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### HOW TO GET IN TOUCH

*JSD* is published four times a year to promote improvement in the quality of professional learning as a means to improve student learning in K-12 schools. Contributions from both members and nonmembers of NSDC are welcome.

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# editor's note/

TRACY CROW

## PUT THE 'I' BACK IN TEAM

**T**eamwork is one of those words with the power to make me cringe no matter how much I sincerely believe in the concept behind it. I suspect I'm not the only one. Yes, we're all for team building, being a team player, taking one for the team, putting team before self. Why has it become a little hard to believe? Have we heard these clichés too many times?

Even for those of us who went to school before cooperative learning involved much cooperation, the value of working on an effective team is obvious. To state the reasons would add to my list of overused phrases. Touting the benefits of teamwork has become second nature to anyone who has applied for a job in the past 10 years, acknowledged a coworker, or won a basketball game.

Maybe that's the problem. Once you've experienced being part of a good team, you believe in teams. You don't really put much thought into the concept anymore. You forget that teamwork isn't a matter of faith. Good teams require effort and skill. Teamwork isn't an end in itself; teams exist for a reason.

I'm concerned the same thing might happen with professional learning communities, or as the lingo goes, PLCs. There are enough people in the right places doing the right things with professional learning communities that we're hearing about wonderful results for students, teachers, and schools. You can read about several examples in this issue of *JSD*. With the results learning communities can achieve, many schools are ready to start a PLC, become a PLC, do a PLC. The term professional learning communities is already so common in our field that it threatens to become overused and misunderstood. Based on the reading that informed this issue and discussions with many educators, I believe the term is used far more widely than the concept is applied effectively.

Like teamwork, the benefits of professional learning communities may be so obvious that educators don't realize how much thought and effort communities require. We don't realize that we can't take professional learning communities for granted — we're barely getting to know what they're all about. As Judith Warren Little said to me (see interview on p. 53), there is still so much research to be done in this arena.

Enabling teachers to meet together every day does not make them a professional learning community. Becoming a professional learning community requires intention, a focus on learning, a focus on results, a commitment to collegiality, and a willingness to reshape a school's culture. The hard work of learning communities goes well beyond a lightning bolt of inspiration from a workshop or our comfortable ideas about teamwork.

Professional learning communities hold so much promise for improving student outcomes. But the concept is still young, and we're not experts in this field — not yet. I don't want to become cynical about something so important, at least not until "doing PLCs" for real is second nature. ■



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**NSDC'S PURPOSE:** Every educator engages in effective professional learning every day so every student achieves.

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## PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT, DEFINED FOR LAW

Working with our allies and advocates, NSDC has created this formal definition of professional development for use in the reauthorized version of NCLB.

Keep track of related legislative activities online at [www.nsdc.org/connect/legislativeupdate.cfm](http://www.nsdc.org/connect/legislativeupdate.cfm).



NSDC Proposed Amendments to Section 9101 (34) of the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act as reauthorized by the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001*.

(34) PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT— The term “professional development” means a comprehensive, substantiated, and intensive approach to improving teachers’ and principals’ effectiveness in raising student achievement —

(A) Professional development fosters collective responsibility for improved student performance and must be comprised of professional learning that:

- (1) is aligned with rigorous state student academic achievement standards as well as related local educational agency and school improvement goals;
- (2) is conducted among educators at the school and facilitated by well-prepared school principals and/or school-based professional development coaches, mentors, master teachers, or other teacher leaders;
- (3) primarily occurs several times per week among established teams of teachers, principals, and other

instructional staff members where the teams of educators engage in a continuous cycle of improvement that —

- (i) evaluates student, teacher, and school learning needs through a thorough review of data on teacher and student performance;
- (ii) defines a clear set of educator learning goals based on the rigorous analysis of the data;
- (iii) achieves the educator learning goals identified in subsection (A)(4)(ii) by implementing coherent, sustained, and evidenced-based learning strategies, such as lesson study and the development of formative assessments, that improve instructional effectiveness and student achievement;
- (iv) provides job-embedded coaching or other forms of assistance to support the transfer of new knowledge and skills to the classroom;
- (v) regularly assesses the effectiveness of the professional development in achieving identified learning goals, improving teaching, and assisting all students in meeting challenging state academic achievement standards;
- (vi) informs ongoing improvements in teaching and student learning; and
- (vii) that may be supported by external assistance.

(B) The process outlined in (A) may be supported by activities such as courses, workshops, institutes, networks, and conferences that:

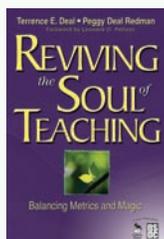
- (1) must address the learning goals and objectives established for professional development by educators at the school level;
- (2) advance the ongoing school-based professional development; and
- (3) are provided by for-profit and nonprofit entities outside the school such as universities, education service agencies, technical assistance providers, networks of content-area specialists, and other education organizations and associations.

## NSDC BOOK CLUB

NSDC members who have added the NSDC Book Club to their membership package will receive *Reviving the Soul of Teaching: Balancing Metrics and Magic* by Terrence E. Deal and Peggy Deal Redman.

*Reviving the Soul of Teaching* is an inspirational book that advocates for heart and soul in teaching and schooling and emphasizes how teachers can influence, inspire, affect, and touch the lives of learners. The book offers fresh perspectives on teaching as an art that promotes character and imagination in students, balancing testing and accountability with the art and passion of teaching, and reform from the ground level where teachers are making a difference in the lives of their students.

Through a partnership with Corwin Press, NSDC members can add the Book Club to their membership at any time and receive four books a year for only \$49 annually.



To receive *Reviving the Soul of Teaching*, you must add the NSDC Book Club to your membership

before June 30. The book will be mailed to NSDC Book Club members in July.

For more information about this or any membership package, call NSDC at 800-727-7288 or e-mail NSDCoffice@nsdc.org.

## LET'S COMMIT TOGETHER TO BUILD LEADERSHIP

Over the past 20 years, my profession and my passion have been about one thing: leadership. Leadership is the key to impacting the lives of students and adults in all of our schools, regardless of geography, economic condition, size, or status as public or private, primary, elementary, secondary, or even post-secondary. As a result, I devote my efforts to growing, sustaining, and supporting leaders throughout the education arena.

NSDC and I share this commitment to leaders. Developing school leaders is one of the five priorities outlined in our strategic plan.

The assumption behind this priority is that the knowledge, skill, and will of school leaders are essential to improving professional learning and student achievement.

To fulfill this priority, NSDC will initiate and lead networks and programs focused on improving performance of school leaders.

I have learned that the power of educational leadership lies in an ability to see beyond the obvious, to envision beyond what is expected, so that both students and adults achieve powerful teaching and learning. The wisdom and work of many people, coupled with my own experiences, have taught me that leadership is not just about vision. Leadership is also about action. The Board of Trustees and NSDC staff members have made a commitment to members and to stakeholders to “walk our talk.” Each of us has created and is implementing plans of action to support the strategic priorities. These plans are designed to be in service and support of NSDC’s purpose, which is “to ensure that every educator engages in effective professional learning every day so every student achieves.” We are strongly committed to making this purpose a reality. At the same time, we hold an expectation that all members of the NSDC community share this commitment.

Leadership is about building the capacity of self and others to achieve commonly shared goals. Professional and personal routines, even those that have proven to be successful in the past, can often get in the way of changing our behavior so that we can accomplish our goals. With this in mind, the trustees and staff are committed to change as necessary to bring the tenets of the strategic plan to life through our daily actions.

Leadership is not necessarily a function of a formalized position. Through various conferences, events, programs, products, and publications (including *JSD*), NSDC challenges all of us to don the mantle of leadership, regardless of our current roles. We are encouraged to see beyond the boundaries of our titles, beyond the boundaries of our jobs, and even beyond the challenges of our current realities, and to be leaders, advocates, sponsors, facilitators, coaches, mentors, catalysts, critical friends, supervisors, change agents, motivators, role models, strategic planners, assessors, questioners, team builders, managers, consensus makers, mediators, and supporters.

Whatever your position, I call upon you to both lead and act. ■



**Karen Dyer is president of the National Staff Development Council.**

powerful  
WORDS

“Not everything that is faced can be changed. But nothing can be changed until it is faced.” — *James Baldwin*

## NSDC FOUNDATION ANNOUNCES 2008 AWARD RECIPIENTS

NSDC's foundation, Impacting the Future Now, has awarded more than \$21,000 in monetary and in-kind donations. The award categories and 2008 recipients are:

- The **E<sup>6</sup> Grant** supports a team's efforts to advance NSDC's purpose. The grant awards up to \$5,000 and the registration fee for the three-day NSDC Annual Conference for three members of the project team.

**Recipient:** Project title: *One Size Does Not Fit All: Embedding Differentiated Learning Through Differentiated Professional*

*Development at the Secondary Level.*  
Project leader: Lisa Moore, Newton High School, Newton Public Schools, Newton, Kan.

- The **Chidley Scholarships** are given to develop leadership in the field of professional learning by providing two scholarships annually for NSDC's Academy for Staff Developers. One scholarship is for a school-based teacher leader or coach who aspires to a role of leadership in

professional learning. The second scholarship is for a district leader whose work involves staff development in a school system with a large population of underserved students.

**School-based staff developer recipient:** Regina Riley-Turner, literacy coach, Fleming Academy, Detroit Public Schools, Detroit, Mich.

**District leader recipient:** Joanne Jones, director of high schools, Hertford County Public Schools, Winton, N.C.

- The **Bridge Builders Grant** is awarded to a principal who has led a high-priority school to meet Adequate Yearly Progress for two consecutive years. The grant includes registration for three successive NSDC Annual Conferences and three pre-conferences.

**Recipient:** Stephen Duch, principal, Hillcrest High School, New York City Schools, Jamaica Estates, N.Y.

Impacting the Future Now is dedicated to supporting a new generation of leaders who act on the belief that continuous learning by educators improves the achievement of all students. The foundation awards grants and scholarships annually. Visit [www.nsd.org/connect/foundation.cfm](http://www.nsd.org/connect/foundation.cfm).



## NSDC CALENDAR

**July 12-13:** NSDC affiliate leaders meeting, Orlando, Fla.

**July 13-16:** NSDC's 4th Summer Conference for Teacher Leaders and the Administrators Who Support Them, Orlando, Fla.

**July:** Registration opens for NSDC's 40th Annual Conference in suburban Washington, D.C., in December 2008.

**July:** Submit proposals online to present at NSDC's 5th Summer Conference in Boston, 2009.

**Aug. 15:** Deadline for submitting manuscripts for Summer 2009 *JSD*. Theme: High-quality teaching.  
[www.nsd.org/jsd/themes.cfm](http://www.nsd.org/jsd/themes.cfm)

**September:** Election for NSDC Board of Trustees.



**Oct. 10:** Early registration deadline for 2008 Annual Conference.

**Oct. 17:** Deadline for proposals to present at NSDC's 5th Summer Conference in Boston, 2009.

**Nov. 15:** Deadline for submitting manuscripts for Fall 2009 *JSD*. Theme: Professional learning 101.  
[www.nsd.org/jsd/themes.cfm](http://www.nsd.org/jsd/themes.cfm)

**November:** Submit proposals online to present at NSDC's 41st Annual Conference in St. Louis, 2009.

**Dec. 6-10:** NSDC's 40th Annual Conference, Gaylord National Resort Hotel and Convention Center, Prince George's County, Md.

## SHIRLEY HORD joins NSDC team



Shirley Hord, a respected authority and researcher on educational change and professional learning communities, joins NSDC as scholar laureate. Hord will lend her knowledge and insights to a number of

NSDC projects. See her first article as an NSDC team member on p. 10 of this issue.

Hord joins NSDC after serving SEDL as scholar emeritus. Her past positions include classroom teacher and university professor and researcher. She has authored numerous articles and books, including the recently released *Leading Professional Learning Communities: Voices from Research and Practice* (with William Sommers, Corwin Press, 2008).

## INGRID CARNEY joins NSDC Board



Ingrid Carney has accepted an invitation to serve on the NSDC Board of Trustees. Her term expires in 2009.

Carney fills the board vacancy created when Maria Goodloe-Johnson left due to increasing professional responsibilities.

Carney is deputy superintendent for clusters and school leaders in Boston Public Schools. Prior to joining Boston Public Schools, Carney was senior executive director of Chicago Leadership Academies for Supporting Success (CLASS). During her nearly 35-year career in public education reform, Carney has also served as teacher, principal, and assistant superintendent.

# EVOLUTION

## of the PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITY

Revolutionary concept is based on intentional collegial learning

BY SHIRLEY M. HORD

**L**et's start with the basics. People everywhere generally agree that the purpose of schools is *student learning*. Further, people are generally in agreement that the most significant factor determining whether students learn well is *teaching quality*. Teaching quality is improved through *continuous professional learning*. Today, the most promising context for continuous professional learning is the professional learning community. The three words explain the concept: Professionals coming together in a group — a community — to learn.

How did we arrive at the professional learning community as a structure for school improvement? We'll examine the concept's development.

### TEACHERS AS SOLE PROPRIETORS

For much of the history of education, teachers worked in what were architecturally characterized as egg crate schools. Teachers typically worked in classrooms with no communication with other adults. Cell-like classrooms and cultures promoted insulation and isolation from other staff, leaving classroom teachers as self-employed individuals, doing their own thing, whatever that was. Single teachers in individual classrooms were given the authority to teach whatever they knew of curriculum and instruction to a fairly homogeneous student population. Numbers of our schools and districts remain in this mode without any

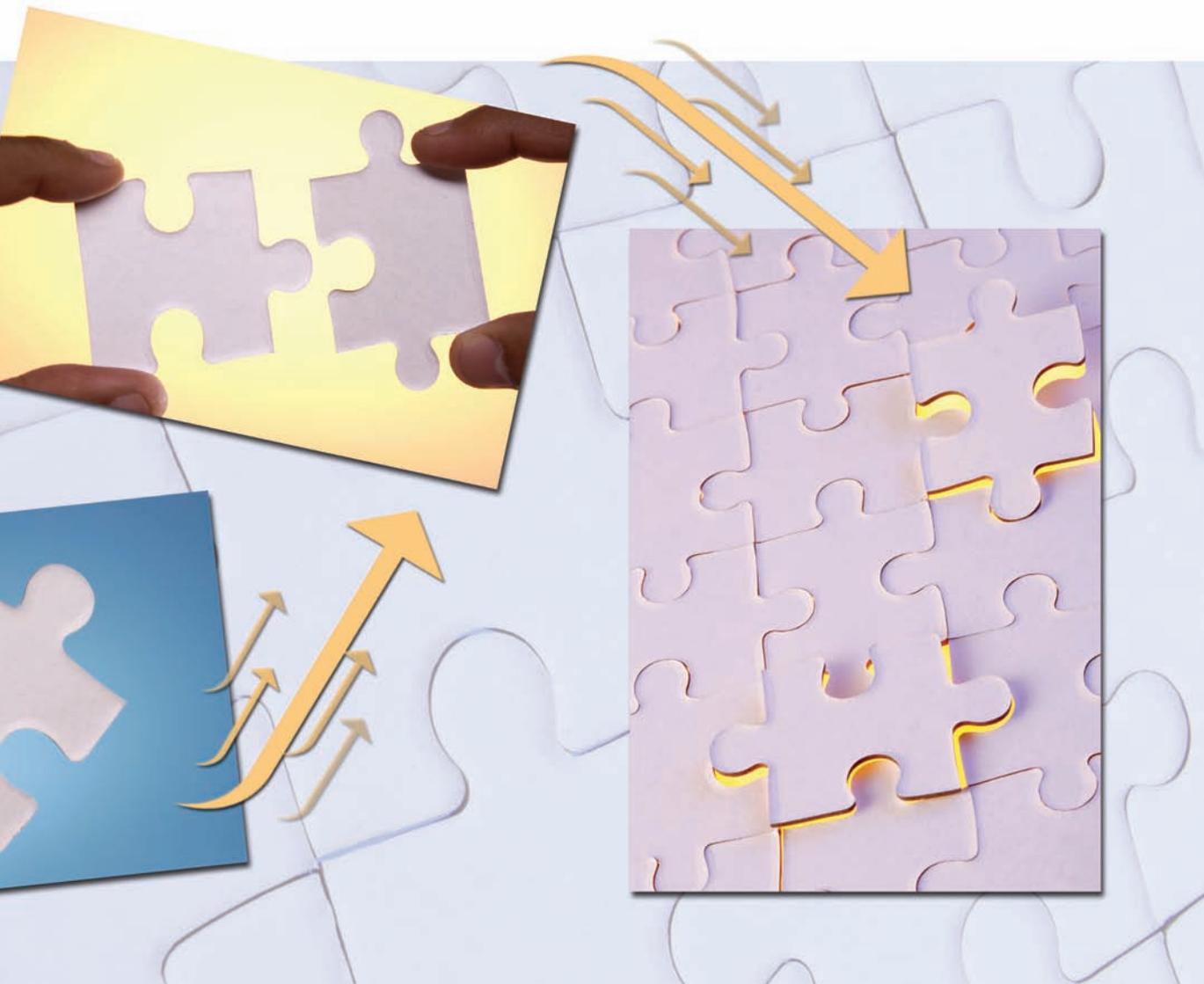
SHIRLEY M. HORD is NSDC's scholar laureate. Hord has conducted research on educational change and professional learning communities in positions at the university and classroom level and as the former scholar emeritus at SEDL. You can contact her at [shirley.hord@nsdc.org](mailto:shirley.hord@nsdc.org).



meaningful interaction among the professionals who work there.

