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Professional Learning: Reimagined Pages 30-35

Harnessing the Power of PLCs

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Here's a look at several professional learning communities that have made remarkable improvements in student and teacher learning.

In the early 1970s, to fulfill the requirements of an administrative certification program, I was assigned responsibility for planning a districtwide professional development day. The superintendent offered me this sage advice—secure a funny speaker. I followed his advice, and I also ensured that the coffee and doughnuts were plentiful, that teachers could go out to lunch with their friends, and that they could all return to their classrooms in the afternoon.

The day was considered a huge success, and I basked in the praise of administrators and teaching colleagues alike. There was absolutely no evidence that the day had influenced teaching or learning in any way, nor was there any expectation that it should have.

This traditional approach to professional development was episodic; it was often a series of disconnected, fragmented events. The goal was to entertain, and the only question asked to evaluate that training was, "Did you like it?" Any other professional development typically occurred outside school. Educators could enroll in almost any workshop, course, or random graduate program—and they were often financially rewarded just for accruing semester hours, regardless of whether the subject matter was connected to their current assignment or to the goals of their school.

More Than Entertainment

Today, research provides a clear and consistent message that effective professional development is

- *Ongoing*, with a sustained, rather than episodic and fragmented, focus.
- *Collective*, rather than individualistic.
- *Job-embedded*, with teachers learning as they engage in their daily work.
- *Results-oriented*, with activities directly linked to higher levels of student learning.
- *Most effective in schools and districts that function as professional learning communities.*

Judith Warren Little's review of the research¹ established that the professional learning community (PLC) process provides the best environment for powerful professional development and that the best professional development builds staff capacity to function as members of a high-performing PLC.

Let's look at some effective professional development practices in school districts throughout the United States.

Learning Within Schools: Adlai Stevenson High School

During the School Day

Located in a northern suburb of Chicago, Illinois, Adlai Stevenson High School District 125 shows how the PLC process can support the ongoing adult learning needed for continual improvement. Stevenson is a huge high school serving more than 4,000 students who typically come from middle- and upper-middle-class homes.

Since the mid-1980s, the school has targeted the following goals: to reduce the failure rate, increase the percentage of students experiencing success in the most rigorous course offerings, and improve student achievement on the ACT exam. Each year for almost 30 years, the school has become more effective in achieving those goals.

From the outset, the district leadership worked with its teachers union to establish that all teachers would work as members of collaborative teams. Teams are typically composed of teachers who teach the same course. The teams agree on the specific knowledge and skills that students must acquire in each unit of instruction; monitor student learning through a process that includes team-developed common formative assessments; and use the results from the assessments to address the needs of individual students, improve individual teachers' instructional practice, and discover areas in which the entire team needs additional training and support.

If the results from these assessments reveal that a student is unable to demonstrate proficiency on an essential skill, the student is assigned to a tutoring center to continue working on the skill until he or she becomes proficient. The school day is structured to ensure that students receive this extra support in a way that never removes them from instruction on new content in any course.

The common formative assessments also reveal who may be struggling to teach a concept. When that occurs, the teacher whose students aren't mastering the concepts may be paired with a colleague who is getting good results to plan future lessons that address the concept or may observe other members of the team as they teach the concept. The entire team becomes a resource.

If everyone on the team struggled to help students demonstrate proficiency in a topic, the team makes teaching that topic the focus of its own professional development. Members can turn to other teachers in the same department for advice as well as to other schools in the district where teachers are getting good results.

With input from teacher leaders, the district has also identified high-leverage strands for professional development that build teacher capacity to improve student learning. Current strands include developing and using common formative assessments, standards-based grading, instructional technology, and social and emotional learning. A curriculum map and rubric of expertise have been created for each strand to help identify the learning needs of and appropriate training for each team. (To see a learning map and rubric for common formative assessment, go to www.d125.org/LearningMaps.)

