

Ready to Alter Your Role?

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Professional Learning Communities and the Changing Face of Education

Seldom have teachers, students, and administrators been given such opportunities to work together. The only question is if we're all up for the challenge of these new opportunities for growth.

Relationships between teachers and students and between teachers and school administrators have changed. The one-way transmission approach to teaching must give way to a more interactive approach. The security of set subject matter culled from dog-eared textbooks is no longer enough. Teachers must redefine themselves and their students as explorers—partners in a journey of discovery.

School reform consists of teacher education and capacity building. Powerful teacher education is more than a matter of learning about and practicing promising teaching techniques; it involves engagement in exploring pressing personal and professional problems and issues with others—the sorts of issues that now form the focus of the teacher-researcher movement.

The professional learning community (PLC) model for educators has become increasingly popular in the American education system. In order to become part of a PLC, educators first must commit to its most fundamental premise: to be a professional. As professionals, educators are expected to stay current in the constantly evolving knowledge base within education. Educators have the responsibility of shaping the minds of society's most vulnerable members—its

children. In order to effectively shape those minds to become contributing citizens, each educator must be armed with in-depth understanding of his or her learners, the subject matter being taught, educational policies, and the communities that are served. Teachers and administrators gain much from pushing the boundaries of their knowledge, skills, and responsibilities, and creating a rich and broad new conception of teaching, one that goes well beyond common craft or technical definitions.

What It Means To Be a Teacher in a PLC

Lasting and meaningful school reform involves teacher development, and that necessitates creating conditions supportive not only of teacher growth, but of teacher evolution. The future of education involves teachers in virtually every educational decision of consequence. Meanwhile, administrators must engage in less formal administration and more faculty development.

The role of teachers is becoming increasingly complex, especially as educators explore the possibilities of PLCs. New tasks call for developing new abilities while simultaneously setting aside cumbersome old habits. The only thing certain in this climate of change is that the student, the future citizen inheriting a host of unique challenges and opportunities, must be the star of the show.

Core teachers, who inevitably confront limitations in their content knowledge, need to reach out to other teachers for support. In addition, teachers are challenged not only to work in new ways with other teachers, but to also foster new and more-complicated relationships with students, taking on the role of facilitator and tour guide.

The following are a few simple steps educators can use to increase their professional learning. These steps do not require a huge time commitment. They simply require a commitment to be the very best.

1. Join a professional organization for educators.
2. Read and share one article per week from an educational journal that relates to either the learners or the subject being taught.
3. Subscribe to an educational periodical to stay abreast of the latest developments in the field.
4. Every month, buy or borrow a book from the education section of a bookstore or library and study the book for 15 to 30 minutes each night.

It Takes a Village

It is said that it “takes a whole village to raise a child.” Similarly, it could be said that it takes a number of teachers working communally and in a variety of roles, yet sharing a unified purpose, to truly educate a child. PLCs allow teachers to teach one another and form committees in which to formulate, disseminate, and test ideas. Every faculty member possesses sufficient talent and skill to produce an extraordinary program, and in most schools that assumption can be proved correct.

Community within schools is necessary for effective student learning for at least three reasons:

1. Students need clear and consistent messages about learning objectives and methods.

2. Teachers must take active responsibility for student success. And since any single teacher’s influence on a student is affected by the actions of other staff, each teacher’s responsibility to the student must extend beyond his or her classroom to the productivity of the school organization as a whole.
3. Teachers who collaborate with their colleagues are more likely to be effective with students, because they will benefit from expanded resources.

While these influences are real, teachers in a strong school community feel significant individual responsibility to maximize student success, regardless of student social background. Individual teacher responsibility becomes easier to assume if fortified by collective responsibility. But there are three obstacles that undermine many attempts at evolving the roles of teachers:

1. According to professional norms, most teachers want to be treated as autonomous professionals, and are thereby reluctant to become involved with their colleagues’ teaching and students.
2. There are few organizational mechanisms that help teachers to carefully examine the success of all students and to discuss problems and possible remedies.
3. Differences in power within a staff can interfere with the process of reaching consensus on staff responsibilities for high expectations, both for students and for one another.

Teachers value both giving and receiving help while conducting their work. Still it is often difficult to find enough time for teachers to work together. Specialization of academic subjects and other school services such as counseling, special education, and bilingual instruction can create additional roadblocks to productive collaboration.

Researchers and reformers can't afford to overlook the impact of decisions and actions that teachers working together in some type of sustained professional contact take to improve school performance. This collective reflection, development of standards, and expectations and formulation of plans for action are major hallmarks of a well-developed professional community.

A school-based professional community can offer support and motivation to teachers as they work to overcome the tight resources, isolation, time constraints, and other obstacles they commonly encounter in today's schools. Within a strong professional community, for example, teachers can work collectively to set and enforce standards of instruction and learning. Instead of obeying bureaucratic rules, faculty members act according to teachers' norms of professional behavior and duty. This also creates room within the school structure for principled disagreement and discussion on different issues, which can add to teachers' professional growth.

