EDUCATION WEEK
SP☉TLIGHT

On Professional Learning Communities

Editor's Note: Educators have turned to Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) as a way to develop professional skills and improve student learning.   This Spotlight offers tips and practical experience from those using PLCs as a way to build teacher-to-teacher collaboration, including how to start teacher learning communities and how to maintain group motivation and avoid burnout.

Published November 10, 2010, in Education Week

District Strives for 'Learning System'

The Goal for Administrators and Teachers is to Convert Typically Scattershot Teacher Training Into a Coherent, Cohesive Endeavor

By Stephen Sawchuk
Lexington, Mass.

Oreo cookies, a veggie platter, and a lot of caffeinated beverages make up the afternoon reinforcements for the educators gathered in the basement of a converted school here in this leafy Boston suburb.

Over the course of the meeting on this fall day, the 18-member professional-development committee for the Lexington school system will cover a wide swath of topics about the ongoing training—everything from practical concerns about teacher enrollment in a district-sponsored course to philosophical ones about how to improve

teachers' ability to modify instruction based on analyses of student work.

Formed in spring 2009 by the district, in partnership with the local teachers' union, the work group has a specific mission: to ensure that the pieces of the district's continuing teacher training are congruent, of high quality, relevant to what teachers are doing in their classrooms, and widely accessible.

In the words of Superintendent Paul B. Ash, the Lexington district is trying to become a "learning system"—one that fosters teacher learning beyond the individual school level.

As it does so, the district is grappling with some of the challenges inherent in upgrading typically scattershot training into a seamless endeavor. Building teacher capacity to advance learning, after all, means moving from an individual exercise to a collective one. It relies on skilled teams in each school working effectively, as well as the provision of additional support when necessary for teachers, and for the teams, to overcome roadblocks.

And that is exactly what this committee has set out to do.

Since coming to Lexington in 2005, Mr. Ash has made the provision of professional development the hallmark of his leadership in this 6,300-student district. Training is now provided in a variety of formats.

Educators in each school are expected to engage in the central component—a minimum of one planning period a week devoted to grade-level or content teams, known at some schools as professional learning communities, or PLCs. Elementary teachers have some additional time on Thursdays, while other teachers and principals supplement the meetings by using contractual after-school Monday meeting time and additional prep periods for the collaborative work.

The idea is for the teams to devise common benchmarks for student learning, discuss how students perform against those benchmarks, and intervene and reteach as needed.

At Jonas Clarke Middle School, for instance, the three members of the 8th grade U.S. history content team used their collaboration time to craft a unit on the 2008 presidential election, after realizing that many students didn't understand the distinction between a Republican and the political concept of "republicanism."

This year, the team is working on ways to upgrade the history curriculum to include more primary sources, historical accounts, and materials beyond the scope of the textbook.

Ramille Romulus, a team member, said one of his group's goals is to gradually raise expectations for students. As he puts it, "After a couple of years of getting things done, it's time to move on to something higher."

Overcoming Resistance

As simple as that concept of a school-based, inquiry-driven approach is in theory, it has not come to Lexington without some bumps in the road. For one, the culture of teacher autonomy at work in the United States is perhaps even stronger in a district that's relatively wealthy and homogeneous than in one with myriad challenges.

"Because we are so high-performing, it's difficult to excite people to thinking that they can do even better," said Carol A. Pilarski, the assistant superintendent for curriculum, instruction, and professional development.

Administrators and even teachers here like to refer to the teaching corps as composed of "thoroughbreds"—confident, trained practitioners who excel in their content areas but also happen to be a bit stubborn.

Mr. Ash began the transition to collaborative work by requiring, starting in the 2005-06 school year, that teams at each school engage in a yearlong "action research" project. Teachers initially resisted, partly out of anxiety about meetings in which elementary and middle schools would share results from those research projects.

"We went through a big implementation dip, and I went through a tremendous backlash," Mr. Ash said. "The union was upset; it felt teachers were overburdened, that there wasn't enough training. ... But I knew that we weren't going to change the culture until enough people had experienced the collaboration and saw that it was better."

Now, five years later, educators are involved in more-frequent cycles in which they look at student work and devise strategies for improving their teaching. Principals and teachers here say they are starting to notice changes in teacher behavior and student outcomes as a result of the teamwork.

Whitney Hagins, the chairwoman of the science department at Lexington High School, says she can't imagine teaching without her PLC. "It's really opened teachers' eyes to things that weren't working," she said. Her colleague Marie Murphy, the foreign-languages chairwoman, says that a once-static curriculum is now "alive and it's always being challenged," making it richer.

And Jeff Leonard jokes that he can hear the changes. The department chairman for performing arts, Mr. Leonard says the band's rehearsal techniques have improved, and final performances now sound more

> **"**
> I knew that we weren't going to change the culture until enough people had experienced the collaboration and saw that it was better."
>
> **PAUL B. ASH**
> Superintendent, Lexington, Mass. school system

cohesive.

The work isn't always easy. It is still difficult for teachers to talk about those instances when their instruction needs help, which is one of the reasons the most effective teams meet more than once a week in order to establish trust. "For the formal meetings to be successful, those relationships have to be in place," said Geetika D. Kaw, the science department chairwoman at Clarke Middle School.

Even then, according to Edward M. Davey, one of the teachers in the history content team at Clarke, a team can run into problems if it devises a test or plans a lesson without having a highly specific goal for what the teachers want to achieve through that activity.

A conversation among team members, he said, is not the same thing as the focused problem-solving that will serve to advance student learning.

Outside Supports

Getting the right system of checks and balances to keep site-based professional development from suffering from such mission drift is highly dependent on building-level leadership.

In Lexington, the principals who have embraced that form of teacher training, like Steven H. Flynn of Clarke Middle School, go out of their way to make sure that time set aside for teacher teams is spent productively. Mr. Flynn's schedule is organized so that he can spend 15 minutes apiece with the four teams meeting on a given day—or extra time with the groups that are struggling. And he keeps extensive records about what goals teams set out in every meeting and what they accomplished that day.

In addition to the school content teams,

other professional supports abound, including at least one dedicated literacy and math specialist in each school and access to instructional-technology experts.

The most recent addition to the professional-development system was unveiled last spring: a series of free, voluntary after-school courses for teachers. The notion of such classes runs counter to the ideas of some professional-development advocates, who contend that most professional learning should be conducted on site.

But educators here stress that the district's courses differ from the expansive menu that teachers typically select from to earn continuing education credits. In November of last year, Lexington officials conducted a survey of the district's teaching corps and designed the courses in response to teachers' top 10 priorities, which included expanding their repertoires of instructional strategies, analyzing student work, and integrating technology.

Crucially, the courses involve a follow-up coaching element based in schools, another feature teachers favored. A few weeks into a course, enrolled teachers have an opportunity to receive feedback on how well they're implementing new strategies and techniques.

"Processing the information and coaching teachers on how to use it are vital, or else it sits in a bubble," said Joanne Hennessy, the chairwoman of the professional-development body, which coordinates the course offerings.

For his part, Superintendent Ash argues that it's crucial to bring fresh ideas to the educators engaging in professional development. Early in his tenure, he recalled, "one of my union presidents said to me, 'What happens if [the school teams] can't figure out what to do next?' That's why you have to have a learning school system, because teachers will run out of ideas," he said. "I really think that the PLC is quite self-limiting. It's limited to the capacity of the three or four people in the room."

Constant Tweaking

It's largely the work of the professional-development committee to make sure that all the professional-development layers come together. At a late-September meeting, committee members discussed suggestions for how to integrate the courses better with the other teacher supports.

One member suggested supplementing the courses with webinars so that teachers could easily access a refresher. Another teacher suggested there might be a way to encourage all members of a school team to attend a course together and so continue the work at their weekly meetings. A third teacher had a practical concern about group-based rather than one-on-one coaching: Would it require elementary teachers to be away from their own classrooms too often?

Debate of that nature may seem academic, but the leaders here stress that systems of support for teachers cannot afford to be static. They must undergo constant supervision and tweaking to meet teachers' needs.

Still more challenges are on the horizon, because the shift has required Lexington teachers to take greater ownership of student success. That's starting to raise delicate questions about teacher performance. In the words of Gary Simon, who chairs the high school math department, the team work has given birth to the idea that if students are underperforming, "it's not that my students didn't do well, it's that I didn't do well."

But there is no question that the conversations will continue. Ongoing training is no longer considered an option in Lexington; it is a professional responsibility.

"We've passed the point of no return," Natalie K. Cohen, the district's high school principal, said about that shift. "If you're a teacher here and you are not on board with this approach, then maybe this isn't the district for you."

