

CREATING SYNERGY

CYCLE OF INQUIRY SHIFTS LEARNING TEAMS INTO HIGH GEAR

By Karl H. Clauset and Carlene U. Murphy

Through learning communities, schools can change to strengthen educator practice and improve student learning outcomes. So can districts.

For 20 years, we have helped states, districts, and schools in the United States and Canada implement Whole-Faculty Study Groups, a design for learning communities.

During the 2010-11 school year, we reconnected with colleagues across the United States to discover how their work with learning communities through the Whole-Faculty Study Groups design transformed the culture of schools and districts, strengthened educator practice, and improved student learning.

Their experiences demonstrate three key lessons:

1. Educators must focus on outcomes and inquiry cycles.
2. Learning teams, learning communities, and schools need ongoing support and pressure.
3. Sharing is essential.

These key points support the Outcomes standard of Learning Forward's Standards for Professional Learning. The overarching goal of Whole-Faculty Study Groups is to address student learning outcomes through sustained collaboration and professional learning that deepens teachers' "content knowledge, pedagogical content knowledge, and understanding of how students learn the specific discipline" (Learning Forward, 2011, p. 50) and engages them in learning or creating new practices to implement in their classrooms.

THE WHOLE-FACULTY STUDY GROUPS DESIGN


In Whole-Faculty Study Groups, the school is a learning community comprised of teams of three to five educa-

tors working collaboratively to address student learning needs. All certified staff belong to a learning team. In many schools, noncertified staff either have their own learning teams or belong to teacher learning teams. Even administrators have their own learning teams, either within a building or across buildings. Sharing, learning, and collaboration among learning teams create the synergy that makes each school a learning community. The principles of Whole-Faculty Study Groups are listed in the box on p. 31. The heart of the design is the cycle of inquiry or action research that learning teams undertake to improve educator practice and student learning. The question driving their work is: What are students learning and achieving as a result of what educators are learning and doing in their learning teams? With this focus on outcomes, job-embedded professional learning occurs in these inquiry cycles as teams:

- Clarify their focus, determine current student performance, and set targets;
- Identify content and best practices, develop expertise, and plan and practice interventions;
- Implement interventions, examine student work, assess impact, reflect on lessons learned, and plan next steps; and
- Assess and reflect on end-of-the-cycle results and plan for the next cycle.

LESSON 1: EDUCATORS MUST FOCUS ON OUTCOMES AND INQUIRY CYCLES.

Paying attention to the work of learning communities means focusing on cycles of continuous improvement. Principals in Franklin County, N.C., Wauconda, Ill., Holdrege, Neb., and Osborne, Kan., frequently monitor and support their learning communities' work in their inquiry cycles. They and their instructional coaches help



teams sharpen their focus, identify content and instructional strategies to use, build expertise, and apply their learning with students. They expect teams to reflect on their learning, their work as a team, and their impact on students. For example, Jewel Eason, principal at Bunn Elementary in Franklin County, asks learning communities to do a written reflection at the end of the year on four areas:

- Specific needs the learning community addressed and outcomes accomplished;
- Strategies that the learning community found to be most effective in classrooms and would suggest that others try;
- What the group knows now that it didn't know before; and
- Where the learning community is headed and whether a different perspective is needed.

In the Wauconda School District 118 in Island Lake, Ill., Matthews Middle School Principal David Wilm says, "Whole-Faculty Study Groups have provided an excellent systematic approach for us as a school and a district to engage in professional development to positively impact student achievement." At Matthews, teacher teams engage in cycles of action research to test their hypotheses about improving student learning outcomes.

One team focused on struggling adolescent readers who were in the lower quartile nationally and did not meet or exceed the Illinois Learning Standards for English Language Arts. They hypothesized that if they provided students with additional reading instructions using scientifically based interventions, students' fluency and comprehension would improve. Thirteen students were given an additional 45 minutes per day of reading instruction using the Read 180 program and small-group instruction on phonics and good reading habits. By midyear, 75% of students increased their reading Lexile, 93% of students scored higher in fluency on the winter benchmarks, and 43% of students met or exceeded their expected progress. In reflecting on their work, the team decided to continue working with students who had not made sufficient prog-

ress and identified several factors that may have affected progress, including lack of motivation with Read 180, student schedule conflicts that reduced instructional time, and the choice of diagnostic tool to assess progress every two weeks.