Professional communities are strong when the teachers in a school demonstrate five critical elements:

1. Members of the community talk about their situations and the specific challenges they face. Together, they critique themselves and the school as well as develop a set of shared norms, beliefs, and values that form a basis for action.
2. Teachers share, observe, and discuss each other's teaching methods and philosophies. By sharing practice, teachers learn new ways to talk about what they do, and the discussions kindle new relationships.
3. Teachers are focused on student learning. They assume that all students can learn at reasonably high levels, and that teachers can help them. Within a strong professional community, this focus is not enforced by rules but by mutually felt obligation among teachers.
4. A strong professional community encourages teachers to work together, not only to develop shared understandings of students, curriculum, and instructional policy, but also to produce materials and activities that improve instruction, curriculum, and assessment for students.

5. Teachers joined in a professional community affirm their common values concerning critical educational issues. These values can address children and their ability to learn; priorities for the use of time and space within a school setting; and the proper roles of parents, teachers, and administrators.

Several conditions must be met in order for a professional community to develop and grow within a school. These conditions include the following:

- **Time to Meet and Talk:** There must be support within the school for teachers who want to take risks and try new techniques and ideas. There should be almost daily opportunities for discussion among small groups with common interests as well as regular meetings among the entire faculty. Such periods must be built into the school's schedule and calendar in a way that gives teachers opportunities to consider critical issues in a reflective manner.
- **Physical Proximity:** Schools can increase teacher contact by creating team planning rooms or other common places for discussion of educational practices. In schools where classrooms are close together and "open door" policies are supported, teachers find it easier to work together and to gain new insight into their own practices.
- **Interdependent Teaching Roles:** It's important for schools to create recurring formal situations in which teachers work together. Examples include team teaching and integrated lesson design. The team provides a lasting, substantial structure for sustained communication based on shared goals. As teachers work together, they develop a sense of community and a greater sense of effectiveness.
- **Communication Structures:** The development of a professional community requires structures and opportunities that encourage an exchange of ideas, both within and across such organizational units as teams, grade levels, and subject departments.
- **Teacher Empowerment and School Autonomy:** Researchers suggest that teachers allowed to make decisions regarding their work feel more responsible for how well their students learn. The flexibility allows them to respond to the specific needs they see.

- **Openness to Improvement:** Teachers must feel they are supported in their efforts to learn more about their profession and to make decisions based on that new knowledge.
- **Trust and Respect:** Teachers must feel they are honored for their expertise within the school as well as within the district. Respect, trust, and a shared sense of loyalty build professional commitment and the cooperation required for collaboration and shared decision-making.
- **Cognitive- and Skill-Based:** Structures such as peer counseling can spread that expertise among faculty members, and can thereby help marginal or ineffective teachers improve.
- **Supportive Leadership:** Leadership is needed to keep the school focused on shared purpose, continuous improvement, and collaboration. Communications from the school's leadership will set the tone for the school.
- **Socialization:** As schools recruit and socialize new teachers, there must be a mechanism for passing along the school's vision to the newcomers. Staff must impart a sense that new teachers are an important and productive part of a meaningful collective.

What It Means to Be a Principal in a PLC

As schoolteachers find themselves called upon to participate in policy discussions and program reform, administrators are grappling with the implications of what it means to lead. Teacher study groups and curriculum councils became common practices, with decentralization of authority and new responsibilities delegated to teachers.

Merely granting teachers greater responsibility for decisions that affect their jobs, such as school policy and curriculum, doesn't guarantee that instruction will improve. In fact, many teachers may resist performing the extra administrative work that empowerment efforts often bring. Or they may resist involvement in their school's decision-making process. In such cases, the mechanisms put in place to empower teachers can end up augmenting a principal's control of the school instead. Yet in order for

students and teachers to benefit from empowerment, a PLC must develop among teachers, one committed to fundamental change in teaching practices.

Principals must be strong believers in making schools nurturing, inclusive places. Teachers work best when they feel they have control over how they do their jobs. At the same time, teachers need to be supported by the administration as they seek out new ideas and techniques and try them in the classroom. The principal must support this process by eliminating routine administrative matters from staff meetings while allowing teachers to design the classes they want to teach. Staffers weigh the merits of each individual proposal as well as addressing the larger question of whether the school's offerings are "balanced."

The principal must demonstrate a true commitment to letting teachers make decisions for themselves, as opposed to pushing an agenda of his or her own. As a result, teachers develop very divergent ideas about curriculum and instruction.

Teachers involved in PLCs consistently report that they exercise real power individually and collectively in decision-making, with many feeling that the greatest pressure to ensure the success of students—by providing true opportunities to learn—came from within their own ranks.

Collaboration can also occur through an array of formal committees that make decisions about aspects of teaching and governance. Teachers also are invited to serve on other committees, meeting after school to oversee the school's physical environment, curriculum and instruction, parent involvement, and other important concerns.

In a climate that demands more of students, more is demanded of the educators who teach them. When teachers embrace professionalism and keep up with advances in their field, they naturally become invigorated and productive. Embracing professional duties not only promises that students will learn more, it makes the teaching profession more rewarding as well.