

# Team Strategies for School Improvement:

## The Ongoing Development of the Professional Learning Community

By Youness Elbousty and Kirstin Bratt

### *Urban High School Implements Teams*

The examination of a large, urban, East Coast high school provides an enlightening chapter in the implementation and validation of a professional learning community (PLC) as a strategy for school improvement. The teachers of this East Coast school were accustomed to working in isolation, and the students demonstrated numerous areas of academic deficiency. Thus, teachers garnered the support of some administrators to employ the principles of professional learning communities to change the culture of the school and to address several issues that contributed to the failure of the school. The PLC initiative called for the implementation of new strategies and processes beginning with collaborative teamwork. Teachers discussed teams

as a strategy for school improvement, and the school-wide conversation then migrated to smaller niches, such as department meetings.

The PLC goals for this urban school were very specific: first, encourage collaboration, and second, ensure student success. To garner school-wide support, two important steps were taken: the schedule was adjusted to provide a common hour dedicated to collaboration, and resources were made available to support the professional learning community team initiative. With these supportive conditions in place instructional leaders and teachers used the common planning hour for calibrating assessments, discussing curricular decisions, and developing timely plans for

failing students. They collected, compared, and disaggregated student data to improve their understanding of why students failed and how they might ensure student success. To improve teaching skills, they visited one another's classrooms and acted as peer observers in order to learn new techniques and to critique each other.

In many schools where PLC work is introduced, as was the case at this high school, teachers initially state their willingness to participate in a professional learning community team, but the reality is often that a great deal of internal resistance disrupts the creation of these collaborative efforts. McLaughlin and Talbert (2001) argue that the ethos of teaching must change from a conservative, individualist perspective to a focus on innovation and collaboration. Yet, despite educator ambivalence about the benefits of collaboration, this case study argues that the formation of the learning community and the collective efforts of teachers are essential to the success of public school students.

In the case of the East Coast high school, a survey was administered to assess progress during the second month of the PLC's second year. Survey questions, both multiple-choice and essay, elicited a wide range of responses about teacher attitudes toward collaboration and other tenets of the PLC. The majority of the teachers admitted having had positive team experiences. One question read: "Do you think that collaboration strengthens your department?" In reply, all of the teachers marked positive responses (ranging from "absolutely" to "very much" to "somewhat"). When asked about the drawbacks of collaboration, four teachers responded that there were no drawbacks. However, two of the teachers responded by identifying problems, one noting that collaboration wasted time and created more work.



### *Perceived Benefits of the Professional Learning Community*

Among the benefits of collaboration, the teachers stated that they had gained insights into curriculum development, classroom management, motivation, and learning disabilities. They declared strong group efficacy, explaining that team members had created and fostered empathy, stress relief, and complementary strengths for one another. They also noted that by working together, team members had solved problems collectively, saved time and energy, and benefited from constructive criticism. The teachers also described the acquisition of new skills and the production of new knowledge.

With regard to collaboration, one teacher explained that when colleagues divided the work, for example by sharing lesson plans, they had saved time. However, other teachers, who marked that collaboration was not useful or was a waste of time, indicated that they preferred to work alone. One teacher wrote, "I try to explain to them how things should be done, but they do it their own way. I'd rather just work by myself and get things done. Some of my colleagues are chatty and unfocused." Other teachers commented on the lack of equity in collaborative work, noting that they had been obliged to perform tasks that properly belonged to other teachers. One teacher stated, "I do a lot of the work for other people, and the rest of the group gets credit for it. Maybe I should just do it by myself."

### *Forms of Resistance to PLCs: Active and Passive*

The study of this East Coast school reveals several barriers common to the progress of many PLC teams and illustrates that substantive change nearly always engenders resistance. The resistance seems to come in two forms:

one active form by which the teacher rejects the very idea of working collaboratively, and one passive form by which the teacher chooses to work only with one or two colleagues while excluding others. Teachers who resist actively express a sense of frustration about fairness and equity, stating that collaboration with colleagues causes more work for them and does not necessarily remedy difficulties. Such feelings of unfairness, no matter how large or small, pose significant threats to the development of the learning community.

the PLC. In a democratic institution, as a public school must be, teachers must truly embrace plurality and differing opinions and seek consensus opportunities among those with whom they disagree. While selective or only partially inclusive collaboration might feel productive and provide support for certain teachers, it is not part of the impartial democratic process that the PLC encourages. The PLC must find a way to welcome and encourage all colleagues, including those who are vaguely or vehemently resistant to collaboration.

