

# Aspiring to a Continuous Learning Ethic: Building Authentic Learning Communities for Faculty and Administration

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An intentional, active and self-regulated approach to professional growth results in improved instruction and higher levels of student achievement over time. School systems that aspire to a continuous learning ethic socialize educators to act on the assumption that all students and all educators are capable of learning and reaching high standards. This article explores the emergence of the notion of a continuous learning ethic within sustainable educational reform, and the experiences of three school districts in introducing, nurturing and building collaborative learning for teachers, student-teachers and administrators. The central phenomenon explored in this article is the powerful role that sustained professional development is playing in education reform efforts and how school leaders are utilizing a continuous learning ethic in forms of adult learning within the context of work. Also, specific practical applications of professional development initiatives that strive to instill a moral purpose for continuous learning are examined and critiqued.

## Introduction

Schools and school systems that aspire to a continuous learning ethic make sustained and lasting efforts to socialize educators to act on the assumption that all students and all educators are capable of learning and reaching high standards. Not just students, but educators as well, are continuous learners. This paper explores the emergence of an ethic of continuous learning as a basis for professional development for teachers, administrators and other school leaders. Authentic leadership and learning, professional development school initiatives, along with ideas pertaining to distributive and instructional leadership in the development of nested learning communities, provide a backdrop for examining the efforts of three Pennsylvania school districts striving to inculcate an ethic of continuous learning within professional development contexts in order to increase student learning and consequent achievement.

## **Emergence of the Notion of Authenticity and a Continuous Learning Ethic**

As early as 1963, Haplin and Croft argued for and identified the critical importance of authenticity as an explanation for behaviors of teachers and principals in open school climates. Their research preceded the abundance of teacher empowerment and school restructuring literature emerging in the mid-eighties to the mid-nineties. For Haplin and Croft (1966), teachers and principals who acted in accordance with their own values and assumptions rather than with strict adherence to role expectations were characterized as authentic educators. Henderson and Hoy (1983) expanded on this line of research and further defined leader authenticity as a multidimensional construct enacted by a salience of self over role, non-manipulation of subordinates and sensitivity toward accountability.

Additional early research on leader authenticity and teacher empowerment hint at the powerful influence that personal qualities of authenticity play in the promotion of faculty professional knowledge and opportunities for teacher and principal development. Blumberg and Greenfield (1980) contend that the principal may indeed influence the climate of the school through unique personal attributes that connote genuineness. School leaders who assume responsibility for their own actions and those of their faculty act in accordance with their own moral assumptions; even when these assumptions conflict with prevailing role expectations or the treatment of teachers instrumentally or as a means for advancement. School leaders who treat their faculty as professionals capable of advancing the vision of the school and their own knowledge and learning are perceived to act in a genuine or authentic manner.

Supporting research by Bredeson (1989), Kouzes and Posner (1990), and Baily (1992) suggest that principals appear to influence student achievement through their impact on school climate (especially building trust and commitment) which in turn affects teacher performance, particularly in areas of empowerment that relate to knowledge seeking and knowledge use. Authentic principals create school climates that are conducive to teacher knowledge building and use in an effort toward continuous professional improvement in areas of subject content, pedagogy, content pedagogy, human relations and group processes. The apparent role of knowledge building and use in teacher empowerment, school culture, and sustained school achievement is substantiated by Kirby and Colbert's (1994) quantitative study in which access to and use of knowledge was the best single predictor of principal authenticity. This form of teacher knowledge and use refers to the ability of teachers to acquire information and skills in shared group processes and is "evidenced by the relevance, degree, and quality of professional development activities" (p. 42).

From early studies in leadership authenticity to further explanations about the relationship of authenticity with teacher professional development, it is not surprising that calls for a higher premium on professional

knowledge and training be clearly apparent in school systems. Support for meaningful professional development from and for school administrators and faculties enhance the likelihood of success in school improvement efforts (Sickler, 1988; David, 1989; Maloy, 1998). At the same time, the National Policy Board for Educational Administration has argued that future administrators be trained to think reflectively, demonstrate interpersonal competence, and act in a manner that conforms to reasoned ethical principles—otherwise, be authentic (Thomson, 1992).

Authentic school leadership shared and negotiated between building administration and faculty (Baily, 1992) affords numerous opportunities for professional development. These opportunities can take many forms such as release time to work on curriculum development or observing other teachers and schools, workshops and in-school-time to participate in the analysis of data, the provision of time and space for professional work and reflection—all evidence of valuing professional learning and resulting in teacher empowerment and evidence of effective school restructuring (Bredeson, 1989; David, 1989; Lagana, 1989; Taylor and Levine, 1991).

