

# Creating and Sustaining Professional Communities<sup>1</sup>

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It is safe to say that public scrutiny of educational practices has never been higher. In 1983, when the “rising tide of mediocrity” was identified as a serious issue for U.S. schools, all eyes turned toward the need to increase curriculum rigor. The 1980’s saw increasing discussion about the need for “coherence,” and both private and public effort went into the design of comprehensive reform models that included attention to professional development, assessment, and student support, in addition to curriculum. At the same time, excessive bureaucracy was blamed for the lack of rapid improvement, and policy makers sought to create more nimble and responsive schools through site-based management and charter legislation. In the 1990’s, these trends were joined in most states by an emphasis on clearer expectations about what students should know, and developing better tests to measure whether students (and schools) were doing a good job.

The unremitting concentration on structural and curriculum reform has been joined in recent years by a new emphasis on improving the social organization of the school. Buoyed by increasing evidence that leadership and school climate have a significant effect on student achievement (over and above the curriculum and the contributions of individual student characteristics), researchers have begun to pay more attention to how adults work together to create effective learning environments in schools. This “soft” focus on social capacity for change and improvement has been largely ignored by state and national policy makers, who tend to emphasize the use of simpler instruments such as mandates (testing) and system changes (choice, finance reform) (Louis, Febey, Gordon, Meath, & Thomas, 2006). Teachers and administrators, however, have been alert to its potential as an instrument to improve their work, and have supported or helped develop many initiatives to increase human capacity, including

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principal leadership academies, new teacher assessment practices, and improved induction for teachers.

One of the most promising of these initiatives has been the focus on professional communities (PC), or its cousin, professional learning communities (PLC), largely because they build on the natural strengths of schools and educators (who are generally a cooperative lot), and they require only a rearrangement of existing resources rather than an infusion of lots of new money. In this chapter, I will try to answer several questions about PLCs that are related to its potential as a lever for school reform:

1. What are PLCs and why would you want one?
2. What are the common mistakes that schools make when they try to initiate and strengthen PLCs?
3. What needs to change in order to have a vital PLC?
4. What are the dilemmas associated with maintaining PLCs?

### **What are Professional Communities and Why Would You Want One?**

There is substantial agreement about the core characteristics of a professional learning community (Roy & Hord, 2006). First, PLCs involve *collective work* in teams (or the whole staff) in which *leadership and responsibility for student learning is widely shared*. The work of groups of teachers (and administrators) *focuses on reflective inquiry and learning*, with an explicit emphasis on how knowledge *improves student learning*. While there is room for diversity of opinions, there is a core of *shared values and norms* that influence how daily decisions are made in halls and classrooms. Sharing involves the development of *common practices and feedback* on instructional strengths and weaknesses. There is also agreement that in order for these characteristics to persist, schools must address the conditions that support or impede the work of PLCs, including attention to the use of time, the use of rewards, and the development of a positive culture.

For most teachers, this sounds like heaven on earth. Who wouldn't want to come to work every day in a school that had these characteristics? But schools exist for a larger goal than teacher satisfaction, and the main reason that educational professionals should pay attention is because PLCs have been shown in several well-designed studies to be associated with improved instruction and student learning.

Several years ago, Helen Marks and I looked at the association between professional community, authentic instruction, and student achievement in 24 schools that were selected because they showed evidence of sustained improvement efforts. In these schools, the level of professional community was strongly associated with authentic instruction, which was in turn associated with both standardized student test scores and their performance on written classroom work (Louis & Marks, 1998). A more limited study of the characteristics of PLCs in a large national sample concluded that there was a strong association with younger adolescents' achievement gains (Lee & Smith, 1996). These effects have an impact in both more and less affluent schools: An in-depth examination of 44 classrooms in low-income/high-minority schools suggests that active participation in professional community experiences is associated with student learning (Langer, 2000). Along with colleagues, I am currently conducting a study of how leadership affects learning in 45 typical schools across the United States. The teacher survey data from this study show strong associations between indicators of professional community and the intensity of instruction—particularly the use of instruction that maintains a focus on student engagement in authentic tasks. Among these schools, the presence of shared norms and a sense of collective responsibility have a more significant effect on the use of focused instruction than the individual teachers' race, gender, or experience (Wahlstrom & Louis, under review).

