



REINFORCE A CULTURE OF CONTINUOUS LEARNING WITH THESE KEY ELEMENTS

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**M**aintaining a robust professional learning culture in schools is vital for attracting and retaining high-caliber talent. Given this, education leaders are looking for guidance on how to establish and sustain an environment that fosters continuous learning.

From our experience in helping educators design and implement professional learning systems, we have come to understand the elements that reflect and reinforce a culture of continuous learning and how schools can bring about that type of environment.

#### KEY ELEMENTS

Many factors must be present if a school is to have an environment that promotes continuous learning. Here are several key factors. The list is informed by our experience working with dozens of schools as well as interviews with teachers, coaches, and principals.

#### 1 FOCUS

Schools can be pulled in different directions by a variety of forces such as state policies, economic trends, and technological developments, but no school staff can simultaneously address all of those factors well. Schools must choose a small handful of areas to improve in and focus their professional learning on those topics.

Substantial growth and learning only occur when educators can engage subjects deeply and iteratively, and there is only time for that level of engagement in a few areas.

#### 2 RESULTS ORIENTATION

Setting ambitious, measurable goals for improving instruction and striving to achieve those goals fuel continuous learning. Staff members need to have a vision of themselves as high-performing and a sense of urgency about realizing that vision.

#### 3 SELF-REFLECTION

Educators will not make the needed improvement unless they periodically reflect on their strengths and challenges. Improvement is only possible if staff members have a realistic assessment of how they are performing and whether their efforts to improve are paying off.

#### 4 GROUNDING IN MULTIPLE FORMS OF DATA

Findings from formative and summative student assessments, as well as classroom observations, help educators monitor their progress and continually raise the bar for themselves in order to raise student achievement. This data also informs the coaching and professional development that staff members receive.

Additional information can be gathered, perhaps through surveys or conversations, from educators about the professional learning being provided



# MENTAL IMPACT

so that it can be improved. These different types of data create a valuable information loop.

## **5 DEDICATED TIME**

Reflection and analysis take time, and education leaders need to set aside time for staff members to engage the data. In some cases, schools have to reimagine the way time is used to ensure that educators have opportunities for professional learning, according to Maria Reyes, principal of Santee Elementary School in San Jose, California. When a school's professional learning is not robust, it is often because school leaders have not dedicated substantial time to it.

## **6 COLLABORATION**

When trying to hone their craft, educators benefit greatly from collaborating with peers. Having colleagues who act as sounding boards, supportive listeners, and critical friends helps educators improve much more quickly than they would on their own.

Collaboration not only taps into

collective intelligence and wisdom but also creates esprit de corps and internal accountability, both of which help keep staff members focused on achieving goals.

Finally, collaboration promotes calibration, meaning that, when staff members work together to design lessons, assessments, and professional development, they develop shared definitions of quality and proficiency, and therefore common goals.

## **7 TRUST**

Being in a learning mode exposes gaps in knowledge and confidence, which can leave people feeling vulnerable. For educators to engage in collaborative professional learning and continually make themselves vulnerable, they need to trust that their colleagues and supervisors will help them learn, celebrate successes, and shore up weaknesses. Trust allows educators to experiment and admit when a strategy does not work so that all team members can learn from the experience.

Several educators have confirmed

in interviews that trust is vital to continuous learning. For example, Linda Grilli, an instructional coach at Edenvale Elementary School in San Jose, California, says that “teacher teams and coaches should focus on building trust so they feel safe opening up their practice to their peers and bringing student work to share with each other.”

Similarly, Karen Orozco, a teacher at Santee Elementary School, believes that trust is a key ingredient in the positive professional learning culture at her school. “I really trust my administrators so when they tell me to try something, I do,” says Orozco. “But they also trust me. If I say something is not working for me and I’d like to change it up, they tell me to try it and see how it goes.”

## **8 AGENCY**

All educators at a school should be encouraged to help shape the building's professional learning. When all team members are asked to contribute their strengths, opinions, and questions, staff

members feel valued, and the school's professional learning is more likely to address everyone's needs. Having team members play an active role in designing adult learning can also help bring skeptics on board because they have the power to address any shortcomings they see.

## 9 ACTIONABLE ADVICE AND FEEDBACK

To foster professional learning, school leaders need to offer educators clear and specific feedback. The information provided can come in the form of coaching, modeling, lesson study, or other modes, as long as educators can readily apply what they are learning.

Donna Yazdani, a teacher at Santee Elementary, confirms the value of actionable advice about her instruction: "I like getting specific feedback, not something broad. Something you can really apply. It's exciting to grow as a professional when you receive specific feedback."

## CREATING AND SUSTAINING A STRONG CULTURE

How does a school develop a culture of professional learning that has the elements described above? Certain tools and systems will help a school make great progress.

One tool is a theory of change regarding professional learning. A theory of change is a description of how and why a desired change is expected to happen (Clark & Taplin, 2012). It maps out long-term goals for professional learning and the activities that are assumed to lead to those outcomes.

A theory of change acts as a reference point and focuses the staff's attention on a few high-priority areas along with the desired results in those areas. Thus, a theory of change helps bring about the focus and results

orientation discussed above.

Ideally, several staff members — not just the principal — develop the theory of change so that it reflects a consensus on the school's challenges as well as the proposed solutions.

After a theory of change has been articulated, it is helpful for a school to set up structures or forums that implement the actual professional learning. One such structure is an instructional leadership team, which generally includes the principal, instructional coaches, resource and specialist teachers, and a teacher leader from each grade, grade span, or department.