### TEACHERS AS TEAMMATES

During the 1980s, our systems experienced team teaching and open classrooms. Educators began to talk about teachers' workplace and its effects on teachers' morale, knowledge and skills, and other characteristics. A shift in the glacier of isolation and the breaking of the physical barriers to teacher interaction led to the idea of teachers coming together to share their work. While this new shared repertoire provided teachers with alternative ideas on teaching, the most significant result was an increase in teacher morale and motivation. They were not alone in their work, but had



colleagues. Though no one paid much attention to what teachers were doing when they met, schools expended significant effort to make these meetings possible. Many schools in many districts, some with great difficulty, scheduled grade-level and department meetings for elementary and secondary teachers.

These new structural arrangements that provided time for teachers to meet frequently led them to work on managerial issues: ordering books and other instructional supplies, scheduling study trips away from the school campus, organizing teaching schedules to make good use of videos or guest speakers who were expected to be in the building. In addition,

sometimes a teacher might report on a conference that he or she attended, or share an instructional activity he or she had used that students enjoyed. Teachers found these meetings to be useful in enabling them to become more organized and in sync with their colleagues' plans and activities for students. This pattern of teacher meetings is what many use today to describe their schools' professional learning communities.

**TEACHERS AS COLLABORATIVE WORKERS**

As teachers met, sharing their successes and failures with their team colleagues, they initiated team teaching and working together on various

instructional strategies and programs. Districts began to see value in encouraging teachers to collaborate. In their early introduction to schools, professional learning communities were characterized as places and opportunities for teachers to work collaboratively. Indeed, some teacher learning results from the collaborative work, although as a by-product, with the team's work being the focus of attention. Equating working collaboratively with professional learning community remains a theme popular with educators.

**EDUCATORS AS LEARNERS**

Then another shift occurred. Along came standards, identifying

what students were expected to achieve and, significantly, what educators were responsible to teach so that students reached the standards. Professionals can no longer rely on yesterday's schooling practices. Teachers and administrators need opportunities for intentional learning, preparing them to enable students to reach high standards. Today's schools are expected to be successful with a diverse student population, which requires a broad spectrum of curriculum, instruction, and assessment approaches. Research and exemplary practice inform school administrators and teachers about more effective ways of developing students into successful readers, mathematicians, writers, and scientists.

### EDUCATORS AS LEARNING PROFESSIONALS

*Professional learning community* — these three words indicate that the professionals in a school are coming together as a group, in community, for the purpose of learning. And what are they learning? The learning is not

trivial, nor is it unplanned.

The question for professionals becomes: What should we intentionally learn in order to become more effective in our teaching so that students learn well? The community of professionals studies multiple sources of student data to see where students are succeeding in their learning and where they are performing poorly. Poor student performance in an area suggests that the professionals should undertake alternative approaches to teaching

students in the identified area. This information drives the work of the community.

### THE RESEARCH

While there is not a large body of research knowledge, there are significant study results that inform us about what and how the professional learning community functions. The literature reports the benefits to staff and to students when the staff is operating in a research-based professional learning community. We still have much to learn about how to initiate and develop a professional learning community in a school, and more studies are needed to follow the development of communities and their outcomes on student performance.

However, we can identify five components of research-based learning communities from what we know already:

**Shared beliefs, values and vision.** A basic component of the professional learning community is the shared vision, mission, and goals that the staff members see as their common purpose. Further, the professional community constructs a shared vision of the changes and improvements on which they will work for the increased learning of students.

**Shared and supportive leadership.** This means sharing power, authority, and decision making within boundaries defined by district and/or state policy. Teachers become actively involved in the organization. They broaden their perspectives, develop a higher level of professionalism, and deepen their effectiveness. The principal is key for the initiation and development of any new element in the school, but the sharing principal soon develops the leadership potential of the staff and becomes the collaborating “guide on the side” rather than the “sage on the stage.”

**Supportive conditions, both structural and relational.** The structural/physical conditions are those such as time to meet, a place to meet, and policies and resources that support the staff coming together for study and learning. Relational/human

capacities include the development of positive attitudes, respect, and high regard across all staff members as they engage in professional and social activities with one another. Trust is a significant factor for the community, and leaders should take steps to build this important capital.

These three components, or conditions, supply the infrastructure that supports the remaining two. The three serve as the shell that provides the environment in which the heart and soul of professional learning communities — intentional learning — can occur.

**Collective intentional learning and its application.** The work of the professional learning community is the intentional learning that the community determines it should pursue. This whole-school decision by the community guides staff members as they meet to learn and work in grade-level or department teams, and as the entire staff comes together regularly and frequently to learn together. The staff's decision about what to learn is based on deep exploration of student data to identify the needs of students and reflection on the extent to which the staff's work is producing the results intended. This allows staff members to determine where they are succeeding with students and where they are not, and to identify priority student learning areas that need attention. The identified student learning areas provide the target for the staff's intentional learning.

Staff members study student needs to make decisions about the adoption of new practices or programs and accept the need for their own learning to employ the new knowledge and practices effectively. They plan precisely what they will learn, how they will engage in their learning, and the resources needed. They may ask if there are colleagues in the school, at other schools, in the district office or intermediate service

The staff's decision about what to learn is based on deep exploration of student data to identify the needs of students and reflection on the extent to which the staff's work is producing the results intended.

agencies that can facilitate their learning. Their learning is incremental, job-embedded, and ongoing so they become proficient with new instructional practices. The mastery of this learning and its implementation in classrooms is followed by another cycle of reflection, discussion, assessment, and consideration of new professional learning that contributes to staff's effectiveness with students. The process is continuous.

**Shared personal practice.** The transfer of new learning to the classroom is enabled by the practice of peers helping peers, the fifth research-based component. Teachers are invited to visit each other's classrooms to observe, take notes, and share observations. When this component is developed well in the professional learning community, staff members are honest and open about what the teacher knows and doesn't know, and

what he or she needs to learn. While this practice is a significant shift in the way that teachers and administrators work, it provides the support and conditions necessary for change.

Research informs us about the significance of the coaching that educators use to support each other in deepening their learning and implementing new practices.

While there are instruments for assessing the presence or absence of the five research components, there is a quick means by which to gain insights about if and how the professional learning community members are engaged in their primary function, their own learning. Three questions addressed to the members can be very telling:

- What are you learning?
- Why are you learning that?
- How are you learning it?

These questions direct the mem-

bers' attention to the core purpose of the community's work — intentional professional learning for the purpose of improved student learning.

#### IN A NUTSHELL

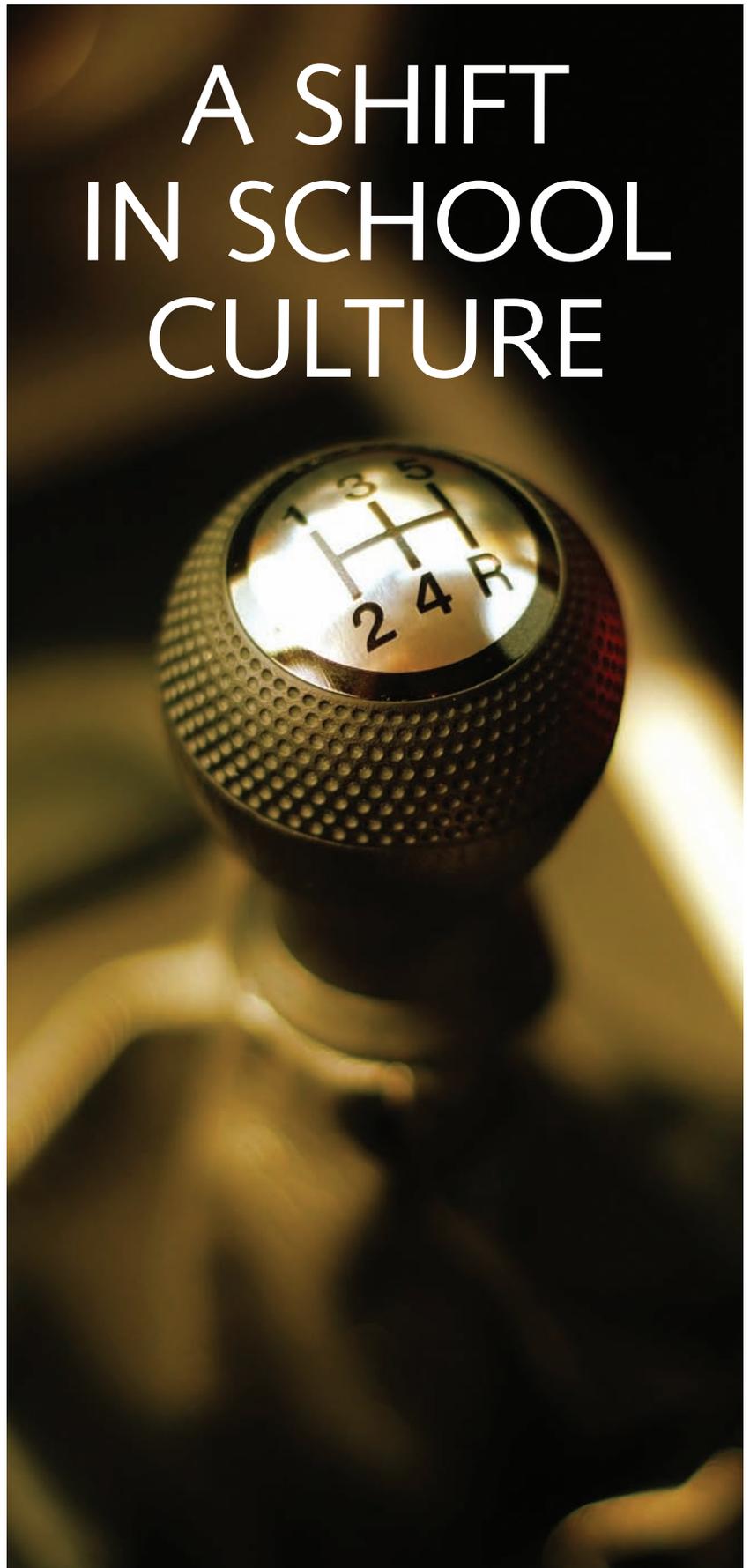
A professional learning community is not just a place where faculty meet regularly or groups come together to work collaboratively. A true professional learning community is a way of organizing the educational staff to engage in purposeful, collegial learning. This learning is intentional for the purpose of improving staff effectiveness so all students learn successfully to high standards. The professional learning community serves to promote quality teaching, the prime factor in whether students learn well. Thus, the professional learning community supports the school's purpose — high-quality student learning. ■

# A SHIFT IN SCHOOL CULTURE

**Collective  
commitments  
focus on change  
that benefits  
student learning**

BY ROBERT EAKER  
AND JANEL KEATING

**T**hese 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 communi-

ty. 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.

**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?**

### 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.

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.

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.

Mutual accountability and peer pressure will not always prevail. In

**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.**

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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# CRUNCHING NUMBERS, CHANGING PRACTICES

A CLOSE LOOK AT STUDENT DATA TURNS THE TIDE  
IN EFFORTS TO CLOSE THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP



BY GARY WADDELL AND GINNY LEE

**A**s I stood at the door of the 4th-grade classroom, I couldn't help but notice how busy the room was. Pairs of students sat at desks and on the floor with lapboards, taking turns reading and reacting to one another's stories. Other students were engrossed in writing at their desks. A few stood at the table on the far wall returning folders to the sets of files there. The teacher looked up and nodded at me

*Editor's note: Gary Waddell is the narrator.*

before returning her attention to the student sitting beside her, the piece of writing between them the obvious focus of their deep conversation. As principal of Viewmont Elementary School in Hickory, N.C., I noticed in this brief snapshot that every student was engaged and that this group of learners represented our school's vast range of achievement levels.

I recalled that this was the same teacher and classroom that I had observed only a couple of years before. But those were the only simi-

larities between the present and the past. In the past, children who were struggling — most often children of color, children living in poverty, and English language learners — were filling time with worksheets because they lacked the skills necessary to access the textbook material or understand the teacher's lectures. Something had transformed this classroom. I knew this wasn't a surface change, as these same students who had for years failed state assessments were now passing in great numbers. I knew that

high-achieving students were also scoring better. Nor was this change limited to a single classroom.

Classrooms throughout this school building told the same story, a story in which students and staff alike



were both learners and teachers. I nodded at the teacher with a smile and closed the door.

When I had arrived as the new principal of the school three years earlier, I found a still-new facility, a friendly teaching staff, and a solid, if noninclusive, core of parents eager to be involved. A deeper look revealed a school struggling with change, including recent demographic changes. Rising numbers of students of color,

students living in poverty, English language learners, and their parents were largely absent from conversations about school programs and practices. Most troubling, the data showed clearly that whatever was happening in the classrooms was not benefiting these students, as they were failing to meet proficiency benchmarks in droves.

A closer look at the data showed that, while many children were performing well, the achievement gap between the highest-performing group (white students) and the lowest performing groups (black, Latino, English language learners, and socio-economically disadvantaged students) was around 40%. I knew that addressing this gap was not something that could be saved for a better time. I was filled with a sense of urgency and deep moral purpose to change whatever it was about the instruction that we offered that was not serving our students.

This article describes the journey that Viewmont undertook to become a professional learning community and specifically focuses on the role of principal leadership in nurturing a faculty from isolated practice to data-driven, collaborative professional work.

In *Reframing Organizations*, Bolman and Deal (1997) identify four “frames” or perspectives for examining school organizations. During our transformation, we were intentional in addressing two of Bolman and Deal’s frames.

We were guided by Bolman and Deal’s recommendations on goals, rational planning, structures, and technology as well as their insights on addressing individual teacher differences.

## DATA AND DIALOGUE

The question that nagged me when I arrived at the school was how to begin a conversation about wholesale instructional reform with an experienced, respected staff that largely felt good about the job that they were doing. The answer, for us, began with two D’s – data and dialogue. This concept capitalizes on data as an impetus to examine practice and dialogue as the means of engaging an experienced faculty. Becoming a professional learning community requires careful attention to both the technical dimension of professional practice as well as the human dimension of authentic engagement.

As the staff met to review state summative achievement data, we agreed that our conversation was not about assigning blame but about owning the achievement of our students. With that understood, we took an honest look at the data. The mood was somber as the data showed that, despite our best efforts, black and Latino students and English language learners were consistently performing below their white counterparts. Working through the data sets from current and previous years, we looked for themes, developed hunches, and asked questions.

We continued our data conversations in a series of small- and large-group meetings. This initial step of grounding the work in the reality of the data was essential as we talked about our practice and why it wasn’t getting the results that we had hoped to find. The data prepared us to get past the blame-the-victim mentality that some schools experience.

**Principal leadership can bring a faculty from isolated practice to data-driven, collaborative professional work.**

## A VISION OF TRANSFORMATION

Our mission became to transform our staff into a community of learn-

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ers. The journey to becoming a professional learning community requires addressing specific practices — what shall we change? — as well as attitude — how shall we create and sustain a belief that it can be done? We began with the assumption that all children could perform well and that poor performance was a reflection of our own practice.

Despite being regarded as an effective school, we had a common understanding that our past practices and beliefs had gotten us to where we were, which wasn't working for many of our students. Teachers, specialists, and support staff worked in study groups to explore texts about literacy, our target area. We formed teams to combine staff who struggled with concepts with those more comfortable with the new instructional practices we were learning. Each team had a leader with both a mastery of the material and credibility with his or

her colleagues. These teams met regularly, each with its own facilitator.

By the end of the first year, each team made presentations at grade-level meetings and with the entire staff, sharing information and practices we agreed would most help our students. The vague concern that many of our kids weren't doing well had, over the course of a year's study, become something more tangible. We needed to change instruction to be more responsive to the needs of

all learners. Differentiation of instruction seemed to present the greatest potential to build our capacity to reach all of our students.

### CHOICES AND EXPECTATIONS

With differentiated instruction, we chose an instructional model that

**Viewmont Elementary School**  
Hickory, N.C.

**Enrollment:** 569  
**Staff (faculty only):** 39  
**Racial/ethnic mix:**

|                                |       |
|--------------------------------|-------|
| <b>White:</b>                  | 47.6% |
| <b>Black:</b>                  | 31.8% |
| <b>Hispanic:</b>               | 16.4% |
| <b>Asian/Pacific Islander:</b> | 3.8%  |
| <b>Native American:</b>        | 0.3%  |
| <b>Other:</b>                  | 0%    |

**English language learners:** 15.1%  
**Number of languages spoken:** 8  
**Free/reduced lunch:** 59%  
**Special education:** 11.8%  
**Contact:** Ann Stalaker, director of curriculum and instruction  
**E-mail:** stalakeran@hickoryschools.net.

was research-based and that made sense to us as a result of our inquiry. While working in study groups had been an effective tool for teacher learning, we were intentional in not yet requiring every teacher to make wholesale changes to instructional practices. At this point in the journey, there were early adopters who chose to try the new practices. The majority of the staff, however, approached deep instructional change with more caution. For them, taking the time to learn and observe early adopters minimized their resistance and allowed them to engage more fully in the learning process.

In our second year of work together, the staff attained a deeper understanding of literacy instruction and our instructional model. To support learning and implementation, we established a model of peer coaching and paired each teacher with a colleague. We agreed to change new practices gradually, implementing one new component of our model each month. For some teachers, this was a smooth process. Others needed individual support and assistance. The school provided substitutes so that peers could visit one another's classrooms to observe the first attempts at implementation. Teachers also had

opportunities to observe model lessons in a fishbowl format and experience specific training on aspects of the new instructional model. Roving teams of substitutes released grade-level teams for half-day meetings with a literacy specialist to discuss what they were learning as they moved from intellectual understanding of the concepts to implementation. These meetings provided deep professional learning as we addressed the sometimes painful byproducts of changing well-established models of teaching.

We were tired by the end of the second year. We had made significant changes in instructional practices. About a third of the staff was flying high in implementing our new constructions of teaching and learning, and another third of the staff was partially implementing and sometimes struggling with the new instructional model. The rest of the staff resisted the changes. They were good at what they did and had received high praise for it in years past. These were largely experienced veterans whose old models of teaching had had varying degrees of success in the past but were becoming increasingly less effective in meeting the needs of our present students. Further, these models of teaching were now firmly entrenched. The difficulty of planning and implementing decentralized instruction, selecting texts for students, and coaching along with providing direct instruction was overwhelming.

