## HOW EDUCATORS BENEFIT

Specified and tested implementation models of learning communities that feature methods to improve instruction are key to educators realizing a broad spectrum of benefits, including:

- Focus and continuity across meetings;

- Cause-effect analyses of teaching-learning connections;

- Dedicated attention to core classroom instruction for addressing common learning needs;

- Attention to formative assessment, including classroom interactions and artifacts, to gauge instructional effectiveness and guide refinements;

- Routine and productive questioning of existing instructional practices;

- Increased interest in alternative instructional approaches; and

- Reliance on evidence to drive instructional planning and decisions.
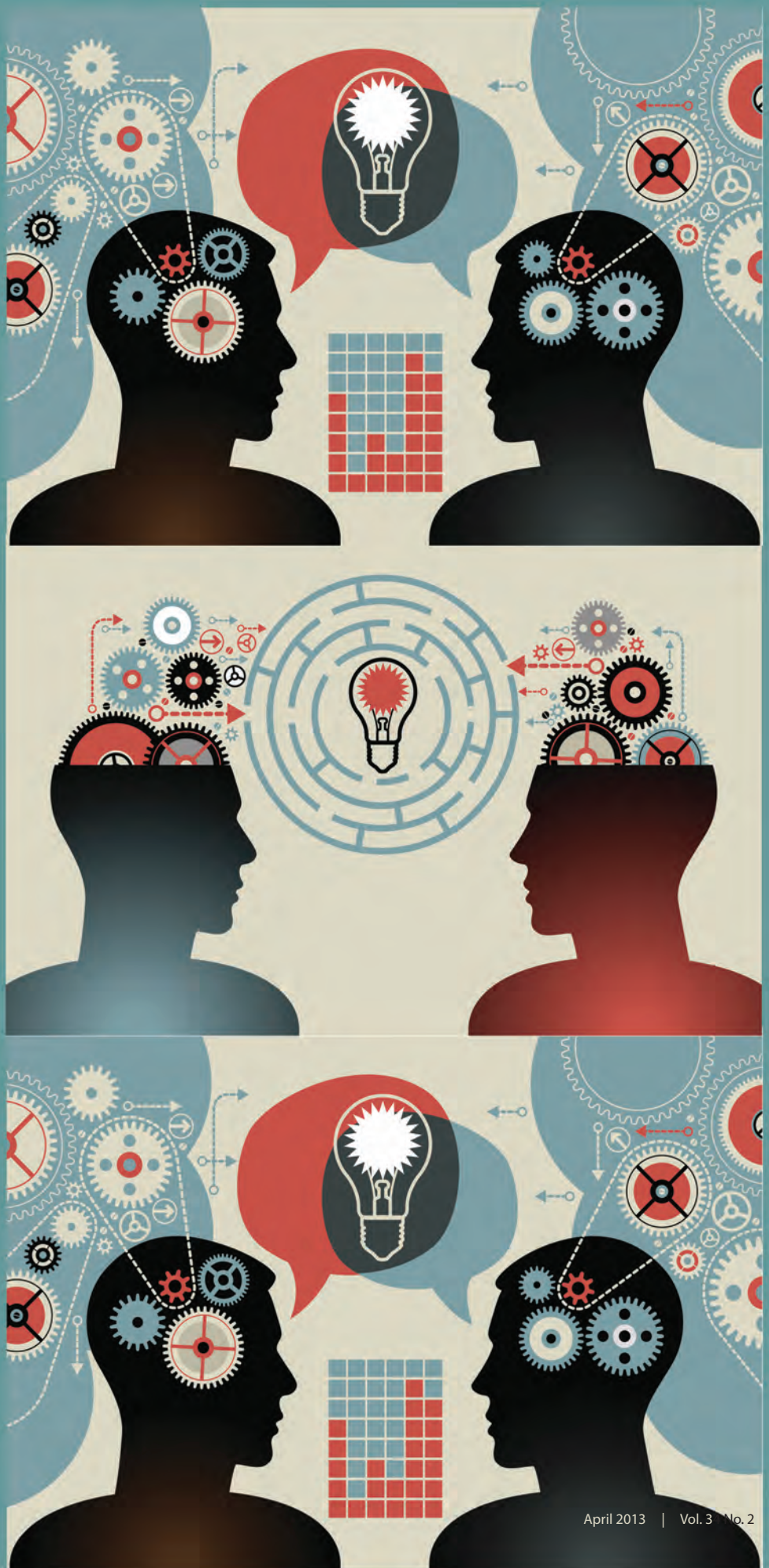
LEARNING TO BE
a COMMUNITY

SCHOOLS NEED ADAPTABLE MODELS TO CREATE SUCCESSFUL PROGRAMS

By Bradley A. Ermeling and Ronald Gallimore

Making schools learning places for teachers as well as students is a timeless and appealing vision. The growing number of professional learning communities is a hopeful sign that profound change is on the way (Lieberman & Miller, 2011).