In the Osborne County (Kan.) School District, music teacher Kathy Conway said that cross-grade learning communities allow teachers time together to look at student needs, review data, and create interventions that work in a classroom. Teachers have a better understanding of each other as teachers and a better overview of how everyone fits together in the district as a team.

Julie Wolters, science teacher at Osborne Junior/Senior High School, reported that her learning community focused on how to help students organize their thoughts and ideas to plan and complete classroom projects. During the first semester, she introduced her students to 3D graphic organizers called foldables, a hands-on learning activity that helps students organize data and material in class. She used learning community time to coordinate her plans and project outcomes with her group. They found that student learning increased when students were given an opportunity to digest information in a systematic, logical, and pictorial presentation.

PRINCIPLES OF WHOLE-FACULTY STUDY GROUPS

- Students are first.
- Everyone participates.
- Leadership is shared.
- Responsibility is equal.
- Improvement requires learning.
- The work is public.

In the second semester, the group determined that for many students, planning and completing projects are difficult because they don't always have role models or someone to encourage them. The group researched and created a new course that implements a tutoring program between high school and elementary school students.

In Holdrege, Neb., all K-12 teachers have participated since 2007 in Whole-Faculty Study Groups that meet every Friday afternoon. In 2010, the percentage of students at each assessed grade level meeting and exceeding state standards was

exceptional compared to local districts and statewide percentages. Teachers and administrators attribute this performance to the groups' work in using data to improve student learning.

An important part of the work of learning communities is achieving the outcomes of improved instruction and improved student performance. In 2000, Louisiana launched the Learning-Intensive Networking Communities for Success, a whole-school reform effort that built an infrastructure for school-based professional learning and sustained teacher support to improve student learning (Langlois, 2010). The program continued through 2009, reaching more than 300 elementary, middle, and high schools across the state. Schools participated in the program for five years.

The program focused on changing school culture and increasing teacher expertise to achieve the desired outcomes

— better teacher practice and improved student learning. The program consisted of five components: regional coordinators, school-based instructional coaches, Whole-Faculty Study Groups in every school, school leadership teams, and university-affiliated professional development.

Field-based regional coordinators worked directly with school and district staff, observing and coaching classroom teachers and instructional coaches, facilitating Whole-Faculty Study Groups, modeling lessons, conducting monthly professional development for instructional coaches, and providing support to schools.

At least one instructional coach from the program worked alongside classroom teachers, modeling lessons, coaching, faci-

lating Whole-Faculty Study Groups, and supporting the implementation of standards-based teaching and learning strategies.

Schools in the program received university professional development in their focus area (English language arts, math, or science). Schools sent teams of three coaches and/or teachers to the university program for three consecutive summers. Participants shared content and pedagogy with other teachers in study group meetings, grade-level and content-area meetings, and schoolwide professional development.

Researchers at Louisiana State University and Nicholls State University evaluated the program annually for the Louisiana Department of Education to measure the program's impact on student and teacher performance. Their results showed that, from 2000 to 2007, the percentage of students in participating schools scoring basic and above in English language arts and mathematics increased on state assessments. In addition, participating teachers demonstrated increased capability to design and teach standards-based lessons and increased ability to prepare rigorous standards-based student assessments.

LESSON 2: LEARNING TEAMS, LEARNING COMMUNITIES, AND SCHOOLS NEED ONGOING SUPPORT AND PRESSURE.

Implementing and sustaining effective learning teams and communities is a lot like gardening. Care and attention produce results — increasing alignment and accountability. Part of the care and attention is setting clear expectations for learning teams and for school leaders.

After eight years of supporting the Whole-Faculty Study Groups design for learning teams in Springfield (Mo.) Public Schools, district professional learning leaders realized in 2010 that some staff and school leaders were not clear about the district's expectations for collaborative work or about how to effectively participate in or support learning teams.

In spring 2011, the district launched Site Professional Learning System. One administrator and a minimum of three teachers from each school attended a one-day session in May and June, during which professional learning staff emphasized key components, covered district expectations (see box at left), and outlined resources. Teams planned their kickoff with their faculties and their distribution of allocated time for learning team work.

In addition to setting clear expectations for the work of learning communities, school and district leaders model desired practices by actively participating in their own learning communities. In Hawthorn School District 73 in Vernon Hills, Ill., and Franklin County Schools in Louisburg, N.C., the districts created learning communities among school and district leaders.