'Teacher Voice'

By Stephen Sawchuk

Geetika D. Kaw's tenure as a teacher in the same district for more than 10 years gives her a clarity of perspective on the waning and waxing of initiatives in Lexington, Mass.

Before the arrival of the current superintendent, Paul B. Ash, in 2005, she'd outlasted a "revolving door" of school leaders—and a corresponding number of professional-development initiatives.

"Some years we had a focus on technology, some years on differentiated instruction," she said. "There was a level of frustration with what was being provided because we didn't have much selection in terms of courses."

Now, though, having a superintendent who has a clear vision about focusing on raising academic standards for students and on classroom strategies for improving instruction has helped give a more cohesive theme to professional development, Ms. Kaw says.

The professional learning community—or content team, as it's known in her school—is the district's core professional-development strategy. In her view, it has gone a long way to encourage the development of a common language and assessments for gauging the quality of instruction, while still allowing teachers to seek individual help if they need it.

There's still room for growth in the system, Ms. Kaw says. For instance, she'd like to attend the 6th and 7th grade science-content-team meetings, in addition to the 8th grade one she now goes to, but the current school schedule doesn't allow for that.
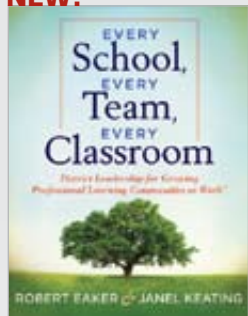
Still, Ms. Kaw has discovered ways in which she can build on the structure at the school. One of her goals as department chairwoman this year: take over other teachers' classes on testing days, so that those teachers are free to observe how peers are leading their lessons.

"The key," she said, "is to let people know I'm available if they need help."
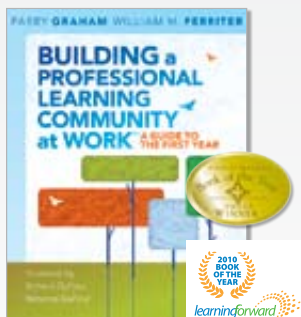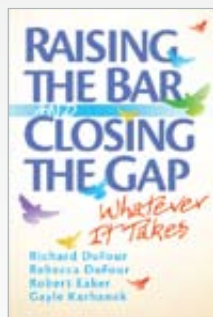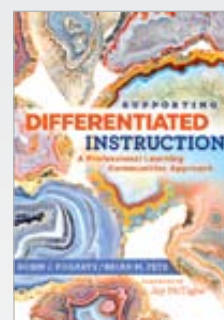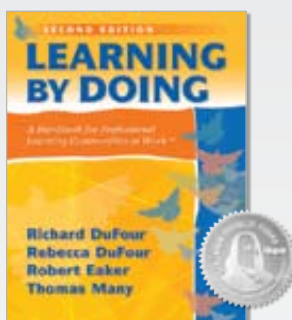
Great Leadership Begins Here

PLC Resources

NEW!

Every School, *Every* Team, *Every* Classroom

District Leadership for Growing Professional Learning Communities at Work™

ROBERT EAKER & JANEL KEATING

NEW!

The Five Disciplines *of* PLC Leaders

Timothy D. Kanold
Foreword by Richard DuFour

The PLC at Work™ Cartoon Book

Cartoons by Martha F. Campbell
Foreword by Richard DuFour & Rebecca DuFour

Aligning School Districts as PLCs

Mark Van Clay
Perry Soldwedel
Thomas W. Many
Foreword by Michael Fullan

SECOND EDITION

LEARNING BY DOING

A Handbook for Professional Learning Communities at Work™

Richard DuFour
Rebecca DuFour
Robert Eaker
Thomas Many

SUPPORTING **DIFFERENTIATED INSTRUCTION**

A Professional Learning Communities Approach

ROBIN J. FOGARTY / BRIAN M. PETE

RAISING THE BAR *and* **CLOSING THE GAP**

Whatever It Takes

Richard DuFour
Rebecca DuFour
Robert Eaker
Gayle Karhanek

PARRY GRAHAM WILLIAM M. FERRITER

BUILDING a PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITY at WORK™ A GUIDE TO THE FIRST YEAR

2010 BOOK OF THE YEAR
*learning*forward

Collaborative Action Research for Professional Learning Communities

Richard Sagor

Solution Tree offers resources by award-winning educators that will strengthen your aptitude and attitude for the challenge of leading schools to higher levels of success.

solution-tree.com   800.733.6786

(re)defining professional development

join us

'Working Smarter By Working Together'

The professional learning community has become a way of life at Adlai E. Stevenson, where teachers have been perfecting the concept for a quarter-century.

By Vaishali Honawar
Lincolnshire, Ill.

Teacher collaboration is hailed as one of the most effective ways to improve student learning, and one high school in Illinois is often credited with perfecting the concept.

Adlai E. Stevenson High School was one of the first in the nation to embrace what are known as professional learning communities. The school's focus on teacher teamwork has catapulted it from an ordinary good school to an extraordinary one, advocates say. Among its many accolades, it has been a U.S. Department of Education Blue Ribbon school for four years—one of only three nationwide to achieve that honor. Moreover, as many as 96 percent of Stevenson's students go on to college. So well known are the learning communities here that each year, 3,000 people visit the school's sprawling campus 30 miles northwest of Chicago to experience firsthand how its teacher-collaboration model works.

Eric Twadell, the superintendent of Stevenson High, a one-school district, describes the professional learning community, or PLC, as "teachers working smarter by working together." From the beginning, he said, the idea was not to create something new or different, but simply to foster an atmosphere in which teachers could learn from one another and share their colleagues' expertise so that, in the end, students would benefit.

In a professional learning community, each teacher has access to the ideas, materials, strategies, and talents of the entire team. At Stevenson, teachers meet in course-specific, and sometimes interdisciplinary, teams each week to discuss strategies for improvement; craft common assessments, the results of which are analyzed to improve instruction; and brainstorm lesson plans.

Instead of the isolation of their classrooms, they spend their time between classes and before and after school in open office areas where their desks abut those of their course peers. The arrangement ensures that the give-and-take between teacher teams is almost constant.

"Many of the best things we do don't happen in team meetings," said social studies teacher Brian Rusin. "The real collaboration happens outside."

Even professional development at the school is targeted at the teams, and the hiring process for new teachers takes the teams into consideration. Candidates meet the teachers who constitute the teams they'll be in if hired, in addition to administrators and department heads.

The term "professional learning community" emerged among researchers as early as the 1960s, when they offered the concept as an alternative to the isolation in which most teachers worked. Over the years, more and more schools have adopted PLCs, and the concept has gained wider acceptance in education circles. A broad range of stakeholders, from state education departments to teachers' unions, sing the idea's praises.

Several states, including California, Missouri, and New Jersey, incorporate learning communities or collaborative teaching in their professional-development standards.

While it is not clear how many schools actually practice collaborative teaching or have established PLCs, Stephanie Hirsh, the executive director of the Oxford, Ohio-based National Staff Development Council, points out that versions of it can be found at many successful schools.

"You find any high-performing high-poverty school, and you will find elements of PLCs," Ms. Hirsh said. "You will find schoolwide goals, teachers working together on lesson plans, … all those critical elements that make up a PLC."

But implementing professional learning communities is challenging. For starters, they require a deep cultural change within the school. Education consultant and author Richard DuFour offers the example of movies about great teaching that usually feature a single teacher making a difference in the lives of his or her students.

"That's the story we've told ourselves about teaching, but now we're saying we have to collaborate and make a collective effort" to help students succeed, said Mr. DuFour, who was the principal at Stevenson High when it first took steps to set up its PLC in 1983.

At Stevenson, Mr. DuFour said, teachers had some reservations at first, and although local union leaders were cooperative, they had concerns about whether assessments, for example, would be used in a punitive way.

"The beauty of working in isolation and doing your own assessing is that you are buffered from an external source of validation. But here we want you to talk to colleagues, want you to look at common assessments that you and your teammates have developed, and that's pretty scary initially," he said. Doing that required a lot of sensitivity and dialogue with teachers early in the process before the cultural change could happen, Mr. DuFour said.

It also took some work to convince the school board. Stevenson, located in a middle-class community, was doing reasonably well in the 1980s, and "there was no sense of crisis, no [No Child Left Behind Act], no state standards," Mr. DuFour said.

As a result, he said, the initial reaction from the school board was "why should we change things; the results are all right, the community seems to like us. There were no imperatives or sense of urgency." The first step then, he said, was to start out with an assumption that "we didn't want to be a good or good enough school, but an exemplary school that lived up to a model of success for

every student."

By now, the culture of collaboration is so deeply embedded at Stevenson High that even the school's counselors and administrators are organized in teams, all working in tandem with the teachers' teams to help students.

