

Practical Leadership

Improving the Schools of Today

Inventing the Schools of Tomorrow

RESEARCH INTO PRACTICE

A Collaborative School

In A Nutshell

Professional learning is the catalyst for school improvement. An emphasis on learning reflects the reality that learning never stops and that the most vibrant and successful schools are those where everyone acts on the need to continue to improve. The most successful professional learning involves educators in more collaborative activities to examine their work and improve practice. Activities like book study, looking at student work, instructional rounds and collaborative work teams reflect these new norms.

There is a growing recognition that when a school faculty comes together around a shared vision and a collective commitment to improved student learning, the results are meaningful and long lasting.

(Hord & Sommers, 2008; Marzano & DuFour, 2011)

Summary of Findings:

Learning Forward, formerly the National Staff Development Council, recommends that professional learning focus on clear results and include activities that promote the growth and learning of teachers and administrators. Activities should be based on standards, and they should be thoroughly woven into the job, rather than simply being an activity that is done as an “extra,” possibly outside of work hours or on staff development days. In other words, learning activities should be results driven, standards based and job embedded (NSDC, 2001).

Professional Learning Communities

Many schools use professional learning communities as a way to engage in professional learning. A professional community of learners is a school where teachers and administration continuously seek to learn and grow professionally and then act on what they learn (Astuto, et.al. 1993; DuFour, et.al., 2010). The goal is improve student learning by improving effectiveness. Three things define successful learning communities. They ensure that students learn, they create a culture of collaboration, and they focus on results, no matter what it takes. Members are accountable to one another and are comfortable working on activities where their work is more transparent. Everyone shares a commitment to continuous improvement.

Characteristics of a Professional Learning Community

- **Collective Inquiry:** Teachers and leaders work collaboratively to examine data about student learning and develop a plan to address students’ needs.
- **Supportive and Shared Leadership:** Power and authority is shared by inviting teachers and families to provide input into decision making about improving student learning.
- **Action Orientation:** There is a willingness to try new things and adopt a “whatever it takes” stance in support of student learning.
- **Focus on Continuous Improvement:** Teachers and leaders recognize the value of routinely examining practice and making changes when appropriate.
- **Results Orientation** – There is clarity about outcomes with a “laser light” focus on achieving the desired results.

(Eaker, DuFour & DuFour, 2002; Hord & Sommers, 2008)

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What a Principal Can Do

Many schools have created professional learning communities but struggle to sustain them. Several strategies for nurturing and sustaining a professional learning community have been identified (Hord & Sommers, 2008; Marzano & DuFour, 2011).

- Organize your school to provide time for teachers to work together and reduce isolation. Common planning time, teaching or departmental teams and location of classrooms are a few examples. Identify a room that is set-aside for these collaborative activities, where teams can meet and discuss their learning and how to positively impact student learning.
- Promote greater autonomy, foster collaboration and improve communication. In one school, every department level policy had to be shared with the other departments so that consideration could be given to its impact. This proved helpful to the design of more broadly accepted policies.
- Provide time for professional learning both during the school day and at other scheduled times. Many schools convert their staff meetings into opportunities for professional dialogue and collaborative work.
- Hire teachers who are comfortable in a collaborative environment, accepting feedback, critiquing their practice, and who share your commitment to improved student learning.
- Be transparent about your own learning and encourage those around you to do the same. Be inquisitive. Read widely. Work to create an atmosphere of trust and respect among all school personnel. Talk about the things you've learned and how you continue to improve your practice.

Create a Culture of Professional Learning

The most collaborative learning communities are places where there is deep and purposeful commitment to building capacity among the staff for success in a collaborative environment (Hord & Sommers, 2008; Williamson & Blackburn, 2009).

Identify and Use Norms of Collaboration – Professional conversation about complex issues involving student learning requires agreement on the “ground-rules” for the discussion. The most successful groups agree on their norms and then monitor their use. The Thinking Collaborative website (www.thinkingcollaborative.com) provides tools, resources and a set of suggested norms.

Provide Constructive Feedback – Similarly, healthy groups are committed to talking about contentious issues and know that it is important to develop the skill to provide constructive and respectful feedback especially when talking about tough issues. Both the Center for Adaptive Schools (www.adaptiveschools.com) and the Coalition of Essential Schools (www.essentialschools.org) provide resources and tools for working on this issue.

Resolve Group Conflicts – Equally important is the need to resolve conflicts among groups or individuals within a group. The most successful PLC's are those where adults reserve the right to disagree, but agree to do so in a respectful way. The Annenberg Institute for School Reform (www.annenberginstitute.org), and the Coalition of Essential Schools (www.essentialschools.org) provide protocols for working on this issue.