### **What are Common Implementation Mistakes?**

Given that a school with strong PLCs is a good place for teachers and students to work, it is surprising that quite a few schools that try to initiate them run into apathy and even failure. While there have been no systematic, large-scale implementation studies, a number of issues that I and others have observed can be suggested.

**PLCs as a program.** *In a suburban elementary school, teachers worked in grade-level teams on the school's improvement plan, which focused on literacy instruction. They had self-initiated study groups, and were conducting peer observations as part of their work. The busy and well-respected principal, eager to find new resources for her school, attended a workshop in which the work of DuFour and Eaker was discussed.*

*Arriving back at school, she announced that they would be implementing PLCs, and assigned teachers to cross-grade-level work groups to analyze the school's literacy data.*

What's the problem here? The principal, though well intentioned, failed to assess the existing state of professional community in the school, which was already very high—and increasing. By looking at PLCs as a new program to be implemented rather than a set of ideas that could augment current routines, she undermined the hard work and enthusiasm that had gone into collaborative practice. Ongoing relationships were disrupted to make room for the principal's vision of what PLCs should look like, and teachers (who generally liked the principal) saw PLCs as a new project—one of many in this innovative school.

In a typical case, a principal may claim to have created a professional learning community in a single year using the standard methods of planned change: presenting the idea, getting teachers to set goals, taking a subset of enthusiasts to a conference and helping them to sell the idea to their peers, and holding teachers accountable for meeting their goals (DuFour, 2001). While the principal may believe that they have created a PLC, we have found that teachers are uniformly skeptical of this approach.

**PLCs as an instrument for accountability.** *In a large suburban district, PLCs were mandated in every school. Each newly organized group was told to select one of the district's learning objectives, and to use the testing data available to them to analyze how to improve student achievement. At the end of each year, the PLCs were expected to report on their progress, paying specific attention to their use of data.*

The cry for more data-based decision-making is in the air, and linked to the emphasis on improving student test scores. More than a few school leaders see PLCs as a strategy to increase teachers' focus on student achievement data: If PLCs are intended to promote reflection, why not ask teachers to reflect on data? Though logical, this approach—in which teachers are given specific analytical tasks to carry out—emphasizes the knowledge use component of professional communities to the exclusion of the “soft” side of human development. As Hargreaves (2007) recently pointed out:

Instead of being intelligently informed by evidence in deep and demanding cultures of trusted relationships that press for success, PLCs are turning into add-on teams of thrown together staff who are driven by

data in cultures of fear that demand instant results.... PLCs are becoming instruments of technocratic surveillance (p 183)

Appointing committees to analyze data and focusing on test score improvement as the goal of PLCs shift attention away from the core emphasis on how teachers can improve the connection between their daily instructional practice and student learning. While PLCs may promote data-based decision-making, an exclusive emphasis on data analysis can distract teachers from sharing effective practices. Increased use of data may be one result of increases in professional community, but a mandated focus on data analysis and raising test scores conflicts with the core of PLCs, which involve trusting, shared solving of problems of classroom practice.

**PLCs as job enlargement.** *A high school in an urban center was asked by the district office to consider designing small learning communities in addition to its recent implementation of a block schedule. As part of this effort, a major scheduling and curriculum reorganization was required, including an initiative to put teachers in touch with community partners who help to implement the themes that were chosen to create specialized foci for the new schools-within-a-school (SWS). Teachers were also asked to adapt their curriculum to ensure that core classes reflected the theme of their new SWS, and to take on increased advisory roles. At the same time, there was a clear expectation that the new SWS teacher clusters would also organize reflective PLCs in order to improve instruction.*

Teachers in this school were willing, but overwhelmed by the new roles that they were expected to play (only a few of which are described above), and by the huge demands of implementing so many new ideas simultaneously. Like many high school teachers, this experienced staff was inundated with multiple requirements, including new curriculum, new ways of relating to students, and increasing emphasis on meeting accountability demands for which preservice training had not prepared them. There is no question that teachers' work has changed over the past several decades—becoming increasingly complex even though the job descriptions have hardly changed at all. If PLCs are added to this increased workload, they are likely to be viewed as one more burden rather than as a way of solving pressing classroom issues.

