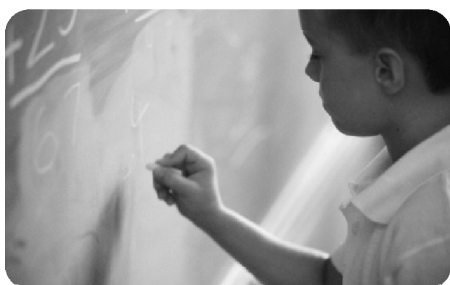


## Unleashing the Potential of Professional Learning Communities

### EdgeNotes™



Few school reform trends are more prominent today than the emphasis on so-called Professional Learning Communities (PLC). The logic is clear-cut: if K-12 educators are to thrive in an era of standards-based accountability, they must engage in the kind of ongoing, job-embedded collaborative learning commonplace in other professions.

Of course teacher collaboration is hardly a new concept; it's been occurring in one form or another for decades. What distinguishes the current PLC approach is its single-minded focus on raising student achievement. Though one might assume this has always been the case, teacher collaboration has historically been relied upon for everything from building camaraderie to reflecting on the challenges of the classroom to sharing teaching materials to planning field trips. From this perspective it is not surprising that researchers have long found the relationship between teacher collaboration and student achievement to be tenuous at best.

The question is what will it take to ensure that PLCs become the engine of K-12 improvement that many envision them to be? At a minimum, successful PLCs require: a) clarity of purpose, b) a truly collaborative mindset, c) appropriate analytic processes and skills, d) timely and actionable information, and e) highly effective instructional leadership.

#### Clarity of Purpose

For professional learning communities to have a significant impact on student achievement, it must be clear at the outset to all involved that this is in fact the unequivocal goal.

While traditional benefits associated with collaboration (e.g., breaking down isolation, supporting common planning, etc.) may be worthwhile, PLCs must be seen as the means to the end, rather than the end itself, if they are ultimately to succeed in increasing achievement. It must be further understood that the most expeditious way to improve learning is by improving teaching; i.e., by knowing precisely which pedagogical strategy is most effective in which context, and precisely how that strategy is adjusted over time. Because practitioners in all fields tend to be creatures of habit, changing well established practices, even those that evidence suggest are no longer effective, can be extremely difficult without an active commitment to do so. Success in a standards-based environment requires a continuous cycle of improvement on the part of K-12 educators; and supporting that cycle is the mission of the effective PLC.

#### Collaborative Mindset

Once consensus regarding the explicit purpose of the PLC is established, fulfilling that goal requires a more open and substantively collaborative mindset than is typical in K-12 schools today. For while teachers have become generally more collaborative in recent years, traditional norms of professional privacy still prevail in many schools, contributing to what researchers characterize as "superficial" or "contrived" forms of collaboration. Rather than a loose association of private practitioners, PLCs must be seen as a well integrated team focused on a common goal. Teachers participating in successful PLCs share a commitment to ongoing professional inquiry and to contributing to an ever-growing, collectively-held body of

knowledge. They also hold a sincere belief that one can always improve one's practice and a willingness to share with colleagues the details and thinking behind one's practice.

### **Analytic Processes**

Successfully unpacking the connection between teaching and learning for the purpose of adjusting instruction is no trivial endeavor. In addition to having the right mindset, it requires a host of analytic skills and a more precise technical vocabulary than is evident in most schools. It also requires a well defined, inquiry-based process that includes asking the right questions, collecting and effectively analyzing the right evidence, drawing appropriate conclusions, and then, most importantly, identifying and implementing effective adjustments to practice.

### **Timely Information**

Along with the right skills and dispositions, effectively implementing such analytic processes requires access to a variety of key information, including detailed achievement objectives; unpacked curriculum standards; pacing guides; high quality teaching materials; research based instructional methods; and a variety of valid and reliable student achievement data. There is nothing more frustrating to PLC efforts than not having the right information, in the right form, at precisely the time that it is needed.

### **Instructional Leadership**

Clarifying the purpose of the PLC, developing a sufficiently collaborative mindset, establishing and refining the correct analytic processes, and ensuring access to relevant information in a timely fashion, are all essential requirements of high functioning PLCs.

But none of these characteristics will prevail, especially within the hectic reality of life in K-12, without keen instructional leadership skills on the part of school administrators and teacher leaders. Expecting teachers to collaborate and operate in a professional capacity is unreasonable when the leadership demands are not aligned or reinforcing good inquiry and practice. If the focus from leadership is on instructional issues and dialogue about effective teaching, then the focus of discussion during PLCs and other collaborative meeting times will follow.

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Implemented correctly, professional learning communities have great potential for supporting dramatic improvements in teaching and learning. Absent the conditions described above, PLCs run the risk of becoming yet one more reform fad that fails to fulfill its promise.

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