



A professional learning community's power lies in its intentions

Effective professional learning communities are based on the assumption that collective learning and problem solving are key to improving educator practice and student learning. Effective professional learning communities promote the spread of better practices from teacher to teacher as well as school to school, ensuring that more students experience instruction that leads to improved learning. Effective professional learning communities are more likely than individualized learning options to ensure every student experiences great teaching every day.

However, not all professional learning communities achieve this outcome. There is considerable variation in how professional learning communities operate, and, as a result, in the outcomes they are able to achieve. Research in school improvement, reports of exemplary practice in the field, and expert observations provide insight into the characteristics of the most effective professional learning communities.

The most successful pay attention to all three words in this concept.

Professional. *Who* will participate? Professional learning communities include the staff responsible and accountable for

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an effective instructional program, ensuring that students achieve high standards of learning. This means that professional learning communities include administrators, teachers, and instructional support staff such as counselors, librarians, and school psychologists.

Learning. *What* will be the work of the professional learning community? Combined ignorance will not lead to better outcomes. The needs of the professionals are paramount. Their learning must cover the content and activities to supply the knowledge and skills they identify as necessary to increase their effectiveness.

Community. *How* are educators organized to achieve the intended outcomes of the learning community? Productive communities operate according to structures and processes that facilitate learning and accelerate achievement.

Educators working in an effective professional learning community join the group with the assumption that the data they examine and the needs they identify will point toward the learning they will undertake to successfully address the challenges they face. Learning Forward's definition of professional development focuses on the cycle of continuous improvement, outlining the steps a community takes to achieve its intended outcomes.

Unfortunately, not all professional

learning communities pay attention to this. As a result, we hear about:

- School systems allocating team time one afternoon a week without embracing a clear purpose or philosophy for achieving results;
- Learning teams using data to justify trial-and-error brainstorming and risk taking rather than decisions that lead to a substantive learning agenda for its members; and
- Learning community members focusing on strategies to strengthen knowledge for students before examining the knowledge and pedagogy needs of educators.

Members of effective professional learning communities recognize that their learning will be the key to their students' learning. Learning is always intentional. It is not simply a byproduct of the many important tasks that groups undertake.

It is no accident that the Standards for Professional Learning begin with the standard on Learning Communities. While many forms of professional learning

may lead to improved knowledge and skills for adults, only the learning community offers a structure, process, and product that lead to systematic continuous improvement for both educators and students. Unfortunately, many embrace the concept of professional learning communities for the appeal of its parts rather than the power of the whole. ■