The rubric identifies five levels of expertise, from least to most proficient—preparation, incubation, insight, evaluation, and elaboration—as well as indicators to help identify where a team falls on the scale. This allows for targeted professional development. One team may be at the *preparation* stage in the use of common formative assessments, whereas another may be at the *insight* stage of integrating technology into student learning.

Stevenson provides teachers with "sacred time" to collaborate. Each month, teams have a three-hour block for collaboration, and every week the schedule is adjusted to provide an additional hour for teams to work together.

Outside the School Day

Stevenson has created the University of Stevenson program to provide training outside the school day for teachers who are interested in a concept that relates to district goals. Any staff member can propose a course that a Stevenson staff member will teach; if it's approved, those who complete it earn credits that can be applied to the salary schedule.

For example, many teachers were interested in integrating technology into their lessons. So the school created an array of courses in this area that are offered immediately after school or during the summer. Courses require participants to demonstrate proficiency or create a product to use in their classrooms.

The district also provides a quality-control mechanism. A process for reviewing and approving both courses and instructors ensures that the training will help educators achieve school and team goals.

The Results

This approach to professional development has resulted in remarkable achievements at Stevenson.

A focus on the D/F rate. Consistently hovering around 40 percent before the PLC process was implemented, the D/F rate decreased to 3.8 percent in 2013. Keys to this improvement included engaging teams in establishing a guaranteed curriculum and common pacing for each unit of instruction, an assessment framework that included team-developed common formative assessments, and a protocol for teams to examine the evidence of student learning from their common assessments to inform their practice. As a result of the continual focus on improved adult learning, student learning also improved.

Timely monitoring of student learning and effective intervention. The school went from reporting student progress every

nine weeks to reporting every three weeks so it could respond more quickly to problems. Because teachers had agreed on the essential skills students would learn in each unit, common pacing during the unit, and a common assessment at the completion of the unit, the team was able to identify students who needed extra time and support *by student and by standard*. As a result, teachers who tutored in the school's system of intervention were able to provide targeted support.

A focus on advanced placement (AP) exams. In 1985, 7 percent of the graduating class had taken AP exams. In 2013, more than 85 percent of graduates had done so. The number of exams taken in one school year has increased from 133 in 1985 to 4,382 in 2013.

Two factors contributed to this dramatic increase. First, in the mid-1980s, only students who were in the top 10 percent of their class had access to the AP program because teachers believed the program was so rigorous that only "the best and brightest" could benefit from it. To change that mind-set, the principal pointed out that the majority of the school's students planned to attend college and could surely benefit from meeting five days a week in a rigorous AP course.

A European history teacher took up the challenge and opened his AP class to any interested student. When 96 percent of his students earned honor grades, it shattered the myth of "only the best and brightest." The school began encouraging all college-bound students to pursue AP courses.

The other factor that contributed to the growth in AP participation was the school's willingness to provide students with extra time and support. The school's intervention system was just as likely to assist a student in AP calculus as in Algebra I.

Over the past five years, 89 percent of students who completed AP exams earned an honor score of 3, 4, or 5, approximately 27 percent higher than the national average in the United States. The mode score (the most frequently occurring score) for Stevenson students has remained at 5, the highest possible score.

Improved ACT scores. The mean composite score of Stevenson students on the ACT exam has increased from 22.0 in 1990 to 26.5 in 2013, even though Illinois became one of the few states in which *all* high school juniors, not merely the college bound, must take the exam. The mean composite ACT score for all Illinois students is 20.6.

Stevenson has frequently been profiled in education books and journals, and up to 2,500 educators have visited the high school in a single year to learn about its culture and structure. (For information about attending one of Stevenson's site visits, go to www.d125.org/about/site_visits_for_educators.aspx.)

Learning Across Schools: Schaumburg District 54

Effective professional development fosters learning not only across teams, but also across entire schools and districts. Schaumburg District 54, a minority-majority district with 27 schools located in Cook County, Illinois, is a national model for districtwide implementation of the PLC process. Here are several approaches they've found to be successful.