Build Trusting Relationships – The foundation for each of these issues is a trusting relationship among individuals and groups in your school, between administration and teachers and between grade levels, content areas and departments. Here are three resources that discuss ways to build, and lose trust, in the workplace---40 Ways to Build Trust (<http://www.ttgconsultants.com/articles/trustworkforce.html>), 6 Ingredients of Successful Collaboration (<http://socialmediatoday.com/index.php?q=SMC/185570>), and 11 Ways to Build Trust (<http://www.jongordon.com/blog/2011/04/11/11-ways-to-build-trust/>).

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Professional Learning in a Collaborative School

A collaborative school is characterized by a shared commitment to professional learning. There are several different models that support a commitment to learning and promote a collaborative culture. As with most things, each has advantages and disadvantages. It is important to select a strategy that supports your school's vision, is supported by teachers and other staff, and that fits with the available resources.

Strategy 1: Book Study

One good way to engage people in their own professional growth is to organize a book study group. At some schools every teacher is asked to read the same book and work in small groups to discuss the book and its implications for student learning. At other schools teachers may choose from several books and join colleagues who selected the same book for their discussion. But the most important part of a book study is the commitment to use the learning to improve teaching and learning.

Book Study Guidelines
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Membership should be voluntary but inclusive.• Decide a meeting schedule, meeting place, length of book to be read and what will happen after the book is read. It is recommended that meetings last no more than one hour and be held at a consistent time and place.• Select a responsible facilitator to keep the group on task and help manage the meetings.• Select a book with a clear objective in mind. For example, You might use <i>Results Now</i> (Schmoker, 2006) or <i>Using Common Core Standards to Enhance Classroom Instruction & Assessment</i> (Marzano et.al. 2012) to begin a conversation about improving student learning.• Conversation is important in a book study. Members of the group share insights, ask questions about the text, and learn from others. It is important to talk about how the ideas can be applied directly in the classroom and how to overcome any potential obstacles.• Journaling is a useful way for members to think about their reading and reflect on how it might be used.

Resources on Conducting a Book Study

How Book Groups Bring Change - ASCD

<http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/feb09/vol66/num05/How-Book-Groups-Bring-Change.aspx>

Book Study Suggestions – Heinemann Publishing

<http://www.heinemann.com/shared/studyGuides/bookStudyOverview.pdf>

Strategy 2: Looking at Student Work

A powerful way to improve your school's instructional program is to look at authentic student work. In many schools, teams of teachers examine student work as a way to clarify their own standards for that work, to strengthen common expectations for students or to align curriculum. This can be useful in preparing for implementation of the Common Core State Standards.

Because looking at student work can be threatening to some teachers, be sure to create a climate where faculty are comfortable sharing their students' work and discussing their successes as well as challenges. The Annenberg Institute for School Reform suggests several steps that can ease adoption of this model. First, talk about the process and assure teachers it is not evaluative. Then select guidelines for the conversation, agreeing on a method for selecting samples, and establishing a system for constructive feedback. Teachers are more comfortable as they see samples of others' work. The Annenberg site www.lasw.org provides examples of protocols for engaging in this work. Select a model that is comfortable for you and your teachers.

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Resources on Looking at Student Work

Annenberg Institute for School Reform
<http://www.lasw.org/>

Looking Collaboratively at Student Work: Coalition of Essential Schools
<http://www.essentialschools.org/resources/60>

Looking at Student Work – Langer & Colton
<http://tinyurl.com/3zen247>

Strategy 3: Learning Walks (a.k.a. Instructional Walkthroughs)

A learning walk is a form of instructional walk-through. But they differ because they are organized and led by teachers. Learning walks are not evaluative, nor are they designed to provide feedback to an individual teacher. Instead, they help participants learn about instruction across a school, and to identify areas of strength as well as needs.

Learning walks provide a “snapshot” of the instructional program. Since participants are in any classroom for only a short time they should not draw conclusions about individual teachers or classes. Most schools report that it is helpful to only look for positive examples during your first learning walks. This gives teachers a sense of confidence and a willingness to continue.

One school in Los Angeles held learning walks each month. Groups of teachers conducted the walks looking for evidence of the use of research-based instructional practices described in Robert Marzano’s *Classroom Instruction that Works: Research-Based Strategies for Increasing Student Achievement* (2001). There is a simple seven-step process for learning walks.

Learning Walk Process
<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Work with your staff to identify the purpose of the learning walk.2. Determine the process including length of classroom visits as well as what will occur during the visits. Develop and use a consistent tool for participants to use to record their observations and collect data.3. Inform staff when the learning walks will occur.4. Conduct a pre-walk orientation for those participating5. Conduct the learning walk and spend no more than 5 minutes in each classroom. Depending on the lesson, talk with the teacher and students, look at student work, and examine the organization of the classroom.6. Immediately after the walk ask participants to meet and talk about the information they gathered and how to share it with the faculty. They may develop questions that they would ask to learn more about what is occurring.7. Develop a plan for sharing the information and for using it to guide your continued school improvement work.