By now, most schools or districts have participated in professional learning community training or implemented some form of collaborative learning program. While this is good news, our observations in 40 districts across 20 states illustrate that the learning communities movement has reached a critical stage in its development. How schools and districts choose to proceed will determine whether learning communities realize their promise or lose their appeal as a driver of improved teaching and learning.

This is the challenge learning communities face: Schools and districts need implementation models flexible enough to adapt to local conditions but sufficiently specific that educators aren't reinventing the wheel. The search for an implementation model prompted 40 districts to invite us to present our research on inquiry-based teacher teams recognized by Learning Forward for the 2010 Best Research Award (Ermeling, 2012; Gallimore & Ermeling 2010; Gallimore, Ermeling, Saunders, & Goldenberg, 2009; Saunders, Goldenberg, & Gallimore, 2009). Although the 40 districts we visited are a self-selected sample, the consistency of reports across diverse communities and states make our observations more than a collection of anecdotes.

TYPES OF COMMUNITIES

What we observed in the 40 districts fell into two categories, each following a different approach to learning communities: compliance-driven and workshop-inspired.

Compliance-driven. At least a dozen of the 40 districts used the term "learning communities" to describe meetings where teachers were expected to work on mandated district initiatives. These included training on new curriculum ma-

terials, analysis of district assessments, accreditation planning, technology training, or high-stakes test preparations. A high school mathematics teacher described his experience as "mandatory district meetings where we are given a math lesson and instructed to make it work." Some districts simply renamed as learning communities their faculty or district meetings covering textbooks, field trips, policy changes, or upcoming deadlines. Activities labeled professional learning communities focused on accountability and compliance rather than collaborative learning opportunities for teachers. These instances confirm what others have concluded: What constitutes a professional learning community is so loosely specified that the label is in danger of losing all meaning (DuFour, 2004; Vescio, Ross, & Adams, 2008).

Workshop-inspired. About 25 other districts we visited intended to support collaborative learning, mirroring goals identified by learning community experts. In these cases, some teachers and more than two-thirds of administrators had attended a locally or nationally organized workshop or seminar where they were inspired by compelling cases of high-performing schools that had established exemplary practices. Experts at the workshops emphasized these themes: Focus on student learning, embrace high expectations for all, become a community of learners, and focus on results.

> Learning community time was seldom used for studying and improving instruction.

Energized by these inspiring ideas and ambitious goals, attendees were apprehensive about the daunting challenge of replicating workshop exemplars. Within a few weeks, the appeal of professional learning communities was more than matched by a realization that making them work as intended was going to be difficult. Teachers and administrators quickly recognized that they lacked an implementation model specifying structures, protocols, and supports necessary for translating ambitious goals into effective reality. Workshops had vividly illustrated how learning communities functioned once they were up and running well. What they lacked was enough detail on where to start the journey and how to keep moving forward.

As a result, school leaders were left to devise their own implementation plans. One principal organized a book study on becoming a data-driven school, others tried to establish a tiered intervention system, some asked instructional coaches to provide professional learning, and others encouraged sharing and testing out best practices as teachers saw fit. One district leader, particularly inspired by workshop presenters, shared frustration with the lack of nuts-and-bolts guidance for implementing learning communities. "If this is research-based, shouldn't there be a clear perspective on what works and how it should be implemented?" he asked.

A few strong principals, working long hours to design their own implementation models, were exhausted or frustrated by

lack of specific implementation guidelines. In other schools with less ambitious principals, teachers expressed dissatisfaction with wasted time better used for individual grading and planning.

A caveat: Self-selection likely filtered into our sample mostly districts dissatisfied with their attempts to replicate workshop exemplars of professional learning communities. How representative these are of the national ratio of satisfied to unsatisfied is unknown. However, something we witnessed in these 40 districts gives cause for concern: an absence of talk about teaching and its improvement during learning community time.