Our work was at a critical point. Could we sustain our changes or would the resisters pull us back into more comfortable, if less effective, instructional modes? The staff meeting when we analyzed our newest data set at the end of the second year was the turning point. Staff members gasped excitedly when we looked at the data. First, we noticed that the student body overall had increased in proficiency. As we dug deeper, we saw that the students who had traditional-

Despite being regarded as an effective school, we had a common understanding that our past practices and beliefs had gotten us to where we were, which wasn't working for many of our students.

ly performed at the bottom of the achievement gap showed sharp spikes in their achievement. The gap was shrinking. As we analyzed the data, each teacher compared schoolwide trends to his or her own classroom data sets. Some saw drastic improvement in their students' scores. Others, largely those in the resisters camp, realized that our school had shown improvement despite rather than because of the performance of their students. The differences in achievement were striking between those who were adopting the reforms and those who were entrenched in their old ways.

After the meeting, I walked into my office to find a group of the teachers who had been key resisters waiting for me. Closing the door, they said what wasn't spoken at the meeting. They saw the power of this new model of teaching and learning for students, and they wanted that for their kids, too. They asked for help.

### REACHING CRITICAL MASS

This was the tipping point. We went from a school where some teachers were implementing a new instructional model to a school that had reached critical mass in sharing a common vision about how we approach teaching and learning. The human side of the journey had caught up with the technical work around instructional innovation, and every faculty member was ready to engage in the professional learning community.

By the third year, most of the serious resistance had faded away. Teachers continued to have questions while implementing new constructions of teaching and learning. We provided ongoing support with half-day meetings, model lessons, peer coaching, and whole-group conversations. The key difference was an expectation of schoolwide implementation. By the end of the third year,

our data validated the hard work of teachers and staff. All of our students continued to excel. The achievement gap had closed from about 40% to less than 10% over the course of three years. We had the highest minority achievement in the district, and our schoolwide proficiency reached 80%, earning the school a statewide designation as a school of distinction.

The school learned several important lessons in these three years. The first is that changing instructional practices is not for the faint of heart. True reform requires passion, daily commitment, and a shared belief that trying and failing are better than not trying and having moderate success. Such change requires a mental picture of what teaching and learning would look like after full implementation. This mental picture that we held guided the daily decisions of the school. Our model of a professional learning community worked, and it required numerous small decisions and flexibility about which steps to pursue at each juncture. The work was hard and worth every effort as we better served our children, particularly the most vulnerable among them.

The outcomes that we reaped as a community of learners were significant as well. Creating a culture of inquiry and a commitment to do whatever it takes to reach all students permeated the school. The staff's commitment to reflection, research, and professional growth became embedded in the school's daily work. The staff's attitude changed from perceiving ourselves only as teachers to framing ourselves as learners, too. And that changed everything.

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# TWO HIGH SCHOOL DISTRICTS RECITE THE ABCs

OF PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES

BY TIMOTHY D. KANOLD, MONA TONCHEFF, AND CINDY DOUGLAS

"I refuse to accept the idea that the 'is-ness' of man's present nature makes him morally incapable of reaching up for the eternal "ought-ness" that forever confronts him."

— *Martin Luther King Jr., accepting the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964*



Imagine teams of high school educators — teachers, counselors, principals, central office leaders, curriculum specialists — working together to overcome the student achievement barriers of poverty, ethnicity, apathy, and inconsistencies in rigor and access to the curriculum in order to pursue the “ought-ness” of a better day. Imagine the adults in these schools working collaboratively to decide how to impact student achievement. Imagine student performance results on an upward trend of improvement unprecedented for the district.

In 2003-04, the adults at Phoenix Union High School District in Phoenix, Ariz., and Grossmont Union High School District in eastern San Diego County, Calif., adopted this vision of a future “ought-ness.” Although many miles apart, these two high school districts were similar in

demographics, number of schools, number of students, levels of poverty, issues of educating all children to meet or exceed state standards, and the general lack of access and preparation for all students into a college readiness curriculum.

Phoenix Union and Grossmont Union adopted the essential tenets of a professional learning community. Faculty and administration focused on the use of collaborative teams to develop adult knowledge capacity to teach, plan, and assess. The journey was built upon an adult commitment to pursue three ABCs of a professional learning community. They are:

- A)** Attacking the entitlement of private practice by creating a collaborative teacher work environment;
- B)** Building the learning capacity of the adults in each high school within the context of the workplace, and
- C)** Creating a result-oriented focus for all teacher teams and school administrative teams to bring coherence to adult actions and provide student interventions.

## **A**TTACKING PRIVATE PRACTICE

Teacher isolation is the enemy of improvement. The National Commission on Teaching and America's Future (2003) indicates quality teaching requires collegial interchange within the norm of professional learning communities. Embracing Fullan's (2007) assertion regarding "deprivatizing" teacher practice, removing teacher isolation and encouraging meaningful teacher collaborative work time became a priori-

ty starting point for each district's high schools.

### **Phoenix Union High School District**

In 2002, Phoenix Union's math state testing results indicated only 14% of sophomore students met or exceeded the state math standards. Phoenix Union needed a change. There had to be a way to combine the hard work of teachers with a more coherent curriculum to raise student achievement. Phoenix Union began four initiatives to transform from a culture of isolation and individualism into a collaborative culture: teacher training in mathematics and pedagogy, team leader training for course-level professional learning communities, on-site teacher observation to make teacher actions transparent, and administrator training to support professional learning communities at each school.

During the first year, teachers spent Saturdays and teacher professional development days reflecting on their classroom instruction and assessments. With the assistance of outside experts working on each campus as instructional coaches and learning community mentors, teachers were asked to reflect on how they could make a difference. Consultants refused to allow teacher teams to blame low achievement solely on the students. They reframed conversations so teachers and administrators would examine the impact of their adult actions on student learning. Teachers resisted at first. They were used to shutting the classroom door and working privately, but this was no longer a viable option.

### **Grossmont Union High School District**

In 2003, the state of California categorized Grossmont Union as a Program Improvement district. The solutions the district implemented — new textbooks and programs, new technology, reduced class size — did not lead to improved student achievement. The cultural makeover began with a "think big, start small" philosophy. Starting with algebra teams at three sites, educators met the idea of collaboration with guarded optimism or resistance. For those resistant to losing perceived autonomy, the collaborative model was difficult. For faculty members who were already collaborating, the reality of leaving "collaboration-lite" and entering into professional learning community interdependence was a difficult transformation. As on-site consultants provided questions that involved personal teaching agendas, such as grades, tests, and homework assignments, reaching agreement to ensure consistent rigor and equity for all students became complex. Eventually, however, teachers redefined their common purpose as providing learning for every student, not just the ones they were personally teaching. Leaving egos at the door and entering into conversations focused on what was best for all students led to improved student outcomes.

**In both high school districts, faculty and administration focused on the use of collaborative teams to develop adult knowledge capacity to teach, plan, and assess.**

## **B**UILDING ADULT LEARNING CAPACITY

Both districts knew student results would not improve unless teachers participated in learning within the "context of their workplace" (Elmore, 2007) to develop their adult capacity together. The districts' vision of a pro-

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fessional learning community team — educators working interdependently to achieve common goals for which they are mutually accountable — became the foundation to measure the success of each teacher team.

**Phoenix Union High School District**

To build adult learning capacity, the district and consultants trained administrators and evaluators to identify and support quality mathematics instruction and assessment. The mathematics instructional leaders on each campus participated in the National Council of Supervisors of Mathematics summer PLC Leadership Academy. As a team, they created SMART goals (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time sensitive) and action plans to improve student achievement. Each campus focused on pre-algebra, algebra, and geometry teams, which had the great-

est potential to impact student achievement on the Arizona Instrument to Measure Standards, the 10th-grade state test students must pass to graduate. Each team created common artifacts, including homework assignments, pacing calendars, formative assessments, and final exams. Through weekly professional dialogue, these teams defined

equity as access to course taking and quality instruction that would ensure higher levels of understanding and achievement for all students.

Site team leaders across the district collaborated four times a year to learn how to facilitate a team. Team leaders learned the basics of establishing norms, setting agendas, taking minutes, and explored more in-depth topics, such as dealing with difficult team members and advocating for support from administration.

**At Phoenix Union: Site team leaders across the district collaborated four times a year to learn how to facilitate a team.**

**Grossmont Union High School District**  
El Cajon, Calif.

**Number of high schools:** 11  
(9 comprehensive, 2 alternative)  
**Grades:** 9-12  
**Enrollment:** 20,185  
**Staff:** 1,511  
**Racial/ethnic mix:**  
**White:** 51.1%  
**Black:** 7.4%  
**Hispanic:** 28.3%  
**Asian/Pacific Islander:** 5.3%  
**Native American:** 1.6%  
**Other:** 6.3%  
**Limited English proficient:** 11.9%  
**Languages spoken:** 42  
**Free/reduced lunch:** 31%  
**Special education:** 13.8%  
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**Phoenix Union High School District**  
Phoenix, Ariz.

**Number of high schools:** 17  
(12 comprehensive, 5 small)  
**Grades:** 9-12  
**Enrollment:** 25,322  
**Staff:** 2,742  
**Racial/ethnic mix:**  
**White:** 7.1%  
**Black:** 9.9%  
**Hispanic:** 77.9%  
**Asian/Pacific Islander:** 1.8%  
**Native American:** 3.3%  
**Limited English proficient:** 14.5%  
**Languages spoken:** 63  
**Free/reduced lunch:** 64.5%  
**Special education:** 11.8%  
**Contact:** Mona Toncheff  
**E-mail:** toncheff@phxhs.k12.az.us

**Grossmont Union High School District**

Consultants provided full-day professional learning community staff development four times a year for team leaders and teacher teams. The district provided support for teacher teams in algebra, geometry, English 9, and English 10, and then expanded to support for teams in most other subjects. Leaders at each school worked together to determine a long-range

plan for systemic growth of the communities.

Adult capacity-building included the administrative team. Principals met monthly in their own learning community and openly shared successes, issues, and concerns, as they created site-based SMART goals, focused on areas of poor student performance, and created plans for supporting required adult collaboration at each school site.

**CREATE A RESULTS-ORIENTED FOCUS**

In highly effective professional learning communities, teams of teachers evaluate the effectiveness of instruction and curriculum by establishing student achievement goals. Teacher teams discuss previous years' trend data and examine specific areas of program weakness. Achievement goals can focus on reducing failure rates, increasing access to rigorous curricula, increasing the percent of students attending college, and improving student performance on state and national exams (Kanold, 2006).

When the adults in the school no longer ignore poor student performance, professional learning community energy produces a laser focus on collective adult action for students not able to exhibit the required knowledge. Intervention for student success becomes the norm.

**Phoenix Union High School District**

As part of the effort to transform into a data-driven culture, Phoenix Union teachers and curriculum specialists created power standards for every math course. The district used team leaders from each campus to create common districtwide assessments for each course.

The teams' SMART goals required evaluation of progress by

continuously studying student work and results. Were students struggling or were they learning the content? The learning communities began to look beyond the summative purpose of tests. Teacher teams used frequent formative assessments to determine student progress in relation to the team's SMART goals and then to adjust instruction based on results.

When teacher teams planned their SMART goals each spring, they identified student interventions required to help all students meet the goals. Each school established mandatory tutoring for poor-performing students. Many campus algebra teams required students to attend a second hour of math, which was structured to preteach and reteach difficult concepts through differentiated instruction and rich hands-on experiences to develop student skills.

The district also addressed the inequity caused by placing 9th-grade students in pre-algebra rather than algebra. To change this practice, the district offered a summer school program for incoming 9th graders. Seventy-eight percent of 9th graders participating in the intervention passed first semester math with an A, B, or C — significantly higher than the district average. An added

benefit was the 28% drop in the number of students enrolled districtwide in pre-algebra over the previous four years, and a 47% increase in the number of students enrolled in Algebra 1 — the gatekeeper course for the college readiness program.

#### Grossmont Union High School District

With the introduction of SMART goals, teacher teams intensified their focus on results. Each principal made a commitment to require each depart-

### STUDENT RESULTS ON THE RISE

#### Phoenix Union High School District

ARIZONA'S INSTRUMENT TO MEASURE STANDARDS (AIMS) STUDENT RESULTS

10th-grade math

**2002:** 14% meet or exceed performance level

**2007:** 56% meet or exceed performance level

2007 AIMS GAINS COMPARED TO 2006

**Math:** 5 out of 10 schools 8% gain or higher

**Reading:** 5 out of 10 schools 3% gain or higher

**Writing:** 8 out of 10 schools 8% gain or higher

STUDENTS ENROLLED IN ALGEBRA 1

**Fall 2003:** 3,279

**Fall 2006:** 4,727

**Source:** Arizona Dept. of Education and Phoenix Union High School District.

#### Grossmont Union High School District

After five years of no change or increased rates in the number of students receiving D's or F's, the rate since 2003 has declined in 36 of 40 subjects and for every population subgroup, including special education and English language learners.

For example, at Granite Hills High School, the rate of students receiving D's or F's in all math classes dropped 13.5% in three years. At Monte Vista High School, a Title I school, the rate of students receiving D's or F's in Algebra 1 dropped from 53% to 26% in two years.

**Source:** Grossmont Union High School District.

**At Grossmont Union: The district learned that interventions were most effective when embedded in the school day.**

ment of the school to set performance improvement goals based on the data.

In Grossmont Union, some teacher teams believed common assessment data meant prescriptive teacher planning. District leaders continually emphasized that each teacher team was empowered to provide instruction based on student needs. As common assessments became a high priority, conversations shifted to their purpose. Teams no longer viewed assessments as simply a means to record a grade, but as a diagnostic tool to inform quality instruction and determine needs for student intervention.

The district learned that interventions were most effective when embedded in the school day. Monte Vista High School implemented one

particularly effective structure: They created a 56-minute lunch period. During first semester, all 9th graders were enrolled in a freshman advisory class during the first 26 minutes of lunch. They were taught study skills, team-building skills, and school pride as they were connected with upper classmen mentors. The 26-minute block within lunch was also used as a mandatory tutorial for freshman with two or more D's or F's. Monte Vista has successfully lowered the rate of freshman receiving D's or F's every year since the inception of the advisory period.

### MAKING THE VISION A REALITY

In both districts, professional learning community efforts started in

the mathematics departments and progressed to other courses. As district mathematics scores steadily improved, instructional leaders from other content areas followed the lead of the mathematics teams in creating common assessments and discussing teacher practices for evidence of student learning. District and school leaders supported the teacher teams as district achievement rates reached unprecedented levels compared to previous years (see results in box on p. 26), while more students received access to the college preparatory core curriculum.

Both districts sustained the effort of the ABCs of a professional learning community despite adult resistance at times. The educators' transformational work has been inspiring as they learn how their collaborative learning

**At Phoenix Union, the teams' SMART goals required evaluation of progress by continuously studying student work and results. Were students struggling or were they learning the content? The learning communities began to look beyond the summative purpose of tests.**

and development together make a difference in student performance. The schools are stomping on inequity and creating communities of success beyond results they could not have

imagined just a few years ago. And why? Because a core group of adults in each of the schools decided to convince themselves and their students to pursue the "ought-ness" of a better day. Imagine.

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BY TOM MANY  
AND DENNIS KING

**H**ow do some school districts not only attain excellence but sustain it over time in the face of remarkable challenges? Two districts — Blue Valley School District in Overland Park, Kan., and Kildeer Countryside Community Consolidated School District 96 in Buffalo Grove, Ill. — have managed to do just that by functioning as professional learning communities.

These districts have achieved remarkable results over an extended period of time despite changes in principal, teacher, and student demographics. In these districts, the keys to success have been the creation of greater clarity and coherence with a single-minded focus on implementation of professional learning communities districtwide.

# Districts speak with **ONE VOICE**

CLARITY AND  
COHERENCE COME  
FROM  
PROFESSIONAL  
LEARNING  
COMMUNITIES



## SETTING THE STAGE

In *The New Meaning of Educational Change* (2001), Michael Fullan states, “Solutions must come through the development of shared meaning. The interface between individual and collective meaning and action in everyday situations is where change stands or fails” (p. 9). Fullan suggests that when districts work to create greater coherence in the system,

“the key words are meaning, coherence, connectedness, synergy, alignment, and capacity for continuous improvement” (p.19).

Blue Valley and Kildeer took similar paths to implement professional learning communities. Both boards of education identified improved student achievement as a high priority and endorsed professional learning communities as the primary vehicle for

school improvement. Historically, Blue Valley and Kildeer had practiced a form of site-based management that featured decentralized decision-making. Responsibility for school improvement plans had been delegated to individual schools, so the board's decision to endorse and publicly support professional learning communities as the model for school improvement at all schools was a significant cultural shift in both districts.

The development of shared meaning within the organization was a second crucial step. Both districts recognized that everyone involved needed to be familiar enough with learning community concepts to speak with one voice. Traditional administrative meetings in Blue Valley and Kildeer were replaced with regular, ongoing learning opportunities to develop a common vocabulary and a deeper understanding of professional learning communities. Within a few months, administrators in both districts could articulate the key concepts.

Both districts also committed to fewer goals and resisted the temptation to shift priorities. Planning in Blue Valley focused on two specific goals: unprecedented academic success and unparalleled student growth. Each goal has a series of SMART targets (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time sensitive) designed to measure progress within the system on an annual basis. Kildeer replaced laundry lists containing dozens of tasks with as few as three or four SMART goals tightly linked to student learning that were reviewed throughout the year.

Finally, both districts also fostered a culture of continuous improvement

by becoming comfortable with being uncomfortable. Blue Valley maintained an unwavering focus on moving the goals of the strategic plan forward. Kildeer created what the district called a “relentless sense of restlessness” around student learning. The culture of both districts was characterized by a sense of continually moving towards better solutions.