Resources on Learning Walks

Using Classroom Walkthroughs to Improve Instruction – Protheroe
<http://tinyurl.com/3punnla>

Blog: 11 Reasons You Should Be Using Classrooms Walkthroughs – Peter Pappas
<http://tinyurl.com/6zhk3cr>

How Walkthroughs Open Doors – Ginsberg & Murphy
<http://tinyurl.com/3jcgzr8>

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Strategy 4: Lesson Study

Originally used by Japanese teachers, lesson studies emphasize working in small groups to plan, teach, observe and critique a lesson. Lesson study involves groups of teachers in a collaborative process designed to systematically examine their teaching with the goal of becoming more effective. Typically, principals invite all teachers to participate. However, working with those who volunteer is most effective.

While working on the study lesson, teachers come together and create a detailed lesson plan. One member of the group then teaches the lesson in his or her classroom while other group members observe. Together, the group discusses and revises the lesson. This circular process can continue multiple times until the teachers believe they have completed the process. This is an excellent way to incorporate key areas of the Common Core State Standards, such as the concept of close reading. There is a center for lesson study at Teacher's College at Columbia University (see below) that provides research and resources on the model.

Resources on Lesson Study

What is Lesson Study? – Columbia University
www.tc.columbia.edu/lessonstudy/lessonstudy.html

Chicago Lesson Study Group
www.lessonstudygroup.net/05lesson_study_resources.html

Strategy 5: Instructional Rounds

Organized like rounds among medical interns, a group of teachers, administrators or both, visit classrooms to gather data about an instructional topic they previously identified. The purpose is not evaluative and the focus is on observing teachers so that participants can think about how to improve their own teaching. One of the major benefits is the discussion among staff that follow the rounds as well as each teacher's own self-reflection (Marzano, 2011). A link to a helpful protocol for instructional rounds is located below (see Making the Most of Instructional Rounds).

Resources on Instructional Rounds

Instructional Rounds - Harvard Graduate School of Education
<http://www.hepg.org/document/98/>

Improving Teaching and Learning Through Instructional Rounds
<http://www.hepg.org/hel/article/157>

Making the Most of Instructional Rounds – R. Marzano – ASCD
<http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/feb11/vol68/num05/Making-the-Most-of-Instructional-Rounds.aspx>

Strategy 6: Conversation About Expectations and Assessments

An alternative to the lesson study, looking at student work or other collaborative learning models is a structured discussion of expectations or assessments. Through this process, teachers and leaders look at samples of common assessments or assignments, and evaluate the work products to determine if teachers' expectations are equivalent. This is particularly important across grade levels and/or subject areas.

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Process for a Conversation About Expectations

Step 1:	Gather copies of a standard assignment, such as a short essay, completed by students. Be sure to have copies from several teachers.
Step 2:	Share copies of the assignment with the group and ask everyone to assess it.
Step 3:	Meet to discuss the results. Use prompts to guide the discussion. For example, “How do you determine quality?” “What do you consider in a quality assignment?,” or “What do you expect students to know in order to complete this assignment?”
Step 4:	You may want to extend the conversation to other grade levels. Discussion prompts might include, “What are some areas that students struggle with?” or “What do you expect students to know before they come into your class?”

From: Williamson & Blackburn (2011). *Rigor in Your School: A Toolkit for Leaders*.

Time for Collaborative Activity

Without time to meet and engage in professional learning it is difficult to sustain a collaborative school. Collaborative time is one of the catalysts for such activity. Finding time for collaborative work is always a struggle and there are no perfect models. The most successful models are tailored to fit the unique needs of a school; it’s schedule and resources. (DuFour, R., DuFour, Re, Eaker, R & Many, 2010; Williamson, 2009)

<i>Common Planning</i>	When teachers share a common planning period that can be used for collaborative work
<i>Parallel Scheduling</i>	A common middle grades approach where special teachers (physical education, music, art, etc.) are scheduled so that grade level or content area teachers have common planning for collaborative activities
<i>Shared Classes</i>	Teachers in more than one grade or in a team combine their students into a single large class for instruction while other teachers use the time for collaboration.
<i>Faculty Meetings</i>	Principals find other ways to communicate routine items and reallocate time from faculty meetings for use on collaborative activities.
<i>Adjust Start and End of School Day</i>	When members of a team, grade, or the entire school agree to begin their workday early or extend their workday one-day a week in order to gain time for collaboration.
<i>Late Start or Early Release</i>	This involves an adjustment to the starting or ending time of the school day for students and the staff use the time for collaboration.
<i>Four Day Week</i>	When districts adopt a four-day week they often use the fifth day for planning and professional learning.
<i>Professional Development Days</i>	Rather than participating in large group professional development, the days are used by school-based teams of teachers to engage in collaborative work.

