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# Keys to a learning community

I got an e-mail not long ago from a buddy working as an assistant principal in a California middle school. “Hey Bill,” he asked, “We’re thinking about starting this PLC thing. Have you got any advice for us?”

Mark’s question isn’t unique, is it? After all, many schools have begun to embrace the concepts behind professional learning communities in the past decade with remarkable results. Teachers working collaboratively and focusing on student achievement are identifying instructional practices that work and rediscovering a sense of professional empowerment that is nothing short of rewarding.

But, just as often, schools seem to struggle with the transition to professional learning communities. Teachers trained in isolation resist collegial work or are overwhelmed by new tasks they are poorly prepared to handle. Administrators interested in immediate results implement top-down decisions instead of waiting for change driven from within — and before long, well-intentioned efforts are abandoned.

So what’s the difference? What key factors are essential to ensuring that professional collaboration takes hold in a building?

First, school leaders must recognize that collaboration is a complex process that teachers may initially struggle to master. Early meetings are often messy affairs as learning teams structure their work with one another. Personality conflicts are likely to arise and consensus may be hard to come by.

School leaders can support novice teams by providing specific, achievable tasks to tackle. Consider asking your teachers to develop a common assessment together or to create a list of essential questions that students should master before the end of a semester — and then cele-

brate the products that are created. Teachers need to feel successful in their early collaborative efforts in order to continue moving forward.

But school leaders must also recognize that sometimes the professional learning community process is more important than any product from an individual team. Schools often put so much attention on outcomes that we undervalue the work that leads to tangible results. This tendency tempts principals to require that learning teams always complete tasks from lesson planning to grade reporting in predefined ways.

The consequences of such constant control are relatively extreme. While teachers are likely to “follow the rules” — and may even believe that administrators have made their work easier by specifying outcomes — critical conversations about teaching and learning are lost. Educators move from being experts wrestling together with content and curriculum to blue-collar workers investing little mental energy into automated assignments.

In many ways, the learning teams in your building are a lot like the students in your classrooms. They are unique and take great pride in their individual identities. At times, they’ll have every tool they need to be successful, and at other times, they’ll need more support than you’d ever expect.

Your goal — just like a good teacher — should be to differentiate the support that you offer, helping each learning team to develop into self-sustaining, thoughtful, and accomplished groups that are passionate about their work together.

Sounds easy, right? ◆



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