From earlier studies on leader authenticity, teacher empowerment, site-based school autonomy and management and effective schools research there emerges the notion of a continuous learning ethic. The moral pronouncement appears in a variety of contexts and literatures, but the point of view is the same: continuous professional development is leverage for learning and if not aggressively pursued carries moral culpability. There is no clearer example of this point of view than Fullan's (2003) *The Moral Imperative of School Leadership*. Effective leadership requires more than dedication and skill. School teaching and leadership are shared moral endeavors, are driven by a moral imperative, a deep moral purpose that all children can and deserve to achieve at high levels and that educators are responsible for ensuring children's academic and intellectual success. Moral purpose is at the heart of the matter, especially for public schools in a democracy. Fullan (2003) states,

The best case for public education has always been that it is a common good. Everyone, ultimately, has a stake in the caliber of schools, and education is everyone's business. The quality of the public education system relates directly to the quality of life that people enjoy (whether as parents, employers, or citizens), with a strong public education system as the cornerstone of a civil, prosperous, and democratic society. As the main institution for fostering social cohesion in an increasingly diverse society, publicly funded schools must serve all children, not simply those with the loudest or most powerful advocates. This means addressing the cognitive and social needs of all children, with an emphasis on including those who may not have been well served in the past. For instance, a focus on academic achievement, such as improving literacy and mathematics [knowledge and skills], must include a commitment to narrowing the gap between high- and low-achieving children . . . (p. 3).

How is this moral endeavor achieved? For Fullan (2003), the only way is by the informed professional judgment of teachers and administrators that is knowledge rich, collective and not individualistic, pursued “continually through cultures of interaction inside and outside the school” and has a

solid moral purpose as a foundation (p. 7). Sergiovanni and Starratt (1998) reinforce this concept when they address the moral ideal of teaching. Professional educators need to have a commitment to practice in an exemplary way. This simply means that educators should be practicing on the cutting edge of their profession, staying abreast of the latest research, reflecting upon their own practice, experimenting with new approaches, and sharing insightful aspects of one's work with others. When this commitment is present, the focus of professional development moves from a training scenario to one of self-renewal, interaction, and greater acceptance of responsibility for one's own professional growth. Informed professional judgment requires teachers and administrators to be immersed in disciplined and informed professional inquiry, development and action that results in raising the bar and closing the achievement gap by engaging all students in demanding thinking and learning tasks. This kind of professional learning is ethical because it not only supports the moral mission of public schooling but honors one's mind in pursuit of progress and continuous improvement.

Starratt (2004) addresses the issue of a continuous learning ethic as an important feature of ethical leadership. Writing from a distinct vantage that is more philosophical in nature, but nonetheless complementing, and in some respects enriching Fullan's (2003) arguments, Starratt suggests that the teaching and learning process is a profoundly moral activity in itself, and that school leadership must recognize and support the clear ethical ramifications of teaching and learning as human activity with no possible "expedient separation of knowledge from value" (Berry, 1990). Starratt emphasizes the necessity of moving beyond technical efficiencies "in the delivery and performance of learning to an understanding of the learning process as a profoundly moral activity that should engage the full humanity of learners and their teachers" (p. 9). Understanding that teaching and learning are moral activities of free agents seeking to inform, train, and influence each other in hopefully interdependent ways, Starratt makes a clear distinction between what he calls "make-believe, fake learning" and "authentic learning tasks."

Similar to Fullan's (2003) reference to demanding thinking and learning tasks for students and a disciplined and informed professional inquiry, Starratt (2004) emphasizes the importance of providing and organizing instruction toward authentic learning tasks for learners. Authentic learning carries with it the responsibility for what is being studied and for what reason and how it is learned. Authentic learning is the opposite of simple recall of memorized information; it involves high order and complex thinking tasks. These expectations for students are the same expectations that should be in operation for school personnel. Starratt explains the moral responsibility for quality teaching and learning:

... [E]ducational leaders are responsible for quality teaching by all teachers. This is not to say that teachers themselves are not responsible for the quality of their teaching. School leaders, however, have a responsibility to continually cultivate quality

teaching by providing abundant and varied professional development opportunities, by providing a stimulating supervisory system that engages teachers in deepening and broadening their craft, and by providing common time for reviewing student work in order to explore more responsive approaches to engaging underachieving students. Given the challenges of overcoming the institutional lethargy of well-worn routines, this cultivation may require vigorous tilling of the soil and weeding out of the chaff (p. 60).

