Rick and Becky DuFour began their 2007 Northeast ASCD Affiliate Conference workshop with the “Big Ideas” of a Professional Learning Community (PLC).

- We accept learning as the fundamental purpose of our school and therefore are willing to examine all practices in light of their impact on learning.
- We are committed to working together to achieve our collective purpose. We cultivate a collaborative culture through development of high performing teams.
- We assess our effectiveness on the basis of results rather than intentions. Individuals, teams, and schools seek relevant data and information and use that information to promote [their] continuous improvement. ¹

Then they showed us a list of twenty-four national professional organizations and twenty-five educational researchers who endorse the PLC concepts; some of the researchers whose work I know and respect are Roland Barth, Doug Reeves, Dennis Sparks, Thomas Sergiovanni, Linda Darling-Hammond, Richard Elmore, Carl Glickman, Jonathan Saphier, Michael Fullan, Andy Hargreaves and Robert Marzano.

Establishing Sustainable PLCs

Now, if all these respected educators are in favor of PLCs, what do we need to do to establish viable, sustainable PLCs? The DuFours offered very specific guidance.

- Adopt new programs and practices
- Discontinue much of what we have been doing
- Agree on the essential learnings for each student for each week, month and year
- Build the capacity and effectiveness of teacher teams to work independently to analyze and impact their professional practice in order to improve individual and collective results that demonstrate how well each student is acquiring the essential learnings
- Create shared team knowledge for essential learnings
- Create team-based systems to monitor each student’s attainment of essential learnings in a timely, ongoing basis through frequent, common formative assessments
- Create school-based and district-based systems to ensure students receive additional time and support when they experience difficulty in mastering essential learnings
- Assess the school-based systems to ensure that they are timely, directive, and systematic
- Provide time for teachers within the school day/calendar
- Ensure that each team adopts student-oriented, essential learnings goals
- Ensure that each team adopts norms, critical attributes, and protocols of high performing teams
- Ensure that each team is hungry for ongoing, timely evidence of student learning
- Align all practices to promote our fundamental purpose of high levels of student learning
- Embed more of the process of teachers acquiring new knowledge in the actual doing of the task and less in formal training programs

**Overcoming Barriers to Establishing and Sustaining PLCs in Schools**

What obstacles are preventing us from establishing PLCs and sustaining them in all our schools? According to the DuFours there is a knowing-doing gap in our profession. They contend that we know what to do but that we do not follow through with the actions that are aligned with what we know. In their book *On Common Ground*, the DuFours identify ten barriers to action and how to overcome them.

1. Substituting a decision for action – be sure decisions are implemented in actions
2. Substituting mission for action – identify collective commitments that must be demonstrated in action
3. Planning as a substitute for action – create and implement ongoing cycle of improvement including team-based action research
4. Complexity as a barrier to action – keep it simple
5. Mindless precedent as a barrier to action – build shared knowledge of best practice
6. Internal competition as a barrier to action – build a “sharing culture” with SMART goals that require interdependent collaboration
7. Badly designed measurement systems as a barrier to action – create formative assessments that provide teachers regular, timely information about student learning
8. An external focus as a barrier to action – focus on what we can and should do to improve learning for each student
9. A focus on attitudes as a barrier to action – create protocols and consistently send the messages that will foster new attitudes and beliefs about improving student learning
10. Training as a substitute for action – balance training and doing by using learning from doing to adjust practice and then do again and adjust again

In schools I think we have a tendency to have discussions around topics such as teaching strategies, programs, curriculums, or professional development that we believe, if implemented, will have a positive impact on students learning. After all of that work and effort, however, there is no time to focus on what students are learning each day, using formative assessments to monitor their learning, analyzing collectively how our teaching impacted the learning, and responding collectively to students who did not learn and students who are ready for more. We need to refocus our time and attention on student learning.

