

Definition

Educators have recognized the concept of *professional learning communities* (PLC) for some time. The concept has survived in part because of its flexibility—learning communities can exist in many forms, for many purposes, and for varying lengths of time. While the concept’s flexibility has benefits when creating a learning community, the lack of precision makes it difficult to engage in productive discussion. For the purposes of this NECC Roundtable, we offer a definition of PLCs focused on their primary desired outcome—improved student achievement:

a group of educators committed to coming together to build their professional knowledge and skills with the near term goal of improving teaching practice to contribute to the ultimate goal of improving student learning.

A PLC requires participants to commit to learning together (community) about the intricate relationship between teaching and learning. A PLC works toward learning to improve each member’s knowledge, skill and practice in order to achieve the collective goal of the profession, improving student learning.

Educators can organize themselves into PLCs along many dimensions of their work: grade-level communities; cross grade-level interdisciplinary teams; subject area groups; house/ pod/ cluster teams; communities that involve representatives across an entire building, across several buildings serving similar populations; teams with K-12 representation; and even cross-district regional learning teams. In whatever organization, learning communities have to address at least four questions:

- What do we want students to know and be able to do?
- How will we know that students have learned?
- What will we do for students who have yet to demonstrate they have learned?
- What will we do for students who are more advanced in their learning?

Of course, learning communities require essential supports to emerge, develop, and sustain their work. Leadership to promote a common vision and to facilitate the provision of resources (time, training in collaborative group processes) is the foundation on which a learning community is built. Members’ commitment to the process of inquiry and analysis is the heart of the learning community. With these two essential supports, learning communities can be a vehicle to change teaching and improve learning.

Rationale

The term professional learning community first emerged among researchers as early as the 1960s to describe an alternative to the isolation typical of the teaching profession in the U.S. Both qualitative and quantitative research has supported the idea that PLCs can promote a change in the professional culture of a school by fostering collaboration, focusing on student learning, encouraging teacher authority, and continuing teacher learning. There is also evidence that participation in PLCs can contribute to changes in instructional practice. Preliminary research shows that such changes, in turn, can lead to improved student learning and achievement; although this is an area that requires further rigorous research. While working collaboratively is an effective process or strategy for improving the professional culture, it is not the final goal. The ultimate goal remains enhanced student achievement.

Research

An extensive search of websites and organizations that were at the forefront of work with school-based learning communities yielded 55 books, papers, and articles that included descriptions of efforts to connect learning communities with teaching practice and/or student achievement. When the researchers limited the review to published articles or book chapters that included *data* about the impact of school-based PLCs on teaching practice and/or student learning, only ten empirical studies remained. Despite the small pool of evidence, the authors summarize their findings by declaring “studies that have been done clearly demonstrate that a learning community model can have positive impact on both teachers and students (Vescio et al., 2005, p.88).

- Our most recent citation is - *A review of research on the impact of professional learning communities on teaching practice and student learning* by Vescio, Ross and Adams (2005).
- *Successful School Restructuring: A Report to the Public and Educators*, by Newmann and Wehlage, synthesized five years of research conducted by the Center on Organization and Restructuring of Schools (CORS). Beginning in 1990, the Center analyzed data from several sources, including *The School Restructuring Study* (SRS), an examination of 24 significantly restructured elementary, middle, and high schools in 16 states and 22 districts with an average enrollment of 700 students. The Center found that organizational capacity was enhanced when schools were structured into professional communities where teachers shared a common purpose, engaged in collaborative activity to achieve this purpose, and took collaborative responsibility for student learning.
- *Does Professional Community Affect the Classroom? Teachers' Work and Student Experiences in Restructuring Schools* was a report on a 1995 study by Karen Louis and Helen Marks of 24 significantly

restructured public schools. Louis and Marks found that the organization of teachers' work in ways that promote professional community had significant effects on the organization of classrooms for learning and on students' academic performance.