Readdressing the influence that authenticity plays in the promotion of faculty professional knowledge and opportunities for teacher and principal development, Starratt places considerable moral weight on the characterological virtue of authenticity as a guiding ethic. He says,

The authentic educational leader [whether administrator or teacher] will exhibit authenticity in his or her relationships with teachers, students, parents, and district officials. . . . Keeping the mission of the school, especially *the core work of authentic learning* [italics ours], uppermost in dealing with stakeholders and colleagues, the authentic leader works the daily details required to live that mission. This steady linking of the mundane, everyday decisions to authentic learning for teachers and students provides a constant example of the leader's integrity. The work of the authentic leader involves the leader's deep commitments as a human being, as an educator, as an educational leader, and as a citizen-administrator. (p. 78)

Authenticity, once again, is the personal quality that is emphasized as being paramount in promoting teacher knowledge, skills and authentic learning within professional development contexts. There is no expedient separation of knowledge from value—the transformative impact of authentic teaching and learning is “knowing with feeling” (Berry 1990), personal, enriching, demanding and rigorous; not simply an intellectual activity, but a moral activity as well. We are not fully human, and we violate our potential and the intentions of other moral agents, if we do not continuously learn, grow and develop in authentic ways.

Fullan (2003) and Starratt (2004) are joined by others in their emphasis on the core work of a continuous learning ethic. The moral pronouncement appears in such varied places as the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future (2003) report, *No Dream Denied: A Pledge to America's Children* and the Center for the Study of Teaching and Policy (2003) publication, *Leading for Learning Sourcebook: Concepts and Examples* where clear statements are made about teacher mentoring and development that ideally encourages professional knowledge building and use within an “ethic of mutual responsibility for each other's learning” (CTP, 2003, p. 82), and likewise builds a professional community. The emphasis that schools need to become learning communities with shared leadership is clearly stated in the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future:

It is time to end the era of solo teaching in isolated classrooms. Good teaching thrives in a supportive learning environment created by teachers and school leaders who work together to improve learning—in short, quality teaching requires strong, professional learning communities. *Collegial interchange, not isolation, must become the norm* [italics ours] for teachers. Communities of learning can no longer be consid-

ered utopian; they must become the building blocks that establish a new foundation for America's schools. . . . [T]eachers in professional learning communities can form collaborative networks of expertise that focus on professional growth and student achievement. (p. 17)

The literature is replete with more examples: Meier (2002) “preaches” about the task of reinventing schools with adult cultures that match the ones being made for students—cultures where teachers and administrators are learning and pressing their intellect as much as students are expected to by those who teach them. The key, according to Meier and others (Darling-Hammond, 1998; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001), is teachers and administrators taking a risk in showing themselves to be learners alongside their students. The Pennsylvania Department of Education’s (2004) strategic plan, *Leading for Learning*, contains similar language and moral reference in one of four components that constitute a “single function framework” where each component of the strategic plan provides an integral part of a larger, unifying vision and mission for the Commonwealth. The fourth component of the strategic plan is a “continuous learning ethic” where in every school and school system there is a culture of evidence-based collaborative practice, continuous professional learning and collective professional accountability (PDE, 2004).

### **Schools and School Systems that Aspire to a Continuous Learning Ethic**

According to a recent survey of more than two thousand school districts nationwide by the National School Boards Association, local school boards, in general, are most concerned about school funding and student achievement (NSEA, 2002). Within a standards based, student testing and accountability movement emanating from the federal government, school boards and the districts they oversee, are increasingly concerned about raising student achievement and ensuring that learning gains by all students are maintained and increase to even higher levels over time. To see these ambitious goals realized, some forward thinking districts have turned to professional development initiatives that connect teacher and administrator learning and work improvement to current national and state level educational accountability policies and reform programs. These districts emphasize specific and focused professional development of administrators and teachers as the key to increasing student achievement and meeting the requirements of increasingly stringent accountability legislation.

To this end, districts will find it necessary to recreate themselves as learning organizations (communities). Organizations capable of improving their performance by acculturating new ways of working and building the new capabilities needed for expert teaching and rigorous learning. No one has addressed this organizational ethic of continuous learning for increased student achievement more than Resnick (1999) (Resnick & Hall, 1998; Resnick & Glennan, 2002). Although never employing specific lan-



guage that would characterize teaching and learning or professional development as moral in itself, Resnick (1998) does articulate an impassioned urgency for cultural change and improved professional development in public education:

To honor every child's educational right to expert instruction, it will be necessary to create enhanced instructional expertise throughout the teaching force, so there is enough expertise to go around. Educators in knowledge-based constructivist schools will need a thorough familiarity with content and pedagogy, as well as an effort based belief system, to take them beyond the [Thorndike-like] associationist paradigm. They will need to know how to create classroom environments that motivate effort, socialize intelligent habits of mind, and foster [student] talk that is accountable to established knowledge and accepted standards of reasoning. Because few teachers or principals have been prepared to function in an effort-oriented system grounded in knowledge-based constructivism—much less to be held accountable for the high levels of student achievement that are expected in such a system—they too will have a right to expert instruction. For educators, expert instruction should take the form of ongoing professional development driven by the same core learning and aptitude theories, as well as the same effort orientation, proposed as the new core for our schools. (p. 108)

According to Resnick, professional development needs to take the same constructivist approaches—built and established on qualified knowledge claims—that socialize teachers toward higher levels of analysis, reflection and studied modification of their teaching and the subject content. And Resnick is not alone; for it is widely acknowledged that professional development needs to be linked to curricular reform, focused on collaborative “culture-building” that emphasizes continuous learning and improvement rather than simply prescribed skills training, intimately tied to evidence of student learning and achievement and deeply embedded within the daily work of teachers and administrators (Loucks-Horsley & Matsumoto, 1999; Lieberman & Miller, 1994; Darling Hammond, 1998; Elmore, 2000; Hargreaves, 2003).

While aspiring to a continuous learning ethic is one thing, having this moral implication imbued within one's daily work is quite another; and as Fullan (2003) indicates, although the teachers we need will necessarily be “immersed in disciplined, informed professional inquiry and action that results in raising the bar and closing the gap by engaging all students” (p. 11), there must be some glimmer of capacity to begin building—and later effectively sustain—a culture of disciplined study and performance where continuous improvement and rigorous professional development are institutional priorities for both teachers and administrators. The glimmer of capacity necessary to introduce authentic learning for informed professional judgment and practice begins with the principal as an instructional leader—one who helps “create and sustain disciplined inquiry on the part of teachers” (p. 7).

## **The Concept of Two-Way Accountability**

All public schools must be learning organizations. A lot is expected of stu-

dents in order to meet high standards for subject content and advanced thinking skills, and conversely, the same high expectations are required for educators as well. One of primary results of acknowledging a continuous, authentic learning ethic is the socialization of educators to act on the assumption that all students and all educators—teachers and administrators—are capable of learning and reaching high standards. Not just students, but educators as well, are continuous learners, and “because children’s learning depends heavily on how well adults learn how to teach them, every adult is responsible for his or her ongoing professional” development (Institute for Learning, LRDC, 2004). This is two-way accountability—initiated and sustained by what is known as nested learning communities.

To do the work necessary for establishing and maintaining effective professional development some form of nested learning is required, and without the standard of two-way accountability all efforts would be inauthentic and fail at acknowledging the moral requirements that are indelibly fixed on the profession. Nested learning is the enactment of effort-based education on a professional level. Building principals are accountable to teachers’ learning in the same way that teachers are accountable to students’ learning; and likewise senior district administrators are accountable to building administrators’ learning for continuous school improvement. Effort based learning for teachers and administrators means adopting a belief that “ability is learnable through effort and that an active, and [eventual] self-regulated approach to professional growth produces improved instruction and high levels of student achievement over time.” Accordingly, schools are places where learning is the work of students and educators: where continuous learning for increased achievement and effective practice is the norm (Institute for Learning, LRDC, 2004; Resnick & Glennan, 2002).

### **Professional Development, Improved Instruction and Higher Levels of Student Achievement**

A recent news series launched by *Education Week* entitled “Professional Development: Leverage for Learning,” indicates the pressures school systems face to build effective staff training. Recent research, although very new, has focused on how teacher learning and other forms of professional development translate into improved student learning and resulting achievement. The link between professional development and its affect on student learning is not empirically direct, and it is difficult to isolate improvements in student achievement as a result of professional development. At this point, several federal studies are underway to examine more closely the measurable affects on student learning gains attributable to teachers’ developing pedagogical content knowledge—what teachers’ know about their subject matter and what they know about how children learn and think about that subject matter. Many schools and school systems



are narrowing the focus of professional development and no longer allowing individuals to make choices about whether they want to grow and learn, or in Elmore's (2000) explanation, ending the customary "volunteerism" approach to professional development. There is an increasing awareness that coherence in standards, curriculum, assessment, and professional development is essential in order to be high-achieving and serve students well (Viadero, 2005).