Each freshman, for instance, is assigned a support team to monitor his or her emotional well-being and progress in achieving academic goals. Students who fall behind academically are given an extra hour of study time each day and specific intervention, if needed.

Every Tuesday at Stevenson, classes start 35 minutes later than other days, but teachers arrive early for their team meetings. The teams range in size from three to 20. Some teachers belong to more than one team, but all the school's 300 teachers are on at least one.

On a recent snow-swept Tuesday morning, French teachers Paul Weil and Agnes Aichholzer make their way into an empty classroom for their meeting. A third team member is on leave.

This morning, Mr. Weil and Ms. Aichholzer strategize on how best to attract new students to courses in French—not an easy job at a school that offers many languages. Other mornings, the team might talk about student progress in their courses, or perhaps, how to better teach a certain aspect of grammar.

"It is our way of gathering and checking in. … We have much better results when we speak to each other and come up with different solutions," Mr. Weil says.

A few doors down in the 4,500-student school, five members of a math "problem-solving" team are putting their heads together. They talk about different ways of doing problems. Someone wonders if grading tests as a team might be a good idea.

Disagreement occurs sometimes when teachers sit down to brainstorm, but even when that happens, says math teacher Victoria Kieft, they eventually agree on what is in the students' best interests.

Superintendent Twadell suggests that some dissidence can be good. But while at other schools that might mean a teacher who disagrees will escape to his or her classroom, at Stevenson it means working together through the differences to find common solutions.

All teams identify team norms of interaction—rules that govern behavior. "We work hard to make sure we all get along," Mr. Twadell said. Teachers on each team choose their leader, who then heads up the discussions and assigns duties to each member.

The culture of teacher collaboration at the school dates back so far that even veterans

Effective Teacher Teams

Richard DuFour, a consultant who is considered a leading expert on professional learning communities, says educators can enhance the effectiveness of teacher teams by focusing on essential points:

∎ Build time for collaboration into the school day and school year.

∎ Clarify the purpose and products of the collaboration: They include identifying common course- or grade-level objectives, developing common assessments of student learning, reviewing samples of student work, analyzing student performance, and identifying areas of concern as well as strategies for improving performance.

∎ Ask teams to clarify their operating procedures and protocols that will guide their work together. Teams should consider and reach agreement on such questions as: What are the expectations for how our team will operate? How will we define consensus? What process will we use to resolve conflict?

∎ Insist that teams identify specific, measurable performance goals, which should ultimately require a team to demonstrate that more students are learning at higher levels.

have long been used to working together, although the format has changed over the years, from meetings in which teachers would just sit down for informal discussions to the present, more structured format, said Dan Larsen, a social studies teacher.

Linda Reusch, a math teacher, said PLCs are just a buzzword. "We have always talked to each other, and not at each other."

Proponents say one of the most important goals for any school planning to establish learning communities is to tailor them to the school's specific needs, rather than copying an existing model.

"One of the worries that NSDC has had is that the label is being used for a lot of experiences, from staff meetings to something that we would genuinely call a professional learning community," said Ms. Hirsh, the staff-development council's executive director. For instance, she said, she has been at schools with so-called PLCs where the conversation at meetings centered on organizing field trips

and managing classrooms or students' failure to turn in homework.

While all those topics are important, Ms. Hirsh said, the agenda of PLCs needs to be more about examining, for instance, available data on how students are meeting standards and determining what needs to be done to help them succeed through sound lesson plans and strategies.

Members of newer learning communities that have made gains in student achievement agree that while they found learning from the experiences of schools like Stevenson invaluable, they've had to create their own versions.

Mike Mattos, the principal of Pioneer Middle School in Tustin, Calif., began the process of setting up teacher teams in his school four years ago, after having done so previously at an elementary school where he had been principal.

"When I came [to Pioneer], I didn't say that I will start a PLC," Mr. Mattos said. Instead, he focused the teachers on working together to get the school's 30 percent of children who were not proficient on state and federal tests to a proficient level. It worked, he said, because the teachers, too, wanted to ensure their students' success. "Almost every teacher that I have ever worked with joined the profession to help people," he said.

"Most teachers don't want to work in isolation," Mr. Mattos said. "They want to be part of something bigger. They realize that collaboration is good not just for the children, but for the teachers as well."

At some schools, the collaboration has extended outside school boundaries. At Fargo North High School, for instance, the single French teacher collaborates with the French teacher from the other high school in Fargo, N.D. So do the German teacher and the health teacher.

"The way we think about this is that when teachers collaborate for learning and development, all students benefit," said Principal Andrew Dahlen.

Mr. Twadell of Stevenson High points out that getting teachers to collaborate does not cost any extra money, nor does it require an enormous investment of time. The most important part, he adds, is to home in on the right questions.

"Schools can begin by organizing teachers into collaborative teams and have them ask the question: What do we do when students don't learn?" he said. "It will slowly but surely change the culture of the school."

Avoid Learning Community Burnout

By Sarah D. Sparks

Teacher professional learning communities are often launched with great excitement and initiative only to lose steam due to time constraints and lack of direction. Anne Jolly, author of *A Facilitator's Guide to Professional Learning Teams,* offers these tips to help teachers reinvigorate and sustain learning teams:

■ **GET A FIRM HANDLE ON YOUR TEAM'S PURPOSE** and revisit it frequently. Your team needs a clear roadmap and destination if you plan to arrive somewhere.

■ **BUILD IN OPPORTUNITIES FOR SUCCESS.** Set short term, doable benchmarks that your team can achieve. Frequently ask yourselves, "What have we accomplished as a result of this collaborative venture?" Look for ways teachers have changed and students have changed.

■ **KEEP NEGATIVE ENERGY AT BAY.** Gain consensus on meeting rules and be sure one of them reads, "We will be positive during our meeting!" Call attention to that rule at the beginning of each meeting to suppress negativity that can drag the team down.

■ **RELAX AND EXPERIMENT.** Give yourselves permission to try new teaching strategies and be unsuccessful. (Oddly, we often learn much more from our failures than from our successes.) Make "It's OK!" cards for all team members to signify that it's alright not to succeed at first, as long as you keep working.

■ **DEVELOP A CONCRETE PRODUCT** that demonstrates what your team is accomplishing. Create a rubric, matrix, lesson plan, or a video of team members using a particular strategy the team is working on. Share it school-wide.

■ **TAKE A DEEP BREATH AND REFLECT.** At the end of each meeting, ask yourselves, "What did we accomplish with today's meeting?" If team members can't answer that, then rethink what's happening at the meetings. Then decide, "What do we want to accomplish at the next meeting?"

■ **ALWAYS MAKE A DECISION AS A TEAM** before leaving the meeting. Even if the decision is to not use a particular strategy you're considering, you've at least made a decision. If team members leave without making a decision of some sort, the meeting will not seem as valuable.

■ **ROTATE RESPONSIBILITIES TO AVOID MEMBER BURNOUT.** Give team members a chance to experience a variety of roles and perspectives.

INTERVIEW

Team-Oriented Teaching

An educator and author sees collaborative work among teachers as the future of professional development.

By Anthony Rebora

ANNE JOLLY, a former Alabama teacher of the year and author of *A Facilitator's Guide to Professional Learning Teams,* talks about how teacher professional learning communities operate and the impact they have on teachers and schools.

Q: What's the philosophy behind using professional learning teams as a form of teacher professional development?

Really you're just giving teachers the same opportunities that other professionals have to work together on projects and share insights during the workday. Teamwork is the best way to make progress in any occupation, because many minds working on an issue are better than one.

But this kind of collaborative work is especially crucial for teachers. There's such a culture of isolation in schools. Teachers are used to doing their work alone. They work very hard to do the best job they can within their range of knowledge. But their knowledge can be limited by many factors—by their professional opportunities, their access to materials, and the time they have for research, for example. By providing teachers time and space to work together and to go deeper into an area of instruction, you build opportunities for them to learn and grow on the job with one another, to create a synergistic kind of learning.

Ideally, as they work together, they will be able to examine new resources, talk about different teaching techniques, use action-research methods, and take a more reflective approach to instruction.

Q: How are professional learning teams different from regular department or staff meetings?

Professional learning teams go beyond just focusing on procedures. In a typical department meeting the conversation might revolve around things like unit scheduling, classroom activities, or who's going to do the bulletin boards. Professional learning teams typically go a layer deeper than that in that they identify and focus on a specific area of student need. They set a clear focus on delving into a particular instruction area and learning how to improve their practice.

Let me give you an example. Many schools identify reading comprehension as an area of student need. So teachers on professional learning teams will get together and work specifically on the area of reading comprehension for perhaps the entire year, trying to ratchet up their instructional knowledge and expertise in that area.