- *The Bay Area School Reform Collaborative, Summary Report (2002)* described attempts by the Bay Area School Reform Collaborative (BASRC) to change school culture, enhance educational quality for students, and close the achievement gap. BASRC provided the Cycle of Inquiry as a tool for schools to examine data and build capacity to analyze, reflect, and act on the basis of evidence. Phase One of the initiative, which ran from 1996 through 2001, concluded that schools whose teachers worked together "and were most advanced in using evidence about student outcomes to evaluate and change their practice showed the greatest SAT-9 gains." It was also noted that the schools made progress on closing between-school, but not within-school achievement gaps (BASRC, Summary Report, 2002, p.12).
- Kristine Hipp and Jane Huffman developed the Professional Learning Community Organizer (PLCO) as a tool for school personnel and administrator preparation instructors and students to enter dialogue about developing PLCs. Based on the work of Shirley Hord in defining PLCs and Michael Fullan's phases of the change process in staff development, the tool not only included the school administrator and teacher interactions but also external relationships and support. Hipp and Huggman found, and described in their report *Professional Learning Communities: Assessment—Development—Effects*, "that the complex interaction of these elements in many schools, and eventually in all situations, contributes to student learning and school improvement." This finding has implications for states and districts working with schools in need of improvement that are considering establishing PLCs (Hipp and Huffman, 2003, p.8).

In preparing this brief it has become obvious that additional research will contribute to the success of learning communities in a diverse range of settings. The research should be both quantitative and qualitative, and include a more extensive library of detailed case studies documenting changes in teacher practices and student achievement over time as schools invest in professional learning communities.

Case Studies

School: Irving Elementary School, Derby, CT (*All Things PLC*)

Irving Elementary School is a Title 1 school that failed to make AYP in the 2005-6 school year. Of the 466 students, 55% are eligible for free and reduced-price meals; 17% are limited English proficient; 9% are special ed; and 48% are Black, Hispanic, or Asian/Pacific Island. Irving has a high transience rate, with about 17% of the student population new each year. A significant turn-around resulted in the 2006-7 school year, the 3rd year of their professional learning community initiative. The school not only made AYP, but also outperformed all the

eight other schools in the Connecticut demographic reference group (DRG) in reading and writing on the grades 3 and 6 Connecticut Mastery Tests and ranked ahead of five other schools in the DRG in math. “This is a district that had no shared time or professional development for many years before the current superintendent arrived in 2005. The teachers from the same grade level never met; the teachers from the two elementary schools did not meet. It was a system of schools, not a school system. ... But once teachers understood the power of teams and the assistance they could get by sharing with each other and working together, they were enthusiastic and eager to do more.” (“All Things PLC,” n.d.)

Districts: Cincinnati and Philadelphia (*Developing Communities of Instructional Practice: Lessons from Cincinnati and Philadelphia*)

The Cincinnati Public Schools (CPS) is a medium-sized urban district of 79 schools and just under 50,000 students. About 60% of the students receive free or reduced-price lunch. The School District of Philadelphia serves 215,000 students in 257 schools. Most students live in poverty and 80% receive free or reduced-price lunch.

Both districts established learning communities to improve the teaching and learning conditions, to strengthen relations between teachers and students, and to be the primary vehicle for improving instruction. Cincinnati’s communities were teacher-based; Philadelphia’s were student- and teacher-based. In both cities, the reforms had a positive influence on school cultures and relationships among teachers. There were measurable improvements in student learning in both cities, but only when efforts focused on changing instructional practices as well as the communal culture. Although these two school districts serve many more than are found in New England districts, the lessons learned and information gained are valuable reading for a district of any size (Supovitz, J. A. & Christman, J. B., 2003).

State: Georgia (*Resources, Professional Learning Services Unit*)

Georgia’s toolkit on professional learning standards contains an overview emphasizing the link between professional learning and quality teaching, an implementation guide, and assessment tools. Adopted from the NSDC standards for professional learning, the *District-based Professional Learning that Improves Student Achievement* has, as its first context standard, an emphasis on learning communities. A related PowerPoint presentation was created to disseminate the policy and accompanying rules. These and other documents may be useful to any state examining how to build guidance and support for their districts in professional learning. They appear on the Professional Learning Services Unit page of the Georgia Department of Education website, http://www.doe.k12.ga.us/tss_school_prolearning.aspx. Look under “Resources” on the right.