This group takes the lead on setting the school's goals and strategies, overseeing professional development, and monitoring progress. A motivated, representative subset of educators can drive a school's professional learning forward while ensuring that all voices are heard and a variety of issues and interests can be addressed.

At Santee Elementary, the instructional leadership team plays an important role in professional learning. Principal Reyes explains that "the team shares leadership of the school, and it's a forum for members to teach each other. We also work with the rest of the staff to help them improve their instruction and data analysis so that the school is not reliant on the instructional leadership team."

In other words, Santee's instructional leadership team promotes two components of a strong professional learning environment: *agency*, in that it involves teachers in the design of professional learning; and *actionable feedback*, in that it helps all staff members in specific ways that are crucial to the school's success.

While an instructional leadership team keeps a schoolwide perspective, other teams focus on the professional learning of individual grades or departments. Ideally, these other teams,

or professional learning communities (PLCs), collaborate to determine what students will learn, how students' improvement will be monitored, and how academic struggles will be addressed (DuFour, 2004).

If functioning properly, professional learning communities continually assess progress on these issues and adjust their approaches and goals. In addition, professional learning communities allow educators to learn from and support one another and hold each other accountable.

Yazdani, one of the teachers at Santee Elementary, believes that her grade-level teaching team, with its collaborative, trustful ways of working, plays a very positive role in her professional learning. "When our team meets, we share what's working well in our classrooms and ask each other for help because oftentimes someone on the team is doing something really well that the rest of us haven't thought of. That's where trust comes in," she says.

Yazdani also describes how multiple forms of data inform her team's learning: "The district's benchmark assessments are useful, but in between we often gauge student performance informally with exit slips and quizzes. We use all that information to help us figure out what instructional strategies are working," says Yazdani. She and her colleagues also learn from feedback that Principal Reyes provides based on frequent classroom walk-throughs and periodic performance evaluations.

Orozco's teaching team also supports her learning in an ongoing way. She says, "My team doesn't just get together on our designated meeting day. We check in after school for 10 to 15 minutes almost every day and ask, 'What went well? What do we need to change? What do we need to do tomorrow?'"

Orozco believes that her team functions well partly because the team members click with each other.

However, she thinks a team can be effective even without that same level of chemistry. “As long as the group bases its work on data and about doing what’s best for our students, it’ll be successful,” she says.

Part of the reason that the grade-level teams at Santee are effective is that Principal Reyes and the instructional leadership team have found ways to ensure that teaching teams have time to analyze student data, reflect on successes and challenges, and plan lessons collaboratively.

For example, the school has converted three of four traditional schoolwide staff meetings per month into grade-level planning sessions so that teachers can focus on instruction rather than administrative issues. In addition, physical education teachers come to school on Fridays and take the students from each grade for one hour, which gives each grade-level teaching team some time to analyze and reflect on data.

In addition to the tools and systems discussed above, professional development and coaching play a major role in creating a culture of continuous learning. The latter components are most effective when they work in concert and address topics in a sustained way.

For example, Orozco describes how professional development and coaching reinforce each other at Santee: “We have professional development sessions every other Thursday. We’ll do several sessions on a given topic and then get support. Our coaches will follow up and see how the learning from the sessions is being integrated in the classroom. If we’re struggling with something, my principal and coach are here to help me make it work.”

Orozco’s coach is in her classroom at least three times a week. He observes, co-teaches, and models instruction. In addition, he meets with her after school

in coaching cycles. Because Orozco is in only her third year of teaching, she gets more time with the coach than her more experienced counterparts do, but he provides a great deal of support to all teachers in the building because of the staff’s commitment to continuous improvement.

The professional development that Santee’s teachers participate in promotes continuous learning in yet another way: It gives teachers agency. For example, as part of a four-session professional development series, teachers were asked to help design the sessions so that they would focus on topics that the teachers were most interested in. As a result, Orozco and her peers were able to focus on issues such as addressing the needs of both guided reading groups and independent readers in their 1st-grade classes.

## ADDRESSING THE HUMAN ELEMENT

Teaching quality is the most influential school-related factor affecting student achievement, and teaching quality can be improved through professional learning. By employing certain tools and structures, a school can put in place the building blocks for a strong system of professional learning.

However, to ensure that a school’s system of professional learning is truly robust requires more than establishing structures. Human factors are hugely important. These human factors can be simple — for example, whether teachers have been given time to transition from teaching students and all that entails to participating in team meetings. Or they can be more complex — for example, whether educators feel appreciated and have a healthy work-life balance. If education leaders do not attend to the human factors, structures and tools will have limited impact.

Conversely, accounting for people’s

needs can intensify improvements set in motion by the tools and systems described above. If staff members feel valued, and systems are set up to address people’s needs and interests, a school will likely see collaboration and problem solving happen not only within those systems but outside them as well. For example, teachers may go the extra mile to help a colleague on a different grade-level or departmental team with an instructional issue.

One way to attend to human factors is to apply some of the key principles of good classroom instruction to professional learning. Specifically, good professional learning assumes that the adults in the building bring strengths to the table, and it builds on those assets.

In addition, effective professional learning gives educators choices as well as support. Designing professional learning in these ways respects educators’ skills, helps them situate the new learning in their experiences, and tailors it to their specific needs and contexts.

If school leaders can get both the technical and human aspects right, they can create an environment in which educators thrive, one that attracts and retains highly talented educators.

## REFERENCES

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