

A New Way of Thinking: Schools as Professional Learning Communities

There is some good news about public education! We know more than we've ever known about successful school improvement. In fact, rarely in American history has there been such wide-spread agreement among researchers and practitioners alike regarding how to significantly improve schools. Increasingly, educators across North America are working to re-culture schools into high-performing professional learning communities.

What Are Professional Learning Communities?

At the most basic level, a professional learning community is a concept — a way of thinking about schooling — whether it is at the district, school, team or classroom level — preferably at every level. While schools that function as professional learning communities do not look exactly alike, they do exhibit certain common characteristics. Dufour, Eaker and Many (2006) describe these schools as having the following components deeply embedded in their day-to-day culture.

A Focus on Learning

Schools that function as professional learning communities operate on the assumption that the fundamental purpose of schools is to ensure high levels of learning for all students. When a school adopts learning for all students as its core mission — the very reason it exists — virtually every aspect of the school is affected, both structurally and culturally. In a school that functions as a professional learning community, the emphasis is on embedding the learning mission into the day-to-day work of the entire school. This is done by focusing intensely on four fundamental questions.

- If we believe the fundamental purpose of schools is learning, just what is it we expect all students to learn?
- If we believe the fundamental purpose of schools is learning and we are clear about what it is we expect students to learn, how will we know if they have learned it?
- If we believe the fundamental purpose of schools is learning and we are clear about what it is we expect them to learn and we have a system in place to monitor the learning of each student, how will we, as a school, respond when students experience difficulty with their learning?
- If we believe the fundamental purpose of schools is learning, and we are clear about what we expect students to learn, and we have a system in place to monitor the learning of each student, how will the school extend and enrich the learning of students when they learn the essential outcomes?

Ensuring high levels of learning for all students does create pressure on everyone in every role, but in a professional learning community there is the recognition that this is our job — what we signed on to do!

High Performing Collaborative Teams

A professional learning community can best be described as a collaborative culture; a culture in which collaborative teams work to ensure all their students learn. Importantly, professional learning communities go beyond merely “inviting” or “encouraging” teachers to collaborate. They embed a collaborative culture within the day-to-day life of schools by organizing teachers into collaborative teams.

Most importantly, professional learning communities focus on what the teams do. For example, teams are expected to clarify essential outcomes; develop and utilize the results of common, formative assessments; collaboratively analyze student learning (particularly the results of formative common assessments); and reflect on their instructional practices in order to improve the learning levels of their students.

Collective Inquiry: Seeking Out Best Practice

There are major differences between collaboration in traditional schools and the work of collaborative teams in a professional learning community. Teachers in traditional schools collaborate largely by “averaging opinions.” Collaborative teams in a professional learning community always approach problems or issues by first “seeking shared knowledge” — studying the “best that is known” about the particular topic being addressed. In this respect, teams are merely mirroring the behavior of other professionals where the expectation is that behavior should reflect the latest and best knowledge base at any given time.

How do teams seek out and find “best practice?” Most often, best practices are found within the collaborative team itself. Best practice may be found on another team or at another school. Best practices are often found in journals, professional organizations or on the internet. In a professional learning community teams of teachers become “students” of best practice.

A Culture of Experimentation and Continuous Improvement

In a professional learning community it is not enough to merely learn about “best practices.” There is an emphasis of action, on doing — closing the gap between what is known about best practice and what faculty and staff actually do day in and day out. Ultimately, a professional learning community is a culture of experimentation — of “doing.” By constantly seeking new and better ways of doing things, by trying them out and collaboratively analyzing the effectiveness of their efforts, the staff of a professional learning community moves beyond the status quo to create a culture of continuous improvement.

A Focus on Results

Often, the first question that is asked in traditional schools when a new initiative or idea is undertaken is, “How do you like it?” Obviously, feelings are important and should be solicited, but in a professional learning community the primary focus is on results — “How has this effort affected student learning?”

In a professional learning community teams of teachers are continually analyzing student learning. They reflect on the effectiveness of their own professional practice. They seek to gain deeper understanding regarding ways to improve their effectiveness. Most important, they set meaningful improvement goals. In fact, the key to understanding the power of professional learning communities is to understand the power of collaborative teams taking collective responsibility for results.

A New Way of Thinking About Principals

To effectively lead schools in new ways, principals must passionately focus on the right things. Principals of professional learning communities are expected to make a seismic shift from being instructional leaders to becoming learning leaders. This role is fulfilled, primarily, by asking the right questions, spending time on the things that will have the greatest impact on student learning and enhancing the effectiveness of collaborative teams.

The Principal's Role in Enhancing the Effectiveness of Collaborative Teams

The importance of principals continually working to enhance the effectiveness of collaborative teams is based on a number of important assumptions. Most basic is the assumption that how well teams perform depends, to a great degree, on the quality of leadership — both of the principal and within teams. If the leadership capacity of district leaders and principals is a critical correlate of effective schools, it only follows, then, that the leadership behavior of team leaders is crucial also. In more traditional schools, department chairs or team leaders are seen as having rather modest responsibilities and the position is usually filled with someone who is “willing to do it” or in some cases the position rotates from one person to another regardless of performance. Rarely, is the role of chair or team leader discussed, much less defined. In a professional learning community position descriptions are collaboratively developed and clearly defined.

Equally important is the assumption that the relationship between team leaders and principals must also be clearly defined. Team leaders should be viewed by principals as the key “link” between administration and faculty. Principals are expected to use team leaders as their “learning leadership team” — just as the “principal learning team” is viewed by the district leadership as the district-wide “learning leadership team.”

Perhaps most important, is the assumption that the work of the “principal learning teams” at the district level should precede and mirror the work of the “learning leadership” teams in each school and that this work should focus explicitly on the work that is expected of individual collaborative teams. Practicing and rehearsing the work with principals as a group, followed by principals and team leaders practicing and rehearsing prior to asking teacher teams to engage in the work, increases the likelihood of success and greatly enhances the quality of the work of individual teams.

As if We Really Meant It

Ultimately, to become a professional learning community, we must “do the work” as though we really mean it — as though we want schools, classrooms and lessons to be good enough for our own child! There are no substitutes for deep understanding, commitment, hard work, passion and persistence. Re-culturing schools to function as professional learning communities is a difficult, complex and incremental journey. However, the goal of achieving higher levels of learning for all students is inherently worthwhile. If we don't start now, when will we? And, if we don't do it, who will?

Reference

DuFour, R., DuFour, R., Eaker, R., & Many, T. (2006). Learning by doing. Bloomington, IN: Solution-Tree.