### SUCCESSFUL IMPLEMENTATION OF PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES

Frequent professional development for district and building administrators repeatedly emphasized the importance of three key concepts: a focus on learning, a collaborative culture, and a results orientation.

### FOCUS ON LEARNING

In the early stages of implementation, teachers kept asking for more learning opportunities, but both districts realized that if they continued to provide only training, they ran the risk of becoming trapped in the early stages of implementation. One staff developer said, “One of the key moments occurred when our teachers moved from training to doing. ... Once teachers began to ‘work on the work,’ their questions became richer and more insightful. The focus of staff development shifted from providing training to providing targeted support in areas where teachers needed it the most. And one of the most powerful ways we found to support teachers was to give them time during the school day to work on implementation.” To create a focus on learning, teachers in both districts spent time discussing what students should be

expected to know and be able to do and identified skills all students should develop as a result of instruction at each grade level, class, or course of study.

Blue Valley accomplished this through curriculum mapping. Teachers developed maps based on the essential indicators identified in the district curriculum. These essential indicators served as a foundation from which to create essential questions and focused reflections on the specific content and skills being taught to support the curriculum. All of these data were stored in the map itself, to allow for focused conversations within collaborative teacher teams. As teachers became clear about what they wanted students to learn, Blue Valley teachers used their maps to align common formative assessments and grade-level or departmental interventions to enhance the learning process for students within each grade level or subject area.

Kildeer also engaged teachers in a process to generate essential outcomes for every subject in every grade level. Each school was responsible for identifying the critical outcomes for a single content area; for example, one elementary school drafted outcomes for reading and another for mathematics. Essential outcomes drafted by a single school or department were sent to districtwide content-specific teams of teachers to review the initial effort. This step spread responsibility for developing outcome statements throughout the district, but limited the focus to a single content area. The essential outcomes created by individual schools or departments were revised to

**In the early stages of implementation, teachers kept asking for more learning opportunities, but both districts realized that if they continued to provide only training, they ran the risk of becoming trapped in the early stages of implementation.**

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include suggested changes and sent to faculties organized by content area for a third review with a focus on alignment. Finally, the products were sent to teachers for one last overview before being published. Annually, grade-level or department teacher teams are the first to review the essential outcomes, followed by a representative group of teachers at the district level and, finally, by the board of education. This process built agreement and commitment to what students should learn.

With essential outcomes in place, both districts developed assessments to provide teachers with information about how students were learning. At Kildeer, the outcomes allowed teachers to design quarterly districtwide, same-subject assessments for all students. In Blue Valley, teachers identified specific learning targets to write assessments for learning based on the content in their curriculum maps.

**A COLLABORATIVE CULTURE**

The collaborative process was essential for shifting responsibility for the school improvement process to teacher teams within each school. Teachers working in collaborative settings allowed both districts to embed professional learning on specific district initiatives. Additionally, a systemic collaborative process enabled teachers to focus on students rather than teaching, shifting their professional learning to classroom implementation.

Building on the results of the assessments, teachers in both districts created ways to provide more time and support for students. Initially, teachers in Kildeer and Blue Valley used data from summative assessments such as the Northwest Evaluation Association’s Measures of

**Blue Valley School District**  
Overland Park, Kan.

**Number of schools:** 31  
**Grades:** K-12  
**Enrollment:** 20,455  
**Staff:** 1,782

**Racial/ethnic mix:**

|                         |       |
|-------------------------|-------|
| White:                  | 85.2% |
| Black:                  | 3.8%  |
| Hispanic:               | 2.4%  |
| Asian/Pacific Islander: | 7.2%  |
| Native American:        | 0.3%  |
| Other:                  | 1.1%  |

**Limited English proficient:** 1.5%  
**Languages spoken:** 53  
**Free/reduced lunch:** 3.7%  
**Special education:** 15.9%

**Contact:** Dennis King, assistant superintendent for school improvement  
**E-mail:** dking@bluevalleyk12.org

Academic Progress test to identify students at risk of failing. They supported those students through intervention and remedial programs targeted to areas of weakness. This work took place at the school level across the district and was directed by the principals.

The districts initially created systematic pyramids of intervention, which they soon enhanced to be more responsive. Blue Valley realized that collaborative teams within each school required additional district intervention strategies to support their work. The district developed a continuum of interventions to support specific curriculum areas: for all students, for some students, and for a few students. This formalized structure helped collaborative teams access district resources to support building-level interventions. Kildeer experimented with a variety of approaches to providing students with more time and support, and conversations between and among principals generated new ideas and strategies for interventions.

**SUPPORT FOR COLLABORATION**

The districts devoted administrative meetings to honing specific skills

**Kildeer Countryside Community Consolidated School District 96**  
Buffalo Grove, Ill.

**Number of schools:** 7  
**Grades:** K-12  
**Enrollment:** 3,359  
**Staff (faculty only):** 214

**Racial/ethnic mix:**

|                         |       |
|-------------------------|-------|
| White:                  | 79.2% |
| Black:                  | 1.2%  |
| Hispanic:               | 3.3%  |
| Asian/Pacific Islander: | 14.6% |
| Native American:        | 0.1%  |
| Other:                  | 1.7%  |

**Limited English proficient:** 3.9%  
**Languages spoken:** 23  
**Free/reduced lunch:** 3.7%  
**Special education:** 17%

**Contact:** Tom Many, superintendent of schools  
**E-mail:** tmany@district96.k12.il.us

for reaching consensus, facilitating team meetings, and responding to resisters. School staff came to consensus on the definitions of important terms such as intervention and remediation, formative and summative, differentiation and extension, and accommodation and modification.

The teams developed common expectations and were responsible for identifying essential outcomes, developing common assessments, establishing targets and benchmarks, analyzing assessment results, and planning for interventions. Each team was expected to identify and evaluate team norms continuously, to establish protocols to guide team work, to establish SMART goals, and to celebrate successes.

**RESULTS ORIENTATION**

Two initiatives helped the districts develop a results orientation. First, teachers participated in data retreats to learn protocols for analyzing data at the district level. Second, principals shared the experience of turning data into useable information to drive instruction.

**The collaborative process was essential for shifting responsibility for the school improvement process to teacher teams within each school.**

Kildeer teachers were hesitant to work with data until they had tools for data analysis. During two-day data retreats, teachers learned specific protocols to identify strengths and vulnerabilities, develop action plans, and implement timelines around specific goals. Participation in the data retreats gave teachers confidence and helped them learn to analyze results of the common assessments. This district-level process of data analysis helped develop a cadre of advocates for using data to drive instruction at the building level.

In Blue Valley, school leadership teams with principals, assistant principals, and key teacher leaders developed and shared a common data protocol. The data protocol allowed schools to investigate their own data and make predictions. Each leadership team introduced the data protocol to

grade-level teams so they could make predictions and analyze the results. Teachers in Blue Valley had an opportunity to examine their practice for turning data into useable information.

Using a strategy very similar to one suggested by Rick DuFour (2007), Kildeer principals meet quarterly to review results of district assessments. Principals present their student achievement results to the superintendent, key central office staff, and their colleagues. The principal interprets the data, identifies strengths and vulnerabilities, and clarifies his or her strategies for responding to the weakest areas. Other administrators ask

clarifying questions and, more importantly, offer support, suggestions, and recommendations regarding successful

practices. Similarly, Blue Valley principals investigate data from their sites on an ongoing basis. Each semester, principals share specific intervention strategies for helping students who were not successful during the previous semester.

The practice of presenting student achievement data in a public way had several benefits. First, every principal was required to generate specific actions that were linked to a specific purpose — raising student achievement. Second, because the data were discussed in such a public way, an ineffective principal could no longer cover up his or her lack of success by blaming ineffective teachers or the manner in which other schools prepared the students to be successful. Finally, principals learned from one another and created the habit of continuously looking for better ways to analyze and interpret assessment results.

## RESULTS FOR STUDENTS

Blue Valley's implementation of professional learning communities began during the 2004-05 school year. Student results have reached new heights since then. The district aggregate for students meeting standard or above for the 2007 state assessments for reading was 94.9% and in math 93.5%. Additionally, each grade level (grades 3-10) exceeded the anticipated mean growth from the Measures of Academic Progress Assessment from fall 2006 to spring 2007. Blue Valley was the only district with more than 10,000 students in Kansas to make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) and the only district larger than 6,000 students to have every individual school make AYP.

Student results at Kildeer were equally impressive. For years, results of the state assessments in this K-8 district of 3,400 students showed that 75% to 80% of students met or exceeded state standards. The measure

of success changed in 2001 when the board of education set a goal that 90% of all students would meet or exceed state standards in literacy and numeracy. Since professional learning community implementation began in 2001, student achievement has improved every year. Data from 2007 indicate that more than 96% of all students now meet or exceed state standards. Over the same period, the number of Kildeer students placing in at least one AP or honors-level course at Stevenson High School has increased from 24% to 49%. Further, as many as 80% of the district's special education students at the middle schools are now meeting state standards in reading and math.

## ACHIEVING CLARITY AND COHERENCE

Blue Valley and Kildeer School Districts used professional learning communities to achieve a higher level of clarity and coherence. They learned that a coherent message throughout the district linked to a limited number of goals allowed for the big ideas of professional learning communities — a focus on learning, collaboration, and results orientation — to permeate the system. Establishing a clear direction, developing shared meaning, and focusing on a limited number of goals provided the clarity these districts needed to improve results for all students.

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**Blue Valley and Kildeer School Districts learned that a coherent message throughout the district linked to a limited number of goals allowed for the big ideas of professional learning communities — a focus on learning, collaboration, and results orientation — to permeate the system.**

KEEP THE LEADERSHIP

# PIPELINE FLOWING

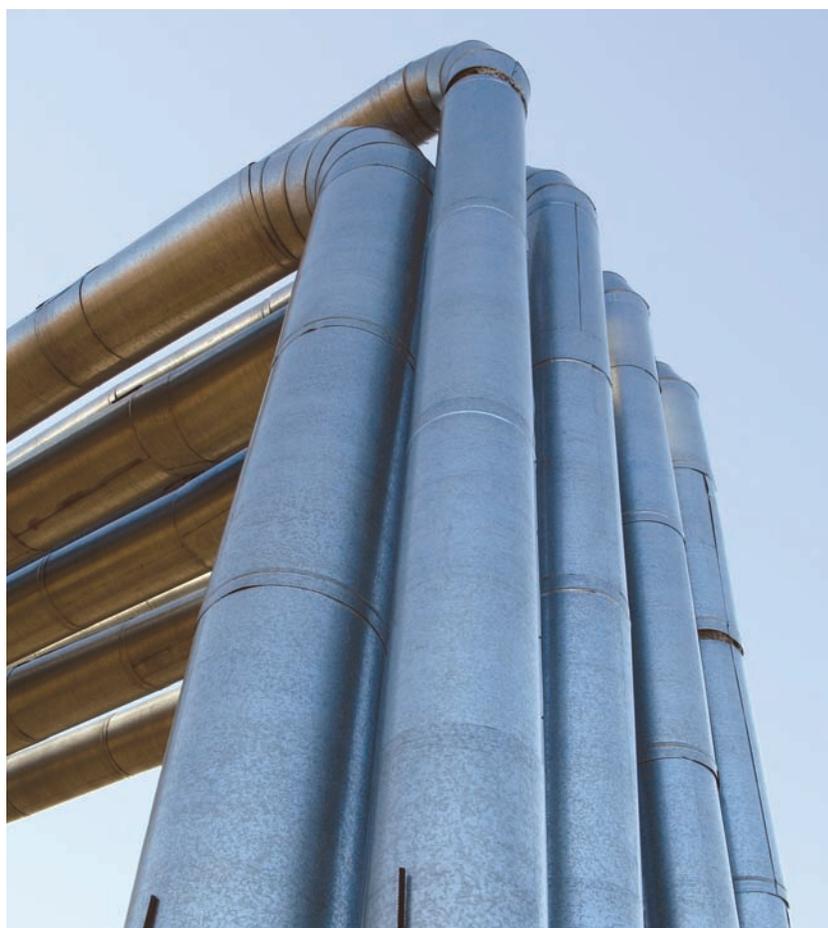
**Districts can adopt these 5 strategies to streamline succession planning**

BY BILL HALL

A school improvement process that relies on professionals learning in concert with each other also holds the key to developing the leadership capacity and sustainability that schools and systems so desperately need. Professional learning communities thrive when districts experience consistent leadership across the district, so succession planning and learning community development must go hand-in-hand. Michael Fullan suggests in *Leadership & Sustainability* (2005) that established professional learning communities are more likely to be disrupted or discontinued when a new leader steps into the principalship. Focusing on internal leadership sustainability can counter this discontinuity of direction (Fullan, 2005, p. 31). Building professional learning communities is the first step in ensuring continuity.

There are a number of ways

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schools and districts can promote leadership development to survive the cultural changes that eventually affect professional learning communities. Here are five essential strategies that facilitate leadership development when implemented in the context of professional learning communities.

## 1. CREATE A FORMAL LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT PLAN

School systems cannot leave leadership development to chance. Schools must create a formal leadership development plan that specifies leadership development components

and how they relate to each other. The plan must answer such questions as, “Who is responsible for leadership development in our schools and district? What are their specific roles and responsibilities? How will we develop all levels of leadership — at the instructional level, at the support level, and at the administrative level?”

To strategically use professional learning communities to develop the leadership capacity of their personnel, organizations must discuss such questions as, “How will the district support the development of professional learning communities at the school and district levels? What resources must be provided throughout the system to ensure professional learning communities are successfully introduced, implemented, and sustained?”

Monitoring the progress of this plan regularly and reporting the results to the district’s senior leadership are critical elements of this strategy. Planning formalizes the district’s commitment to develop leadership and holds district leaders accountable. A formal, written plan must clearly identify who is responsible for what action and must be communicated to all stakeholders, underscoring the importance of professional learning communities throughout the leadership development continuum.

## 2. DEVELOP A SUCCESSION PLAN

Develop a succession plan at the district level, emphasizing a formal process that spells out how districts will replace their leaders. This plan identifies critical leadership positions and communicates how the district prepares and develops individuals to become eligible for these positions when they are left vacant through

retirements, resignations, and promotions. Districts without formal succession plans waste time focusing on filling individual vacancies. They are constantly trying to answer, “Who will we get to fill a specific employee’s vacancy?” Formal succession planning focuses on the “how” of filling vacancies (the process), not on the “who” will fill each vacancy (the individual).

Professional learning communities can be an integral component of succession planning, creating a critical mass of leaders that will continue the focus on school improvement and student achievement. Schools and districts that do not adopt formal succession planning processes and structures expose themselves to external change agents who could dismantle current practice. The support of all levels of district leadership — the superintendent, the school board, the district’s leadership team, including building principals — is critical to the success of this strategy. An effective means of ensuring implementation of formal succession planning is for districts to include it in their strategic plan.

## 3. THINK LATEROALLY AND VERTICALLY

To sustain the cultural changes of professional learning communities, a leadership development framework must provide for both lateral and vertical capacity building (Fullan, 2005). This strategy emphasizes developing teacher leadership within the school and encouraging the promotion of eligible school-based leaders into district-level positions as they become available.

To implement capacity building at the school level, principals can use a number of leadership development strategies that use or build professional learning communities. Leading action research and data-driven decision-making initiatives gives teachers opportunities to work with data and focus on the importance of shared

knowledge. Leading collaborative teams allows teachers to develop skills in team organization, communication, facilitation, and curriculum mapping and design. Providing substitutes throughout the year gives teacher leaders time to take advantage of leadership development and school improvement opportunities. Serving in grade-level or department chairmanships, helping organize and lead summer programs, working on task forces or school improvement teams provides valuable experiences for teacher leaders. Becoming a core leader in a subject area gives teachers opportunities for instructional leadership. These core leaders can be released from class during the school day to collaborate on lesson planning and to model lessons for other content teachers. Working as mentors or coaches strengthens how teachers work with and lead adults. Through their day-to-day work in professional learning communities, teacher leaders gain real-world experiences and develop applicable skills that can be used as leadership opportunities arise.

To address the cultural changes that impact the district level, school boards and district leaders must strategically support school-level professional learning community initiatives. The district must provide various levels of leadership development opportunities for teacher leaders, school-based administrators, and district-level administrators. At the district level, give administrators experiences with incremental responsibility, such as serving on a district-level committee or asking them to fill in for district-level administrators during vacation periods or long-term leaves.

To implement this strategy, leaders need to answer such questions as, “What can teachers do in grade levels or content areas to actively assume leadership roles and responsibilities? How can teachers lead groups of adults? What can districts do to

**Schools and districts that do not adopt formal succession planning processes and structures expose themselves to external change agents who could dismantle current practice.**

include the perspective of teacher leaders in their districtwide initiatives?”

The best way to prepare people for leadership is to put them into situations where they are called upon to lead. Learning by doing and learning by leading provide powerful experiences when imbedded into the culture of professional learning communities.

#### 4. DISTRIBUTE ACCOUNTABILITY THROUGH GUIDING COALITIONS

One way professional learning communities endure changes in the principalship is through vesting leadership not solely in the principals, but in collaborative leadership teams. John Kotter (1996) addresses the importance of creating guiding coalitions, effectively assembled teams of the right people who trust each other and work toward a common goal. These guiding coalitions have the capacity to make needed change happen despite all the forces of inertia.

Without powerful guiding coalitions, change stalls and carnage grows (pp. 65-66).

Robert Marzano (2003) also points to the benefits and necessity of distributed leadership through developing and depending on strong leadership teams. Through collaborative leadership teams, novice to expert leaders can realize their potential and contribute significantly by using their abilities and talents. Ideally, leadership becomes the act of getting things done through other people.