So it's not just a brush-fire-by-brush-fire approach to a meeting. It's a systematic, reflective, long-term approach that seeks to make lasting changes in instruction and student learning.

Q: How have school administrators and school districts responded to the idea of teacher professional learning teams?

It varies, but districts are becoming more supportive. In fact, professional learning teams are now mandated by many districts. They're being seen as an effective and common-sense strategy. For their part, I think school principals are generally supportive of professional learning teams, but they don't always know how to support them.

How can principals be more supportive? They need to keep the lines of communication open, but not micromanage. For example, they shouldn't necessarily attend the meetings, but they need to know what's happening in them. They need to set up ways for teams to communicate their work and ideas to the school—for example, by arranging e-mail groups, collaborative Web sites, or presentations at faculty

Q: What's the philosophy behind using professional learning teams as a form of teacher professional development?

Really you're just giving teachers the same opportunities that other professionals have

to work together on projects and share insights during the workday. Teamwork is the best way to make progress in any occupation, because many minds working on an issue are better than one.

But this kind of collaborative work is especially crucial for teachers. There's such a culture of isolation in schools. Teachers are used to doing their work alone. They work very hard to do the best job they can within their range of knowledge. But their knowledge can be limited by many factors—by their professional opportunities, their access to materials, and the time they have for research, for example. By providing teachers time and space to work together and to go deeper into an area of instruction, you build opportunities for them to learn and grow on the job with one another, to create a synergistic kind of learning.

Ideally, as they work together, they will be able to examine new resources, talk about different teaching techniques, use action-research methods, and take a more reflective approach to instruction.

Q: How are professional learning teams different from regular department or staff meetings?

Professional learning teams go beyond just focusing on procedures. In a typical department meeting the conversation might revolve around things like unit scheduling, classroom activities, or who's going to do the bulletin boards. Professional learning teams typically go a layer deeper than that in that they identify and focus on a specific area of student need. They set a clear focus on delving into a particular instruction area and learning how to improve their practice.

Let me give you an example. Many schools identify reading comprehension as an area of student need. So teachers on professional learning teams will get together and work specifically on the area of reading comprehension for perhaps the entire year, trying to ratchet up their instructional knowledge and expertise in that area.

So it's not just a brush-fire-by-brush-fire approach to a meeting. It's a systematic, reflective, long-term approach that seeks to make

lasting changes in instruction and student learning.

Q: How have school administrators and school districts responded to the idea of teacher professional learning teams?

It varies, but districts are becoming more supportive. In fact, professional learning teams are now mandated by many districts. They're being seen as an effective and common-sense strategy. For their part, I think school principals are generally supportive of professional learning teams, but they don't always know how to support them.
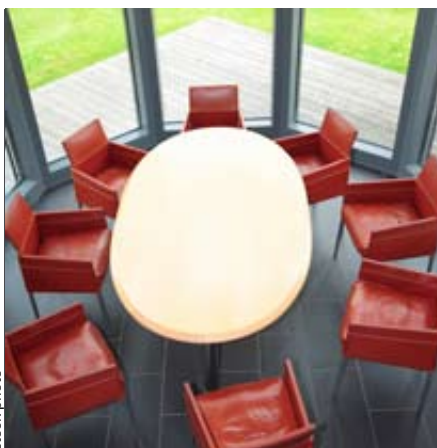
How can principals be more supportive? They need to keep the lines of communication open, but not micromanage. For example, they shouldn't necessarily attend the meetings, but they need to know what's happening in them. They need to set up ways for teams to communicate their work and ideas to the school—for example, by arranging e-mail groups, collaborative Web sites, or presentations at faculty meetings. In other words, principals need to keep the professional learning teams on the front burner and not just look at them as some extracurricular activity that teachers are engaging in. They need to keep the effort highly visible in the school community.

Q: What sort of things do educators need to think about when creating professional learning teams? Are there common mistakes or pitfalls?

The first thing that can hurt a learning team effort is when the administration, primarily the principal, doesn't buy in or doesn't see the need. So if I were a teacher interested in forming a professional learning team, I would begin by touching base with my principal and explaining what it is we want to accomplish. I don't know many principals who would say no, but it's important to get buy-in from the start.

Another important thing is to make sure that the team provides all members the opportunity to grow and have leadership roles—for example, by using rotating facilitators. Within certain parameters, teachers on these teams should be able to determine the processes by which they're going to learn and the particular teaching techniques they're going to adopt. The decisions they make in team meetings should not be dictated to them—although there need to be certain guidelines so that the effort doesn't get off course. The team projects should take place within a structured framework, but still give teachers flexibility.

Finally, you need to believe strongly in what you are doing. Professional learning teams are research-based, and they do make a powerful

istock photo

Teamwork

Professional learning teams have a variety of shapes and structures, according to Jolly, but they tend to share these common characteristics.

- Teams serve as vehicles for teacher professional development and ongoing learning focused on instruction.

- Team goals are determined by student data and needs.

- Teams meet regularly throughout the school year and use a systematic approach to guide their work.

- Team activities revolve around an action-inquiry cycle that engages teachers in questioning, studying, planning, experimenting, reflecting, and assessing.

- Team members rotate roles and share responsibilities equally.

- Teams keep documentation of their work and share this publicly.

SOURCE: Excerpted from *A Facilitator's Guide to Professional Learning Teams*.

About the Expert

During her 16 years as a middle school science teacher in Alabama, Anne Jolly always had the nagging feeling that there was something wrong with the way teachers were expected to do their work. Faced with dramatic changes in student demographics, academic requirements, and information technology, teachers were cocooned in their individual classrooms, where it was difficult to acquire new professional knowledge and all too easy to fall into familiar teaching routines. "I wondered what it would be like to work in an environment that encourages teacher collaboration, support, and personal growth," says Jolly, who was Alabama's Teacher of the Year in 1994. "What would happen if teachers worked collectively to increase our expertise and change our teaching practices?"

That line of questioning led Jolly to undertake an extensive research project on the art of teacher-collaborative work and ultimately to write her book *A Facilitator's Guide to Professional Learning Teams*, published by the SERVE Center at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. Jolly defines professional learning teams as small, hyper-focused groups of educators working together to improve learning for both themselves and students in a particular academic area. She believes that these teams are schools' best bet to break down the traditional cultural of isolation in teaching and to help teachers expand their intellectual horizons and improve their practice.

Jolly is now project director for professional learning teams at SERVE.

difference. But you're going to find it tough going: You're going against the cultural norm and status quo in schools. To keep everyone enthusiastic, you need to have some good selling points, and you should start with some small, doable goals.

Q: How do professional learning teams find time to meet regularly?

This is one reason why you have to have buy-in from the principal. Meeting time during the school day is not usually something teachers can create themselves. They have to work with the principal to find a way to make time.

Some schools have enough teachers' aides that they can rotate teachers off so they can meet at least once a week for an hour or so. (It helps if the aides are also meeting in learning teams, studying the same things teachers are, so that not much ground is lost when they take over a class.) Another way is to bring in volunteers—for example, parent teams—to cover classes, or to have teachers in non-core subjects fill in on a rotating basis for core teachers.

Of course, many schools also have late-start or early-dismissal days where time is devoted to professional development. The trick is to get principals to see the need to allow teachers to use that time for learning teams.

Q: Is an hour a week typical?

An hour a week is about the least amount of time you can meet and still make progress. The ideal would be to meet every day, but that's usually not possible at this point.

Q: How do you respond to educators who say they'd rather work independently, or that meeting with other teachers is just a waste of their time?

You'd have to acknowledge that you understand that sentiment but tell them you feel that not only would they benefit from the learning-team experience, but that others would benefit from their participation—from their own knowledge and input and experience. This is actually a fairly common situation. You just have to push through it. Rick DeFour, who's pretty much the grand guru of professional learning communities, cautions that collaboration by invitation doesn't work, because isolationism is so deeply engrained in schools. There comes a time when you have to say to those who are reluctant, "We understand your feelings, but this is something that we think will make a difference for the kids." Generally you'll see changes in teachers' attitudes as the work progresses and they begin to see the value of working colleagues in a

focused way. I've seen this happen even with some of the most outspoken skeptics.

In your book, you talk about the importance of data to a professional learning team's work? Can you explain what sort of data teams should be looking at? I generally see data as being much more than just student scores. It's really more a matter of looking at what experiences are taking place.

