
Imagine . . .

All professionals—teachers, administrators, counselors, media specialists, librarians—in all schools (Grades K–5, 6–8, 9–12) engaged in continuous professional learning. In the professions, such as medicine and law, the membership is expected to review the journals of their field and to attend conferences. They observe each other at their work, offering feedback that leads to increased professional effectiveness. They are expected to examine and explore new methods and approaches to their work as well. Professionals, according to *Webster's*, are characterized by a codified knowledge base, which can be increased consistently through ongoing research that seeks new means by which to expand the effectiveness of its members—professionals maintain familiarity with the research.

Such study of one's profession, especially when done in community with others, where the learning is richer and deeper, has not been the norm of the education community. Educators have typically been isolated physically from others because of the structure of school facilities and the schedules that dominate the school day. This has resulted also in mental isolation, with no colleagues for interaction. However, knowledge is most fruitfully constructed in a social context. Providing the opportunities, the structures and schedules, for school-based educators to come together to learn in community is an important challenge.

School and district staff members understand that the most significant factors that determine whether students learn well are the *competence*, *caring*, and *commitment* of teachers and administrators. Their expertise, combined with their capacity for communicating and interacting meaningfully with students on their cognitive, intellectual, and emotional levels, results in powerful connections with students that enable them to learn at higher standards of quality and deeper layers

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of understanding. These educators have a deep commitment to their professionalism and a profound clarity about the purpose of their work. Such schools support their educators in continuous study, reflection, dialogue, and learning.

This book is offered as a means for addressing the challenge of providing for educators' continuous learning and improvement opportunities and increasing their professionalism. One is reminded of Peter Senge's *The Fifth Discipline* (1990), in which he advocates for the learning organization, where "people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning how to learn together" (p. 3).

In many schools, staff learning together is a very new endeavor. Some schools schedule time for grade level or subject matter teams to meet, assuming they are then a professional learning community. The majority of these meetings focus on management, a very legitimate purpose. These meetings are useful and necessary. But they are not typically characterized by professionals meeting together to learn deeper content knowledge, more powerful instructional strategies, or investigating the differentiated and sometimes unique ways that students learn. Unstructured time for human interaction does not assure learning (Kris Hipp, personal communication, January 2007) or productivity to result. The professional learning community label has preceded the concept. As it has spread across the nation, and around the globe, the idea of professional learning community has been translated into a wide array of definitions and descriptions—most of which miss the mark of educators in a school coming together to learn in order to become more effective so that students learn more successfully.

There are research reports, observations of exemplary practice, and good old-fashioned common sense, upon which we draw for this book. Our goal is to translate research-based concepts and exemplary school-based practices into the capacity, or capabilities, of the staff so they support their school in becoming a community of professional learners. The book's intentions are

To clarify what a professional learning community looks like, acts like, and the results to be gained for staff and students

To recognize the essential and critical role of the principal and other school leaders in working with the school staff to initiate, develop, and maintain an effective professional learning community, and

To offer ideas and suggestions about how leaders may successfully do this work

If these goals are of interest to you, please turn the page.