When schools reach this level of sophistication and trust, professional learning communities provide a seamless way to develop leadership while concurrently meeting students’ instructional needs. Through properly

designed and implemented professional learning communities, leading and learning occur at the same time in the same place.

Essential questions to be addressed in this strategy include, “Who will sit on our guiding coalition? How many members should we have? How will this leadership team be used — in decision making, in an advisory capacity, or a combination?”

By creating guiding coalitions at each school, the leadership load is dispersed among team members. The extent of delegated responsibilities depends upon the experience and leadership maturity of each teacher leader. Distributed accountability among teachers with varying degrees of ability and skill enhances the school’s leadership capacity. Strong learning communities develop when principals learn to relinquish a measure of control and help others participate in building leadership throughout the school (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006, p. 81).

#### 5. MAKE LEADERS RESPONSIBLE AND ACCOUNTABLE FOR LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

While this essential strategy is last on the list, it plays no less an important role in promoting leadership development and sustainability. As part of an organization’s performance management system, revise all administrative and supervisory job descriptions to include leadership development as an essential job function. Through this board-approved action, administrators and supervisors are annually evaluated on their effectiveness in developing employees who report to them. Included in their annual performance appraisals are the results of the steps they take to develop leadership capacity in their schools, departments, or divisions. Through this one strategy, leadership development becomes every leader’s responsibility.

#### CONCLUSION

Individually, these essential strategies can, to some degree, contribute to leadership development and sustainability efforts. However, when implemented in learning community cultures, these five strategies give districts potential for substantive, sustained leadership development.

Organizations that embrace the concepts of professional learning communities cannot assume that individuals who work in them automatically become leaders. Effective leadership development does not occur on its own. Successful leadership development happens when professional learning communities are viewed as environments where developing leadership capacity co-exists with school improvement efforts focused on student learning.

Schools and systems that integrate leadership development with professional learning communities will be more likely to thrive when they encounter future leadership challenges.

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Schools and systems that integrate leadership development with professional learning communities will be more likely to thrive when they encounter future leadership challenges.

# ONE STEP AT A TIME

Many professional learning teams pass through these 7 stages

BY PARRY GRAHAM  
AND BILL FERRITER

Imagine having the opportunity to work at a new middle school, built around professional learning community principles. From day one, teachers are organized into professional learning teams working to define essential curriculum, develop common assessments, and analyze student data. Similarly, administrators work as a team to support the development of professional learning teams and emphasize a distributed model of leadership. Several years ago, we had the opportunity to work as a teacher and an administrator in this new school in the Wake County (N.C.)



Public School System.

With little experience to guide us, we learned a number of important lessons. First, professional learning teams represent a powerful mechanism for improvements in teaching and learning. Second, developing successful professional learning teams is difficult, requiring concerted effort from teachers and administrators. And third, while different teams develop at different rates and with different personalities, most professional learning teams pass through similar stages in terms of the nature of their work.

Like many, we found that the work of professional learning teams progressed from a focus on teaching to a focus on learning. Helping teams make that progression, however — and emphasizing effective dialogue and reflection along the way — are key components in building a professional learning community. Here we outline these stages of development and provide recommendations for supporting and challenging teams.

**STAGE 1:  
FILLING THE TIME**

The first question that novice teams often ask is: “What exactly are we supposed to do?” Initial meetings can be rambling affairs, especially for teams lacking clear guidelines. As teachers initially explore collaboration, meetings can swing from one extreme to the other: either struggling to fill time or tackling too many tasks in hour-long meetings. Frustration is inevitable for groups struggling with new responsibilities.

The best way to help teams move quickly out of this stage is to set clear work expectations. Defining specific tasks — such as identifying essential objectives or creating a common assessment — lends direction to an ambiguous and overwhelming process. Sample agendas, suggested team roles, and sets of adaptable

norms are helpful for developing teams. When school leaders fail to provide basic structures for early meetings, collaboration can quickly become confusing and seen as a waste of time by teachers comfortable with isolation.

**STAGE 2:  
SHARING PERSONAL PRACTICES**

A common next question is: “What is everyone doing in their classrooms?” Teachers may be genuinely interested in what other teachers are doing, hoping to pick up new ideas. Or it may be that talking about teaching feels like collaboration. Initially, there is great value in these conversations because sharing practices makes instruction transparent. More importantly, conversations about practices are comfortable, serving as a first step toward establishing positive patterns of interpersonal dialogue among team members.

Unfortunately, many groups fail to move beyond sharing instructional practices to the real work of learning teams: Reflection resulting in teacher learning and improved instruction. School leaders can promote meaningful work by requiring team members to arrive at collaborative decisions around curriculum, assessment, or instruction. Teams can create shared minilessons that all teachers will deliver, shifting the focus from individual efforts to a collective exploration of effective instruction.

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**STAGE 3:  
PLANNING, PLANNING,  
PLANNING**

As teachers learn to work together, teams will wonder: “What should we be teaching, and how can we lighten the load?” Planning — a task that consumes all teachers — becomes an ideal place for collective efforts.

At this stage, school leaders may see a self-imposed standardization of the curriculum emerge. All teachers within a team begin teaching roughly the same content at roughly the same time in roughly the same way. Less experienced or effective teachers benefit from the planning acumen of more successful colleagues. Teams are also able to delegate responsibilities. Rather than each teacher individually planning every lesson, different members take responsibility for sets of lessons and share their work.

Unfortunately, teams often grow comfortable with shared planning and fail to focus on results. Unless challenged, team attention remains centered on teaching rather than learning. The most effective way for school leaders to move teams forward is to structure efforts to use student achievement data in the planning process. School leaders must ask teams to answer basic questions about outcomes: “Are your students learning what you want them to learn? How do you know?”

**STAGE 4:  
DEVELOPING COMMON  
ASSESSMENTS**

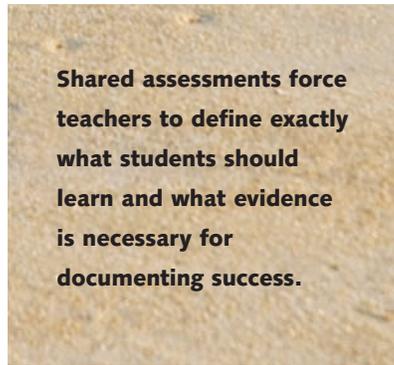
New thinking related to student outcomes forces teams to ask: “What does mastery look like?” This question can cause controversy by tapping into teachers’ deepest philosophies. Should the classroom focus be on basic skills or on applying knowledge in real-

**Unfortunately, many groups fail to move beyond sharing instructional practices to the real work of learning teams: Reflection resulting in teacher learning and improved instruction.**

world situations? Which is more important: being able to get the right answer or being able to explain your work?

Teams first struggle with these questions while developing common assessments. Shared assessments force teachers to define exactly what students should learn and what evidence is necessary for documenting success. Novice teams may work to avoid common assessments, thereby steering clear of difficult conversations, but common assessments are essential if teams are to shift their focus from teaching to learning.

Productively wrestling with fundamental beliefs requires teachers to develop the interpersonal skills necessary for working through contention. Having set individual direction with little intervention for years, many



experienced teachers lack the skills for finding common ground. While teams with positive relationships thrive on the synergy generated by complex conversations, teams struggling with personalities need real support. School leaders should consider moderating difficult conversations and modeling strategies for joint decision making.

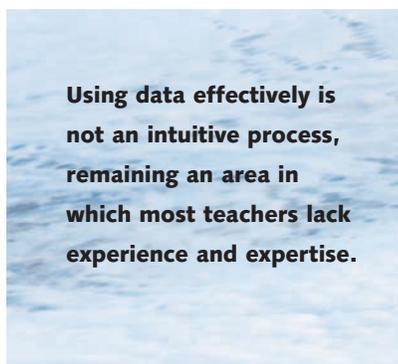
Teams may also need additional skill development in assessment during this stage. While teachers often possess an intuitive understanding of their students, common assessments require a measure of standardization, both of task and of judgment, to provide reliable comparisons. Investing energies in simplistic measures of performance will only frustrate teams and stall future work. Time spent on a study of the core differences between assessments *of* learning and *for* learning as well as a review of strategies for assessing a wide range of outcomes ensures that joint evaluation of student learning will be embraced by developing teams.

**STAGE 5:  
ANALYZING STUDENT LEARNING**

After administering common

assessments, the next question is perhaps the most challenging: “Are students learning what they are supposed to be learning?” It is at this stage that professional learning teams begin to shift their focus from teaching to learning. This is also the stage where teacher teams need the most technical and emotional support.

Technically, teachers often require significant training on data analysis and interpretation. Using data effectively is not an intuitive process, remaining an area in which most teachers lack experience and expertise. School leaders who provide structures and tools for effective data analysis are rewarded with highly motivated teams driven by results. Many successful learning communities repurpose positions, hiring teachers trained in data analysis to assist teams in identifying



trends in student learning.

Common assessment data will reveal varying levels of student success across classrooms, leading to feelings of guilt, inadequacy, and defensiveness. Teachers are put in the delicate position of publicly facing what they will inevitably — yet inaccurately — view as individual successes and failures. This intensely personal reaction

is understandable from invested professionals confronted with hard evidence.

When handled properly, analysis of student learning can lead to rich conversations about effective instruction. As teachers spot patterns in data, they can work as a unit to respond productively. On highly functioning teams, collective intelligence provides a never-ending source of solutions for addressing shared challenges. Getting teams to this point, however, requires emotional support and patience.

School leaders are encouraged to create safe environments in which teachers can discuss common assessments and to model nonjudgmental approaches to data. Separating the person from the practice is an essential first step for teams examining results. School leaders should also

“walk the walk,” sharing reports reflecting their own work, such as faculty or parent surveys, in public forums.

By modeling a data-oriented approach, school leaders send the message that data analysis is about improving outcomes, not judging individuals.

**STAGE 6:  
DIFFERENTIATING FOLLOW-UP**

While teacher teams almost naturally move to the next stage of development — responding instructionally to student data — school leaders can facilitate this transition in two important ways: by asking teams to reflect on the right questions and by giving teams the resources needed to craft appropriate responses.

As teams become adept at analyzing student data, school leaders should no longer be directing team development, instead serving as collaborative partners in ongoing conversations about teaching and learning. Teams at this point in the process are typically performing at a high level, taking collective responsibility for student success rather than responding as individuals.

The most effective way to further develop a team at this level is to pose questions, both to the team and to individual members: “Which instructional practices are the most effective across

your team? What concepts do your students struggle with? Are your students able to apply knowledge to novel problems?” By posing provocative questions and demonstrating flexibility as teams pursue various approaches for intervention and enrichment, school leaders encourage

the professional ownership that defines accomplished educators.

More importantly, however, school leaders must identify concrete ways to support differentiation. Traditionally, this has meant identifying professional development opportunities or providing substitutes so that teachers can plan responses as a group. Interested teams are often engaged in partnerships with sister schools sharing similar student populations. Funding is provided for after-school tutoring, honoring the talents of teachers filling once voluntary roles.

But supporting differentiation also requires a commitment to nontraditional school structures and processes beyond the classroom. Effective administrators reallocate positions, focusing resources on struggling students. Rethinking the role of guidance counselors, secretaries, teacher assistants, media specialists, assistant principals, and literacy coaches creates a pool of human capital that can be tapped to address the challenges involved in differentiating learning for all students.

Action from those beyond the classroom is essential to maintaining a learning community’s momentum. While school leaders can begin to move out of a directive role with individual teams, their efforts to coordinate available resources, support innovative approaches to differentiation, and engage faculty members in new work will determine how successful a building will be at meeting the needs of every learner.

**STAGE 7:  
REFLECTING ON INSTRUCTION**

Teams performing at a high level will eventually ask one final question: “Which practices are most effective with our students?” This question brings the process of professional learning team development full circle, connecting learning back to teaching.

Teams at this point are engaged in deep reflection, tackling innovative projects such as action research or lesson studies.

At this point, school leaders should facilitate a team’s ability to explore the teaching-learning connection. Efforts might include giving teachers the opportunity to observe each other or providing released time to complete independent projects. When multiple teams in the school are at this level, school leaders may facilitate cross-team conversations, creating opportunities for practices and perspectives to migrate school-wide.

**NAVIGATING A CHALLENGING PATH**

While the process of developing a professional learning team may feel uniquely personal, we believe certain stages of development are common across teams. We hope that by helping educators to understand that these stages exist and by describing both the challenges and opportunities inherent in each stage, we can improve the chances of success.

The path to building learning communities may be difficult, but students will benefit from the process. While teachers face significant challenges, so do school leaders committed to supporting substantive teacher collaboration. Those leaders must play multiple roles — at times, walking with the members of a professional learning team; at times, walking a few steps ahead and anticipating the next turn in the road. ■

**As teams become adept at analyzing student data, school leaders should no longer be directing team development, instead serving as collaborative partners in ongoing conversations about teaching and learning.**

## USE BOOK STUDIES TO GENERATE FRANK TALK ABOUT BELIEFS AND PRACTICES

**E**nsuring high achievement for all students requires more than technical solutions.

To create schools where every student learns at high levels, school must find ways to transform the deficit beliefs many well-intentioned educators hold about culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse students and families. However, many school leaders don't know how to address such beliefs.

One way to begin to change teachers' beliefs about students of diverse backgrounds is to provide learning experiences that allow participants to explore and discuss culture and its influence on their own identities, those of their students and families, and teaching and learning. We suggest book studies as a starting point. Book studies are among the simplest activities to implement because the planning, preparation, and time involved are relatively limited. They are easy to coordinate, and the discussions build interest and knowledge among participants fairly quickly.

Facilitators aren't required to have a high degree of cultural knowledge because the facilitator participates as a learner rather than as an expert. With all participants in the learner role, group members are more relaxed and likely to develop mutual trust. Discussions about diversity issues can be contentious, but when participants know that everyone is working to expand his or her own understanding rather than to criticize or judge others, emotionally charged arguments are less likely to occur.

Study groups have a greater chance of early success when they start with members who are interested in exploring cultural understanding rather than those who most need it. Volunteers are more willing to reflect on and discuss difficult issues. Such discussions often trigger deep introspection about beliefs and the influence of beliefs on classroom practice. This critical analysis leads teachers to make their practice more culturally responsive. Those who

are empowered by such discussions will share this positive learning experience with colleagues. At the same time, those who are required to attend the book study may not be open to such discussions and may view them negatively. They will also "spread the word," which may dissuade others from participating.

### ORGANIZING A BOOK STUDY

#### *Finding time*

Schools often have so many professional learning initiatives under way that adding one more can be a challenge. Rather than waiting to introduce a book study on a designated professional learning day, we suggest simply choosing a time and inviting all interested teachers and staff members to attend. One Texas high school assistant principal holds her book studies one hour before school starts. She calls it the Breakfast Club and serves food. She started with 14 participants who met once a month. Within a few months, the number grew to 20 and is still growing.

At the initial meeting, have those in attendance decide on the frequency of the meetings and the day (e.g. the third Thursday of every month). Once a month works well as a starting point for most groups. Though participants may indicate they would like to meet more frequently, be cautious about setting a schedule that is too ambitious. Members will drop from a group if the schedule becomes too demanding. Start slowly and consider adding additional meetings if the group requests to do so after meeting several times.

#### *Selecting readings*

After determining a meeting time, text selection is the most important aspect of a successful book study. You can select articles as well as books. The key is to find readings that match participants' levels of cultural knowledge. Exposing participants to content well beyond their level of understanding is likely to turn off some and cause others to drop out. For this reason, we suggest that the facilitator identify a list of suggested readings. We know of well-intentioned facilitators who allowed the group to choose the first reading without pre-screening it, but participants found it highly offensive. To avoid this situation, identify readings that describe inequity in schools without blaming



In each issue of *JSD*, Patricia L. Guerra, above, and Sarah W. Nelson write about the importance of and strategies for developing cultural awareness in teachers and schools. The columns are available at [www.nsd.org](http://www.nsd.org).



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or judging students, parents, or educators. Look for books that discuss issues from multiple perspectives in neutral language, rather than language that evokes strong emotion (e.g. “well-intended educators” versus “racists”). The goal is to get people to explore diversity issues without scaring them away. Be strategic — start with inspiring readings focused on successful practices.

As participants gain cultural awareness and understanding, facilitators can introduce more pointed literature examining inequitable practices. If groups use articles instead of books, start with articles by practitioners, which are generally more appealing to this audience than articles by researchers. Our preference is to start with a book such as *The Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African American Children*, by Gloria Ladson-Billings (Jossey-Bass, 1997). Based on the practices of five teachers of mixed racial and ethnic backgrounds working in urban schools, this book guides teachers in developing a vision of cultural proficiency. We would then follow with articles written by practitioners and later introduce research-oriented literature. Find additional recommended books in our Winter 2008 *JSD* column at [www.nsd.org](http://www.nsd.org).

#### *Facilitating the discussion*

With a schedule in hand and a list of readings, the facilitator is ready to begin the discussions. At each session, the facilitator should designate a timekeeper and a scribe to take notes. Simple questions are very helpful for engaging participants and initiating dialogue. We offer this list to start:

- What was something you learned from this reading?
- What challenged your thinking and why?
- What did you disagree with and why?
- What is something you learned about your culture and does it hold true for you? Why?
- What is something you learned about your students’ and families’ cultures and does it hold true for them? Why?
- What questions or comments do you have?
- What topics would you like to explore further?

Once participants are comfortable with this reading and discussion process, you may move on to advanced

questions that probe deeper issues related to school-based practices:

- What did you learn about your own cultural identity? How will this influence your teaching and classroom practice?
- What did you learn about your students’ cultural identity? How might this influence their learning, interactions, and behavior in school-related situations? How can you use this cultural knowledge in the classroom to transform your practice?
- Given what you have read, think about your past practices and interactions with students and families of diverse backgrounds. What situations or conflicts were influenced by cultural differences? What would you now do differently? Why?