Of course, when a team starts out, in order to identify areas of student need and set some benchmarks, they need to look closely at whatever summative data on students is available—for example, standardized test scores, report cards, portfolios. That can help them set clear goals and gauge a school's strengths and weaknesses. But as their work proceeds, teams should be looking more at what I call formative types of data—basically evidence of whether teaching and learning is changing for the better as a result of the team's work. This might consist of customized classroom assessments, classroom observations, or videotapes of lessons. The process should become a real study of the art of teaching.

Q: How are professional learning teams held accountable? How do schools evaluate the work teams are doing to see if they are adding value?

There are several levels to this. First of all, you want to look at how teachers are reacting—whether their attitudes toward their work or professional development are changing for the better. This is an important but often overlooked measure of success. Then you want to examine what teachers are learning in their team meetings and whether there is carryover to the classroom. As a principal or teacher leader, you can do this by looking at the materials teachers are using, by visiting classrooms, by asking team members to make presentations at faculty meetings, and by looking at meeting logs. You'd be surprised by what you can tell by looking at the logs. Over time, you should see substantial changes in the way the teachers are talking about their work and what's happening in the classroom. It starts to go beyond just "OK, now let's try this" and evolves into something more reflective, where the team is blending experience and research and really dissecting the steps in the teaching and learning process.

And then finally, of course, the biggest area of evaluation would be changes in student performance. You should expect to see these more slowly. It might take a whole year to see real growth. But if teams are really focusing on one area, you're going to see pretty substantial growth toward the end of a year.

Q: Is there evidence that professional learning teams improve student performance?

Yes, there's some scientifically based research data, and quite a lot of literature that chronicles the value of this process for teachers and for students. SERVE Center has done some statistical analyses on student performance in the Edenton-Chowan school system in North Carolina. The student scores in reading there went up dramatically after teachers had been working in learning teams. They began to see increases after a year, and the gains were even greater after the second year.

Another way to document impact is to examine changes in classroom applications and teaching performance. But school districts these days pretty are harassed by a lot of different pressures, and they're trying to implement a lot of initiatives at once. It's hard to put enough focus on any one initiative to monitor and measure impact at the local level, but that's what we try to help districts do.
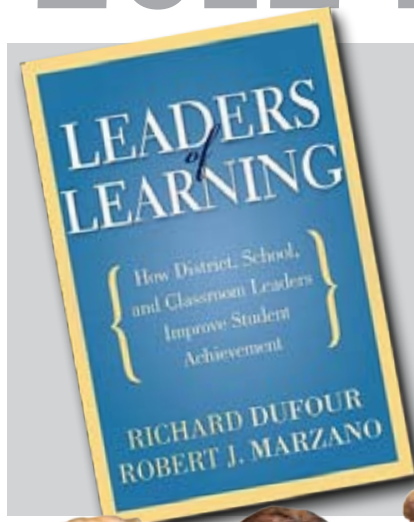
Q: What's your outlook on the future of professional learning teams and teacher professional development in general?

I see this particular approach as being the only practical and viable professional development approach we'll have. We have a lot of data showing that one-shot workshops, if that's all there is, are not very effective. I'm not saying that we don't need workshops. We do. But once the workshop is over, what then? This is where working together to sustain good practices and ideas is going to be very valuable. If it's worth sending teachers to a workshop, then it's worth having teachers get together to figure out how to put what they've learned into practice. Otherwise, if you just leave everybody to their own devices, very little of it is going to be implemented.

We've got to have some way to keep the teaching profession as close as possible to societal needs. And right now society is changing so fast. Breaking through the culture of isolation in schools can help teachers become more connected—to each other, to changes in student needs, to new instructional techniques.

PLC AT WORK™

2012 INSTITUTES

LEADERS OF LEARNING

How District, School, and Classroom Leaders Improve Student Achievement

RICHARD DUFOUR
ROBERT J. MARZANO

Architects of PLC at Work™: Richard DuFour, Rebecca DuFour, and Robert Eaker

June 4–6	**New Orleans, LA**
June 7–9	**St. Louis, MO**
June 13–15	**Las Vegas, NV**
June 20–22	**Denver, CO**
July 10–12	**San Antonio, TX**
July 18–20	**Baltimore, MD**
July 25–27	**Orlando, FL**
August 1–3	**Hartford, CT**
August 6–8	**Lincolnshire, IL**
August 13–15	**Minneapolis, MN**
August 21–23	**Seattle, WA**
September 19–21	**San Diego, CA**

More 2012 dates coming soon. Visit solution-tree.com for details.

a powerful strategy

solution-tree.com   800.733.6786

(re)defining professional development
join us

COMMENTARY

Learning Teams and the Future of Teaching

By Tom Carroll & Hanna Doerr

Learning is no longer preparation for the job, it is the job. In a world in which information expands exponentially, today's students are active participants in an ever-expanding network of learning environments. They must learn to be knowledge navigators, seeking and finding information from multiple sources, evaluating it, making sense of it, and understanding how to collaborate with their peers to turn information into knowledge, and knowledge into action.

What does this mean for teachers? It means that they should be constantly learning with and from accomplished colleagues and experts in the field, modeling for their students the collaborative learning and knowledge construction that is at the core of 21st-century competencies.

Yet according to the most recent "MetLife Survey of the American Teacher (2009)" today's teachers work alone—they spend an average of 93 percent of their time in school working in isolation from their colleagues, and they continue to work alone during their out-of-school hours of preparation and grading. Their day-to-day work is disconnected from the efforts of their colleagues, and their pullout professional development is fragmented and poorly aligned with their students' learning needs.

This fragmentation prevents any substantial education reform from gaining traction, because teachers are not given the support they need to collectively build a coherent body of knowledge and practice to improve student achievement. Today's new teachers are eager to work with their accomplished colleagues, but they find themselves working alone in self-contained classrooms where they are bound to the teaching practices of the past. Faced with a choice between working in the last century or the 21st century, they "vote with their feet": The young people we are counting on to teach for the future are leaving our obsolete schools at an alarming rate.

It is time to change this picture. Today's teachers want to team up to teach for the future. In survey after survey, teachers who are most satisfied with their careers and the contributions they are making to their students' lives are more likely to work in schools with higher levels of professional collaboration.

To expand on these survey findings, the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, with the support of the Pearson Foundation, has conducted an extensive review of research reports and practitioner case studies to document the specific learning-team principles and practices that improve teaching effectiveness and student achievement. Based on our findings, we have concluded that the nation has a pressing need, and an unprecedented opportunity to improve school performance by using learning teams to systematically induct new teachers into a collaborative learning culture—teams that embed continuous professional development into the day-to-day fabric of work in schools that are constantly evolving to meet the needs of 21st-century learners. This calls for a cultural shift in schools, a shift that is gaining momentum across the country.

NCTAF's review identified six learning-team principles and practices that are most effective in improving teaching and student achievement, described in the report "Team Up for 21st Century Teaching and Learning." While there is no magic formula, we found that highly effective learning teams have the following:

Shared Values and Goals. The team members have a common vision of student learning needs and a well-defined understanding of how their collective teaching capabilities can be orchestrated to meet those needs. They clearly identify a learning challenge around which the team can join forces to improve student achievement.

Collective Responsibility. Team members have appropriately differentiated responsibilities based on their experience and knowledge levels. They hold themselves mutually responsible for each other's success, and they are collectively accountable for improving the achievement of every student served by the team.

Authentic Assessment. Team members hold themselves personally and professionally accountable by using assessments that give them real-time feedback on student learning and teaching effectiveness. These assessments are valuable to them—not because they are linked to high-stakes consequences, but because they are essential tools to improve the team's teaching effectiveness, as measured by student learning gains.

Self-Directed Reflection. Highly effective learning teams establish a reflective feedback loop of goal-setting, planning, standards, and assessment that is driven by the learning needs of the students and the corresponding professional-development needs of the teachers.

Stable Settings. Highly effective learning teams do not function within dysfunctional schools, but they can transform low-performing schools into successful learning organizations if they are given dedicated time, space, resources, and leadership for their collaborative work. Even the best teachers in the world can't turn around a low-performing school by working alone.

Strong Leadership Support. Highly effective learning teams are supported by school leaders who build a climate of openness and trust that empowers team members to make decisions on how to improve teaching effectiveness that are directly linked to student needs. This support must be balanced with appropriate, positive pressure to

continuously increase school performance with improvements in teaching effectiveness that are explicitly linked to specific student learning needs.

Transforming American education is the rallying cry heard throughout the country today. The Obama administration has focused the nation's vision for education in 2020 on two basic goals: assuring that every student is college- and career-ready, and closing the achievement gaps for low-income students and children of color.

NCTAF is answering this call by creating "learning studios" for teaching the STEM subjects of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics that are based on the documented effectiveness of these six principles. Similar to architectural-design studios, these STEM Learning Studios enable learning teams composed of digital-age teachers, tech-savvy youths, veteran educators, and skill-based volunteers to develop innovative responses to complex learning challenges. Learning studios improve student achievement, increase teaching effectiveness, and amplify the impact of community resources.