**What a Kindergartener Wants: Will PLCs Help Him Learn?**

I asked my grandson who attends kindergarten what he had learned in school recently. He told me spelling, and then he asked for paper and a pen so he could print the words Zoo, Lion, Batman, and Spiderman to illustrate his important learning. Boy, he seemed really motivated! Then I asked him what he wanted to learn this week in school. He said, “I want to learn to use the telephone.” Now he could have said that he wanted to learn how to read, but I’ll stay with the telephone. We talked about the telephone, and he decided his first step was to copy down my phone number and his so we could talk about them and he could begin to learn how to remember them and be ready when he learned how
to “use the telephone.” I doubt his teacher is planning to teach him how to use the phone this week, but if it were an essential learning, could I be assured that the teacher, his or her team, and the school have in place everything that the DuFours and many others are saying is essential to a PLC? Will the school and district have overcome the barriers that stand in the way of actions that will truly have an impact on student learning? Can I assume they have answers to the four corollary questions if we believe all students can learn?

1. What is it we expect them to learn?
2. How will we know when they have learned it?
3. How will we respond when they have not learned it?
4. How will we enrich and extend the learning for students who are proficient? ¹

If we want students to learn how to use the phone (or to read), for example, how will we know if they can use the phone (or read), what will we do if they can not use the phone (or read) after we have taught them, and what will we do if they can use the phone (or read) either before we teach them or while we are still teaching other students in the class? Effective PLCs are developing answers to each of those questions for each essential learning in each grade and each course in elementary, middle and high schools throughout the country. Where do you stand in relation to the best practice of PLCs? How about your school or district?

**PLC Resources**

To promote better understanding of all things PLC, the DuFours have created a non-commercial web site that provides much information, resources, and web links to assist you in learning more about the topic: [www.allthingsplc.org](http://www.allthingsplc.org) I would also recommend the resource *Through New Eyes: Examining the Culture of Your School*. It includes a powerful dramatization of the experiences of a high school freshman in a “traditional” school and the same freshman in a PLC school that for me did a good job illustrating the day-to-day behaviors of staff in a PLC school. I would hope my freshmen grandson is having experiences typical of a PLC school. You can find it at [www.solution-tree.com](http://www.solution-tree.com)


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**11th Northeast ASCD Affiliate Leading & Learning Conference**

**Sustaining Learning Communities**

**November 30 – December 1, 2007**

**Keynote by Douglas Reeves**

**Over 900 educators attended the conference.**

**Author lunch with Pam Robbins**

**More pictures on page 26.**
I was steamed. How dare she accuse me of not supporting her and the other teachers? Who removed the screaming, flailing kindergarteners, to the detriment of my shins? Who tracked down the child who broke ranks on the return from recess, hidden away in one of many corners and closets? And what about the workbooks and hand lenses, the extra table and chairs we found; didn’t administration try and address every need and concern? None of that mattered at the moment or prevented Ms. Jacobs’ rolling eyes and murmurs as she stormed back to her room. I had twenty minutes to cool off and get ready for the monthly staff meeting.

In the Beginning

I remember August ’06, the week before Labor Day: the Martin Luther King, Jr. Charter School of Excellence had no adult or office furniture, no phones, some of our books, twenty five staff members, and in seven days 180 K through 2nd graders would arrive at our doors. In our third week of staff development, we busied ourselves with discussions on differentiation and Responsive Classroom techniques. Yet neither novice teachers nor I were truly ready to differentiate. It was the first year of teaching for many, the time for realizing the gulf between theory and practice, the time for appreciating just how much hand-holding exists in many practicum experiences. So we took what we learned into the field; morning meetings were great ways to start the week and the class day.

Every Monday the cafetorium roared with the school chant. We’d give recognition to students who used “walking” feet, who used their words to solve a conflict, to the child who helped a fallen classmate instead of laughing. The Book of Honor, as it’s called, is where these students’ names and deeds would be recorded. Many teachers used the meeting time in class to reinforce our monthly Dr. King value, through a song, discussion or a read aloud. This was an energetic, idealistic, and hard-working bunch of people who plunged into this monumental work, primarily on faith. We were a newly opened urban school, with neophyte administrators, yet things started out remarkably smoothly.

