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Professional Learning Communities: A Bandwagon, an Idea Worth Considering, or Our Best Hope for High Levels of Learning?

*** *This We Believe* Characteristics**

- An inviting, supportive, and safe environment
- High expectations for every member of the learning community
- Organizational structures that support meaningful relationships and learning

* Denotes the corresponding characteristics from NMSA's position paper, *This We Believe*, for this article.

Richard DuFour

It should surprise no one that there are faculties throughout North America that refer to themselves as professional learning communities (PLCs) yet do none of the things that PLCs do. Conversely, there are faculties that could serve as model PLCs that may never reference the term. A school does not become a PLC by enrolling in a program, renaming existing practices, taking the PLC pledge, or learning the secret PLC handshake. A school becomes a professional learning community only when the educators within it align their practices with PLC concepts. Therefore, any valid assessment of the impact of PLC concepts on a school or the compatibility of those concepts with the middle school model would first need to determine if PLC practices were actually in place in the school. Only then would it be possible to determine the impact of those practices on the learning of both students and adults.

The May 2006 issue of the *Middle School Journal* included the article "Learning Communities in 6–8 Middle Schools: Natural Complements or Another Bandwagon in the Parade" (Patterson & co-contributors, 2006). The authors based the article on interviews and surveys of the staff members of two middle schools that considered themselves to be in the very early stages of implementing professional learning community concepts. In brief, the authors discovered there was widespread confusion regarding the term and that teachers saw little potential benefit in the PLC concept. They concluded the article by offering the caution that, while PLC ideas "are worth considering,"

educators should be wary about "jumping on the bandwagon" and following a "recipe-driven process."

If the educators in these schools are confused about the term, "professional learning community," they are not alone. As I observed in an earlier article, the term has been used "to describe every imaginable combination of individuals with an interest in education—a grade-level teaching team, a school committee, a high school department, an entire school district, a state department of education, a national professional organization, and so on. In fact, the term has been used so ubiquitously that it is in danger of losing all meaning" (DuFour, 2004, p. 6). As Fullan (2005) has cautioned, "terms travel easily … but the meaning of the underlying concepts does not" (p. 67). Thus, it is not surprising that some educators would express uncertainty regarding terminology.

The wrong focus

The authors of the "Bandwagon" article did not focus much on practices; instead they focused on terminology, structures, and perceptions. They described one school's structural change from "eight teams to four learning communities." Teachers were perplexed by the change, saying their learning communities "still act like teams" and merely represented the merging of two teams into one. The second school continued to assign teachers to one of seven "teams" but added two "learning communities" on the basis of the location of teacher classrooms. Teachers in this school focused on "the structural aspects of learning community" and saw it as "a way of organizing or containing students." In both instances teachers expressed confusion regarding vocabulary and a preference for the "team" format over "learning communities."

The authors presented little evidence that the educators in these schools actually engage in PLC practices. Had they studied a school that was a PLC in *fact* rather than in name only, they would have found that teachers were organized into collaborative *teams* that focused their collective efforts on certain critical questions such as:

1. Are we clear on the knowledge, skills, and dispositions each student is to acquire as a result of this course, grade level, and unit we are about to teach?
2. Have we agreed on the criteria we will use in assessing the quality of student work, and can we apply the criteria consistently?
3. Have we developed common formative assessments to monitor each student's learning on a timely basis?
4. Do we use the formative assessments to identify students who are having difficulty in their learning so that we can provide those students with timely, systematic interventions that

guarantee them additional time and support for learning until they have become proficient?

5. Do we use data to assess our individual and collective effectiveness? Do assessment results help us learn from one another in ways that positively affect our classroom practice?
6. Does our team work interdependently to achieve SMART goals that are Strategic (linked to school goals), Measurable, Attainable, Results-oriented (focused on evidence of student learning rather than teacher strategies), and Time-bound?
7. Are continuous improvement processes built into our routine work practice?
8. Do we make decisions by building shared knowledge regarding best practices rather than simply pooling opinions?
9. Do we demonstrate, through our collective efforts, our determination to help all students learn at high levels?
10. Do we use our collaborative team time to focus on these critical issues?

Researchers who have studied schools where educators actually engage in PLC practices have consistently cited those practices as our best hope for sustained, substantive school improvement (Darling-Hammond, 2001; Fullan, 2005; Louis & Marks, 1998; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001; Newmann, 1996; Reeves, 2006; Saphier, 2005; Schmoker, 2005; Sparks, 2005). Those practices have been endorsed by the National Staff Development Council, the National Association of Secondary School Principals, the National Association of Elementary School Principals, the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, the National Board of Professional Teaching Standards, and the National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform. They certainly "complement" the recent recommendations presented in *Success in the Middle* by the National Middle School Association (2006) and *Breaking Ranks in the Middle* by the National Association of Secondary School Principals (2006).

