

## Research Brief

### Nurturing and Sustaining Professional Learning Communities

**Question: How do school leaders create, nurture and sustain a professional learning community?**

#### **In a Nutshell**

Many schools have embraced the idea of professional learning communities (PLC's). The term is used to describe all sorts of collaborative activities. The professional community of learners suggested in the early 1990's describes a school where teachers and administrators continuously focus on improving student learning. They are committed to continually learn and act on their learning in ways that positively impact students' educational experience. These professional learning communities are powerful tools for engaging adults in collaborative work to strengthen and improve student learning.

As PLC's have matured some schools struggle with ways to nurture and sustain the vitality often present in the first few years.

#### ***Professional Learning Communities***

Recommendations for school reform emphasize greater professionalism for teachers and other school personnel. 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. Professional learning communities have several benefits for staff. They include reduced isolation, increased satisfaction, improved morale, and creates a greater commitment to the mission and goals of the school.

Shirley Hord, one of the early advocates of PLC's, identified four characteristics of a school with a clear commitment to professional learning.

- School personnel hold a **clear vision** that places students, and their learning, at the center of everything they do.
- This vision is supported by a **commitment to continuous teacher development and adult learning**. Teachers visit other schools, read articles and books, attend conferences and share their experience. Time is provided for teachers to work together and share their learning.
- **Relationships** among staff are critical. Staff learn together but also spend time building personal relationships and an atmosphere of trust and caring.
- **Empowerment of staff, students and parents** to participate fully in the life of the school and to contribute their expertise to the good of the school is also important. This includes supporting teachers when they write proposals for grants, streamlining administrative procedures and building a leadership team that assures that teachers have an effective voice in decisions.
- Underlying all of these elements is an **academic focus** with absolute emphasis on student learning and success.

Others also identified characteristics of a professional learning community (Eaker, DeFour, & DeFour, 2002 and Hord & Sommers, 2008).

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

### **Assessing Your Professional Learning Community**

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

(<http://www.sedl.org/pubs/catalog/items/plc01.html>).

### **Nurturing and Sustaining Professional Learning Communities**

Many schools have created professional learning communities but struggle to sustain them as they mature. Several strategies for nurturing and sustaining a professional learning community have been identified.

- First, create a schedule and other organizational structures that 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. Locate a room where teams can meet and hold their discussion about students and student learning.
- Next, incorporate policies that 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.
- Third, provide time for professional development at a variety of times both during the school day and at other scheduled times. Many schools convert their staff meetings into opportunities for professional dialogue and collaborative work.
- Fourth, when there is an opportunity to hire new staff, look for teachers who are comfortable accepting feedback, looking at their practice, and who share your commitment to improved student learning.
- Finally, 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.



## **Build Capacity**

The most successful professional learning communities are places where there is an intentional commitment to building the capacity of the staff to participate fully in the life of the school.

**Develop and Use Norms of Collaboration** – Professional conversation about complex issues involving student learning require agreement on the “ground-rules” for the discussion. The most successful groups agree on their norms and then monitor their use. The Adaptive Schools website ([www.adaptiveschools.com](http://www.adaptiveschools.com)) provides tools, resources and a set of suggested norms.

**Learn to 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](http://www.adaptiveschools.com)) and the Coalition of Essential Schools ([www.essentialschools.org](http://www.essentialschools.org)) provide resources and tools for working on this issue.

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

**Build Trusting Relationships** – The foundation to each of these issues is to diligently work on building and sustaining trusting relationships 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/>).

## **Adult Learning Models**

There are several ways to engage adults in activities that promote professional discussion and growth. Each strategy can be used to build professional community

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**Lesson Study** – It involves small groups of teachers who work together to plan, teach, observe, critique and revise a lesson. The goal is to systematically improve the quality of lessons and student learning.

What is Lesson Study? – Columbia University  
[www.tc.columbia.edu/lessonstudy/lessonstudy.html](http://www.tc.columbia.edu/lessonstudy/lessonstudy.html)

Chicago Lesson Study Group  
[www.lessonstudygroup.net/05lesson\\_study\\_resources.html](http://www.lessonstudygroup.net/05lesson_study_resources.html)

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**Looking at Student Work** – Teams of teachers, either at the grade, course, team or departmental level examine authentic student work samples as a way to clarify assignments and assessment, strengthen expectations for students, and align curriculum.