One of the best examples of coherence between professional development, improved instruction and higher levels of student achievement was the work accomplished in New York City Community School District #2, under the leadership of Tony Alvarado from 1987 to 1998. The heart of the matter for this school district, at the time, was professional development. The result of building authentic learning communities as part of professional development for teachers and administrators translated into increased student achievement over time. New York City Community School District #2 fostered an intentional, active and eventually self-regulated approach to professional development (Maloy, 1998; Elmore & Burney, 1997). Much of the professional development work focused on teacher inquiry in small collaborative groups. As trust developed over time, administrative guidance subsided and educators adopted an accountable stance where they engaged in problematizing student outcomes, their own pedagogy, and the curriculum in order to generate new and useful "home-grown" knowledge for educational improvement.

Although direct administrative assistance with professional development was important for changing a culture that aimed to improve instruction in all subject areas, gradually, over time, "from central administrators to the greenest teachers," a shared and sustained focus on high quality teaching "became a cultural ethic" (Maloy, 1998). Continuous, authentic learning became more of who the professional staff was in District #2 rather than just what they did. An ethic was imbued and professional development became internalized: self-, but corporately and collegially, regulated. For District #2, professional development was embedded in each individual school's culture—taking a lot of time, effort and trust because the best way to learn how to improve teaching practice is to actually do it and get feedback within the context of one's daily work.

In addition to the lessons learned from Community School District #2, other efforts at strengthening professional development and improved instruction for higher student achievement can be found in the work of Professional Development Schools. In the early 1980's, John Goodlad began to promote a concept for the creation of school-university partnerships as a strategy for school improvement. In 1990, the Holmes Group published a report and made the case for the establishment of the creation of professional development schools. PDSs are new models of school organizations formed by two larger pre-existing entities. They are innovative institutions formed through partnerships between professional education programs and PK–12 schools. Their mission is the professional preparation of candi-

dates, faculty development, inquiry directed at improvement of practice and enhanced student learning (NCATE, 2001). PDSs are considered professional learning communities (Newmann & Wehlage, 1995), and according to Darling-Hammond (1994) PDSs are a special case of school restructuring. As PDSs simultaneously restructure partner schools and teacher education programs, they redefine teaching and learning for all members of the profession and the school community.

Defining PDSs as a professional community helps to describe the underpinning of how PDSs operate. PDS's are collaborative efforts that approach the development of teachers in an inquiry based way where practicing teachers take an individual, yet collaborative responsibility for the development of new teachers. Rather than the traditional student-teaching model where a teacher candidate will student-teach for one semester in the final year of their college career; ideally, PDSs are integral, albeit separately functioning schools-within-schools where teacher candidates experience and practice their craft in depth for longer periods of time. They are created to prepare new teachers, support the professional development of classroom teachers, university faculty and new teachers, and provide a clinical setting for research on teaching and learning (Pritchard & Aness, 1999).

## **To Imbue an Ethic: Experiences in Three Pennsylvania School Districts**

### **Evergreen School District<sup>1</sup>**

Evergreen School District is entering its third year as an affiliate school district with the Institute for Learning, Learning Research and Development Center at the University of Pittsburgh. A rural school district situated just beyond the growing borders of a larger metropolitan region, Evergreen is actively pursuing ways to increase student achievement throughout the entire District. There are slightly over 1700 students served by the District, and approximately twenty-five percent of this population is classified as economically disadvantaged. The District has narrowly avoided state warning and sanctions based on student achievement as measured by state assessments.

Through the efforts of a former superintendent who was concerned about positive academic press in the schools and enhancing coherent professional development linked to sound principles of teaching and learning within a rigorous curriculum, the Evergreen School District entered a three year instructional and curricular reform initiative guided by the Institute for Learning. This process, begun prior to the 2004–2005 academic year has led to dramatic shifts in professional development—how it is delivered, and what the focus and purpose is in order to raise student achievement.

<sup>1</sup>Names of school districts and immediate locations are fictitious.

A major focus of the Institute's work with affiliates is to train a core of educational leaders to deliver new forms of professional development within their respective districts. Much of the professional development work in the Evergreen School District has constituted a cultural shift in teacher collaboration and learning. Contracted time has been restructured to provide opportunities within the school day for teacher collaboration and learning. Five after school meetings with cohorts of six to eight teachers meet regularly throughout the school year. These meetings are designed and led by curriculum and instruction facilitators trained by the Institute.

Professional development looks much different in Evergreen than it did just two years ago. There is no volunteerism and all faculties are involved in text based discussion pertaining to principles of effective teaching and learning, video-based discussion of enacted teaching and learning situations within live classrooms, and professional collaboration and exchanges of local knowledge in order to improve instructional practice. In addition to regularly scheduled collaborative meetings, teacher formative classroom observations are aligned with design principles and professional development delivered and discussed during collaborative meetings.

