them with collaborative professional development time that leads to improved student learning. A survey of teachers earlier this year indicated that teachers value opportunities to work closely with colleagues and believe their teams are effective, that talking with their colleagues is important, and that such interaction has a positive impact on student achievement.

## BEFORE PLCs

Carman-Ainsworth High School Principal Steve Tunncliff was the new kid on the block when the district began to nudge teachers towards teaming.

He detected the district's direction when he was interviewed for the principal's job and he had done quite a bit of reading about professional learning communities as part of his doctoral work. But, as a new principal, Tunncliff wasn't prepared to jump into PLCs ahead of the district. The only school-based professional meetings the teachers had experienced before his arrival were five one-hour staff meetings each year. Moving from that into PLCs would have been a cultural shock.

Instead, during his first year as principal in 2004-05, he introduced "stakeholder discussions" to enable teachers to address concerns in the high school. These voluntary after-school

**See the March 2007 issue of *The Learning System* to learn how the relationship between the Carman-Ainsworth Community Schools and its teachers' union led to improved professional learning for teachers.**

meetings were organized around topics suggested by teachers. Some of the meetings attracted as few as 15 of the 90 high school teachers, others as many as 40.

"I figured we needed something to help us find some common ground," he said.

By the end of the year, these stakeholder groups had achieved several changes in the school, including reconfiguring the schedule to add a third lunch period and writing a new attendance policy.

"That really jump-started us to thinking about how we could change things. I think it planted a seed that, if we worked together, we could address some issues," Tunncliff said.

As the stakeholder groups were working, Tunncliff also used staff meetings to have teachers read and discuss articles about professional learning communities and common assessments.

By the time the district announced plans to introduce PLCs, the high school staff had been primed for the change.

## INTRODUCING PLCs

Carman-Ainsworth rolled out PLCs for all schools during the 2005-06 school year. Initially, teachers worked an additional 80 minutes after classes ended one day each month; in 2006-07, the district introduced late start Wednesdays and provided 75 minutes each week for the PLCs.

The high school's 90 teachers are divided into more than 30 teams, typically according to the courses they teach. Each team identifies

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# Teachers harness the power of professional learning communities

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essential outcomes for each course, writes SMART goals, collaborates on designing several common assessments each year, and examines the results of those assessments. The teams do not have formal leaders but rotate jobs among the participants. As a result of moving to PLCs, the school has also abandoned department chairs in order to encourage leadership among more teachers, Tunnickliff said.

The high school teams also create a “data center” which records the essential outcomes for each course, how students will be assessed, and how many students have achieved each outcome. “If teachers have said these 10 things are essential, then I want teachers to know how many of their kids have mastered those,” Tunnickliff said.

“For teachers to say they had an average score of 82 on an assessment, that’s just meaningless. You want to know if what students learned is related to those essential outcomes,” he said.

Several other accountability measures are in place. Teams turn in weekly learning logs to a building administrator who reviews and comments on the work. Each quarter, PLCs meet with their entire department to share data about student learning. Finally, building administrators and central office administrators do walk-throughs during the PLCs to monitor progress.

## LEARNING IN PLCs

After two years, Kevin Nelms, who teaches math to students with learning disabilities, said his students are the real beneficiaries of his opportunity to join the Algebra I math PLC.

“Before PLCs, we didn’t have a set curriculum for the (special education students). We pretty much would pick and choose what we thought was most important for them to learn. Because of the PLC, I have a better grasp of what they should know and the pace they should be

going,” Nelms said.

His Algebra I students take the same assessments as regular ed Algebra I students. “Their attitudes have changed quite a bit. They know they’re getting the same information, albeit a bit slower. When they take the same test as other students, they feel a better sense of accomplishment,” Nelms said.

“If I’d had access to something like this from day one, it would have been phenomenal,” he said.

Even after a relatively short time working in PLCs, Tunnickliff has seen his staff deepen their understanding of their practice. When teachers initially see results from their assessments, many principals report that they blame students for not studying hard enough or not following directions. As they continue to learn, teachers see that questions are poorly written and they focus on improving the questions. As this evolution continues, they begin to notice gaps in performance, sometimes between groups of students and sometimes between teachers. Eventually, their growth reaches a point where they begin to question how they can change their instruction to get better results.

“That’s the hard stage to be at. How do they have those tough conversations with each other about what they do when they teach and how they should change that?” he asks.

Tunnickliff’s vision for PLCs at his school is this: collecting and examining data to learn about student performance will become such a natural part of teachers’ work that most of their time together will be spent discussing and learning from what they see and planning how to adapt their work accordingly.

“It’s still so new to them that they’re spending so much of their time collecting and analyzing that they might miss the whole purpose of the discussion. We’ll know we’re there when most of the time is spent in discussion about how to change their practice,” he said. ■

**“I’ve seen veteran teachers who are very hesitant to share, like they have a copyright on their ideas. But I think real professional people feel comfortable being open. Your work is not a secret. If you have something that helps kids, it’s your professional duty to share that with your colleagues so you can help more kids.”**

— *Math teacher*  
Richard Standen

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