THE MISSING ELEMENT

Whether a district adopted a compliance-oriented or workshop-inspired approach, learning community time was seldom used for studying and improving instruction. Some districts expressed uncertainty about whether learning communities should even deal with instruction. At a district training session, one educator commented, "We've always been told this is not about teaching; it's about student learning." During the same session, an administrator asked, "Are you focused on teaching or student learning? Because we've decided to focus on student learning."

For many districts we visited, the message that professional learning communities are about assessment must have been the prevailing workshop take-away. For example, a group of teacher leaders in a charter school vented frustration that their learning community time was spent on creating and reviewing assessments and identifying student weaknesses. "We never have an opportunity to work on instruction related to our daily classroom teaching," they said.

A district of 40 schools invited us to visit five sites they identified as high-functioning learning communities. In four of those schools, the majority of learning community time focused on developing common assessments, reviewing assessment results, identifying struggling students, and assigning them to an intervention group and reading or math expert. Only one of these schools discussed what intervention strategies might be most effective for the struggling students they identified. None of the five schools devoted time to identifying and planning core classroom instruction that might minimize the need for more intensive intervention.

Workshop presenters' well-intended messages to "focus on student learning" and "dig deeply into assessment results" had inadvertently de-emphasized instructional planning and inquiry. As a result, learning communities in these 40 districts rarely provided collaborative time to work on all facets of the basic teaching cycle of planning, teaching, assessing, and reflecting.

IMPLEMENTATION MODELS

What we learned from these 40 districts — and what we know from published research (Gallimore et al., 2009; Vescio

et al., 2008) — suggests that providers of next-generation training for professional learning communities need to develop and offer fully specified implementation models that emphasize instruction. Too many busy educators struggle to craft successful implementations entirely on their own, and a surprising percentage leave instruction out of the picture altogether.

Specified and tested implementation models of learning communities that feature methods to improve instruction are key to educators realizing a broad spectrum of benefits. (See box on p. 42.)

An implementation model that produced these benefits was deployed in a five-year study of teacher learning teams in nine Title I elementary schools (Saunders et al., 2009) and in subsequent scaling efforts (Gallimore et al., 2009). The model tested included an instructional improvement protocol that gave every team a standard structure and common language for investigating and addressing student learning needs. The model also provided teachers substantial latitude in applying the protocol to their team's context, beginning with guidelines for identifying a pressing student need to work on together. Next, teams formulated a clear objective for assessment, identified a promising instructional approach, developed and implemented detailed instructional plans, analyzed student work to gauge effects, and reassessed progress to determine next steps. The nine Title I elementary schools using this fully specified but adaptable implementation model registered achievement gains of 41% above demographically matched comparison schools and 54% gains for Hispanic students. One assistant superintendent from a large urban school district said, "It's been encouraging to watch the change. …Teachers are really talking about instruction. They're having detailed conversations about pedagogy and how to meet the needs of all students."

In contrast, learning community meetings in the 40 districts we visited typically focused on important tasks (unpacking standards, analyzing student work or assessments, sharing practices), but each in isolation rather than integrated into a cycle of inquiry and improvement. Standards are critical, but studying them in isolation has little impact unless connected to planning, implementing, and analyzing instruction for student outcomes defined by those standards. Examining student work or other assessments is also critical, but has limited impact unless systematically connected to cycles of planning and teaching related to specific learning needs. In most of the reported cases, assessment or analysis of student work was treated as an end in itself, leaving teachers to figure out instructional approaches on their own rather than in their learning communities.

THE NEXT PHASE

Some districts and schools are struggling to translate inspiring case stories into successful programs at their own schools. Dozens in our self-selected sample said professional learning community workshops provided too little guidance for turn-

ing intentions into reality. We were especially concerned by the number of educators influenced by their training to de-emphasize instructional inquiry and improvement as key drivers of change.

The learning communities movement is at a crossroads, in danger of relying too much on inspirational examples and overly general implementation models. We believe there is a middle ground between leaving educators to work out their own approach and offering an educator-proof recipe antithetical to a learning community.

This middle ground is to develop and share tested implementation models that are detailed enough to guide yet flexible enough to sustain effective learning communities. Despite a limited evidence base (Vescio et al., 2008), there are enough successes to know that this is possible. In the meantime, identifying, validating, and sharing tested implementation models represents a clear and important call to action for the next generation of professional learning communities.

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