References

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- Other (GA) resources for Professional Learning: http://www.doe.k12.ga.us/tss_school_prolearning.aspx
- Georgia State Board Rules Update and Professional Standards (2003): http://www.doe.k12.ga.us/DMGetDocument.aspx/pl_standards.ppt?p=4BE1EECF99CD364EA5554055463F1FBB77B0B70FECF5942E12E123FE4810FFF5F253235D64DC6CBA66CE3D618E698FF5&Type=D
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- Vescio V., Ross, D., & Adams A. (2008). A review of research on the impact of professional learning communities on teaching practice and student learning. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 24, 80–91.

Resources

STARTING POINTS—What Is a PLC? (theoretical framework, definitions, focus questions)

DuFour, R., Eaker, R., & DuFour, R. (Eds.). (2005) *On common ground: The power of professional learning communities*. Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree. ISBN: 1-932127-42-9.

A collection of articles and essays by the editors and other well-known writers (M. Schmoker, D. Reeves, R. Stiggins, J. Saphier, R. Barth, D. Sparks, L. Lezotte, B. Eason-Watkins, and M. Fullan) on core characteristics of professional learning communities and their application in a variety of settings. A comprehensive starting point resource.

Hord, Shirley. (1997) *Professional Learning Communities: Communities of Continuous Inquiry and Improvement*. Available online at <http://www.sedl.org/pubs/change34/>

Dr. Hord explains how communities of educators inquiring into the intricate connection between teaching practice and student learning can lead to improved achievement for all students.

NEXT STEPS—How To establish, develop, sustain a PLC

All Things PLC (<http://www.allthingsplc.info/>)

This website contains a large collection of tools and articles helpful to those implementing PLCs in their settings. Caution: the “evidence of effectiveness” section of this site does not represent rigorous research, but instead gathers anecdotal self-reports of PLC practices by each school. There is insufficient information to infer the specific impact of PLCs on school performance.

DuFour, R, DuFour, R, Eaker, R., & Many, T. 2006. *Learning by doing: A handbook for professional learning communities at work*. Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree.

DuFour, R. (2003). Building a Professional Learning Community: The Superintendent’s role. *The School Administrator*. Available online at <http://www.aasa.org/publications/saarticledetail.cfm?ItemNumber=2909&snItemNumber=950&tnItemNumber=1995>

Hord, S., & Sommers, W. (Eds.). (2008). *Leading professional learning communities, voices from research and practice*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

The essential need for leadership—at all levels of school organization—to help professional learning communities realize their promise of improved student achievement.

McLaughlin, M., & J. Talbert. (2006). *Building School-Based Teacher Learning Communities*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press. ISBN-13: 978-0-8077-4679-0.

Schmoker, M. (2006). *Results Now: How we can achieve unprecedented improvements in teaching and learning?* Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Chapter 8: Professional Learning Communities: The Surest, Fastest Path to Instructional Improvement, pp. 105 – 123.

Chapter 9: Leadership in the Professional Learning Community, pp. 124 – 149.

Chapter 10: Scaling Up: Central Office and State Level Leadership in the Learning Community, pp. 150 – 162.

CHALLENGES – Encouraging commitment, scaling up, finding time

DuFour, R. (2002). Bring the whole staff on board. *Journal of Staff Development (NSDC) 23(3)*, 76-77. Available online at <http://www.nsd.org/library/publications/jsd/dufour233.cfm>

McLaughlin, M. & Talbert, J. (2001). *Professional communities and the work of high school teaching*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Johnston, J., Knight, M., & L. Miller. (2007). Finding time for teams. *Journal of Staff Development 28(2)*, pp. 14-17. Available online at <http://www.nsd.org/publications/issueDetails.cfm?issueID=196>

One of several in this issue of the *Journal of Staff Development*, the publication of the National Staff Development Council, this article addresses the issue of time for collaborative team meetings. Other articles from the volume are available at website.