**PLCs or professionalizing individuals?** *A recent case description of two urban secondary schools makes a different point. In the effort to try and counteract professional isolation, the PLC literature has ignored individual needs. Not all of these are pretty—people want to be outstanding and have influence; they hope to gain perks for their classroom in the constant battle for scarce resources; and they have professional dreams that do not overlap with the collective will. If no explicit attention is paid to balancing individual and collective professionalization, micro-politics and behind-the-scenes may spiral and undermine the spirit of PLCs.* (Scribner, Hager, & Warn, 2002)

The point of this cautionary story is that school reform needs to balance individual and collective hopes, fears, and needs. Nearly 80 years ago, the father of modern management theory pointed out that on any given day, employees will come to work with a wide range of attitudes and preferences, not all of which are consistent across individuals, and not all of which can be met (Barnard, 1938). Administrators are as overworked as teachers, and it is easy to overlook the need for individual recognition, reward, and feedback in the effort to promote school-wide success. Creating a balance between paying attention to individual and group needs requires constant adjustment. However, we know that no matter how well-entrenched PLCs become, most daily innovation and improvement in classroom practices (and consequently student learning) will come from individual reflection and adjustments—although the inspiration and “aha” moments may come in group discussion.

### **Another Approach: Shifting the Culture of the School**

The core of the implementation problems outlined above is actually quite simple. The idea of professional community was developed as an effort to integrate two previously distinct concepts: professionalism (which is based on specialized knowledge and a focus on serving client needs) with community (which is based on caring, support, and mutual responsibility within a group). In implementation, the focus is too often on increasing professionalism, while ignoring the problem of community.

A number of studies have concluded that creating *structures* that support PLCs—such as time for teams to meet and giving teachers more influence and responsibilities (distributed leadership) and creating more opportunities for feedback on performance—is

important to sustaining activities that are core elements of a professionalizing school (Bryk, Camburn, & Louis, 1999; Louis, Marks, & Kruse, 1996). However, the results of efforts to restructure have often been disappointing and exhausting. On the other hand, these same studies—and many others—conclude that it is shaping school *culture* that has the greatest impact on supporting and sustaining PLCs. Reemphasizing the importance of culture requires that we balance professionalism and community.

PLCs are, in themselves, a shift away from what many have described as a core assumption of teachers' work: a focus on constant and busy adaptations to classroom activities and individual students. Instead, PLCs emphasize sustained collective attention to recurring patterns of student learning, and how individual teachers' behavior affects it. The most obvious cultural shift is away from individualized routine and its concomitant teacher isolation, and toward an emphasis on an evolving consensus about teaching practice. However, there are other underlying changes that must be in place to support professional community.

It is not hard to find schools that are characterized by significant pockets of naturally occurring professional community. A more vexing question is how to create it where it is not already in place, or where its manifestations are scattered and weak. School leaders cannot manage a school's culture in the same way that one can ensure that discipline is maintained and students are assigned to the right classes in order to graduate. A simple list of "to dos" is a sign that the writer has not actually tried to understand, shape, and change the culture of a school. Nor can culture be permanently altered in a short time frame—a school year. However, several elements of a school's culture that will help to balance professionalism and community are particularly amenable to influence by a principal or other school leader: commitment, trust, promoting organizational learning, and consistent tailoring of the work to the particular school and the people who are in it.

**Commitment Begins at the Top.** One of the problems with efforts to change the culture of the school through PLCs is that administrators want to change everything but their own work. However, as Robert Quinn points out, creating deep change in an organization requires the leadership to engage in deep personal change (Quinn, 1996). That commitment must be visible to others in the school: If teachers don't believe that

their principal or other school leaders are willing to question how they carry out their jobs, why should they be asked to engage in difficult and fundamental questioning of their own practice? The need for principals, in particular, to work backward from teachers' work to their own work—and to engage in serious questions, with teachers, about how the school is organized and for what purposes (and for whose benefits) will easily be seen as false professionalism. Principals need to be part of PLCs of their own. Quinn's book is all that a leader needs in order to understand the deep change that is required of everyone in the school.

**Creating and Sustaining Trust.** Why does it take so long to initiate a PLC? One answer can be found in the increasingly robust research suggesting that *trust* is an element of organizational culture that is both critical and routinely overlooked—probably because administrators don't really want to face the music. Trust is the basis for “taken for granted” aspects of social interaction, a necessary ingredient for cooperative action, and a foundation for social capital (Coleman, 1988; Zucker, 1986), but the “problem of trust” is evident in educational settings. Many schools have weak levels of relational trust among the adults who work in and with them, even when there are pockets of high relational trust in small groups of like-minded teachers (Goddard, Tschannen-Moran, & Hoy, 2001). Trust is associated with higher levels of performance on such varied measures such as student achievement and parent collaboration (Hoy & Tschannen-Moran, 1999). Conversely, low trust is associated with teacher burnout (Friedman, 1991).

