A SHIFT IN SCHOOL CULTURE

Collective commitments focus on change that benefits student learning

BY ROBERT EAKER
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These are the best of times and the worst of times in education, to paraphrase Charles Dickens. Never before has there been such widespread agreement among researchers and practitioners regarding the most promising approach to significantly improve schools. Researchers, writers, and educational organizations have all endorsed the concept of schools func-

tioning as professional learning communities. At the same time, the concept will have little impact on schools unless professional learning community practices become embedded into day-to-day school culture.

If professional learning communities offer our best hope for school improvement, a critical question facing educators is this: How can we develop school cultures that reflect the ideals and practices of professional learning communities? We have found that collaboratively developed shared values and commitments can be a powerful tool for shaping school culture.

STRUCTURE IS NEVER ENOUGH

Michael Fullan (2005) observed that "terms travel easily … but the underlying concepts do not" (p. 67). And while the term "professional learning community" has traveled easily, actually transforming a school to function as a professional learning community requires much more than a superficial understanding of the concept and feeble attempts at reorganizing. Schools and districts that bring the concept to life do more than adopt a new mission statement, launch a strategic plan, or fly a banner to proclaim, "We are a professional learning community!" They do more than organize their staff into teams, change their schedules, develop a new organizational chart, or engage in other attempts to tinker with the organization's structure. They recognize that while structural changes — policies, programs, and procedures — may be necessary, those changes are never enough to transform a school into a professional learning community. They understand that it is impossible for a school or district to develop the capacity to function as a professional learning community without undergoing profound cultural shifts, and they will engage in an intentional process to impact the culture.

We see an organization's culture in the assumptions, beliefs, expectations, and habits that constitute the norm for those working in it. Impacting an organization's cultural aspects is far more difficult than changing the policies, programs, and practices that constitute the structure. As Phil Schlechty writes, "Structural change that is not supported by cultural change will eventually be overwhelmed by the culture, for it is in the culture that the organization finds meaning and stability" (1997, p. 136).

CULTURAL SHIFTS FOR BECOMING A PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITY

What does the culture of a school look like when it functions as a professional learning community? How does the culture differ from more traditional schools? While all professional learning communities do not look alike, all reflect three critical cultural shifts.

A shift in fundamental purpose from teaching to learning

Professional learning communities shift their primary purpose, their reason for being, from a focus on teaching to a focus on learning. This shift is seismic — such a change represents more than mere semantics. When schools passionately and sincerely adopt the mission of ensuring high levels of learning for all students, they are driven to pursue fundamentally different questions and work in significantly different ways.

A shift in the work of teachers

Professional learning communities acknowledge there is no hope of helping all students learn unless those within the school work collaboratively in a collective effort to achieve that fundamental purpose. There is no credible evidence that the best way to improve student learning is to have teachers work in isolation. On the other hand, there is ample evidence to support organizing teachers into high-performing, collaborative teams. A teacher's world can change when the school shifts from a culture of isolation to a culture of collaboration.

A shift in focus

Educators in professional learning communities recognize they will not know if their collaborative efforts to help all students learn have been successful without a fixation on results. They are hungry for evidence of student learning, and they use that evidence both to respond to students who need additional time and support as well as to inform and improve their professional practice. Their focus shifts from inputs to outcomes and from intentions to results.

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THE POWER OF SHARED VALUES AND COMMITMENTS

John Kotter advises that the central challenge of changing culture is "changing people's behavior" (Kotter & Cohen, 2002, p. 2). Engaging staff in a collaborative process to develop shared values, or "collective commitments," is one of the most powerful tools for changing behaviors that can,

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ultimately, transform the culture of a school or district.

As Ken Blanchard (2007) writes: "Values provide guidelines on how you should proceed as you pursue your purpose and picture of the future. They need to be clearly described so that you know exactly what behaviors demonstrate that the value is being lived. Values need to be consistently acted on, or they are only good intentions" (p. 30).