NCTAF developed its first such learning studios in two Maryland school districts, with a grant from the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, in partnership with the Goddard Space Flight Center. We then launched a STEM Learning Studio expansion with the Albuquerque, N.M., public schools and Lockheed Martin/Sandia National Laboratories. Learning studios, we have found, keep veteran teachers engaged and improve novice teachers' effectiveness by teaming them with industry and government professionals. The studios deploy volunteers in inquiry-based learning projects with teachers and students in a way that calls on their professional skills and experience. They work with students on authentic learning challenges, and work with teachers to help them model for their students the collaborative inquiry, knowledge construction, and innovation that are at the heart of 21st-century competencies.

This kind of teaching and learning represents ambitious goals. Making it happen will require changes that go beyond tinkering with today's schools. If all we do is to give today's students a better factory-era school, with stand-alone teachers who continue to deliver monolithic instruction in self-contained classrooms, the future is already over. It is time to team up to teach for the 21st century.

Tom Carroll is the president of the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, in Washington. Hanna Doerr is a program manager at the commission.

COMMENTARY

Five Keys to Effective Teacher Learning Teams

By Ronald Gallimore & Bradley A. Ermeling

The Obama administration's Race to the Top initiative is focusing more attention than ever before on teaching effectiveness, with federal funds tied to strategies that improve student performance. For school administrators, these additional requirements mean unprecedented responsibility for ensuring that teachers provide high-quality instruction that promotes the success of all their students.

One popular response calls for on-the-job learning opportunities known as professional learning communities—sometimes called learning teams—in which teachers collaborate to improve instruction. But there has been limited evidence to show that these initiatives actually work, or how to do them well.

In a five-year study of Title I schools, serving more than 14,000 students in all, our team documented the significant contribution of teacher learning teams that were part of a school improvement model we evaluated. Using a rigorous research design, we found that achievement rose by 41 percent overall, and by 54 percent for Hispanic students, after schools converted routine meetings into teacher learning teams focused on what students were struggling to learn. Demographically similar schools selected at the beginning of the study to serve as "controls" had no comparable achievement gains over the same five years. Schools in both groups were challenged by histories of low achievement, large numbers of English-language learners, and high percentages of students receiving free or reduced-price lunch aid.

This study and subsequent investigations identified five keys for creating effective

> **"** It's not just meeting as a team that makes the difference. Rather, it's how the teams use the time that's set aside to gradually and steadily improve lessons and instruction."

teacher learning teams at the high school and elementary school levels:

■ **Job-alike teams of three to seven teachers who teach the same grade level, course, or subject.** Teams with an instructional and achievement focus plus common teaching responsibilities collaborate more effectively. Unless teams share common teaching challenges, their members drift into broad discussions and make few improvements in the classroom. But when teachers choose a learning problem that their students share and jointly develop a solution, that focus binds and sustains the team. This may explain why reforms that pressure individual teachers to "innovate," but don't support job-alike teams, do not work as well, according to national surveys.

■ **Published protocols that guide—but do not prescribe—the teacher team's improvement efforts.** In addition to guiding the team's work, the protocol creates recurring

opportunities for teachers to contribute their knowledge, creativity, and skills. This is one reason a protocol-guided approach is rated positively by more than two-thirds of the teachers we worked with in our research.

An effective team protocol includes steps familiar to educators, including jointly identifying goals for student learning; finding or developing assessments of student progress toward those goals; adopting promising approaches to address the goals; planning and delivering lessons everyone tries; using classroom performance data to evaluate the commonly planned and delivered lessons; and reflecting on student gains to determine next steps.

▪ **Trained peer facilitators—point people— to guide their colleagues over time**. Because peer facilitators try out in their classrooms the same lessons as everyone else, they are uniquely and credibly positioned to model intellectual curiosity, frame the work as an investigation, explain protocol steps, and encourage the group to stick with a problem until it is solved. Peer facilitators free up coaches and content experts to act as knowledgeable colleagues rather than team leaders. Distributing leadership in this way also frees administrators to circulate and provide support and accountability for multiple teacher teams. As a group, facilitators, site administrators, and instructional coaches function as a leadership team acting together to assist the work of each teacher team. The role of peer facilitator can be shared, and members can rotate from year to year as capacity grows.

▪ **Stable settings dedicated to improving instruction and learning.** Both the teacher teams and the leadership team need stable settings in which to work if they're to improve achievement. Teacher teams need at least three hours each month dedicated to instructional inquiry and improvement, while facilitators need about two hours each month to develop strategies and plan for the ongoing assistance and leadership of teacher teams. Establishing, publishing, and protecting a calendar for these meetings is critical to helping schools become vibrant places of continuous learning for adults as well as students.

▪ **Perseverance until there's progress on key student performance indicators.** Whatever goals the teacher learning teams choose, it's critical that they stick with them until their students make progress on key performance indicators. It might be a grade-level or department concern,

such as understanding unlike fractions or writing coherent paragraphs, or it might be a districtwide or schoolwide focus identified in assessments. Once they see tangible student gains, teachers are less likely to assume "I planned and taught the lesson, but they didn't get it," and more likely to adopt the more-productive assumption that "you haven't taught until they've learned."

A caveat: The five keys are critical, but the larger context of specific schools cannot be ignored, since that also determines the fate of learning teams. Our results indicate that teachers in highly challenged schools can—and do—make a difference in student learning and achievement. But our experiences also suggest that schoolwide factors, such as organizational capacity and stable building leadership that makes instructional goals a priority, are critical contributors to sustaining productive learning teams.

It's not just meeting as a team that makes the difference. Rather, it's how the teams use the time that's set aside to gradually and steadily improve lessons and instruction. Job-alike teams, peer facilitators, protocols, and stable settings create focused opportunities and build teachers' confidence that their efforts are paying off for their students. When that kind of work is sustained and supported, the promise of teacher collaboration is translated into achievement results.

Ronald Gallimore is a distinguished professor emeritus at the University of California, Los Angeles, and a senior research consultant to Pearson Learning Teams. Bradley A. Ermeling is the senior director for Pearson Learning Teams. The learning-teams-evaluation study is available at the American Educational Research Journal, *and the "five keys" study at* The Elementary School Journal.

COMMENTARY

How a Learning Community Helped Me Relearn My Job

By Bill Ferriter

Maybe you'll find this shocking, but here goes:

I openly admit that until I started to work with my professional learning team at Salem Middle School, I hadn't even really looked at the state standards for the subjects that I was teaching. Instead, I taught topics that other teachers in my subject area had been teaching or that were listed in my set of classroom textbooks. Over the course of 11 years, I'd developed a comfortable pattern of instruction based on a strong understanding of what I'd done in previous years and a remarkably weak understanding of the standards set by the state.

And I'm supposedly an accomplished teacher!

The good news is that all this changed for me several years ago when our principal instituted colleague learning teams. While there weren't a lot of requirements set for our teams, our principal did insist on one action described by Richard DuFour in his first book on school learning communities. We had to develop common assessments that would be delivered in each of our classrooms. That simple requirement pushed us to have conversations that we'd never had before.

DuFour believes that teachers teaching the same courses or grade levels should periodically create and use "common formative assessments" to identify students who are having difficulty, to spot strengths and weaknesses in their teaching, and to give feedback on how well their students were learning in comparison to all students.

To begin, we had to wrestle with decisions about what content was essential to teach. As we moved together toward standardizing the implemented curriculum across our hallway (often for the first time), we really had to think about what it was that students were supposed to be learning. That led us to look carefully at the state standards for our subjects in ways we'd never done before.

It was almost amazing (read: embarrassing) to find out that the lessons and units we'd been teaching for so long didn't directly fit the standards expected by our state. We found early on was that the units we'd spent months teaching were only a small part of the state's intended curriculum, while concepts that we breezed over were to be emphasized (and tested).

Ambling through Ancient Greece

Take Ancient Greece and Rome, for example. The only thing more certain than death and taxes is that 6th graders love mythology. There's something about dudes with lightning bolts and rivers of fire that captures their imaginations in a way few subjects can. Another truism is that teachers love any subject that kids love. In years past, my unit on Ancient Greece and Rome had run for almost 10 weeks! We made temples, ran mock debates, practiced Socratic seminars, read myths. Heck, I even threw on a toga once or twice.

It was a great unit that the kids enjoyed. I'm sure they learned tons of essential standards and skills both in language arts and social studies. But spending so much time on Greece and Rome meant we never got to study much of South America before the end of the school year, even though it is a part of our standard course of study. What's more, I'd been overemphasizing the history standards for our social studies' curriculum—of which there are only two—and under-emphasizing the geography standards—of which there are 41!