Children were well-behaved, even subdued. Hallways were orderly, lots of crayons and pencils were in use: there seemed to be smiles everywhere. Even the chaotic gridlock in the parking lot during dismissal was resolved by the third day. Then in week three I heard Ms. Jacobs yell. That same week Jason decided he no longer wanted to stay in line and could instead outrun us throughout the building. The second graders started what became months of petty squabbles, teasing and putdowns, usually commencing at breakfast. The honeymoon was over, and it seemed kindergarteners in particular were unraveling. Several took to leaving the classroom when frustration peaked. Others cried for hours over the tiniest matters, quickly comforted when parents arrived to take them home. Then there were those bent on kicking and throwing, which is when I became proficient in escorting five year olds in meltdown to my office, staying out of reach of flailing feet. I didn’t even have a template for my first suspension and had to call around Springfield until a colleague faxed us one.

Despite all this, I thought things were under control. That’s before hearing through the grapevine that we weren’t tough enough on the disruptive children. I began detecting tiny cracks of exasperation in voices of teachers receiving students from one-day suspensions. Some students seemed stuck in a revolving door in and out of class; earlier and earlier each day, they got less and less instruction and more and more parental escort. Parents didn’t like it either. Those whose children were victimized wanted drastic measures. Parents whose children offended accused teachers of lacking classroom control. Teachers complained they couldn’t teach. One threatened to quit – two paraprofessionals did. We tried a number of things and seemed to be making headway when Ms. Jacobs stormed in my office, demanding to know why a student was returned to her class after suspension. Ms. Jacobs felt she should no longer have to instruct such an unruly child. After a little back and forth, she opined that she spoke for many teachers who felt unsupported “in this God-forsaken place.” I knew she’d hurry back to vent with colleagues, there’d be some uh-huh-ing and adding on, and not a few now sat, at four on a Friday, glaring. . . .

The Learning Community from Scratch

By Jamel Adkins-Sharif

“I remember August ’06, the week before Labor Day: the Martin Luther King, Jr. Charter School of Excellence had no adult or office furniture, no phones, some of our books, twenty five staff members, and in seven days 180 K through 2nd graders would arrive at our doors. In our third week of staff development, we busied ourselves with discussions on differentiation and Responsive Classroom techniques. Yet neither novice teachers nor I were truly ready to differentiate. It was the first year of teaching for many, the time for realizing the gulf between theory and practice, the time for appreciating just how much hand-holding exists in many practicum experiences. So we took what we learned into the field; morning meetings were great ways to start the week and the class day.

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The Learning Community from Scratch

By Jamel Adkins-Sharif
Doing the Hard Work

Edward de Bono carried the afternoon. Using his Six Hats Thinking paradigm, we targeted the frustrating challenge facing us and schools throughout urban America: student behavior that negatively impacts learning. Circulating around the room in groups, staff donned a particular colored hat, then processed and recorded ideas and responses on sheets of chart paper. As expected, there was much lingering around the red hat, which asks: How do I feel about this? Two sheets of chart paper were required. Yet it was cathartic, and after the laundry list of I’m angry, can’t teach like this, not a babysitter, who’s raising them, not fair to those who want to learn, etc., we could put on our blue hats and ask: what thinking or planning is needed? We discovered we’d already given thought to this and the green hat query: What new ideas are possible? We had formed a democratic School Culture Committee of teachers, teaching partners, lunch mothers and the executive director.

They developed a common language around five themes: How we walk in the halls; how we eat in the cafeteria; how we dress; how we learn; how we treat each other. Each theme had four quick bullets, easy for kids to remember. Every adult used the language, and children eventually internalized it. Now when we met for schoolwide morning meeting or assembly, we issued Book of Honor certificates for students and classes that exemplified one or more aspects of school culture. Detail was important, as was peer recognition: Boys and girls, Luis was sitting with his bottom on chair, feet on floor, and raised his hand to ask to use the bathroom (last week he bolted out of the door to go relieve himself). We hired additional paraprofessionals (which we dignify as teaching partners) to replace those who couldn’t hang in and to bring more men into the building.