It would be inaccurate to portray PLC concepts as a fad, bandwagon, or recipe. We have known for decades that students benefit when the teachers in their schools work in collaborative teams (Little, 1990), establish a guaranteed and viable curriculum to ensure all students have access to the same knowledge and skills (Marzano, 2003), monitor student learning on a frequent and timely basis (Lezotte, 1997), use formative assessments to identify students who need additional support for learning (Reeves, 2006), and demonstrate high expectations for student achievement through a collective commitment to help all students learn (Brophy & Good, 2002). These concepts represent more than "ideas worth considering": they continue to represent best practices for meeting the needs of all students.

The wrong timing

Had the authors of "Bandwagon" set out to describe potential problems in the early stages of the implementation of the PLC concept, a case could be made for studying schools immersed in their first and second year of the initiative—if the schools were actually implementing PLC concepts.

However, the authors proclaimed their purpose was to assess the potential of the concept by studying schools that did not have sufficient time to make valid assessments. As Fullan (2001) wrote: "One of our most consistent findings and understandings about the change process in education is that *all* successful schools experience 'implementation dips' … a dip in performance and confidence as one encounters an innovation that requires new skills and understanding" (p. 40). As a result, Fullan concluded, people are likely to feel anxious, confused, and overwhelmed in the early stages of innovation.

Another researcher put it this way: "Everything looks like a failure in the middle. Predictable problems arise in the middle of nearly every attempt to do something new. … Stop an innovation because of these problems, and, by definition, that initiative will be a failure. … Change-adept organizations support initiatives through the difficult middle period" (Kanter, 1997, p. 11)[1].

The schools studied in the Patterson and associates article (2006) had neither implemented PLC concepts nor had enough experience to assess the effectiveness of those concepts. Had schools been described that had pushed through the implementation dip to drive PLC concepts deep into the culture of their schools—the nationally recognized Freeport Intermediate School in Brazosport, Texas; the award-winning Adams Middle School in Westland, Michigan; Levey Middle School in Southfield, Michigan, which has not only closed but shattered the achievement gap between students of different races; Woodlawn Middle and Twin Groves Middle in suburban Chicago, where more than 90% of students meet state proficiency standards; or any of hundreds of other middle schools that actually do what learning communities do—they would have observed very different results and heard very different opinions regarding the potential for PLC concepts to make schools better places for learning for students and teachers.

Conclusion

School reform efforts in the United States have followed a predictable pattern. An improvement initiative is launched with great enthusiasm, only to be buffeted by confusion, criticism, and complaints. Many educators then abandon the initiative and continue their quest for the quick fix that will result in deep cultural changes that are unaccompanied by anxiety and concerns. Hosts of researchers, however, have concluded that substantive change inevitably creates discomfort and dissonance as people are asked to act in new ways (Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005; Fullan, 2005; Sarason, 1996). We cannot avoid the discomfort, but we can determine how we will respond when the going gets tough. As Schlechty (2005), a veteran observer of school reform has concluded, "One of the most fundamental problems confronting those who would transform schools … is the problem of persistence of effort" (p. 23).

In his study of organizations that made the leap from "good to great," Collins (2001) found that the transformation was never the result of "a single defining action, no ground breaking program, no one killer innovation, no miracle moment" (p. 14). The improvement was always the result of "a cumulative process, step by step, action by action, decision by decision" (p. 165) and "pushing

in a constant direction over an extended period of time" (p. 169). Greatness required persistence, fierce resolve, and consistent, coherent effort over the long haul. There were no shortcuts.

The professional learning community concept does not offer a short cut to school improvement. It presents neither a program nor a recipe. It does provide a powerful, proven conceptual framework for transforming schools at all levels, but alas, even the grandest design eventually degenerates into hard work. A school staff must focus on learning rather than teaching, work collaboratively on matters related to learning, and hold itself accountable for the kind of results that fuel continual improvement. When educators do the hard work necessary to implement these principles, their collective ability to help all students learn inevitably will rise. If they fail to demonstrate the discipline to initiate and sustain this work, their school is unlikely to become more effective, even if those within the school claim to be a professional learning community. The rise or fall of the professional learning community concept in any school will depend not on the merits of the concept itself, but on the most important element in the improvement of any school—the collective capacity, commitment, and persistence of the educators within it.

Editor's Note

[1]The phenomenon where measurable success does not immediately follow the implementation of a new initiative is called the "J-curve" effect. For a more complete discussion of how the J-curve phenomenon applies to educational innovations, see Erb, T. O., & Stevenson, C. (1999). Middle school reforms throw a "J-curve": Don't strike out. *Middle School Journal, 30*(5), 45–47.

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