These "discoveries" about curriculum standards—which many outside school walls wrongly assume are a fundamental part of the fabric of any teacher's preparation or professional experience—came only when we started to develop those common formative assessments our principal required.

Knowing excellence when you see it

For the first time in over a decade, my work

> " Like most educators, we've had little training in how to develop assessments that are tied to state standards and that are appropriate for the skills we are attempting to measure."

with students was focused and efficient. What's more, I was teaching the intended curriculum set out by the state for 6th graders, which is my job after all.

Common formative assessments also pushed our team into meaningful conversations about what student mastery looked like. What did it mean to say, "they learned it"? Strangely enough, that's something teachers may never consider while working in isolation. For the isolated teacher, "mastery" is often defined by the personal standards we establish for our individual classrooms, not by an external set of expectations informed by multiple perspectives.

In every building I've ever worked, there have been variances across classrooms on what mastery looks like. My personal favorite was always the "easy A teacher" that students loved to get because they knew they could do very little work and still make the honor roll. While those students were satisfied with their scores, they were being fooled into believing that they'd mastered essential skills.

And even though I felt strongly that those teachers were failing students as much as they were fooling them, I never started a conversation about what mastery looked like with anyone. That's kind of a taboo subject in schools steeped in isolation. Teachers rarely question the professional judgment of other teachers and take great offense when someone questions them. As a result, the best interest

of kids is often overlooked. How's that for scary?

These days, conversations about what mastery looks like happen all the time on my learning team. And while they are challenging and time-consuming discussions that we don't always look forward to, they're incredibly important. Essentially, we're forced to come up with common definitions of mastery, thereby increasing our own assessment capacity and introducing some measure of standardization across our hallway.

I am a more reliable judge of student performance now than ever before because I've carefully considered what excellence looks like through the multiple lenses of my peers.

We don't have it all figured out

Don't get me wrong. Our team still struggles to develop assessments that we think are reliable measures of student performance. That is a very real—and very disconcerting—capacity gap which we share with many other teachers. And it must be addressed before the full benefits of common assessments and professional learning between peers are realized. Like most educators, we've had little training in how to develop assessments that are tied to state standards and that are appropriate for the skills we are attempting to measure.

We know we're supposed to "deconstruct" standards, but we don't know how, nor do we have the time built into our day to learn. We know that certain skills and behaviors are best measured by performance tasks, but we don't know which ones they are. We know that there are certain processes for identifying trends and drawing conclusions from collected data, but we don't have the tools to sort through the mountains of available data or the training to know where to begin.

In some ways, we are still struggling to wake up from our assessment nightmare.

Even so, the process of developing common formative assessments has already benefited our students immensely, because the instruction we're delivering today is directly connected to state standards. What's more, we continue to have regular conversations as a team about what students should know and be able to do—and about how we will know when those skills have been mastered.

In the end, these ongoing discussions are the value-added product of teacher teams collaborating around common assessments. While it may seem difficult to quantify the impact of conversation, just stop by my room some day, and I'll show you the standards I'm addressing in the lesson that I'm teaching. That's something I couldn't have done five years ago!

Bill Ferriter teaches 6th grade language arts and social studies in Raleigh, North Carolina. He was named a North Carolina Regional Teacher of the Year in 2005-06. Ferriter's popular blog about the teaching life, The Tempered Radical, *is hosted at the* Teacher Leaders Network *Web site. He received his National Board certification in 1997.*

COMMENTARY

From Closets to Community: Our PLC Saga

By Cindi Rigsbee

My initiation into the world of professional learning communities was unusually swift. The staff at my school had to get from zero to functional teams faster than most schools. And although we knew that swimming was the only option, sinking was definitely part of my past experience.

Most of my years in teaching have been spent in "at-risk" middle schools—schools that have Central Office staff visiting nearly every day and morale problems that interfere with instruction. In fact, I once chaired a teacher morale committee at one of these schools. Morale was so bad that the committee members wouldn't even show up for the meetings.

After years of working to improve student learning (and teacher dispositions) in these challenging settings, I was given the opportunity to step over the county line and help open a brand new middle school. In July 2006, our faculty met for the first time for a summer retreat. We were strangers, most of us, a melting pot of teachers from all over the county, and from many neighboring counties, who had the same vision for being part of developing an exemplary school.

I remember feeling awkward when it came time for lunch. No one really knew where to sit, but I grabbed a teacher I had met in the parking lot, and we ate together. It was a strange feeling to realize that after many years, I would be teaching beside people I barely knew. But the world was about to spin in another direction. Just minutes after the tasty dessert, I heard the words "professional learning community" for the first time.

I take that back. I'm sure I'd heard the

> **"** People who had been total strangers only a month before were now inseparable: making plans, discussing instruction, and collecting student learning data."

words before. But so what? Of course we are professionals. Of course we want to learn. And all schools consider themselves communities. But I was about to embark on a PLC journey that would change my thinking about schools and "community."

To make the PLC case to our newly melded staff, our administrators brought in an expert to speak to us—a middle grades teacher who was part of a successful professional learning team. We soon learned we had something in common with him: he'd been a member of a faculty that had recently opened a brand new school not far from us. We sat and listened, wondering if our school could ever display the positive characteristics he described.

Unfortunately, the school year began with our new building unfinished, and we became squatters at a nearby school. Circumstances were difficult. Not one of our teachers had a classroom. The band held class in the host school's instrument closet. The former "shop" became two

classrooms with no doors or instructional boards. Teachers wrote lessons on chart paper.

We soon began gravitating to the media center during our planning periods. It was there, where we sought refuge (and a place to sit), that our professional learning communities were born. People who had been total strangers only a month before were now inseparable: making plans, discussing instruction, and collecting student learning data. By the time we moved into our new building in early November, we were a blended faculty. We had the same mission and goals, but we still needed to define our relationships within our own walls.

Growing a Culture

As we settled into our new home, our administrators pulled together a five-member group of teacher leaders who comprised the instructional team. We worked for several days that year with a regional school leadership institute, participating in sessions like "Building a PLC Culture." We soon realized we had much to learn before we could truly define ourselves as "a collaborative team whose members work interdependently to achieve common goals linked to the purpose of all."

Even so, we have made great strides since those first few months when we didn't have a place to call our own. Content area PLCs are thriving, planning together daily. Students are assessed using common documents every three weeks, and teachers adjust instruction according to those results. Grade level PLCs are meeting, and while they are reminiscent of "middle school team meetings" of my past, there is one major exception: No longer do we sit around a table and discuss student behavior or share "woe is me's." Instead, all our conversations were focused on one result: student achievement.

In addition, our PLCs had a component that most schools would have difficulty implementing. Because 8th graders were "grandfathered" and able to stay at their original middle schools, we opened with only 6th and 7th grades. This situation meant that elective teachers were without students in the middle of the day—the time they would eventually teach 8th grade electives. Our administration saw this as a tremendous opportunity to build PLCs that could cross the border between curricular areas.

That first year, elective teachers participated in ten literacy workshops—professional development that gave them strategies to teach reading and writing through their own content. Then, during the middle-of-the-day time slot, they "buddied" with a core teacher and shared students. Sometimes they were team teachers in the same room; sometimes they pulled students for remediation or enrichment activities. Importantly, the administration allowed times for core and elective teachers to meet in grade level PLCs together. There were times when administrators covered duties for teachers so that all disciplines could meet and plan together.

While we were working quickly with colleagues we barely knew, I believe that our fast pace was helpful in keeping out some of the negative feelings that can carry over from year to year and make a true professional learning community very difficult to build or sustain. Those early days without our own building bonded us in a positive way. Currently, our school is thriving, and I believe our entire staff would agree that a strong relationship among colleagues is one of the most attractive characteristics of our school.

We are also participating in a regional teacher leadership network created by the Center for Teaching Quality and funded by the Wachovia Foundation. We are still relatively new to this work, and the opportunity to share ideas with colleagues in other schools who are further along in the process of forming and utilizing PLCs has been very valuable to us. Most of this dialogue takes place online in a virtual learning community. And while many of the schools involved are within an hour's driving distance, we all know that every school is a time-bound island. The technologies supported by CTQ make it possible to knit these islands of teachers together into a meaningful whole.

For schools that don't experience the "start-up" situation we had, the challenge is to find a way for teachers to build the all-important trust and respect. Each school has its own distinctiveness; Professional learning communities can grow out of that individuality and thrive as they work together for children.

And I have to wonder how much easier our professional lives could have been in my former school if PLCs had been established. Maybe there wouldn't have been a need for a morale committee. Certainly, we would have managed to actually have a meeting!