A major component of ongoing professional development involves working with teacher belief systems about the nature of intelligence and the importance of planning and delivering instruction based upon the principles of knowledge-based constructivism. More than just studying strategies and techniques, professional development is a socialization process for rigorous adult learning. Teachers read, consider, dialog and reflect on the ideas such as intelligence as a learnable attribute, accountable student talk over subject content, and what constitutes academic rigor in a thinking curriculum. Strenuous and challenging professional development is based on the belief of two-way accountability. If students are expected to learn and achieve at high levels then faculty and administration are expected to learn how best to teach for increased student learning.

This cultural shift in professional development at Evergreen is the first step in linking administrator and teacher learning to increased student achievement. An effort is being made to build a learning organization where everyone is held to standards of rigorous learning and higher levels of performance. With these changes there has been some resistance, but overall faculty and staff have been open and supportive of the process, knowing that the only way to drive the district forward to higher levels of student achievement is to continuously improve upon how best to teach and how best to learn.

A continuous learning ethic is beginning to establish itself at Evergreen. An institutional belief that carries moral weight is hard to achieve in just three years, but as one teacher says, "The opportunity to discuss and share with colleagues has been beneficial and has helped develop a sense of professionalism in the district." Others who are part of the professional development change process have indicated similar sentiments, as noted by another teacher's feedback: "The topics [we've discussed] however, have

forced me as an educator to reflect on my own teaching practices to ensure that I continue to hold my students to high standards while encouraging them to achieve.” These statements are a few examples of how Evergreen teachers and administrators are viewing the importance of learning community activities and how focused professional development will—with much work still ahead—be considered not only sound, accountable practice, but also a moral obligation to oneself and the students who are served by this local school district.

### **Mountain School District<sup>1</sup>**

Mountain School District is located in northwestern High County and comprised of four communities—Rockville, Windytown, Snowcap Township. Mountain School District is classified as a suburban LEA in southeastern Pennsylvania. The communities served have a small-town atmosphere each with their own distinct characteristics. The District serves approximately 2,600 students and seventeen percent of the student population is classified as economically disadvantaged. Education in the Mountain School District has been well funded and continues to provide a variety of programs to help students become successful. The district has three elementary schools, a middle-school, and a high school. The schools themselves in many respects are the center of community culture. Many community members turn out for performing arts activities, athletic events, and even graduation. In essence, community participation in the schooling effort is integral and welcomed.

In order to fulfill the ideals represented in the District’s philosophy (which focuses on improving student learning) it needed to develop and continually enhance (through ongoing collegial review and evaluation) innovative procedural structures to ensure that students both acquire knowledge and develop understanding. The District identified the need for effective instructional leadership by working toward proper implementation of the essential elements of instruction and meaningful conferencing with professional educators. By creating instructional expectations for faculty, based on scientifically-based best practices, the district could equip professional educators with the tools necessary to fulfill the goal of providing students with a quality education. The intent of this administrative focus was to assist developing educators who would be able to make conscious, intentional, instructional decisions regarding their students and be able to articulate the reasoning for those decisions in a collegial setting. Mountain focused on the meta-analytic leadership studies of Waters, Marzano, and McNulty (2003). This provided the best method, according to Mountain School District, of integrating quantitative research, theoretical insights and professional wisdom regarding effective leadership.

Mountain School District, like many organizations, initially focused on establishing a vision to ensure continual focus on the purpose of the profes-

<sup>1</sup>Names of school districts and immediate locations are fictitious.

sional development effort and drive future planning and implementation. Part of this collective vision for the District included this guiding principle for staff development and instructional leadership: “Staff development should be flexible to deal with contingencies. It should also be consistent and pervasive which includes focusing on research-proven results that are consistent with the district model by using a common language that all practitioners recognize. Staff development should also focus on the maintenance of existing initiatives thus allowing for individuals, who may need additional support, to catch up. The filter for staff development should be based on instructional theory.”

Mountain conducted an extensive revamping of the differentiated supervision model. It was in this major revision that conferencing with professional educators was addressed. In initially looking at the supervision and evaluation plan in place prior to the revisions, the administrative team found it to be more summary-evaluative than assessment-formative. The overall goal was to provide faculty with an opportunity to reflect on their teaching and then apply sound practices to their instruction while eliminating those teaching tendencies that would inhibit student learning. The participants involved in this process decided that there would be five differentiated supervision options for faculty members to participate in and that every three years they would be required to change options. Those options are administrative consultation, peer-coaching, individual instructional support, professional dialogue, and individual professional growth plan.