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In emerging PLCs, those who resist passively claim to be supportive of team structures, stating that they do work collaboratively; however, they admit they work with a few colleagues whose ideas are closely consonant with their own. Such exclusionary collaborations threaten the full development of a true learning community. In the East Coast school survey, a teacher stated, "I would rather work with one or two than work with a crowd because a lot of ideas are lost." Another teacher indicated a preference for working with someone who shared "work ethic, understanding of curriculum, and realistic expectations." Another wrote, "We should have similar views, ideas, goals, and be able to discuss clearly what we want and why it's important."

Unfortunately, this willingness to collaborate only with those most like oneself is antithetical to the development of

### *Conclusion: Overcoming Resistance*

Although resistance does undeniably exist during the evolution of teams within professional learning communities, the survey responses of teachers in the East Coast school confirmed what research indicates: when teachers work together, they share different perspectives and practices that make a collaborative environment useful and productive. Kruse, Louis, and Bryk (1994) postulate, "A core characteristic of the professional learning community is an undeviating focus on student learning" (p. 9). McLaughlin and Talbert (2006) concur that it is crucial for teachers to examine student work together. Under professional learning community constructs, students will benefit from the ongoing collaboration of their teachers, as they master the intended outcomes of the curriculum and transfer that learning to different milieus (Elbousty & Bratt, 2009). As DuFour and co-authors (2004) state: "We con-

tend that a school truly committed to the concept of learning for each student will stop subjecting students to a haphazard, random, de facto, educational lottery program when they struggle academically" (p. 33).

Educators will not realize the effectiveness of collaboration unless they utilize their precious time wisely, focus on improved student performance, and work toward creating a stronger school community. Under these conditions, collaborative teams will see results when they make the effort to work together and will learn to view collaboration as an inestimable resource. As for teachers who persist in their preference to work alone, when and if that resistance is thoughtful and reasoned, it can be harnessed as a means of refocusing and refining PLC teams, thereby rendering them models of optimal, collective efficacy.

In high-functioning teams, teachers develop and apply common assessments, discuss their teaching, and conduct peer observations. They develop consistent, systematic procedures to support students and solve academic issues. In peer observations, teachers observe each other and conference among themselves about best practices and feasible methods of implementation. The aforementioned concepts undergird the common goal of successful teams, where the values and goals of the school



become shared among the faculty, students, and surrounding community (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Karhanek, 2004 and McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001, 2006). Linda Darling-Hammond (1995) postulates that the PLC is essential to school improvement, helping school personnel stay cohesive and focused on learning. Anderson and Larson (2009) argue the exigent need for this coordination, especially in impoverished school settings.

If PLC teams are established successfully, the school culture becomes grounded in collaboration, whereby both knowledge and power are equally shared and distributed among the members of the

learning community (Bratt & Elbousty, 2010). In this collaborative mode, teachers work together continually to assess student strategies, assist each other in developing methods to improve student achievement, discuss issues openly, create a supportive environment conducive to achievement, and confer about their pedagogical approaches (Hord, 2009). Indeed, establishing a successful learning community improves student achievement measurably and ensures the success of the learning community. In short, educators can best guarantee learning by enthusiastically embracing PLC teams and seeking answers collaboratively, thus enhancing and encourag-

## PLC URLs

<http://www.nsdsc.org/standards/learningcommunities.cfm>

This is the National Staff Development Council website; it includes many studies and recent reports conducted by the NSDC. It also provides issues of JSD (Journal of Staff Development).

<http://www.sedl.org/change/issues/issues61.html>

The Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL) dedicated a recent issue of its journal to articles related to the Professional Learning Community.

<http://www.allthingsplc.info/>

Website provided by Solution Tree: a professional development resource that assists schools in developing their Professional Learning Communities.

[http://pdonline.ascd.org/pd\\_online/secondary\\_reading/el200405\\_dufour.html](http://pdonline.ascd.org/pd_online/secondary_reading/el200405_dufour.html)

An article defining the concept of the Professional Learning Community (PLC), by Richard DuFour.

ing their commitment to working together in support of students and one another.

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