The White River School District in Buckley, Wash., has used the power of collective commitments to help its schools operate as professional learning communities. The district asks all staff members to consider, "What would it look like if we really meant it when we said we embrace learning as our fundamental purpose, or we will build a collaborative culture, or we will use evidence of results to respond to student needs and improve our practice? What commitments are we prepared to make to every student who walks into our schools this fall? What commitments are we prepared to make to one another as we attempt to create a professional learning community?" People are asked to participate in a deliberate effort to identify the specific ways they will act to improve their organizations, and then commit to one another that they will act accordingly.

The presence of articulated collective commitments will not necessarily inspire every staff member to live by those commitments on a daily basis. Discrepancies between what people say and what they do will continue to exist.

For example, while focusing on improving reading achievement, one elementary school in the district, Mountain Meadow, made a commitment that "the children *most in need* will receive the *most help* from the *most skilled staff*." In order to fulfill this commitment, collaborative teams of teachers began reviewing formative assessment results together and making timely instructional changes to meet each student's needs. They developed plans to provide students who were experiencing difficulty additional time and support within the school day, and they began reporting student progress to parents on a weekly basis. These practices represented a seismic cultural shift from the days when students most in need received help from paraprofessionals who had minimal training and little direct guidance from a classroom teacher or when parents only received formal progress reports every nine weeks.

A word of caution: Collective commitments should not be confused with developing a shared vision for a school. Vision describes an attractive future for the organization, but its focus is on the organization and the future — "someday we hope our school will be a place where … ." Collective commitments clarify how each individual can contribute to the work, and they have a much more immediate focus: "This is what I can do today to help create the school we want." We can think of the collective commitments as a series of "if-then" statements. For example:

If we are to be a school that ensures high levels of learning for all students, *then* we must commit to monitor each student's learning on a timely basis using a variety of assessment strategies and create systems to ensure they receive additional time and support as soon as they experience difficulty in their learning.

If we are to create a collaborative culture, *then* we must commit to be positive, contributing members to our collaborative teams and accept collective responsibility for the success of our colleagues and our students.

THE EXPECTATIONS-ACCEPTANCE GAP

In *The Knowing-Doing Gap,* Pfeffer and Sutton (2000) explore what they regard as one of the great mysteries of organizational management — the disconnect between what we know and what we do (p. 4). Schools and districts are certainly susceptible to the knowing-doing gap, but they also often fall victim to another damaging gap — the disconnect between what leaders contend is *expected* and what they are ultimately willing to *accept*. For example, a collaborative culture will benefit student achievement only if educators focus their collaboration on the factors that directly impact student learning. However, schools often settle for collaboration that has no impact on what happens in the classroom — who will pick up the field trip forms, how can we stop students from swearing in the hallways, who will write the parent newsletter this month. Effective leaders will avoid this tendency by clarifying the specific standards that represent high-quality work and insisting that the work meet these standards.

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Mutual accountability and peer pressure will not always prevail. In

those instances, leaders must be willing to address the problem. The presence of collective commitments, however, allows principals and central office leaders to assume a new role in relationship to staff — the role of promoter and protector of the shared vision the staff has created and the pledges people have made to one another to make that vision a reality. When leaders must address a concern with a staff member, they can refer to the commitments ("here are the promises we have made to one another, I need you to honor them") rather than the organizational chart ("I'm the boss") or the policy manual ("the district policy says you must do this"). In so doing, they operate with the full weight of the group's moral authority behind them, protectors of mutual pledges rather than keepers of the rules (DuFour, DuFour, & Eaker, in press).

SUMMARY

The increased popularity of the term "professional learning community" has not, as yet, resulted in the actual application of the concept in the majority of schools and districts throughout North America. The challenge of changing culture is the challenge of changing behavior, of persuading people to act in new ways. Engaging the faculty in a collaborative process to articulate the school's core values or collective commitments is a powerful — and often overlooked — way to shape school culture. Establishing explicit shared commitments is one of the most effective tools available to those seeking to implement professional learning communities in their schools and districts.

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