At first, discussions may be more content-driven. With time, participants will grow to trust each other and will learn they can take risks without repercussions. Meetings will become frank dialogues about beliefs, values, and practices. At this stage, the facilitator can push the discussion deeper by asking questions that challenge participants. What are our beliefs and assumptions about culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse students? How do our beliefs and assumptions influence our work? Do we treat some groups of students and families differently than others? What are the consequences of differential treatment? How does our language influence our relationships with students? Are we focused on changing students and families, or do we believe the educational system and our practice needs to change? What knowledge and skills do we need to effectively work with diverse students and families?

Everyone in the group, including the facilitator, should carefully address these types of questions. Members should use the cultural knowledge gained from the readings to help each other question, examine, and reframe their beliefs and the influence of these beliefs on their practice. Such discussions can be uncomfortable but transformational. Without the cognitive dissonance such questions evoke, the efforts of a study group are fruitless. Newly acquired cultural awareness and knowledge remains just that, and practice goes unchanged. ■

## MEMBERS SKILLED IN QUESTIONING TECHNIQUE CAN KEEP THE GROUP WORK ON TRACK

Professional communication lies at the heart of getting work done in schools. Educators communicate informally within and across disciplines, grade levels, departments, and schools. They talk in pairs and trios, in discussions that are spontaneous or planned. Through communication, teachers work to improve instructional practice and performance. They communicate to clarify policies, identify and address problems and priorities, and monitor achievement. Faculties communicate in their work together to respond to the changing needs of students, standards, and curriculum demands. Through communication, groups manage differences and cultures evolve — or stay the same. In schools, one primary vehicle for communication is meetings.

Meetings have a greater effect on organizational success than we might think. They are the bedrock of successful learning communities.

First, effective and time-efficient meetings produce work important to students.

Second, well-conducted meetings promote member satisfaction, capacity to collaborate, and therefore willingness to conscientiously contribute.

Third, the more groups are successful at getting important work done in meetings, the greater their collective efficacy, a resource undeniably linked to student success (Hoy, Tarter & Hoy, 2006). Finally, members of successful groups ultimately become members and leaders elsewhere and enrich the quality of work within the school and district.

For these reasons, knowing how to produce work through meetings has become an essential part of an educator's professional portfolio, regardless of his or her role.

Ultimately, skillful group members influence meeting success more than a strong facilitator does. Fundamental to meeting effectiveness is the intention members share that meetings be worth their — and their students' — time as well as the knowledge that they can make a difference toward ensuring that meetings meet this standard.

This column describes how members use a technique called naïve questions combined with three meeting struc-

tures to keep the group on track. The group's work may be studying measures of student achievement, inventing and testing instructional approaches, assessing their results, and planning, implementing, and assessing again in a continuous cycle of inquiry and improvement.

### NAIVE QUESTIONS

A teacher from a large urban district complained about attending 30 years of dysfunctional meetings. After learning about naïve questioning, she realized that as a group member, she could make a difference. She began to ask naïve questions and was amazed at the power she held to get meetings on track.

Asking a naïve question is one way that group members effectively offer correction to group work. To communicate naïvely is to speak with innocence, to be artless, unaffected, and neutral. Naïve questions have an intonational quality of child-like inquiry, posing questions that are truly open-ended. "Who will communicate this decision?" and "Who will be informed about this?" are examples of naïve questions. They develop awareness about process and alert leaders who may have overlooked such questions in planning.

### SUCCESS STRUCTURES

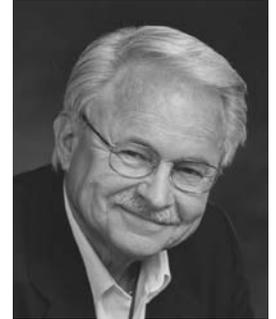
The term "structure" describes a system of order and organization. Since any group brings a variety of mental models, cognitive styles, personal histories, and individual agendas to its work, the potential for chaotic interaction always exists. Providing structures permits a full and focused expression of these differences in a manner that is useful to the group's work.

Following are three structures that can make groups more effective. (A fourth structure, managing meeting environments, is also critical.) Each of the following addresses a significant question in a group's work life.

1. Who decides?
2. What topics are ours?
3. What are the meeting standards?

### WHO DECIDES?

Using this structure, the group determines who makes the decision related to the issue under discussion. Will the decision maker(s) be certain individuals within the group, the group as a whole, the person who convened the group,



In each issue of *JSD*, Robert J. Garmston writes about how to create collaborative work environments that result in improved student learning. His columns can be found at [www.nsd.org](http://www.nsd.org).

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or even some person or group(s) not present at this meeting? Groups are most effective and productive when they are clear about whether their role is to inform others who are making a decision, recommend a choice, or decide themselves.

Trust is diminished when groups are not clear about who makes the final decision and what decision-making processes will be used. When members lose trust, groups can experience second-guessing, resistance, or lengthy and unproductive process arguments. This robs time and, more important, saps group energy, efficacy, and motivation to persevere on important topics. Some naïve questions group members might ask about decision-making authority and processes are:

- “Who is making this decision?”
- “What processes will we use?”
- “What is our role in this decision?”
- “Are we to inform, recommend, or decide?”

### WHICH TOPICS ARE OURS?

Whose turf are we on — yours or ours? All groups have interests that intersect with other groups’ turf and decision-making authority. Groups must take into account coordination, effectiveness, and politics to honor overlapping areas of concern. Individual and collective vigilance to what lies within and outside the group’s influence is an essential ingredient of group success. At some time in every group’s history, this structure becomes important to departments, curriculum task forces, advisory groups, grade-level teams, site councils, and faculties.

An issue many schools address is who should be responsible for decisions about policy and practices on student discipline. This seems like a simple question, yet it relates to turf. Even the briefest conversation will reveal that the group must explore several related questions. Within the classroom or the school? In what areas — gum or guns? Within what parameters — state law or district policies? At what level of authority — unilaterally or in consultation with the principal or parents? Some questions group members might ask are:

- “Should we be talking about this?”
- “What parts of this issue live on our turf?”
- “What other stakeholders are involved?”
- “What are the roles of other groups in making decisions about this topic?”
- “What limitations, if any, are we bound by?”

### WHAT ARE THE STANDARDS?

Standards are agreements for ways of working together (Garmston, 2002). Although each group is responsible for deciding what standards will guide its work, Bruce Wellman and I (Garmston & Wellman, 1999) advocate

starting with the following set of standards. Wherever we have seen these standards in place, we have witnessed successful meetings: maximum accomplishment, minimum time, and maximum member satisfaction. Additionally, when effective groups implement these standards, their levels of efficiency, efficacy, craftsmanship, and satisfaction soar. When ineffective groups adopt them, their productivity improves. Four standards with sample naïve questions appear below.

- **One topic at a time:**

Talk about one subject at a time to maintain coherence.

*“Excuse me, I thought we were talking about X. Are we on to a new topic now?”*

- **One process at a time:**

Groups lose time and confusion reigns when they jump from one process, such as brainstorming, to another, such as dialogue, without completing the former.

*“What process are we using now? I’ve lost track.”*

*“Are we done brainstorming?”*

- **Balance participation:**

Encourage all voices. Diversity of perspective forms stronger ideas.

*“Sally, I don’t think we’ve heard from you. Anything to add?”*

*“Can we take a couple of minutes to buzz on this?”*

- **Engage cognitive conflict:**

Disagreement about ideas is necessary for sound decisions.

*“I see it a different way.”*

*“Here is another idea.” (Instead of “Yes, but!”)*

Knowing and using naïve questions are two different matters. The urban teacher in the example above decided to risk injecting questions into the meeting and was delighted with the results. What will it take in your group for teachers to feel empowered in this regard? A good start is to convince members that meeting success is more dependent on their informed participation than the skills and knowledge of a boss, a content expert, or a facilitator. Because you know the players and the history and context of your group, you can find a way.

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## IF YOU DON'T TRY, YOU CAN'T SUCCEED AT SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

I stumbled into a lesson about taking risks and facing fears when I was hiking in Arizona last spring.

Actually, I wasn't even hiking at the time. I was only preparing to hike.

I was savoring the view of Oak Creek Canyon near Sedona, Ariz., when my left foot connected with a 30-pound boulder that had slid onto the sidewalk. I went launching forward, landing awkwardly on my hands and my left knee — and a couple of other rocks also lying in my path.

My husband immediately reached to help me up, but I lay there for several more moments trying to get my bearings. What happened? Was I hurt or just stunned? What hurt?

When I finally allowed him to help me to my feet, I was still examining myself for injuries. My jeans and shirt were dusty but not torn. There was no blood. My hands pulsed with sensation, but otherwise everything seemed to work just fine.

As I realized that I was fine, I began to shudder and cry. My husband seemed alarmed. "Are you OK?" he asked. "I thought you said you were OK."

He retrieved ice from the cooler in our car, and after soaking my hands for a few minutes, I was ready for the hike.

I was embarrassed that I hadn't looked ahead to see the obstacles in my way. I was embarrassed that I had fallen awkwardly in front of my nimble triathlete husband just as we were beginning our big adventure. I was embarrassed that I had cried.

Does this sound familiar to anyone who has launched headlong into another school improvement initiative? Someone, often a district administrator or an external consultant, tells you about the great experience you're going to have and the great results you're going to get. So you forge ahead, looking only at the horizon without taking into account the little obstacles along the way. Sometimes you become frustrated because the work that you believed would improve student learning didn't achieve the results you wanted in the way that you expected. You get beat up

in the process when the media finds out that your school didn't deliver as well as another school. You're ready to give up, embarrassed that you were not as good as you wanted to be.

My tumble during the early phase of my hike taught me to pay closer attention during the journey. Instead of looking only at the big picture, I kept an eye on exactly what was on the path ahead of me. Anyone embarking on any new work or new adventure can't anticipate all of the obstacles they will encounter. A quick scan of the known environment may reveal some of the potential pitfalls. But others are sure to pop up along any path.

I also learned to pause and take account of what was around me and to appreciate how far I had journeyed. I'm grateful that I plunged ahead after my fall instead of allowing the incident to scare me off. If I had stopped, I would have missed rocky streams and soaring red canyon walls. I would have missed the green growth of grass and trees in places where there seemed to be no earth. I would have missed seeing trees that looked as if they had been sunburned.

The morning after my fall, I discovered large bruises on my legs and chest. I was a little achy, but we were heading to the Grand Canyon and there was no opportunity for downtime. Once at the mighty canyon, my husband, as usual, was game for an adventure. He had been there once before and was eager to hike down into the canyon. I knew this was coming, so I browsed the various trails and found one that intrigued me enough to suggest it.

About 200 feet down the canyon paths, I realized I had taken on a bigger challenge than I expected. I tremble when I cross large bridges. Stepping onto the ridges of the Grand Canyon presented me a much greater landscape to view than crossing any bridge I've ever encountered.

I was immobilized with fear. All I could imagine at that moment was that I would tumble over the edge. Then I saw dozens of other people trudging up from the bottom of the canyon. They seemed quite healthy, and none of them looked any more fit than me. In fact, I thought I was in much better shape than most of them.

So I took a deep breath and moved ahead.

I remembered how I had gotten to this point. I'm not one to be led down any path without doing my homework first. I wanted to be ambitious without overreaching my



In each issue of *JSD*, Joan Richardson writes about the relationship between professional learning and student learning. All of her articles and columns can be found at [www.nsd.org](http://www.nsd.org).

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skills. I also carried the lessons from the previous day's hike with me. School improvement work is no different. Not all reform initiatives are created equal. Teachers and principals have to take the responsibility of becoming knowledgeable about their options rather than sitting back and just accepting what someone else suggests. You know your schools, your students, and your staffs better than anyone else. The more you know, the more you will be able to fine-tune a program to fit your needs and your abilities and the more likely that others will heed your input. At the same time, if you want to achieve real change with students, you must embark on a program that requires you and your colleagues to challenge yourselves and gives you opportunities to increase your abilities.

When you start down your path, focus on every step of the work, not just the big picture. Looking out over the Grand Canyon too early or too often would have terrified me. But settling down onto a (safe) rock for a mid-morning apple and at lunchtime gave me the opportunity to appreciate how far I had traveled and to savor the view.

My husband, who's run several marathons, reminds me that even dedicated athletes can feel discouraged during a tough competition. They get through by attending to the small pieces of the race. "The finish just seems so far away, so you have to focus internally. Every breath. Every step.

Every motion. Just hold the course. In time, the next marker comes around, and the next and the next. And finishing isn't just a possibility, it's a certainty," he says.

Might you get hurt? Yes. You may be embarrassed by a blunder. I've seen plenty of runners stumble, even lose their breakfast along the sidelines, and some who have had to walk the last several miles of a race. You may be embarrassed by something you've done. But you could also just as easily be embarrassed by something that you have not done. How would I have felt, for example, if I had returned home to tell my children that Mom was too much of a fraidy-cat to hike down the Grand Canyon?

I think I'm safe in saying that nobody has ever died in the course of school improvement. To be sure, egos have been bruised, and people have been frustrated when they failed to achieve their goals as quickly or easily as they would have liked. But the pain of not taking the chance is far worse than any injuries incurred by acting.

My father used to counsel me that you can't win the game you don't enter. Even if you fail to reach the summit on the hike or the finish line of the race, you will learn. But learning requires joining the adventure and taking the risk. There is little to be learned by sitting on the sidelines, whether you're talking about canyons in Arizona or school improvement in Detroit. ■

## NSDC'S STANDARDS EASE THE SHIFT FROM ISOLATION TO COLLABORATION

As the science chair at a high-performing high school, Jesse is responsible for supervising and supporting 22 science teachers. He is a solid teacher, and his peers consider him a good leader. He is comfortable with the meetings he runs, where the group focuses on announcements, procedures, and materials. Recently, Jesse's principal told him that the school will be making a shift — they'll use meeting time for team learning. Jesse is not prepared for a shift to team time focused on the improvement of student learning. Considering his new challenges, Jesse wonders if he can be an effective leader. He is not knowledgeable about what is involved in leading adults in school improvement and his role in that effort. Let's look at how NSDC's Standards for Staff Development support a teacher like Jesse as he works to implement the Learning Communities standard: "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."

Jesse's principal, Felicia, is working with a peer group in a learning community. She is eager to take the lessons she is learning back to her school, asking all chairs and department heads to use their meeting time to focus on improving student learning. Her principal group is studying *Moving NSDC's Staff Development Standards Into Practice: Innovation Configurations, Volume I* to learn how they can support adult learners working in teams to improve student learning (Roy & Hord, 2003). The principals meet regularly to share their successes and challenges, always coaching each other through the challenges that happen when schools are changing.

Principal support is key to the success of learning communities, as adults change from working in isolation to forming teams to solve student learning problems. The year before she asked her teachers to make this shift, Felicia met on a regular basis with her colleagues to plan for this change. Their intent was to practice and model what they want teams of adults at their schools to do. The principals

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began by sharing their expectations for their work together and developing norms to move them toward successful and efficient work time. Next, they reviewed student learning data for their schools, practicing the conversations that their chairs and heads will use when doing the same work with teachers. These school leaders know that they will be coaching the teacher leaders in implementing this work schoolwide, perhaps supported by a school-based staff developer or coach.

Once the principals established team norms and analyzed student learning data, they paired up to coach each other on developing action plans and goals aligned to their school improvement plans. The group revisits the goals over time. While most principals are comfortable writing school improvement plans, many teachers are not accustomed to writing and being held accountable for their own improvement goals based on student learning and school improvement plans. The principals recognize that their faculty members will need support in this aspect of teamwork.

Back at her school, Felicia met with the leaders who would be guiding this work within the learning teams. According to the *Innovation Configurations*, principals have five main outcomes regarding learning communities. They are to "prepare teachers for skillful collaboration, create an organizational structure that supports collegial learning, understand and implement an incentive system that ensures collaborative work, create and maintain a learning community to support teacher and student learning, and finally, participate with other administrators in one or more learning communities" (Roy & Hord, 2003, pp. 60-61).

Although Felicia expects the chairs or team leaders to guide the work, she wants all teachers to own the process and share in leadership responsibilities. Gathering feedback from her chairs, Felicia develops a training session on the purpose of learning communities, her expectations, and the collaboration skills she expects teachers to practice within the context of improving student learning. She shares her expectation that all teachers will "meet regularly with colleagues during the school day to plan instruction, align collaborative work with school improvement goals, and participate in learning teams, some of whose membership extends beyond the school" (Roy & Hord, 2003, pp. 14-15).

The teacher leaders who are guiding this work appreci-



Lea Arnau's columns on NSDC's standards are available at [www.nsd.org](http://www.nsd.org).

ate Felicia's public support and clear statement of her expectations. Furthermore, Felicia has told the staff that regular meeting time for this work will be built into the schedule. She tells her staff that she will monitor this work time to ensure that it meets her expectations (Roy & Hord, 2003, p. 66 ).

By now, Jesse and the other teacher leaders are more confident about the work they are being asked to do. Felicia has asked them to tell her about the successes and challenges within their teams. She has told the faculty that successful teamwork resulting in improved student learning will be rewarded and shared throughout the school. Jesse tells his team that Felicia expects teachers to take risks, to build trust within the team, and to try innovative ideas that will improve student learning.

Jesse and his team begin where the principals began at their first meeting. They talk about the principal's expectations for their work, about how they best learn as adults, and about the practices that make team meetings effective. They create and agree upon a set of norms that will be revisited regularly and will guide their work. Just as with the principal group, the teachers' work will be driven by the school improvement plan and student data.

Jesse has asked each team member to assume a particular team role — recorder, timekeeper, facilitator. Though these roles may vary from team to team, all members are expected to be responsible for facilitating the learning sooner or later. The team discusses their concerns about changes they have been asked to implement, working as a team focused on improved stu-

dent learning instead of planning lessons and student assessments in isolation as had been their habit.