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>

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**Instructional Rounds** – Organized like rounds among medical interns, a group of teachers, administrators or both, visits classrooms gathering data about a problem of practice identified by the school. Immediately following the rounds, they meet with school personnel to share their observations so that staff can use the information to improve practice.

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>

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**Book Study** – One way to engage faculty in professional conversation is to organize a book study group. In some schools everyone reads the same book. In others, teachers choose from among several books and join colleagues who selected the same book. The goal is to read and discuss a professional book and then use the information to strengthen and refine practice.

Book Study Group FAQs – Eye on Education  
[www.eyoneducation.com/Book-Study-Group-FAQs](http://www.eyoneducation.com/Book-Study-Group-FAQs)

Oklahoma Department of Education – Tips for Starting a Book Study Group  
[http://sde.state.ok.us/teacher/master/pdf/tips\\_study\\_group.pdf](http://sde.state.ok.us/teacher/master/pdf/tips_study_group.pdf)

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**Learning Walks (a.k.a. Instructional Walkthroughs)** – This walk is not evaluative but designed for a group to walk about the school, visit classrooms and gather data about practice. They are not designed to provide individual feedback but to learn about instruction and identify areas of strength and areas of need.

Using Classroom Walkthroughs to Improve Instruction – Protheroe  
[http://www.naesp.org/resources/2/Principal/2009/M-A\\_p30.pdf](http://www.naesp.org/resources/2/Principal/2009/M-A_p30.pdf)  
<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>

### Time for Collaboration

Collaborative time is one of the catalysts for nurturing and sustaining a professional learning community. Teachers value the opportunity to meet with grade or content peers to discuss their successes, diagnose ways to improve learning and to develop a repertoire of strategies that they may use in their own classroom.

There are several different ways to provide collaborative time. The most appropriate model varies based on grade level and structure of your school day.

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| <i>Common Planning</i>                    | When teachers share a common planning period that can be used for collaborative work   |
| <i>Parallel Scheduling</i>                | A common elementary school 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>Professional Development Days</i>      | Rather than participating in large group professional development, the days are used by teams of teachers to engage in collaborative work.   |

Adapted from: Williamson, R. (2009) *Scheduling to Improve Student Learning*, and DeFour, R, DeFour, Re, Eaker, R. & Many, T. (2006). *Learning by doing: A handbook for professional learning communities at work*.

**Online Resources:**

***Annotated Bibliography of PLC Resources from Learning Forward (formerly National Staff Development Council)***

<http://www.learningforward.org/standards/learningcommunities.cfm#bibliography>

This site provides numerous resources that school leaders can use to nurture and sustain professional learning communities in their school. Most resources provide links to the full-text document.

***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](http://www.adaptiveschools.com)) – This site provides numerous resources for how to build professional community including nurturing and sustaining the work of collaborative groups. The site includes two useful tools: This Week’s Skill Builder (check out the archive) and the Seven Norms of Collaboration Toolkit

(<http://www.adaptiveschools.com/inventories.htm> or <http://csi.boisestate.edu/Improvement/7%20Norms.pdf> )

***Professional Learning Communities*** – This article by Richard DuFour, perhaps the most recognized proponent of professional learning communities, appeared in *Educational Leadership* in May 2004 and describes the “big ideas” of PLC’s.

[http://pdonline.ascd.org/pd\\_online/secondary\\_reading/el200405\\_dufour.html](http://pdonline.ascd.org/pd_online/secondary_reading/el200405_dufour.html)

***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/](http://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](http://www.e3smallschools.org/resources_program.html)

***Annenberg Institute for School Reform*** ([www.annenberginstitute.org](http://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](http://www.annenberginstitute.org/tools/index.php))

***Coalition of Essential Schools*** ([www.essentialschools.org](http://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](http://www.ceschangelab.org/cs/clpub/print/cl_docs/10))



**Related Research Briefs** ([www.educationpartnerships.org](http://www.educationpartnerships.org)) – This site includes over 250 Research Briefs with several related to professional learning communities.

Professional Learning Communities -

<http://www.educationpartnerships.org/pdfs/ProfessionalLearningCommunityEPI.pdf>

Dynamics of Change -

<http://www.educationpartnerships.org/pdfs/DynamicsofChangeEPI.pdf>

### **Print Resources**

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

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

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

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 (2006). *Learning by Doing: A Handbook for Professional Learning Communities at Work*. Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree.

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By: Ronald Williamson, Eastern Michigan University

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