In Franklin County, central office staff and school principals belong to cross-site administrator learning communities that meet monthly to engage in cycles of inquiry to address districtwide issues in teaching and learning. In 2009-10, focus areas included:

SITE PROFESSIONAL LEARNING SYSTEM

District expectations for the Site Professional Learning System in Springfield (Mo.) Public Schools include:

- Teachers use contract time to actively engage in collaboration/learning.
- Data drives each team's work and classroom instruction.
- Plan and work must align with the school improvement plan and exhibit cycles of improvement.
- Teams document work and monitor outcomes.
- Leader provides written and verbal feedback to collaborative teams and opportunities to make the work public.

- Academic achievement gaps in reading and math for minority and low socioeconomic male students;
- Differentiated instruction;
- Increasing the graduation rate; and
- Supporting healthy lifestyles.

The action plans and logs from the countywide learning communities are posted on the same Moodle website as the faculty learning communities action plans and logs. Principals also share their learning community work at their school's instructional council meetings.

In Hawthorn, the planning council is a learning community comprised of school and district leaders charged with three main tasks:

1. Develop and recommend strategies that promote successful teaching and learning and integrate technology for all Hawthorn learners;
2. Model open and positive communication and identify ways to promote such communication throughout the Hawthorn learning community; and
3. Identify staff development initiatives that will help to enhance teaching and learning.

The planning council creates and implements ongoing professional learning for its members so that they can be more effective in leading their staffs in improving teaching and learning.

Modeling the element of coherence outlined in Learning Forward's Outcomes standard, these learning communities support educators in developing sustained, ongoing professional communication with other educators who are engaged in similar changes in their practice.

LESSON 3: SHARING IS ESSENTIAL.

Sharing results and best practices among learning teams enhances faculty commitment to their collective responsibility for improving the learning of all students and ensures that professional learning is aligned with student learning goals. Learning teams tend to operate in isolation unless the principal and the school leadership team implement regular and frequent opportunities for teams to share strategies, lessons learned, and results with other teams and support schoolwide use of best practices.

In Franklin County, the district uses Moodle to support districtwide sharing of action plans and logs and mandates at least two instructional council meetings per year where learning community representatives and the school leadership team meet to share strategies, results, and lessons learned. In addition, Laurel Mill Elementary schedules workshops during the year for learning communities to teach other teams how to use specific strategies with students. Bunn Elementary and other schools use the principal's weekly staff newsletter and the school's parent newsletter to share the work of learning communities.

Sharing, learning, and collaboration among learning teams

create the synergy that encourages teams to strive toward continually improving their practice and student learning outcomes.

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE WORK

In Wauconda, Ill., Carthage, Mo., and Franklin County, N.C., teachers talked about their passion for the work they were doing in their teams and the importance and urgency they felt for improving learning for all students. Teams were not perceived as administrative structures, but rather as opportunities for collaboration and learning among team members focused on student learning needs. This embodies several of the Standards for Professional Learning, including the Outcomes and Learning Communities standards, highlighting collective responsibility and mutual accountability for continually advancing the learning of adults based on the specific learning needs of students.

In Franklin County, Jewel Eason, principal of Bunn Elementary, says, "I can attribute the work we began more than eight years ago using the Whole-Faculty Study Groups process with the high level of collaboration, especially across grade levels and disciplines, that we enjoy at our school. . . . The work we are doing is challenging, exciting, and meaningful."

Marsha Braxton, English language arts teacher at Bunn Middle School, says, "Sharing resources and ideas with colleagues at the Whole-Faculty Study Groups has proven essential to unraveling the Common Core standards for effective implementation in our classrooms this year."

At Fairview Elementary School in Carthage, Mo., 4th-grade teacher Lori Harter says, "We are intentional, focused, and adaptable as we educate our diverse population to prepare our students for their future, whether it be college, vocational school, or the workplace."

Rita Waynick, 4th-grade teacher at Fairview, describes the shift in the school's culture this way: "The teachers at Fairview Elementary are not just educators; they are scientists and theorists in the study of educating students."

REFERENCES

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Karl H. Clauset (khclauset@comcast.net) is director and Carlene U. Murphy (carlenemurphy@comcast.net) is executive director of Whole-Faculty Study Groups National Center. Their new book, *Schools Can Change*, co-authored with Dale Lick, will be published in November by Corwin Press. ■