Along with revising the differentiated supervision model, it was necessary to look at how to establish a common language between participants in the supervision process. It was at this juncture that a document was realized to include a compilation of fundamental elements of instruction to be shared with the administration and faculty. This document allowed all parties to understand what the expectations for good teaching were in Mountain School District and provided a framework for building-level administrators to work with faculty who were deficient in one or more of the aforementioned elements.

In order for the process to be consistent across the district, it was decided that an essential component of the process to enhance instructional leadership would have to involve thorough training and ongoing peer coaching of the administrative team (this would include the Superintendent, Director of Curriculum and Instruction, Director of Special Education/Alternative Education Programs, and the building-level administrators). The training would focus on the fundamental elements of instruction and effective conferencing with faculty. A consultant was brought in to conduct the training during the summer months. Dr. Ernest Stachkowski, whose work provided much of the conceptual framework for Mountain’s approach to supervision and evaluation, was contracted to do the training. Dr. Stachkowski worked extensively with Madeline Hunter, Erlene Minton and others in the TIP (Theory Into Practice) Projects at UCLA. This train-

ing opportunity allows the administration to continue to hone the skills necessary to teach the fundamental elements of instruction and to confer with faculty members in a productive fashion.

Along with the training, the administration agreed that a system of peer coaching would need to be put in place so that the knowledge gleaned from the training could be sustained. A time was set aside during monthly cabinet meetings to address one of the fundamental elements of teaching. Every administrator is assigned to present that particular element for the rest of the administrative team. As well as having a time set aside within administrative meetings, administrators were required to complete and submit for review one of the following options: (1) Complete and submit to the Director of Curriculum and Instruction one written conference plan for Semester 1 and Semester 2. (2) Videotape a conference with a faculty member and submit it to the Director of Curriculum and Instruction. (3) Plan and conduct a conference with the assistance of the Director of Curriculum and Instruction.

The Director of Curriculum and Instruction would then meet with the administrator individually to discuss the process and rationale for handling the conference in the manner documented. Administrators also discussed and review each other's work in this area. At the high school, the principal and assistant principal met to discuss how conferences were handled for the purposes of consistency. This also provided opportunities to refine the process.

Every fall semester in October the faculty from the entire district are put together and assigned to groups randomly for the day (a group consists of approximately 20 individuals). Each administrator within the district presents on a different fundamental element of instruction utilizing a proper lesson format. By having the administration conduct the in-service, it demonstrates to the faculty that the administration truly understands the concepts they want to see in the classroom. This in turn leads to more productive dialogue within the post-observation conference and a stronger collegial relationship. The district clearly had the foresight to understand the importance of sustainability and credibility among its administrators. Sustainability in the sense that present and future administrative training could be maintained and honed by means of an established system of peer coaching and likewise engaging in the same practices with one another as they were with the teaching staff.

As with any improvement effort initiated, the success or failure of it will be determined over time. An ongoing longitudinal analysis continues to provide important information to guide the process and continues to improve the leadership within the district. This analysis consists of administrative and teacher reflections, feedback from conferencing, documented improvement in instruction through observation, and an increase in achievement as measured by curriculum embedded testing, overall semester grades, and state accountability test results. School participant feedback regarding this effort has been positive in many areas. In particular, teacher feedback has indicated a greater sense of collegiality between fac-



ulty and the administration as well as more meaningful dialogue regarding instruction. Several teachers have indicated that it has caused them to “re-evaluate their instruction and incorporate pedagogy that will enhance student learning.”

Mountain sees its work as both an opportunity and a responsibility. It is an opportunity for Mountain to reinforce for all its relevant “publics” that high quality teaching is what sets the stage for high learning achievement. The situation creates a responsibility to not only provide formal staff development intended to ensure that all teachers who may need information about the most effective instructional strategies have that information, but also to provide support and follow-up for the implementation of those strategies via clinical supervision along with other types of support. It is the intention of the current district leadership to build on these efforts. With a focus on current research regarding leadership, effective instruction, and staff development, Mountain School District clearly understands that in the end, leadership and learning are indispensable to each other.

### **The Collegiate School District<sup>1</sup>**

The Collegiate School District is a medium sized suburban/rural school district located within close proximity to a large nationally acclaimed state university. There are 14 public schools: ten elementary, two middle, one high school and one alternative high school. There are also four charter schools serving the elementary and middle levels. The high school has approximately 2600 student in grades 9–12 and over 7000 students attend schools in the entire district. The school culture is very competitive and academically oriented. It is a well regarded and well financed school district and performs at levels that exceed state and national norms. The staff members and the schools regularly win regional and national competitions in academics and athletics. Approximately seventy percent of the graduating seniors go on to become freshman at this state university.

