



## As learning communities mature, collaboration skills matter more than ever

Learning communities are moving beyond their adolescent years, and you can see their evolution in education literature, in practice, and in the Standards for Professional Learning.

The earlier Standards for Staff Development (NSDC, 2001) included Collaboration and Learning Communities. Both emphasized the process and structure of learning collaboratively. For example, the 2001 Learning Communities standard stated, “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” (NSDC, 2001). The 2011 version states, “Professional learning that increases educator effectiveness and results for all students occurs within learning

communities committed to continuous improvement, collective responsibility, and goal alignment” (Learning Forward, 2011).

And yet, even as schools and teams move to enact learning communities more deeply as described in the newer standard, the individuals within those

teams are presumed to be working together effectively. That means that those who participate in learning teams, Critical Friends Groups, professional learning communities — wherever they learn intentionally and collaboratively — must still attend to the basics of collaboration. Those leaders and facilitators who create cultures that nurture the communities, even as they push learners to connect student achievement and sustained continuous improvement to the work they do daily in teams, have to keep an eye on how adults work together to ensure that their efforts are productive.

The current Learning Communities standard recognizes this when it states, “Learning community members strive to refine their collaboration, communication, and relationship skills to work within and across both internal and external systems to support student learning. They develop norms of collaboration and relational trust and employ processes and structures that unleash expertise and strengthen capacity to analyze, plan, implement, support, and evaluate their practice” (Learning Forward, 2011).

A lot of important work is packed into those two sentences, and the articles in this issue offer examples of teams working at all levels, developing and practicing the collaboration skills they need as they accomplish their shared goals for students. Moving from a profession whose individuals were steeped in isolation to one whose

participants are willing to be vulnerable, share expertise, and confront challenges within and beyond the school’s doors, as Ed Tobia and Shirley Hord write about on p. 16, requires the right “relational skills.” Kevin Fahey (p. 28) stresses how important protocols were in ensuring that a network of principals collaborated intentionally. Jane Kise emphasizes important elements and skills for collaboration in her article on p. 38.

In other articles, the use of such skills are more implicit, and for a delightful reflection on how far learning communities and the field of professional learning have evolved, turn to Carlene Murphy’s article on p. 43.

It’s exciting to track the field’s growth, most importantly because of the results that growth creates for students. We know so much more about what is required for effective adult learning. As we shift our emphasis to deep learning, let’s not leave process behind. Learning communities — in fact, deep professional learning in any form — require us to focus on both.

### REFERENCES

- Learning Forward. (2011).** *Standards for Professional Learning*. Oxford, OH: Author.
- NSDC. (2001).** *NSDC’s Standards for Staff Development*. Oxford, OH: Author. ■

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