

## theme

EXPLORE THE STANDARDS  
FOR PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

## LEARNING COMMUNITIES

As they write about the Learning Communities standard in **Reach the Highest Standard in Professional Learning: Learning Communities**, authors Ann Lieberman and Lynne Miller consider why communities have gained widespread attention and support and summarize the established research base about them. They also describe three contexts in which professional learning communities have been enacted and consider the challenges professional learning communities face, concluding with an examination of the “questions professional communities raise and the implications they pose for school reform in general and the role of teachers in the reform agenda in particular” (Lieberman, Miller, Roy, Hord, & von Frank, 2013). This excerpt from their full chapter shares rationale and findings from research about learning communities.

# HARNESS THE ENERGY OF COLLABORATION

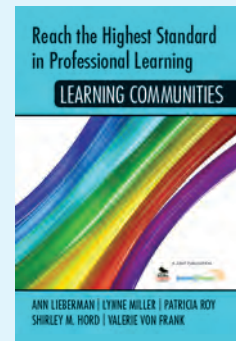
By Ann Lieberman and Lynne Miller

In 2008, we characterized professional learning communities (PLCs) as “on-going groups of teachers who meet regularly for the purpose of increasing their own learning and that of their students” (Lieberman & Miller, 2008, p. 2). We have come to think that they are more than that. They are not just a way for teachers to collaborate, nor are they just one more promising approach to staff development. Professional learning communities have gained traction across the globe because of their potential for energizing a larger agenda: to reform schools, improve and professionalize teaching, advance learning for *all* students, and change the discourse about teacher accountability.

Professional learning communities in education owe much to the work of two organizational theorists whose initial inquiries focused on groups outside of education and whose ideas have since been applied to teachers and schools. Don Schon (1983) looked at how architects collaborated on design projects and came up with the idea of *reflective practice*, in which the practitioner allows himself to experience surprise, puzzlement, or confusion in a situation he finds uncertain or unique. He reflects on the phenomenon before him and on the understandings that have been implicit in his behaviour. He carries out an experiment that serves to generate both a new understanding of the phenomenon and a change in the situation (p. 68).

Schon viewed reflective practice as a precondition for continuous learning. He described two kinds of reflective practice: *reflection in action* and *reflection on action*. It is reflection on action, which entails opportunities for sharing ideas, looking at practice with a critical eye, and jointly identifying problems of practice and hypothesizing about solutions, that is central to professional learning communities in education.

Professional learning that increases educator effectiveness and results for all students **occurs within learning communities committed to continuous improvement, collective responsibility, and goal alignment.**



#### ABOUT THE BOOK

**Lieberman, A., Miller, L., Roy, P., Hord, S.M., & von Frank, V. (2013).** *Reach the highest standard in professional learning: Learning Communities.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin. Excerpted with permission.

The other thinker is Etienne Wenger, who studied apprentices in the process of becoming full members of a craft guild. He introduced the idea of *communities of practice* in which practitioners develop a shared repertoire of resources that allow them to identify and solve shared problems of practice. Wenger (1998) noted that these communities develop over time and have a powerful presence in the lives of members. They include rituals and routines that affirm membership, engage members in a variety of interactions, provide short- and long-term value, and promote a communal identity and a sense of belonging

(Wenger, 1998). Wenger adds to Schon's idea of reflective communities; both contribute to our understanding of the roots of PLCs as communities of practice that engage in reflection on practice. Nonhierarchical and self-governing, they offer opportunities for teachers to reflect on action, to learn from each other, to share resources and insights, to solve problems of practice, and to assume responsibility for results.

In their review of the literature on professional learning communities, Vescio, Ross, and Adams (2008) investigated the effects of professional learning communities on three outcomes:

teacher practice, school culture, and student achievement. In terms of teacher practice, they found evidence that teachers who participated in professional learning communities viewed their practice as having changed in the direction of student centeredness, though there were few descriptions of the specific pedagogical practices that had changed. When it came to effects on school culture, the researchers found substantial evidence that PLCs led to increased teacher collaboration, more focus on student learning, expanded teacher authority over instructional decisions, and the establishment of norms of continuous learning. In terms of effects on student achievement, the researchers concluded that the few controlled studies that were done indicated improvement in student test scores in schools where teacher collaboration was complemented by “structured work that was highly focused around student learning” (Vescio et al., 2008, p. 15). They found no evidence of effects on student achievement where this structured work was absent. At issue with this and all effectiveness studies is that the goals under study tend to be limited to quantifiable variables and that student achievement is narrowly defined as growth on standardized measures.

There is a growing body of research that provides a wider lens for viewing professional learning communities and that broadens the idea of “effectiveness” as a focus of inquiry. Qualitative in nature, these studies document the development and growth of professional learning communities and how they enact conditions that enable them to develop and grow. Talbert (2010, p. 257) identified four such conditions:

- Norms of collaboration;
- Focus on students and their academic performance;
- Access to a wide range of learning resources for individuals and the group; and
- Mutual accountability for student growth and success.

These conditions draw attention to the multiple dimensions of the “structured work” in which members of professional learning communities engage.

Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1993) described how successive professional learning communities that met in a university setting structured their work around inquiry into practice. The groups met for 12 months and included student teachers, faculty, and supervisors from the university and cooperating teachers from different schools in the area. Group members engaged in ongoing collaborative inquiry into a wide variety of issues, including “language and literacy, curriculum and pedagogy; race, class, gender; modes of assessment; and the cultures of schools and teaching” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993, p. 66) and how they impacted learning and teaching. In their later writings, Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) reported how community members documented and made public the changes they made in their instructional practices and how these impacted observed student learning and engagement.

Little and Horn (2007) and Horn (2005) reported on a learning community that developed in one high school and

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consisted of nine math teachers who met every week to work on ways to improve their teaching of algebra, increase student math achievement, and add to enrollments in advanced classes. The group members used a structured “check-in” to jump-start each session. During this time, each participant was invited to present a problem of practice or a new idea for group consideration. The honest and direct talk that followed focused on both teaching practice and student learning. It was a way for the members to develop norms of collaboration and hold each other accountable to the group for their practice. This dual emphasis on teacher and student learning had its desired results: The researchers reported changes in teaching practices and teacher leadership roles as well as an increase in student engagement and in the number of students taking higher-level math courses.

McLaughlin and Talbert’s (2001) ambitious study of 22 schools in Michigan and California provides insight into teaching communities within schools. The researchers identified three kinds of teaching communities and reported on the degree to which their differing teaching cultures, professional norms and values, and instructional practices influenced innovation, promoted reform, and affected student engagement and academic outcomes. *Weak communities* were characterized by teacher isolation, a high priority on teacher seniority in course assignment, text-based teaching practices based on a transmission model, and low expectations for students. In these communities, students were minimally engaged and showed little change in attainment levels. *Strong-traditional communities*, where teacher isolation was less pronounced and collegiality more normative, were characterized by sorting students by academic ability, differentiated student expectations (high for the most able, lower for others), seniority-based course assignments, and grading on a curve. In these schools, the highly tracked students demonstrated a high level of engagement and attainment, and the



## LESSONS LEARNED FROM PRACTICE

If there are any implications for the future of professional learning communities, they are best derived from lessons learned from practice:

- Develop and nurture a professional teaching culture that provides an alternative to the norms and values of the bureaucratic culture of schools.
- Learn how to navigate between the two cultures and leverage bureaucratic mandates for authentic teacher learning.
- Dedicate time and resources to the work.
- Routinize structures for inquiry, reflection, and collaboration.
- Provide vehicles and supports for making teaching public.
- Maintain control of the agenda in the face of pressures to do otherwise.
- Embrace expansive definitions of teacher development and student learning.
- Practice patience and take time to navigate the fault lines that emerge.
- Take on issues of equity and accountability and make them your own.
- Make an effort to be inclusive rather than exclusive and to share practices and insights with a larger community of educators.

lower-tracked students did not fare so well. McLaughlin and Talbert (2001) viewed these communities as being “stuck” in terms of innovation and reform.

In what they termed *strong teacher communities*, McLaughlin and Talbert (2001) identified characteristics that set these groups apart from the strong-traditional communities. These included:

1. Teacher collaboration around problems of teaching and learning;
2. A belief that all students could learn;
3. High expectations for all students;
4. Nontracked classrooms;
5. A focus on developing a shared language and knowledge about teaching and learning; and
6. A commitment to active engagement and equitable achievement for all students.

McLaughlin and Talbert (2006) considered these strong teacher communities to be “moving” toward innovation and reform and noted the essential role of principal support in their success. In these schools, there was evidence of increased student engagement and gains in achievement.

McLaughlin and Talbert (2006) dug deeper into the strong teacher communities and described their stages of development. The first stage is the *novice stage*, in which teachers begin to focus on shared inquiry and do so by collecting data.

The second stage is the *intermediate stage*, where teachers move beyond the mere collection of data and begin to examine the data collectively, develop a shared language and goals for their work, and build leadership skills. The third stage is the advanced stage. Here the teachers consider how to change their practices in order to improve student outcomes, take on the reform agenda and make it their own, and accept shared responsibility for student learning.

Grossman, Wineburg, and Woolworth (2001) also described the stages in the development of a professional learning

community. Working in one high school, they organized and documented the progress of a community of teachers of English and social studies who were charged with creating an interdisciplinary course.

They identified three stages of development. The first stage was the *beginning stage* in which teachers were involved in the formation of group identity and playacted at being a community, forming what was in effect a *pseudo-community*. The second stage was the *evolution stage*, where teachers engaged in a process of *navigating the fault lines*. They competed for attention, negotiated their tensions, and fought through their differences. The final stage was the *maturity stage*. When the group reached this stage, they took responsibility for each other and assumed “communal responsibility for individual growth” (Grossman, Wineburg, & Woolworth, 2001). Like the McLaughlin and Talbert (2006) study, this study demonstrates a movement from individual to communal work and demonstrates the dynamics of growth and change of a community over time.

This research adds to our understanding of professional learning communities across a variety of venues. It highlights how work gets structured and focused on both student achievement and teacher learning, how norms of collaboration are built, how learning resources are used, and how by making their work public to colleagues, teachers assume collective responsibility for their own learning and that of their students — and, in so doing, expand the idea of what it means to be an effective professional learning community.

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## Harness the energy of collaboration

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