Like most rural parts of this state, there is limited homegrown diversity in the school district. The small minority population in the community is mostly attributed to university families. The teaching staff is predominantly white despite the school district making considerable efforts in recruiting minority educators. There are numerous crossover projects between the school and the university. The two Professional Development Schools (PDSs), (each with their own director) one at the elementary level with approximately 60 students and one at the high school level with 15 students, are viewed as successful collaborative efforts between the school district and the College of Education.

The Collegiate Secondary English Professional Development School is a small organization that operates as an integral component of the two larger, bureaucratic organizations: the State University College of Education and the Collegiate Area School District. The College of Education is one of the

<sup>1</sup>Names of school districts and immediate locations are fictitious.

largest teacher preparation programs in the nation. Approximately sixty students graduate each year with a degree and certification to teach secondary level English. Of these sixty, approximately fifteen students each year complete their final year field experience/student teaching through the English Professional Development School.

The English Professional Development School places the majority of its student-teachers at the high school level. There are plans to start a middle level professional development school in the future. The larger Elementary PDS places sixty student-teachers in all ten of the elementary schools of school district. It is important to understand the roles of the people involved in the secondary level PDS. There are mentors, interns and consultants. This group is called a triad and there are as many triads as there are interns. The mentors are the school district teachers, the interns are the pre-service teachers, and the consultants are university graduate students who advise and assist the interns and at times the mentors in practical and theoretical matters concerning their practice. The PDS interns, college education majors in their final year of preparation, once being accepted to the PDS begin to follow the school district calendar and begin teaching with their cooperating teacher at the start of the school year and are mentored for one year. Mentors teach the interns university credited classes in their respective school buildings.

The ingredients that have made this PDS successful over the course of its development, was not necessarily professional trust, although trust did play a large part as the program began to grow and develop (Polizzi, 2007). As one teacher who has been involved with the PDS since its inception over nine years ago stated, "What we felt before trust, before community was established, before all those imperatives to good collaboration were allowed to develop, we felt they plunged, they were ready to plunge right into inquiry; and with inquiry comes critique." Inquiry and critique took center stage from the outset of the program.

This inquiry "plunge" from the very outset of the PDS, and inquiry as the central component of the Collegiate English Professional Development School, continuously brought out the concepts of negotiation, ambiguity and change in the lives of the teachers and interns and the structure and culture of the learning community. There is a leveling out of the learning hierarchy that takes place by all members contributing and negotiating the spaces that create learning. Each member's individual learning ethic emerges in the process of inquiry and collaboration. It is through a negotiation of roles and flexibility of practice that the collaborative effort enables mentors, interns and associates to work jointly in creating the functionality of the PDS learning community each year. A visualization of the PDS inquiry model (not represented here) places all members of the learning community as equally important in the production of knowledge and valued activity. Establishing trust and determining each individual's needs as members of the community become central components, over time, to the learning context and the creation of a collaborative environment.

## Conclusion and Implications

Inquiry and critique are not easy components to manage in a school setting and the force of such activities can be expected to cause bruised egos and sensitize reflection on long-held and sometimes ineffective practices. In attempting to foster and develop a new, more individualized and collective learning ethic in the classroom and among teachers, school leaders must face the challenges that are evident in changing and improving the stature of their current learning communities. Context will never be perfect (Easton, 2008) and the capacity for initiating a “plunge” and sustaining it is necessary—whether by teachers themselves or the administration who oversee school processes.

At the district and school level there is the necessity of school leadership to produce the initial force and nourish the continued momentum required to begin a change process to overcome “institutional lethargy of well worn routines” and institutional isomorphism that can be obstacles to creating a culture of a continuous learning ethic. This leadership for learning effort is, as it has been said before, slow “steady work.”

In the founding and forming of self-regulated learning environments there is a tension and ambiguity that exists between individuals during and throughout the process of the turning over and the acceptance of these reins of individual inquiry, learning and the cultivation of the customs of collaboration. An authentic leadership disposition that is learning focused is necessary in order to orchestrate the process of negotiation and confidence building required to form new, more collaborative, professional cultures that instill the vision of a continuous learning ethic.

The process of promoting and developing an individual learning ethic along with a collaborative commitment from a community of learners bears political and social responsibilities that go beyond the classroom and the school. School leaders must help to show that “teacher learning is linked to larger change efforts—school reorganization, democratic schooling, and social justice—and to the expanded roles of teachers as leaders and activists” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999, p. 281). What is important is whether or not and to what extent opportunities for individual learning and development are understood by the participants in learning communities to be connected to and carried out in the service of larger agendas for school and social change.

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