Cindi Rigsbee is a National Board-certified reading teacher at Gravelly Hill Middle School in Orange County, North Carolina. She was recently selected as North Carolina's State Teacher of the Year for 2008.
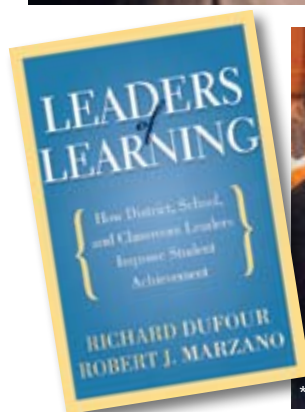
COMMENTARY

When Teachers Are the Experts

How Schools Can Improve Professional Development

By Ross Hunefeld

I think I'm going to miss the coffee and Danish most of all. I won't miss staring at the clock with my politely disengaged colleagues. And I won't miss the guy up front, some former principal or ace teacher, who's going to teach us about some topic that has been deemed important for the entire staff.

These whole-school workshop sessions that many of us have experienced are what I'll call "old PD": professional development in the form of an expert up front and teachers listening passively. If improved teaching practice and better student outcomes are the goal, then these methods of keeping teachers up to date and growing professionally are not working.

What my school is learning, and what current research suggests, is that teachers don't improve by listening to someone tell them how to do something newer or better in their classrooms. They learn by working together to address problems they themselves identify in their schools and classrooms. This type of staff development goes by many names, but I'll use the term "collaborative PD." The problems with old PD are so many, and the benefits of collaborative PD so great, that the days are surely numbered for the former. Yes, old-style professional development is doomed.

But, some will say, if we've been doing it for so long, what can be wrong with bringing in experts to share their knowledge with teachers? One major issue is the variation in teachers' experience and ability levels. Any group presentation runs the risk of being too advanced for some and too basic for others. Teachers also have different interests and needs, so the topic of the day may lack relevance for many in the room.

Given this, is it any wonder that we tend to see terrible rates of carry-over from presentation to classroom practice? Studies show that techniques taught in old-style professional-development workshops result in extremely poor classroom implementation. On top of this, the cost of hiring experts to provide such programming is high. In today's economy, no one has extra money to throw into ineffective training events.

The truth is, these expenditures are unnecessary. A staff of hardworking teachers with access to basic technology could learn much more together than they would under the tutelage of an imported expert. Rather than hiring external presenters, schools can see much better results by putting the responsibility for, and the control of, professional growth in the hands of their own teachers.

There are few problems teachers can't solve, and few techniques they can't master, given adequate time and resources. Collaboration allows them to share the expertise within a school, and gives veteran teachers the opportunity to take on leadership roles. Teachers are also able to work together to learn about areas in which the school has no existing expertise.

Professional learning in this context becomes much more authentic, as teacher-learners choose their own topics to emphasize and

> ❝ As teachers learned from each other, student learning also improved.❞

proceed at a pace that is appropriate to them and to their students' needs. Experimentation with new teaching methods happens in a classroom-as-laboratory setting, so the implementation is virtually automatic.

Technological improvements in communication and the transfer of information have made professional learning communities like this highly feasible. Teachers have much more access to information today than even a few years ago. Through the Internet, they can pull up full texts of scholarly and more-general articles on education, as well as view video libraries of excellent teaching. They are also able to share and read the opinions of other educators on countless edu-blogs. And they can expand their learning through online presentations and webinars. Such resources are readily available, free or for a small fee.

At my Chicago high school, Noble Street College Prep, we gave up doing old PD and organized professional learning communities, what many call PLCs, instead. These are groupings in which teachers have the chance to work collaboratively with members of their departments.

Each PLC began by looking at student test data from the previous year, to set a clear goal for student achievement. Then, to meet the goal, each PLC followed an action-research model involving new learning, choosing a strategy to meet the goal, experimenting with the new strategy, and checking progress against the goal.

Math teachers, for example, worked together to improve the level of questioning in their classes. English teachers worked on vertical alignment of their planning. And science and elective teachers began implementing reading strategies in their classes. Reading teachers worked on pre-, during-, and post-reading strategies to better reach their students.

At the end of each semester, we held a "share fair" at which teachers shared with one another what they had learned. The result was soon apparent: As teachers learned from each other, student learning also improved. This collaborative approach is one of the reasons our students' test scores have reached their highest point in the school's 10-year history.

Our system is by no means perfect, and implementation has not been easy. We had initial missteps in determining how much structure to provide, we spent too little time on team-building and establishing group norms, we struggled to find time in the workday for meetings, and we had difficulty establishing the best ways to measure progress. Still, the obstacles highlight another of the approach's benefits: With good teacher feedback, we can continually adjust and improve our system. And we believe a flexible, collaborative approach to professional development, while not easy, is one that can be implemented at any school.

A widespread shift to collaborative PD, however, would require some changes in the education world. A first one would encompass education consultants and academics, who play a major role of discovering the best practices

we hope our teachers will implement. These experts are certainly important, but in the new plan they would have to change how they presented their material. Increasingly, experts would respond over long distances, in individualized ways, to targeted groups of teachers.

Rather than having a reading expert address an entire school staff, for instance, groups of teachers working on content-area reading strategies in various schools around the country could interact with and learn from a university-based expert via conference call, webinar, e-mail, or video.

Second, schools of education would need to include some components of collaborative "action research" in their undergraduate programs, producing students ready to direct their own continuing professional development. Independent research and study is a common component in undergraduate work in science and engineering. Our teachers need to be as adept as our scientists at working in teams to uncover current knowledge in their field and pushing themselves to new learning.

Finally, schools must place an emphasis on hiring staff members who are willing to collaborate and who wish to constantly improve their practice. A new teacher willing to work and learn with colleagues will quickly surpass a more experienced colleague who is not interested in collaborating. Principals should take this into account as they look for new members to add to their teams.

With these changes, and a continued call from researchers for more collaboration, it will not be long before old PD practices fade away and collaborative PD is the norm. And schools will reap the benefits: Students will have more creative and engaged teachers; budgets will balance, with professional-development funds used on resources that yield greater returns; and experts will expand the use of technology to reach teachers more efficiently and directly.

My only hope is that somehow, even in this new world of teacher growth, we can hold on to the best parts of the old way: free coffee and Danish.

Ross Hunefeld is the dean of instruction at Noble Street College Prep, a campus of Noble Street Charter School, in Chicago.

Resources on Professional Learning Communities:

NOW FEATURING INTERACTIVE HYPERLINKS.
Just click and go.

A Facilitator's Guide to Professional Learning Teams Creating On-the-Job Opportunities for Teachers to Learn and Grow
http://www.eric.ed.gov/ERICWebPortal/detail?accno=ED485208
By Anne Jolly
SERVE Center at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, 2004

Learning Forward
http://www.learningforward.org

The MetLife Survey of the American Teacher: Collaborating for Student Success (2009)
http://www.eric.ed.gov/ERICWebPortal/detail?accno=ED509650
The MetLife Foundation, April 2010

Moving the Learning of Teaching Closer to Practice: Teacher Education Implications of School Based Inquiry Teams
http://www.jstor.org/pss/10.1086/597001
By Ronald Gallimore, Bradley Ermeling, William Saunders, and Claude Goldenberg
Elementary School Journal, Vol. 109, No. 5, May 2009

Professional Learning Teams
http://www.serve.org/professional-learning-teams.aspx
SERVE Center at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro

Team Up for 21st Century Teaching and Learning: What Research and Practice Reveal about Professional Learning
http://www.nctaf.org/TeamUp.htm
By Tom Carroll, Kathleen Fulton, and Hanna Doerr
National Council on Teaching and America's Future (NCTAF), June 2010

EDUCATION WEEK
SP☉TLIGHT

Get the information and perspective you need on the education issues you care about most with Education Week Spotlights

The Achievement Gap • Algebra • **Assessment** • Autism • Bullying • Charter School Leadership • Classroom Management • Common Standards • Differentiated Instruction • Dropout Prevention • E-Learning • ELL Assessment and Teaching • **ELLs in the Classroom** • Flu and Schools • Getting The Most From Your IT Budget • Gifted Education • Homework • Inclusion and Assistive Technology • Math Instruction • **Middle and High School Literacy** • Motivation • No Child Left Behind • Pay for Performance • **Principals** • Parental Involvement • Race to the Top • **Reading Instruction** • Reinventing Professional Development • Response to Intervention • School Uniforms and Dress Codes • STEM in Schools • **Teacher Evaluation** • Teacher Tips for the New Year • Technology in the Classroom • Tips for New Teachers