To ensure that her leaders are supported as they move their teams forward, Felicia has structured time for the chairs to come together and work around their own challenges. They have developed team norms and identified data to measure the effectiveness of their work. They share ideas and discuss successes and challenges. The work these leaders do within the school is a model for the learning communities they are guiding within their grade-level or subject-area teams. In addition, Felicia has charged this group of teacher leaders with restructuring the monthly faculty time she has traditionally led. She wants whole-faculty time to be devoted to learning, not focused on administrative matters as in the past. Various learning communities will share the work they are doing with the whole school, thus holding teams accountable to their peers for improved student learning.

Felicia and Jesse can look down the road and see that teams will move into developing lesson plans and common assessments. They will develop the trust needed to go to the next step of collaborative work — teachers observing each other in the classroom and openly discussing specific instructional practices so that all teachers will improve. The Learning Communities standard guides Felicia and Jesse in setting the context for effective adult learning that will ultimately improve student learning in the school.

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**Felicia and Jesse can look down the road and see that teams will move into developing lesson plans and common assessments.**

## BUILDING PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES THROUGH 3-2-1

**R**ichard Elmore (2007) suggests that improving group performance depends on whether members choose to act like professionals. Professionalism requires us to focus on specific professional practices rather than individual personal attributes. By consolidating their expertise toward a common goal, team members treat professional knowledge as collective rather than individual.

How can educators get to know each other and learn to appreciate one another's strengths and weaknesses? Very rarely is a team instantly ready and willing to work together openly and effectively. Teams may struggle when members approach a new situation with different levels of experience or engagement.

This tool can be used in person or through e-mail to begin to establish a group's shared understanding of concepts, visions, and goals. If you use the tool by e-mail, suggest that participants "reply all" with their responses to start a conversation before a face-to-face meeting takes place.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_



3. Name three times you've been wowed by staff or students this year.

- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_

2. Name two of your proudest professional accomplishments from this year.

- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_



1. Name one thing you really struggled with this year. How do you plan to use it as a learning experience?

- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_

**Reference:** Elmore, R. (2007, Summer). Let's act like professionals. *JSD*, 28(3), 31-32.

**Tool contributed** by Carrie VanAlstine, assistant superintendent of curriculum and instruction, Ball Chatham Community Unit School District #5, Chatham, Ill. You can contact her at [cvanalstine@chathamschools.org](mailto:cvanalstine@chathamschools.org).

# Declaration of interdependence



Educators need deep conversations about teaching and learning to spark real changes in practice

BY TRACY CROW

**J**SD: As we have been compiling this issue of *JSD* on professional learning communities, I have been fascinated by how many schools and districts are seizing the concept of community, and yet how relatively few examples there seem to be of effective working communities. Why is this concept so hot right now, and why aren't more schools getting it right?

Judith Warren Little: "At the same time, there's good evidence that where you get strong workplace communities and relevant support for ambitious teaching, you see schools that are improving."

**Judith Warren Little:** The interest among educators in collaborative work goes back a long time. Back in the 1980s, Andy Hargreaves and I both wrote cautionary tales about how hard this is to do and about how a lot of what comes under the banner of collaboration doesn't add up to much. At that time, efforts to build more collaborative workplaces seemed localized and homegrown. Now there's an industry out there, whole programs for introducing professional learning communities in schools.

Most of the research doesn't supply much guidance for what those organized efforts might pursue. Most research, my own included, tends to identify existing instances of robust communities, but doesn't really account very well how they got there. So professional learning communities are hot, they are



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increasingly organized, but they have been relatively weakly informed in terms of trajectories — how you would get started, what you would focus on. At the same time, there's good evidence that where you get strong workplace communities and relevant support for ambitious teaching, you see schools that are improving.

I want to really underscore the conceptual neutrality of the term community — there is nothing about community that is necessarily virtuous or improvement-oriented. There is certainly evidence throughout history of very strong communities that are

up to no good. Strong communities are much better about preserving practice and viewpoint than they are about changing. However, if groups have a disposition to embrace community in pursuit of instructional improvement and to embrace investigation of their own assumptions and practices toward that end, then community can be transformational.

**JSD: What do communities need to thrive?**

**Little:** With that disposition in place, you still have to ask, what resources are available to that community for making headway? Even groups of teachers who are committed to reform and interested in and willing

to collaborate aren't necessarily equally positioned to marshal the kind of resources that would let them do really productive work together or to really support each others' learning. They have different resources — resources of internal leadership, of knowledge,

of time and space and curricular materials — and so just the fact that many of them are coming together willingly or eagerly won't allow you to account for what they accomplish. That coming together may be necessary but not sufficient.

If people are operating with a different set of curricular resources, then they have less to anchor their conversations about practice. If they never see each other's practice, that limits their ability to make any headway. If their time together is all about getting the next week's work organized and not about actually examining what's going on with kids' understanding, that limits their progress. The more that the thinking and work and experience of students is available to the community of adults as a resource for examining their practice, the more headway they can make.

The ability of a group both to influence individual practice and to influence collective practice is contingent on aims held in common. Without some kind of foundational commitment to ambitious kinds of practice, the likelihood of a group having influence on that kind of practice is probably small.

School leaders are in an interesting and potentially difficult place. On the one hand, if you don't have leadership that supports collective attention to problems of practice, to helping people develop sophisticated instructional knowledge and skills, then it's very unlikely that we're going to get anything more than the scarce examples we have now.

On the other hand, when district or school leaders take the initiative in the current policy climate to promote and establish collaborative groups, such efforts may be experienced by teachers in the way that Hargreaves described as "contrived collegiality" — that is, people are brought together to do work that is defined by others. They're brought together to do partic-

ular tasks of data analysis, looking at evidence, mapping out standards, aligning curriculum and assessment. All of that may be really valuable work. The question is who owns it.

So the leadership task becomes both organizing the school or the district to support that kind of ambitious work and creating conditions where people really endorse and claim it as central parts of what it means to be a professional. If working as a community doesn't carry value added over what teachers are able to accomplish independently, then it won't be worth the transactional costs, the investment of time, and the competition with what teachers feel that they have to do individually.

**JSD: What aren't schools better prepared to do this work?**

**Little:** We're not actually organized for the kind of professional community that we're all describing. One of the early analyses of the school workplace that really gained a foothold was Dan Lortie's, in the book *Schoolteacher* (University of Chicago Press, 2002). He talks about the structural isolation of the classroom and the egg crate school, that we're organized socially to absorb high levels of turnover in the workforce.

So if we're finding it hard to organize for community, what are we organized for? We seem to be organized more for independence more than interdependence and organized for workforce turnover rather than continuity. We're organized as if teaching were easy rather than hard, given the relatively low level of investment in professional development and that we expect first-year teachers to shoulder the same burden as a veteran teacher.

The image of the teacher is that everyone solves his or her own problems. You might rightfully argue that a number of problems that a teacher

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experiences as individual problems are really deserving of collective attention. However, to the extent that they get experienced as individual problems, then there isn't much impetus or much support for professional community.

**JSD: In some of your recent research, you have looked very closely at the conversations teachers have in their working teams. What do you see there?**

**Little:** One of the things that we've been trying to attend to particularly in conversations that go on just during the ordinary workplace interaction is whether and how they actually afford sustained attention to problems of practice, to actual classroom experience. We've been looking at the ways in which conversation may develop in a way that turns away from teaching or turns towards discussion of teaching. One of the differences between groups is when a problem of practice surfaces, first of all, does it get noticed? Sometimes people will say something and it gets deflected, it gets turned into a joke, or it gets ignored. When the problem is noticed, what happens next? What often happens is something we've been calling normalizing, that is, the issue is recognized as an ordinary, expected, and shared problem of the classroom. People express reassurance — "Oh, don't worry, this happens to all of us," or "I had one like that." There is an expression of recognition that this is something that happens in the classroom, followed by reassurance, and an offer of advice. But when the conversation develops in very rich ways, it doesn't stop at reassurance and it doesn't move quickly to a remedy. Instead, a question is asked, or you hear an invitation to say more that allows for a detailed accounting of the classroom story. So the invitation to say more is one of the things

### JUDITH WARREN LITTLE

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**Professional history:** Before joining the faculty at Berkeley, Little was the senior program director at Far West Laboratory for Educational Research and Development (now WestEd).

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that marked the learning-rich conversations. There is a bridging back and forth between the particularities of what happened on this day and more general principles and practices and ways of seeing.

If groups have to press on with the daily task of having something to teach, the conversations are much more likely to move to the quick remedy, the helpful sources of advice. Groups are less likely to take the time to examine their own assumptions and to really unpack the nature of a problem so that the conversation yields more than the quick fix.

When groups dig more deeply

into issues of teaching and learning, these are also people who are in and out of each other's classrooms. They are able to bring stories of the classroom into group meetings and to convey them with enough specificity and transparency that people can have meaningful conversations about them. These teachers share a curriculum, they share an understanding of particular instructional approaches, and they're able to have conversations after school that are really anchored in their shared understanding of each other's teaching in school. Groups whose knowledge of each other's classroom is much more limited and rudi-

mentary just aren't positioned to have the same kinds of conversations.

Other important supports for these kinds of conversations are deep curricular and subject matter understanding and content knowledge for teaching particular groups of kids. There are issues of expertise. Groups that don't have the means to unpack and resolve their problems can only get so far in having a discussion, especially by themselves. The conversations can point to places where school leaders or district leaders could help build the capacity of the group to do more with the conversations they're having.

**JSD: Is this where external support can make a difference?**

**Little:** My views about the contributions of formal professional development have changed somewhat in the last few years. I've come to be more appreciative of the combination of strong workplace supports for learning in and from practice combined with the use of well-designed external professional development, for a couple of reasons.

One is some school-level research we did on professional community.

The groups that really were doing sophisticated digging into problems of practice and providing really strong supports, for example, for beginning teachers, had strong external ties. They were not operating in an internal vacuum; they were not maintaining that they didn't need anybody else. They had strong partnerships with external networks, with professional development programs that supplied them with conceptions of teaching that they held in common. They received technical assis-

tance and encouragement. External professional development was a real resource for teacher communities that were making progress. So that was one lesson for me.

The other is that I've been both reading about and doing research in programs of highly designed subject-specific professional development. I have seen what teachers are able to learn in a subject that they feel insecure about with really scaffolded professional development. This is not something that a school group could easily do on its own. The professional development I'm referring to is really consistent with what people would call intellectually and socially ambitious teaching.

**JSD: What about internal leadership — what is the role of participants in the group in moving the work forward?**

**Little:** This is another challenge related to professional communities — teachers' ambivalence about their own leadership within schools. If you look at the research on the effective groups that are out there, we certainly see practices of leadership at the workgroup level that help account for the group's ability to tackle tough issues. However, in doing interviews with people in leadership roles over the years, I've been struck by the number of times that people say, "Well, I don't really consider myself a leader" or "You know, I have this funny view about leadership — we're all equals." Somehow, many teachers hold the image of teacher as leader as inappropriate, as an invoking of hierarchy versus a view of leadership as informed initiative on practice. A view of leadership in terms of initiative on practice could be highly reciprocal — there can be more than one source of initiative in a group. The support from teachers for informed initiative seems crucial to the func-

tioning of these groups that clearly influence practice.

This ambivalence about leadership seems to be based on a couple of grounds. The first is the strong egalitarian roots in the occupation. In order to lead in an organizational sense, in the past, you'd have to move to administration or you'd have to make a claim to a greater expertise than someone else. Those views are all tied into the fact that people have been willing to say that there is no knowledge base that informs teaching, that teaching is all a matter of style; therefore there's no basis on which people would move into a leadership role.

The second is the way in which over the years people have been recruited into purported leadership roles on the basis of possible enthusiasm for given reforms, but with variable levels of actual teaching experience. The people whose leadership status seems most accepted are those with real depth of experience, where there is a degree of social trust in them as leaders and an acceptance that this is an appropriate organizational thing to do. But there are examples of people in their second or third year being recruited into department chair positions or mentor positions for beginning teachers, and they're still just figuring it out themselves. That has made it difficult for people to move into positions that could help a professional community to move forward. ■

**Somehow, many teachers hold the image of teacher as leader as inappropriate, as an invoking of hierarchy versus a view of leadership as informed initiative on practice.**

# LEADING WITHOUT LEAVING THE CLASSROOM

**Tap into teachers' skills and knowledge  
to solve school problems**

BY CATHY OWENS

**N**ever before has the need been so great for classroom teachers to become agents of change and position themselves as problem solvers at the school building level. Teachers are uniquely positioned to assume leadership roles on a variety of tasks that could transform schools from more traditional workplaces into professional learning communities.

Schools' most complex problems are best solved by those working in them daily and grappling with the challenging issues firsthand. Teachers' daily experiences foster an

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## My journey to leadership

I have fond memories of my induction to teacher leadership. I made the transition once I grew weary of listening to my colleagues gripe about the monthly staff development days where students were released from school three hours early so teachers could get “professionally developed.” We had to report to the auditorium to sit and get inspired by motivational speakers who talked at us about teaching with power, stirring our passion, and going with gusto. Meanwhile, I sat in the back of the room and marked up yearbook proofs with power and gusto.

What really stirred my passion was learning that these speakers were being paid thousands of dollars — professional development dollars — that I knew could be used to serve staff learning needs. I recruited a colleague to be my thinking partner and, together, we created a writing-across-the-curriculum plan where cross-departmental leadership teams assisted content teachers in adding at least one writing assignment to their weekly lessons. The goal was a 15% increase in our school’s overall score on the state-mandated student writing exam. We presented the idea to the principal, who approved, and then to the staff, who not only cheered, but were fully present at our monthly three-hour data review and writing workshops led by cross-curricular team coaches. At the end of the year, writing scores increased by 27% overall, and the prin-



Cathy Owens

incipal used the leftover staff development dollars to take all of us to a catered picnic in the park.

Looking back, I realize that initially I was behaving as part of the problem and not the solution. Rather than providing honest input and feedback on the staff development sessions, I silently went

along with a program I clearly did not see as beneficial. This in no way helped my principal, who was under pressure to provide mandated staff development that may or may not fit his staff’s needs.

The solution to the staff development problem was something I and my colleagues understood all along, yet we neither volunteered our opinion nor felt it was invited. But as representatives of the teaching staff and thinking partners with the leadership staff, we were able to build bridges. The camaraderie that grew out of our collaborative planning was a rewarding milestone. While we met the overarching goal to increase student writing scores, we experienced other added benefits that helped create a professional learning culture in the school so teachers were not only glad to step up and lead but welcomed to do so.

inside view of what can be done. This inside advantage allows school-based teacher leaders to more creatively and often more quickly design solutions that get to the core of a school’s problem long before an outsider has had time to review and assess what the school may need.

This is not to say that outside help from consultants is not at times necessary or helpful. Indeed, it can be. However, when teachers sit at the decision-making table, they can most efficiently respond to a school’s needs. In my travels across the U.S. and Canada helping teachers enhance

their skills and strengths as leaders, I repeatedly hear the same feedback about what they encounter at work. They say, “Our schools don’t need someone on the outside to come in and fix our problems. As teachers, we need to be first responders, offering the best and most practical solutions.”

### HOW TEACHERS CAN LEAD

Teachers have the potential to lead the profession, not just their individual practice. As leaders of learning communities, they can engage in deep collaborations that contribute to the overall effectiveness of schools. They

can assume leadership roles that will effect positive change in how other teachers teach, how all students learn, and how a professional learning community operates.

For example, teachers who are given flexible schedules such as an additional planning period may use that time to facilitate learning team meetings or model an effective lesson for new teachers. In schools with an influx of new staff, veteran teachers can create a welcoming team to ensure that newcomers have an easy transition. They may create learning circles for novice teachers to get infor-

mal refreshers on new math or literacy concepts or other content. Through distributed leadership, teacher leaders might assist the principal by designing staff development, contributing to agenda planning for faculty meetings, serving on site-based leadership teams, writing and managing grants, performing classroom walk-throughs, and leading schoolwide learning events. There are so many tasks that must be done for schools to make their visions a reality. The teachers in those schools are able to take the lead. Why don't they?

Often they know exactly what to do to improve a school's teaching and learning environment, but they are often not seen and, in some cases, do not see themselves as an integral part of school improvement teams. Historically, classroom teachers have been viewed as the ones who "kept the kids" while the "official" leaders made the big decisions. Teachers were responsible for implementing programs and policies, not designing them. Their job was to stay with the students. If they wanted to do any leading — a task solely reserved for the principal — they had to leave the classroom to do so. For years, becoming a principal was the only option for teachers who wanted to lead.

### DEVELOPING A LEADERSHIP MINDSET

Teachers can take initiative by first recognizing their role in ensuring the success of all students and, second, by being willing to assume more responsibility for putting solutions in place. This starts with sharing an idea or having candid conversations with colleagues about what can happen without being stifled by what has happened in the past. Teachers have to be able to ask the hard questions, grapple with the difficult answers, and do the hard work necessary for effecting change. They must be willing to team with colleagues and principals in

order to shape internal policies and practices that change the way they work.

In stepping up, teachers must also be consciously competent as well as consciously incompetent. Not only must they acknowledge what they know but they must also realize and take measures to learn what they do not know. To be able to lead, teachers must have the knowledge and skills — emotional intelligence, trust building, facilitation, adult learning theory — necessary to engage colleagues.

### WAYS TO LEAD

As agents of change who choose not to leave the classroom but rather to lead from the classroom, teachers can make steps toward leadership by helping colleagues with teaching methods. They can model best practices, share student evaluation methods, and videotape and review each other's teaching.

More importantly, teachers can offer solutions to some of the school's most challenging questions. For example, how do we accommodate the needs of at-risk students while simultaneously responding to the needs of advanced learners?

Classroom teachers have varying levels of skills for differentiating instruction for all learners. A teacher leader might address this challenge by identifying two or three teachers who have expertise in differentiation and asking them to lead learning labs for their colleagues. They may form monthly study groups to review and assess the needs of challenged students and collaboratively develop individualized learning plans to help those students achieve.