While higher or lower levels of trust can characterize a whole school, the well-understood but little discussed problem of change is that relationships between teachers and administrators are less trusting than those among teachers (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). This means, of course, that teachers are likely to look cynically at an administrator-initiated change. Furthermore, under sub-optimal trust conditions, change creates additional tensions and decreases trust because it disrupts the “taken for granted” aspects of institutional functioning or is inconsistent with existing norms. This finding reinforces the need for leaders to build trust in order to sustain effective change (Keedy & Allen, 1998; Mishra, 1996). However, this may be difficult if there is limited institutional trust prior to a change initiative.

In sum, trust is a precondition for developing PLCs, but few schools (and probably fewer school administrators) have confronted the issue of how to improve this component of

organizational functioning. Even in the business literature, there are few serious comparative studies about how to build trust, though some valuable suggestions exist. These include emphasizing a covenant between formal leaders and members—the principals and behaviors that they fundamentally agree upon—as well as a contract, and focusing on the building blocks of trust in the process, trust in one’s confidence to participate, and trust in the other participants (Caldwell & Kaari, 2005; Sachs, 1994).

**Promoting Organizational Learning.** Organizational learning (OL) as a model for cultural change is based on two assumptions: (1) that common meaning is necessary to collective action, but (2) that change cannot occur unless ideas that challenge the status quo are available. In the learning school, adults work together to gather more information about teaching and learning and then discuss, share, and critique new ideas so that all members understand and can use the new information. The learning organization focuses on continuous improvement rather than “reengineering” or “restructuring” but is not necessarily averse to considering more dramatic innovations. There is evidence to show that schools that engage in more active organizational learning also have higher-achieving students (Marks, Louis, & Printy, 2002).

The appeal of the organizational learning framework is, in part, based on the assumption that creating more effective schools does not merely require identifying a list of structural or instructional characteristics and re-jigging the system to implement them. Instead, it is based on a more fluid idea of how change happens. Knowledge, for example, may come from many sources:

- Teachers bring *individually held knowledge* from their prior experiences and training that is often difficult for colleagues to access and use.

- *New knowledge is generated by self-appraisal*, as a result of evaluations, action research, or accountability information. These data can be turned into commonly held knowledge only when there is a shared vocabulary and incentives to discuss “findings.” Joint small-group planning periods, regular faculty meetings devoted to discussion, and frequent lateral communication networks provide organizational designs for acquiring information.

- *Knowledge is gained by organized search efforts.* Search efforts vary depending on the energy devoted to them and the absorptive capacity of the organization to take in and use new ideas to create alternative organizational structures and ideas (Louis, 1994).

Most concur that an organized search for high-quality knowledge is a weak point in public education, which has been generously characterized as faddish. It is here that administrators may have the biggest impact, as they carry out the role of intellectual leadership, helping to find and sort information.

Once schools have a clearer understanding of the knowledge resources that they have or must create, they also need *mechanisms for sharing new ideas*. Again, this is an area in which school leaders have enormous influence because they are often responsible for supporting formal and informal opportunities for exchange. Information distribution involves more than placing photocopied articles in teacher mailboxes, nor is a 10-minute discussion at a staff meeting a substitute for sustained conversation that can link ideas to action. Instead, organizational learning calls for the construction of meaningful contexts and conditions under which new routines are *demonstrated or practiced* rather than merely *discussed*.

In sum, the ideas underlying an organizational learning perspective focus on continuous change, stimulated by multiple sources of knowledge, where knowledge is a constantly changing collective understanding not of “facts” but of the action implications of what is known together.

**Tailoring the Work to the School.** Of course all schools are in one sense similar—but they are populated by students and teachers who bring with them variable talents and preferences, and they are embedded in communities with differing demands and needs. Place matters, and the people in the place matter. While importing new ideas is essential, it is equally crucial to recognize that PLCs in one setting may not operate in the same way as in any other setting—even in a school just a few miles away. It is important to keep the guiding principles in mind (those that were outlined at the beginning of this chapter), and to remember that there are many ways to reach the same goal. Some schools might prefer to work in semi-permanent teams where trust can be built over a period of time. Others, particularly in small and stable settings, may have high levels of trust and need more stimulation that could arise from multiple overlapping groups and an expectation that new ideas be confronted. It is particularly critical that school leaders recognize what is needed for a school to move forward at any given time, and to coax (not mandate) teacher groups toward active work on that issue.