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Summary

The most effective schools are those that are committed to the professional learning and growth of every teacher and administrator. They recognize the importance of investing in people and assuring that they have the knowledge and skills needed for continued success. Professional learning communities and other collaborative structures provide a mechanism for teachers, principals and other staff to make the improvement of student learning a priority.

Resources

Online Resources

Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement – Learning Point Associates (formerly the North Central Regional Educational Laboratory (NCREL))

<http://www.centerforcsri.org/plc/references.html>

This set of resources provides tools for nurturing and sustaining learning communities.

Center for Adaptive Schools (www.adaptiveschools.com) – This site provides numerous resources for how to build professional community including nurturing and sustaining the work of collaborative groups. The Seven Norms of Collaboration Toolkit <http://www.thinkingcollaborative.com/norms-collaboration-toolkit/>

Professional Learning Communities: What Are They? – This article from the Southwest Educational Development Lab describes professional learning communities and how they can benefit schools.

<http://www.sedl.org/change/issues/issues61.html>

All Things PLC – This website provides blogs and discussions about implementing PLC's and includes numerous tools and resources that can be downloaded and used in your school. www.allthingsplc.info/

School Change Rubric – This site provided by Employers for Education Excellence provides a comprehensive set of readings and other online resources including a self-assessment tool that can be used to guide the creation of a professional learning community. http://www.e3smallschools.org/resources_program.html

Annenberg Institute for School Reform (www.annenberginstitute.org) – This site includes a set of Tools for School Improvement Planning that can be used to sustain a professional community. There are multiple tools for each task. Link to the section labeled *Tool Collection*. (www.annenberginstitute.org/tools/index.php)

Coalition of Essential Schools (www.essentialschools.org) - The Coalitions' Change Lab provides access to information and tools from participating schools. A free registration is required to access the site. (www.ceschangelab.org/cs/clpub/print/cl_docs/10)

Assessing Your Professional Learning Community (<http://www.sedl.org/pubs/catalog/items/plc01.html>)

One way to start a conversation about the vitality of your PLC may be to gather data about its work. You can gather local data or you might want to use a survey from outside of your school. A reliable tool is the survey developed by the Southwest Educational Development Lab (SEDL) to assess the status of a professional learning community.

Oregon GEAR UP Podcasts (<http://gearup.ous.edu/podcasts>)

Peer Professional Development - <http://gearup.ous.edu/podcasts/peer-professional-development>

Professional Text Studies (Book Study) - <http://gearup.ous.edu/podcasts/professional-text-studies>

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Related Oregon GEAR UP Research Briefs (<http://gearup.ous.edu/research/research-briefs>) – This is the home page for all Oregon GEAR UP Research Briefs

Productive Use of Collaborative Time - <http://gearup.ous.edu/sites/default/files/Research-Briefs/ResearchBriefCollaborativeTime.pdf>

Coaching Teachers - <http://gearup.ous.edu/sites/default/files/Research-Briefs/ResearchBriefCoachingTeachers.pdf>

Print Resources

The following print resources can help with nurturing and sustaining professional learning communities.

Eaker, Robert., DuFour, Richard & DuFour, Rebecca (2002). *Getting Started: Reculturing Schools to Become Professional Learning Communities*. Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree.

DuFour, Richard, DuFour, Rebecca, Eaker, Robert & Many, Thomas (2010). *Learning by Doing: A Handbook for Professional Learning Communities at Work* (2nd ed). Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree.

Hord, Shirley & Sommers, William (2008). *Leading Professional Learning Communities*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Marzano, R. & DuFour, R. (2011). *Leaders of Learning: How District, School, and Classroom Leaders Improve Student Achievement*. Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree Press.

National Association of Secondary School Principals (2009) *Breaking Ranks: A Field Guide for Leading Change*. Reston, VA: NASSP. (www.principals.org)

Williamson, R. (2009). *Scheduling to Improve Student Learning*. Westerville, OH: AMLE.

This *Research into Practice* brief was prepared by Practical Leadership, LLC and authored by Ronald Williamson, Professor of Educational Leadership at Eastern Michigan University and Howard Johnston, Professor Secondary Education at the University of South Florida. This brief is prepared for use by principals and school staff in Oregon GEAR UP schools.

Practical Leadership, LLC is a full service educational consulting firm specializing in leadership development, training and professional development, research and evaluation, student achievement and school success, and positive community relations.

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