The 90-Day Performance Review

Each August, the central office cabinet meets with principals and representative teachers of all 27 schools to review results from the previous year as well as goals and action plans for the coming year. Each school presents its information to the cabinet and to approximately 50 principals and teachers from within its feeder pattern. The presenting staff offers its analysis of longitudinal trends, pointing out improvements or declines in multiple indicators of student achievement for the entire school, different grade levels, different subgroups, and different subject areas.

This transparency enables participants to identify a school or team that's achieving exceptional results for specific students as well as schools that are struggling to help a particular group of students demonstrate proficiency. The process is repeated at the end of the first semester and again at the end of the year. Schools are expected to learn from one another; teachers and principals of high-performing schools or teams become a valuable resource to their colleagues in other buildings.

This same information is available to every principal through the district's data-management system. As a result, every team has access to the expertise of all the teams in the district that teach the same course or grade level. For example, if the 3rd grade team in a particular building is struggling to meet the needs of English language learners (ELLs), teachers on the team take a field trip to visit the 3rd grade team that's getting the best results for ELLs, and they begin an ongoing relationship to improve student learning.

Principals' Meetings

District 54 has also changed the focus of its monthly principal meetings. Meetings that once were devoted to presentations from the central office have become problem-solving sessions focused on teaching and learning. For example, a principal who's trying to provide time for intervention will solicit advice from other principals who have developed creative solutions.

This process has, in effect, enabled individual schools to conduct action research. For instance, one of the district's five junior high schools took a few minutes from each of its nine class periods to create a 10th period twice a week for intervention and enrichment. When student achievement soared at the end of the year, the other junior high schools adopted or adapted the same schedule.

Training in the PLC Process

Twice each year, District 54 presents an intensive two-day workshop to all teachers and administrators new to the district to ensure that new hires understand the PLC process and the rationale behind it. Educators from schools in districts throughout the area are also invited to attend.

Part of each workshop is devoted to presentations from teams in Schaumburg schools whose members explain how their schools have implemented the PLC process and the benefits they've accrued. The presenters also serve on a panel and respond to questions from the audience.

This practice emphasizes to new employees the district's ongoing commitment to the PLC process. The training sessions also serve as an accountability check on the schools that make the presentations. Principals and teachers must understand the PLC process deeply enough to "talk the walk" and explain their practices clearly. They're also called on to "walk the talk," to actually *do* what they claim to be doing because visitors will want to see their process in action.

Districtwide Symposia

Every June, Schaumburg 54 hosts a symposium for its principals and teachers that consists almost entirely of presentations by district educators to district educators. Proposals for presentations are solicited each January and are assessed on the basis of two criteria: (1) the presenters will explain how a team or the school implemented a process to improve student achievement or school culture, and (2) the presenters can provide evidence that the process had a positive effect.

Topics from the 2013 event included implementing an enrichment program, teaching close reading of informational text, creating high-cognitive-demand tasks in mathematics, using writing to enhance reading proficiency, implementing behavioral strategies for students with autism, and using free technology to improve student engagement. Each presentation incorporates evidence of impact that typically includes results from district benchmark testing, state assessments, or school climate surveys.

The symposium, offered free to District 54 employees, runs eight presentations each hour, and all attendees receive a CD with handouts and materials from each of the breakout sessions. Educators who find a session beneficial can invite the presenters to replicate the session at their own schools. Interest in attending has been so high that requests have far exceeded the 500-person maximum at the facility where the symposium is held.

The Results

In the 2006–07 school year, the board of education of District 54 committed to implementing the PLC process throughout the district and established a stretch goal of having at least 90 percent of its students demonstrate proficiency in both mathematics and language arts on the state assessment. At the time, only about 75 percent of students demonstrated proficiency in both subjects, and none of the 27 schools had ever reached the 90/90 target.

Within five years of engaging in this PLC process, the district reached the 90/90 goal, 19 schools were 90/90 schools, and several had become 95/95 schools.