## **Sustaining Professional Community**

Andy Hargreaves (Hargreaves, 2007) recently articulated seven principles for developing sustainable professional learning communities. While I freely borrow from his analysis, my experience suggests a somewhat shorter list of essential tensions that need to be balanced if a nascent PLC is to survive over the long haul.

**Depth and Breadth.** As implied above, PLCs (or whatever the school wishes to call its teams or working groups of professionals) need to have the freedom to pursue an important task over a long period of time—whether that is changing literacy instruction or closing the achievement gap in mathematics. On the other hand, teams must also be nimble enough to confront new dilemmas, to take on new members with alacrity, and to expand their focus when the need arises. Self-assessment, supported by critical friends, about the degree to which the school effectively balances persistence and agile adaptation must be continuous.

**Stability and Change.** The lack of stability in teacher teams is a persistent cause of their failure to produce much that affects students (Louis & Freeman, 2007). Teacher mobility and administrative decisions create settings in which teachers spend more time building trust with new partners than getting on with the work. On the other hand, if teams are too stable, they may become so cohesive as to compete with or otherwise undermine school-wide planning and change efforts (Kruse & Louis, 1997).

**Diversity and Focus.** It is tempting to turn existing groups of “alike” teachers, whether they are departments or grade level teams, into the dominant PLCs. Self-selected groups, composed of people who know and like each other, will have less difficulty with trust, and will quickly find topics of common interest to work on. Research suggests, however, that diversity within groups may lead to better longer-run problem-finding and problem-solving. Balancing the desirability of both broadly representative groups (with divergent opinions and backgrounds) and focused, role-alike task-oriented groups requires some flexibility, as well as sensitivity to the local setting. In particular, my colleagues and I have elsewhere urged school leaders to make sure that all members of the school community—including non-teaching staff—are part of the effort to create PLCs (Bolam, Stoll, & Greenwood, 2007; Louis & Gordon, 2006).

**Networking and Integration.** PLCs need both to look inward, taking advantage of the unexplored talents of staff members and creating cohesiveness around the goal of

student learning, and outward. The strain between focusing on the individuals, who want to participate in professional groups outside the school (district task forces, subject-matter networks, etc.) and the need to create internally focused work groups is a persistent issue for PLCs.

Each of the above tensions is a component of the larger dilemma, which is how best to maintain an equilibrium between the focus on professionalism and the focus on community. Excessive professionalism (diversity, breadth, networking, and change) will lead to fragmentation in the school and will reinforce the old pattern of teachers as autonomous actors, joined only by a parking lot. On the other hand, too much community (focus, depth, integration, and stability) will lead to self-satisfied groups that fail to challenge themselves, but are content to measure their climate by the number of potlucks and birthday parties held for staff. No single person can be responsible for maintaining the delicate balance required, but it is clearly the task of an individual who is able to observe all of the PLC-like groups in the school to determine when imbalance is occurring.

## **Conclusion**

The public focus on content standards has persisted over the past two decades unabated, as schools are increasingly being held accountable for both what is taught and what students learn. At the same time, educators have an urgent sense that schools—and students—need more than benchmarks and tests if they are to succeed. This chapter has emphasized the importance of the “soft” side of the improvement equation, and has argued that continuous improvement (or more substantial innovation) is unlikely to occur in the absence of professional communities that change the way in which teachers and administrators work together to meet the needs of students. Attending to the hunger that most teachers feel for time to think about their work in concert with others whom they know and trust is a precondition for resilient schools.

If there were a simple roadmap toward creating and sustaining professional communities that was supported by research, I would have tried to present it. Instead, after more than a decade of studying professional communities, I continue to be struck by the variety of ways in which they emerge—and by their fragility. Professional

community is more than intellectual energy for the challenging task of teaching, and more than creating environments that support educators in increasingly difficult jobs. We know what it looks like when we see it, and we know a great deal about what supports it, but in the end it consists of a set of dynamic relationships embedded in a supportive school culture. Providing direction that promotes and sustains these relationships under conditions of accountability and uncertainty is a demanding task, and requires familiarity with, and the ability to apply, an understanding of cultural leadership.

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