Another challenging question may be: How do we use achievement data to better assess student learning? Schools and districts are awash in data. A teacher leader can lead conversations on data-driven decision making. He or she can help principals

collect and provide samples of assessment data and then walk colleagues through not only the review process but also the next actions necessary to ensure application of new knowledge.

Perhaps the most daunting questions are: How do we ensure that teachers get effective, job-embedded professional learning every day, and how can we ensure that this adult learning transfers into classroom practice? Teachers with an awareness of both student and teacher needs are in the best position to help principals shape professional learning. Teachers may choose to join the school improvement planning team and create a schoolwide professional learning curriculum. They can research and share strategies for job-embedded learning. They can help develop flexible teaching schedules that allow for more team planning, encourage peer observation, promote on-the-job coaching, and foster daily reflection on practice.

Collaborating with colleagues and principals through shared leadership roles will push new teacher leaders to do more and help them develop skills to become more effective.

Through shared leadership teams, teacher leaders can get engaged in "the work behind the work," meaning the professional tasks in addition to the instruction of students, that require new business processes and staff protocols necessary for making a school's reform goals a reality. Teachers can share practical strategies for school improvement with principals who, as both team players and the final decision makers, are able to ensure implementation of these strategies.

**As agents of change who choose not to leave the classroom but rather to lead from the classroom, teachers can make steps toward leadership by helping colleagues with teaching methods.**

**THE TIME IS RIPE**

I believe that the 21st century has opened a new door for teachers. Those who have found solutions in their classes can share that knowledge with their departments and grade-level teams. The teams can share new information with other teams and, before long, the school establishes a teaching and learning culture where leading without leaving is the intended goal and not an outcome by default. This trend relies on a new approach to school-based leadership where principals don't want to go it alone and recognize that teachers have the expertise to provide help.

Across the nation, various models of shared leadership demonstrate that principals are seeing more consistent gains in student achievement when they don't allow problems to accumulate on their desks. Rather, they share with staff the problems as well as the responsibility and credit for solving them. We all know that the achievement gap, one of today's most critical

concerns, does not start and stop with the data on the principal's desk. A progressive principal will engage a team of thinkers, planners, and "gap closers" to assess the situation, recommend approaches for how to address it, create a plan of action, and then garner support from colleagues to make it happen. These principals have given teacher leaders a level of autonomy that encourages strategic thinking and, thereby, have built a level of reliance their teachers deeply appreciate. Visionary principals both accept and elevate the teachers' voice on school issues because they believe that in a learning community, every voice matters, not just the loudest.

American education is on the cusp of what may be its most radical transitions. With swift advancements in technology, major shifts in federal policy, and far-from-traditional school structures, the work of school leaders is beyond the scope of the two or three people who have been formally assigned to it. Teaching and learning

today demand education programs and strategies that have more than potential for achievement gains down the road; application must yield more immediate results. Therefore, the timing for improving schools from the inside out is now. The timing for teachers to lead is now. This requires a change in our thinking, a change in our leadership, and a change in our system for how we do school. Systemic change begins with teachers who are willing to lead, principals who support their doing so, and school communities that are seeking change for a very long time. The reason for change remains the same as ever: Students are at stake. In the words of Roland Barth: Students learn when teachers lead (Barth, 1999).

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# snapshots

A QUICK GLIMPSE AT RECENT RESEARCH AND RESOURCES

## WHAT TEACHERS WANT

**"Professional development in Oregon: What do teachers want, what do they get, and do they find it useful?"**

*Chalkboard Project, January 2008*

Despite growing evidence about what works, little is known about how much school districts invest in professional development, how it's delivered, and whether teachers are satisfied with the offerings. This report seeks to provide guidance to educators and policy makers in Oregon and throughout the country.

[www.chalkboardproject.org/images/PDF/OregonProfessionalDevelopment.pdf](http://www.chalkboardproject.org/images/PDF/OregonProfessionalDevelopment.pdf)



## EVALUATION PROTOCOLS

**"Teacher professional development programs in Florida"**

*Interim Project Report from the Florida House of Representatives, January 2008*

Learn about Florida's policies for professional learning, including information about the protocols in place for evaluating district professional development systems. Florida's professional development guidelines are aligned with NSDC's standards. This report examines changes that districts in the state have experienced since the implementation of the protocol system.

<http://snipurl.com/26642>



## WINNING WAYS

**"How the world's best-performing school systems come out on top"**

*McKinsey & Company, September 2007*

This report explores what makes the world's best-performing schools successful as well as why so many improvement efforts fail. Findings from this study suggest that recruiting the right people to teach, developing teachers effectively, and ensuring delivery of the best instruction for every child are critical factors.

[www.mckinsey.com/clientervice/socialsector/resources/pdf/Worlds\\_School\\_Systems\\_Final.pdf](http://www.mckinsey.com/clientervice/socialsector/resources/pdf/Worlds_School_Systems_Final.pdf)

## NEW ISLLC STANDARDS

The Council of Chief State School Officers has published the recently revised and approved national standards for educational leadership policy. First released in 1996 by the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC), these standards have helped guide leadership policy and practice in more than 40 states. The standards are intended to give policy makers and education leaders a common vision and goals for how to improve student achievement through better educational leadership.

[www.ccsso.org/projects/education\\_leadership\\_initiatives/ISLLC\\_Standards/](http://www.ccsso.org/projects/education_leadership_initiatives/ISLLC_Standards/)

## PENNSYLVANIA COACHING PRACTICES

**"Making a difference: Year two report of the Pennsylvania High School Coaching Initiative"**

*Research for Action, November 2007*

Based on in-depth qualitative research and educator surveys, this report provides recommendations to participating schools and districts in a coaching initiative in Pennsylvania. Findings indicate that instructional coaching, in combination with particular research-based instructional practices, makes a difference in classroom practice and student engagement.

[http://pdf.researchforaction.org/rfapdf/publication/pdf\\_file/344/Brown\\_D\\_PAHSCI\\_Year\\_2\\_Report.pdf](http://pdf.researchforaction.org/rfapdf/publication/pdf_file/344/Brown_D_PAHSCI_Year_2_Report.pdf)





**TURNAROUND SCHOOLS**  
**“School turnarounds: Cross-sector evidence on organizational improvement”**  
*Prepared by Public Impact for the Center on Innovation & Improvement, 2007*  
 This synthesis of research examines how organizations in a variety of sectors showed rapid improvements. The purpose of the report is to assist low-performing schools in identifying conditions and actions that make it possible for organizations to experience dramatic and sustained change. The report is also intended to inform future research on school turnarounds.  
[www.centerii.org/survey/downloads/Turnarounds-Color.pdf](http://www.centerii.org/survey/downloads/Turnarounds-Color.pdf)

**REFORM THAT WORKS**

**“The Benwood Plan: A lesson in comprehensive teacher reform”**

*Elena Silva, Education Sector, April 2008*

The Benwood Initiative in Chattanooga, Tenn., has been widely recognized as a successful reform effort. This new report describes how Benwood's success was not just about recruiting better teachers, but also about helping existing teachers improve the quality of their instruction. The report includes an analysis of teacher effectiveness data that indicates that over a period of six years, existing teachers in the eight Benwood elementary schools improved steadily.

[www.educationsector.org/usr\\_doc/TheBenwoodPlan.pdf](http://www.educationsector.org/usr_doc/TheBenwoodPlan.pdf)



**AUDIT AND LITERACY**

**“Focus on literacy: Professional development audit”**

*Community Training and Assistance Center, January 2008*

Learn about the effectiveness of professional development services provided by the Schultz Center for Teaching and Leadership, an independent nonprofit organization in Jacksonville, Fla., to educators in

Duval County (Fla.) Public Schools. This report describes the audit process and findings related to the effectiveness of literacy professional development and makes recommendations for the ongoing work in this area.

[www.ctacusa.com/DuvalReport\\_2608.pdf](http://www.ctacusa.com/DuvalReport_2608.pdf)

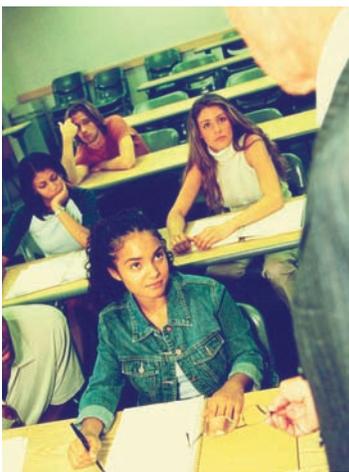
**SCHOOL LEADERS**

**“Schools need good leaders now: State progress in creating a learning-centered school leadership system”**

*Southern Regional Education Board, 2007*

This report calls for states to designate school leadership as a visible state, district, and school priority, focused on the principal's role in leading schools toward higher student performance. The report describes the progress that states should make to ensure that they have the learning-centered school leaders they need to succeed.

[www.sreb.org/main/Goals/Publications/07V48\\_School\\_leadership.pdf](http://www.sreb.org/main/Goals/Publications/07V48_School_leadership.pdf)



**FREING THE PRINCIPAL**

**“Out of the office and into the classroom: An initiative to help principals focus on instruction”**

*Holly Holland, Center for the Study of Teaching and Policy, University of Washington, January 2008*

For many principals, improving instruction often takes a back seat to administrative tasks. This article describes how schools in nine states are testing a new position, called School Administration Manager (SAM), whose job is to help free principals of many administrative distractions and allow them to spend more time on instructional matters.

<http://snipurl.com/24x4a>

**BUILDING CAPACITY**

**"Improving relationships within the schoolhouse"**

Roland Barth, *Educational Leadership*, 63(6), March 2006

Barth's article addresses the type of relationships that educators have, why the nature of those relationships matter, and examples of how some educators have created a culture of collegiality.

<http://snipurl.com/nz7f>



**GOOD INTENTIONS**

**Creating Purposeful Communities**

*Changing Schools*, (57), Winter 2008

The articles in this publication from Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning emphasize the importance of shared goals in achieving remarkable outcomes for students. Read school-based examples and references to relevant research.

[www.mcrel.org/pdf/changing-schools/0125NL\\_08\\_Changing-Schools\\_Winter.pdf](http://www.mcrel.org/pdf/changing-schools/0125NL_08_Changing-Schools_Winter.pdf)



**EXAMINING IMPACT**

**"Professional learning communities"**

*Annenberg Institute for School Reform*

This report shares what the institute has learned about the use of professional learning communities as part of a comprehensive reform initiative. Lessons from research are included.

[www.annenberginstitute.org/pdf/ProfLearning.pdf](http://www.annenberginstitute.org/pdf/ProfLearning.pdf)

EXPLORE PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES

**The web is full of useful information about educators working and learning together. Start your journey with these resources.**



**A COMPREHENSIVE RESOURCE**

**AllThingsPLC**

This web site strives to be the clearinghouse for information related to establishing and implementing professional learning communities. Resources include a blog to which noted authors Rick DuFour, Robert Eaker, and Becky DuFour regularly contribute postings. Other sections provide related articles, templates and tools, and a database for locating schools across the country that have successfully used learning communities for school improvement.

[www.allthingsplc.info/](http://www.allthingsplc.info/)

**COMMUNITIES 101**

**Communities of practice**

Etienne Wenger is a leading thinker in the field of communities of practice and how they work in all types of organizations. His web site offers information about communities of practice and links to other articles and web sites.

[www.ewenger.com/theory/index.htm](http://www.ewenger.com/theory/index.htm)

**COMMUNITY MODELS**

**Teachers Working Together**

*Northwest Education*, (11)1, Fall 2005

This publication of the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory explores several stories of teachers working together to achieve student success through various collaborative models. An interview with Linda Darling-Hammond stresses the importance of overcoming teacher isolation.

[www.nwrel.org/nwedu/11-01/cloak/whole.pdf](http://www.nwrel.org/nwedu/11-01/cloak/whole.pdf)



## theme / PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES



### **Evolution of the professional learning community:**

*Revolutionary concept is based on intentional collegial learning.*

How and why teachers work together has changed considerably through recent generations. Consider a fundamental definition of the professional learning community, and learn how this concept has developed over time. The author also summarizes five key elements of professional learning communities from research literature.

*By Shirley M. Hord*

**A shift in school culture:** *Collective commitments focus on change that benefits student learning.*

Establishing professional learning communities requires much more than structural changes. Substantial changes in a school's culture include a shift from a focus on teaching to a focus on learning, a new vision of how teachers work, and a sustained fixation on student results.

*By Robert Eaker and Janel Keating*

**Crunching numbers, changing practices:** *A close look at student data turns the tide in efforts to close the achievement gap.*

Viewmont Elementary School in Hickory, N.C., was a new school with a respected staff and decent school performance. Once the faculty took a deeper look at the data, they made a commitment to close the significant achievement gaps they found. Transforming practices as well as attitudes carried the school to new heights.

*By Gary Waddell and Ginny Lee*

**Two high school districts recite the ABCs of professional learning communities.**

Two high school districts, one in California and one in Arizona, adopted essential tenets of a professional learning community to ensure that students would have equal access to high-quality learning. Since the inception of the communities, students have seen unprecedented gains.

*By Timothy D. Kanold, Mona Toncheff, and Cindy Douglas*

**Districts speak with one voice:** *Clarity and coherence come from professional learning communities.*

With an eye on results and support for teacher collaboration, two districts focused on exactly what students needed to learn in order to succeed. Educators in Overland Park, Kan., and Buffalo Grove, Ill., created a culture of continuous improvement by speaking with one voice and selecting targeted goals.

*By Tom Many and Dennis King*

**Keep the leadership pipeline flowing:** *Districts can adopt these 5 strategies to streamline succession planning.*

Professional learning communities not only rely on effective leadership, they also support its development in a district. Follow five strategies for developing leaders in the context of learning communities in order to sustain leadership over time.

*By Bill Hall*

**One step at a time:** *Many professional learning teams pass through these 7 stages.*

New educator learning teams don't necessarily know how to start working together. Read how teams progress through seven stages of development, and consider what school leaders can do to support this growth.

*By Parry Graham and Bill Ferriter*

## features

**Q&A with Judith Warren Little.** *Declaration of interdependence: Educators need deep conversations about teaching and learning to spark real changes in practice.*

A prominent researcher of professional learning communities shares her thoughts on what we know about this concept as well as why schools aren't generally prepared to work this way. She also discusses the role of leadership, why external support is valuable, and the types of conversations that move reflective practice forward.

*By Tracy Crow*

**Leading without leaving the classroom:** *Tap into teachers' skills and knowledge to solve school problems.*

Now is the time for teachers to step up as leaders in their schools — without leaving the classroom. Teacher leadership has become more important than ever. Teachers have new roles to fulfill and new responsibilities to assume in order for schools to make the best improvements for students.

*By Cathy Owens*



## coming up

In Fall 2008 *JSD*: **Using evidence**

## A NEW PRINCIPAL LEARNS WHAT IT TAKES TO SURVIVE THE STORM

When I arrived at Freedom Hill Elementary School in a driving rainstorm two years ago to be introduced as the new building principal, my umbrella would not open on the way into the building. I got drenched. What a fitting sign — with a professional staff of more than 100 adults and a student body of 500 children, I was feeling underprepared and overwhelmed. The skills and knowledge I had gained over 25 years as a teacher would need to be completely retooled, much like my umbrella. Honestly, I feared that I would be



Tim Stanley

a failure. However, my mentors and my wife listened and reminded me to hold tight to my mission. A former principal told me to approach every decision thinking of what was best for the students and my decisions would be good ones.

I knew the job would be demanding. There was a collar of responsibility wrapped tightly around my neck that was heavier than I had imagined. Suddenly I was “the boss” and very challenged and lonely. Ultimately, I was responsible for the actions of more than 500 students and 100 staff members. People came to me for answers about curriculum, personal leave, interpretation of special education law, staff development, personnel conflicts, funding, assessment, and student behavior. As a teacher, I worked toward a goal that teachers would lead the school forward, and as a principal, I believe it is the teachers who can best lead us forward. Yet as the principal, I realized people were watching me like hungry hawks — how would the new principal respond to conflicts, issues,

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and pressure? Frequently, I woke up at 2 a.m. and thought about our school, working out solutions in my sleepless brain.

I was thrust into a world of powerful adult stakeholders. I learned that sometimes I needed to negotiate a compromise and sometimes I had to stand my ground. I had not imagined the variety and number of people I would come to know: all of the elementary school staff plus school board members, PTA officers, high school principals, business partners, central office staff, neighbors of the school property, and many others. I learned new relationship skills, such as gaining the trust of staff and facilitating inclusive relationships between the professional staff and our parent community.

I tried to ask the right questions to support my learning and to encourage those with whom I work to reflect on their practices. My focus was to listen, care, be present, model professionalism, and believe in the good work of our children and teachers. My learning came from many sources. I turned to the expertise of Rick DuFour as we looked to support growth through a professional learning community. He writes about asking grade-level teams for specific products like quarterly plans and common assessments. When I recently lost a teacher I interviewed to another school, I called the principal to ask him how he “stole” a great teacher. He talked about knowing when an interview candidate would be a good fit for your school. And as I walked around the 16 construction trailers on school property, overseeing the renovation of our school, I learned what I needed to know from our contractor. One of my teachers asked, “When you took the job, did you know you would be managing a major construction project?” You learn to expect the unexpected as a principal.

Now as I sit at my desk early in the mornings, I feel a great, positive energy, thanks to the actions and words of children and adults in my school. My mission is to increase individual teacher efficacy. I strive to spend more time in classrooms getting to know our teachers and how they help our students learn. I want to guide and inspire our teachers to teach like Rafe Esquith writes about in *Teach Like Your Hair's On Fire* (Viking, 2007). But I still remain overwhelmed by the responsibility of the position. Fortunately, my wife reminds me that my umbrella is just fine — I will remain focused on our students even through the intense rainstorm. ■