Virtual Learning Communities

The Virtual School of Spring ISD

The virtual secondary school of Spring Independent School District (ISD) serves students in grades 7–12 in Harris County, Texas. From its inception, the school was designed as a professional learning community. Its teachers work in virtual teams in which colleagues teaching the same course collaborate to do all the things that high-performing teams in brick-and-mortar schools do.

Teachers use software, such as Elluminate or Collaborate, to host team meetings. The software enables teachers to share their computer screens, send messages, hear and speak, poll, and plan. In addition, the technologies enable meetings to be recorded and stored for review at a later date. Administrators can sit in virtually and coach as needed or provide team leaders with feedback.

Regina Owens, the school's first principal and the district's current executive director for instructional engagement, found that the virtual school actually makes collective inquiry and peer learning more effective because of the transparency of the instructional process. As Owens explained,

In a traditional school, you hoped teachers implemented the new strategy, but it was difficult to be certain. In the virtual school, each teacher's lesson and interaction with students are captured either through text or video. The team can see what a teacher is saying and doing and see the choices he or she is making during instruction. Members can also see how students are responding. The team can examine results at the end of the unit, and if a particular teacher was able to show significant improvement, the entire team can study the questioning strategies that he or she used. If the team continues to struggle, we can then build in online support for the team.

Students taking classes from the virtual school outperformed their district counterparts on state assessments, and Owens was named principal of the year in the 38-campus district.

Video-Based Learning Communities: Hillsboro County

Hillsboro County, Florida, has developed video-based learning communities to enable its educators to create personal learning networks that share, reflect on, and improve instructional practice. Teachers film clips of their lessons, upload them to a private workspace, and engage in online dialogue with their colleagues on what the lessons reveal. For example, a team might agree that members need to improve their questioning strategies and feedback to students during instruction. The video clip might capture a teacher attempting to address these areas; the entire team can debrief on what did and didn't work.

Teachers see how colleagues use different strategies, techniques, and materials to teach the same content. They use chat threads to reflect on what they see and meet face-to-face through Skype or Google Hangouts to discuss their observations. Space barriers have been eliminated because teachers don't have to be in the same school or even in the same state. As Ryan Kinser, a middle school teacher in the district, asserts, "We're no longer just talking about our lessons and teaching in isolation. We're blowing the doors off our classrooms."

Supports for Virtual Learning

Scores of professional organizations offer support for virtual teams and personal learning networks. The following are particularly helpful:

- [The Center for Teaching Quality](#) provides teachers with free access to its *collaboratory*, a virtual community designed to help teachers expand their personal learning networks by working with others who face similar challenges.
- [Mastery Connect](#) offers teachers who struggle with creating assessments aligned to the Common Core standards free access to a network of educators who have contributed assessments for their content areas and grade levels.
- [The College Board's AP Virtual Community](#) links teachers of any AP course to help them meet the challenge posed by this rigorous college-level curriculum.
- [The Teaching Channel](#) provides free access to hundreds of videos of lessons taught by educators in different grade levels and subject areas, which teacher teams could use to analyze instruction.

Beyond the War Stories

For educators to realize the potential of the PLC process, they must ensure that these networks—whether face-to-face or virtual—are more than just support groups for adult commiseration, a forum for sharing war stories, or a platform for promoting personal preferences about instruction. If PLCs are to function as a powerful source of professional development, they must reflect what we know about best practice.

We now know what good professional development requires. But the question remains, Will we act on that knowledge? Will we abandon old models of professional development and create the conditions that support the ongoing learning of the most important resource in any school or district—the professionals who work there?

Endnote

- ¹ Little, J. W. (2006). *Professional community and professional development in the learning-centered school*. Washington, DC: National Education Association. Retrieved from www.nea.org/assets/docs/HE/mf_pdreport.pdf

[Richard DuFour](#) is an author and consultant on implementing the PLC process. He is coauthor, with Michael Fullan, of *Cultures Built to Last: Making PLCs Systemic* (Solution Tree, 2013) and, with [Robert J. Marzano](#), of *Leaders of Learning: How District, School, and Classroom Leaders Improve Student Achievement* (Solution Tree, 2011).

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