

# REBEL WITH *a* CAUSE

**A PIONEER IN THE FIELD REFLECTS  
ON THE EVOLUTION OF PROFESSIONAL  
LEARNING COMMUNITIES**



Carlene U. Murphy sees three stages in her 14 years as lead staff developer in Augusta, Ga.

**By Carlene U. Murphy**

**A** revolution took place in staff development in the late 1980s and into the 1990s. It was not reported on the evening news. Very few knew it was happening. I was a rebel, along with others I had not yet met, in the rebellion that resulted in learning communities, the dominant form of professional development today.

In 1978, the superintendent asked me to fill a new position that he planned to recommend to the board of education. This position was director of staff development. “What would I do?” I asked. “You have the opportunity to determine the scope of the job,” the superintendent told me. I was awed with the prospect, yet questioned whether staff development could be justified to the board as a full-time position. I found few resources. Professional publications heavily favored curriculum development. Nobody

else in Georgia held a position with such a title. There were no academies to provide support. The state department of education was developing staff development guidelines for local leaders that I found helpful. It would be 1980 before I attended an event sponsored by the National Staff Development Council (now Learning Forward). Once the position was approved, I set out to discover what I needed to know and be skillful in doing to do my job.

## **A CHANGING ROLE**

I view the 14 years I served as the lead staff developer in Augusta, Ga., in three stages. For the first few years, I was a logistics organizer, designer of credit activities, registrar, and contractor for speakers and presenters. The second stage was the push for school-based staff development — not to be confused with establishing learning communities. Principals requested funding for motivational speakers and workshop presenters. I now added critiquer of plans and banker to my repertoire. As the state began paying stipends for credits earned, I became a more accomplished accoun-

tant and bookkeeper. As the state mandated specific courses teachers were to take to renew certificates and local boards mandated credit hours for maintaining tenure, I found the No. 1 concern of teachers coming to my office was whether or not they were in compliance with regulations.

I saw a dullness in teachers' eyes as they stood before me with papers in hand to register for both district and school offerings. My reports for numbers of teachers and administrators involved in department activities were impressive. The district received accolades from state leaders and national organizations. Yet I knew something wasn't working. I knew student achievement in the district was, at best, standing still. As I visited classrooms and observed teachers preparing materials in the district's teacher center, there was no evidence that the resources being put into training activities were having an impact on students.

The third stage began in 1986, when my frustration with the status quo was at its highest, and, lucky for me, I was in the right place at the right time. Georgia was increasing its staff development funds to local districts at the same time I was chairperson of the National Staff Development Council's 1986 Annual Conference. Feeling the mounting pressure of accountability, I made the most of my personal connections to leaders in the field who would be presenting at the national conference. Bruce Joyce and Beverly Showers spoke about the need to increase student achievement through staff development (Joyce & Showers, 2001). I realized I had to change how I worked. With this realization, I became a staff development rebel.

I rebelled against the traditional role I had assumed. I had a superintendent who was willing to hire Joyce and Showers as consultants for a three-year period and to allow me to spend at least 50% of my time with three faculties for one year, adding additional schools in years two and three (Murphy, 1992). We wanted to document how teacher learning is tied to student learning, how changing teaching behaviors changes student behaviors. At the time, I had no idea that we had set our eyes on climbing the Mount Everest of professional development. I had a new purpose, and plans for the remainder of my career took a sharp turn in a new direction. These years would be spent assisting district and school leaders in developing strategies for organizing whole faculties into learning units focused on what students need for teachers to do. I was a rebel with a cause.

### NO MODEL TO FOLLOW

In 1986, "professional learning communities" was not a term used within the staff development community. In specific schools we targeted, our district broke new ground in expecting every faculty member to be in a study group (Murphy, 1992) with no more than five members using student achievement

as its measure of effectiveness. The six years before I retired from my home district were years of learning how to work with whole faculties in small groups working on student instructional needs. We had not found any schools in the nation doing what we were doing in our district in 1987. We had no model to follow. As I left the district in 1992 to become a consultant working with faculties throughout the country, I found that few knew what to do to make the connection between staff development and student achievement. The "how" was still fuzzy to me. To those who called for help, I said, "We'll learn more together." As it had been with me, school and district leaders everywhere were struggling to meet the needs of teachers and students through archaic staff development systems. More funding brought pressure and high expectations from local boards of education, state departments, and federal agencies.

### STAFF DEVELOPERS AS EXPLORERS

I share this look into my past because I think it mirrors how the field of professional development has evolved over the past 30 years. We experienced a staff development revolution in the mid-1980s through the 1990s. Every issue of *Journal of Staff Development* brought stories of new "discoveries." Staff developers were explorers. We explored new ways of working and tried what we heard others were doing successfully. We had little research to guide us — we were doing the research ourselves, doing what had not yet been written. Administrators wanted research to back up their decision making, and we had little to give them, except what we had just done. We had studies in training that Joyce and Showers had done with teachers attending summer institutes at the university level (Joyce & Showers, 1983). When we began in 1987, an assistant superintendent in my district asked me, "Where has what you are proposing been proven to increase student achievement?" I replied, "California." He didn't push for more. Dare I have said nowhere? We confronted disbelievers: Why should every teacher at a school participate in a study group? Isn't this un-American? Teachers wondered why they were expected to share their secrets of good teaching with other teachers. A nationally known leader challenged me on the point of "whole faculty." Another challenged me on the idea that staff developers should be accountable for student learning. How can that be? We don't work with students. Those of us in the middle of the revolution often felt attacked and defensive. However, we prevailed, and new leaders in professional development today have volumes of research to wade through, many books telling them what to do, and consultants with various backgrounds eager to guide them.

### WHOLE-FACULTY STUDY GROUPS

After retiring from my hometown district in 1992, I continued the work in districts across the country. I worked with faculties eager to take control of their own learning. I called the

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work Whole-Faculty Study Groups (Murphy & Lick, 2005). Are there schools that started Whole-Faculty Study Groups that are no longer using the design? Yes, for two primary reasons: Leadership changed at the school or district level, and productive group work is hard work. Measuring impact on students means record keeping; looking at student work means looking at teacher work. Without support for principals and problem-specific support for study groups, disillusionment is likely. In such situations, it is too hard to continue. For any form of learning community in schools, strategies for supporting, monitoring, and assessing the impact on students must be clear before beginning. Based on available resources, learning systems are not hard to design. However, such systems are very difficult to maintain without visible support from district and school leaders.

In 2005, I put my luggage in storage and became an observer. I see the term “professional learning community” in every professional publication I receive. Catalogs and advertisements are full of references. Today, believing in the merits of learning communities is like believing in the American way. If asked, any principal is likely to say, “Yes, of course, we have communities of learners in our school.” Pressed for more descriptive information, we would hear responses that reflect a

range in likelihood that students are going to benefit from what the teachers are doing.

What will be the next revolution in our profession? Will it be Learning Forward’s standards? Will it be a new plan by the federal government to “save education”? Who will be the rebels — will it be teachers tired of wasting time and energy in unproductive professional learning communities? Let’s hope whatever it is and whoever are the initiators, our country’s children will be the benefactors.

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