We recognized most of our overt disruption and defiance came from boys; having a few more men seemed to settle things. That they are African American was an added benefit, as our student body is primarily black, and too many children spoke angrily of missing incarcerated fathers. A couple of teaching partners became our Character Development Specialists, a combination of counselor and dean. We learned when they were assisting teachers that they possessed a knack for deescalating students and helping them think through decisions. Our school social worker and a couple of interns from Springfield College of Social Work held friendship groups during lunch for those second graders and anger management sessions as needed. The physical education teacher ran a problem-solving table during recess. We incorporated the Second Step Violence Prevention program as part of our social studies curriculum. We held a family night and detailed our approach to parents, offering some suggestions on how they could support and reinforce. And probably most importantly, we encouraged, pleaded, perhaps even coerced parents into the building, particularly those whose children were most challenging, and who consequently had become the most defensive and resentful. Just pop in, we urged, peek into classrooms, hang out during lunch, watch things in the hall. See that we are committed to your child, and we care.

Some parents weren’t used to the transparency and were even suspicious of motive. Yet the ones who stuck with us came around and helped their children do the same. It wasn’t total success of course; there were those we couldn’t bring in, those who couldn’t get past the blame game. There were some who couldn’t accept possible special needs implications. And for some we just weren’t the best fit for their child’s needs. These were difficult conversations, but we had them. So in reminding the staff of the good points, as the yellow hat requests, we had seen growth and progress. Yet as Frederick Douglass once implored, it never comes without struggle. And the reality of what’s wrong in many district schools, the reason for a charter school’s existence in the first place, is there are no easy answers, but there exist many possibilities.

Realizing Success

Of course we also didn’t bring all staff around completely, but the critical mass overwhelmed the squeaky wheels in the end. Ms. Jacobs glared a lot less; others thanked me for the simple opportunity to vent. I reminded them it was where we started but not where we could remain. For some it was simply a philosophical difference, with an approach to socialization that emphasizes relentlessly modeled instruction and logical consequences as opposed to isolation and punishment. For those we could refer to the school charter, and they’d have to make a professional decision. But the school was sticking to its mission: to prepare K-5 students of Springfield for academic success and engaged citizenship: we believe neither occurs without explicit character education. The white hat
requests simply the facts, known all too well: the achievement gap, poverty, broken and dysfunctional homes, racism, poor-quality teachers, lack of high expectations.

I reminded them of another fact: They came in with a sense of mission, with idealism, a sense something wasn’t right coupled with a belief they could change the world. I reminded them it’s why we hired them, why the executive director and I continue to count our blessings for our “dream team.” The rewards trickle in, and if you look closely, listen earnestly, they’re all around: The proud crowd of 150-plus family members at our end-of-year celebration; the thanksgiving from parents grateful we hadn’t given up on their children; the kindergarteners who could now read, the fidgety child who sat long enough to present his artwork on organisms, the buzz in the community, and mostly, the smiling, hopeful faces that run up and hug us every morning. De Bono puts on his last hat, the black one, re-tooled grey at our school, and asks: What could be wrong with this? The staff answers: Nothing, so long remember we can, we will, and we believe.

Jamel Adkins-Sharif is Director of Education at the Martin Luther King, Jr. Charter School of Excellence in Springfield, Massachusetts. The school, in its second year, will expand a grade annually until it is a K-5 elementary school. Jamel is a graduate of the MSSAA Teachers21 – MASCD Leadership Licensure Program (LLP). For more information on the LLP, go to www.mascd.org. For information on Edward de Bono’s work go to www.draftymanor.com/bart/sixhats.htm.

Join the Next Generation of School Administrators

Applications are now being accepted for the class of 2009 for the MSSAA-Teachers21-MASCD Leadership Licensure Programs. The LLP prepares principals, assistant principals, and supervisors/directors. The LLPS, offered in partnership with READS Collaborative, prepares superintendents/assistant superintendents. In this highly competitive program, students spent two weeks in the summer and one weekend a month learning about and immersed in effective instructional and organizational leadership. Candidates completed a 300 hour practicum and a professional portfolio which includes artifacts and reflections related to the Massachusetts Professional Standards for Administrators. The cohort model enables participants to develop important collegial skills and to benefit from the diverse backgrounds and perspectives represented in the group.

Both programs offer the option of a graduate degree. LLP students may earn a Masters in Organizational Management from Endicott College; LLPS students may earn a Ph.D. from Lesley University. The LLP is held at MSSAA in Franklin; the LLPS takes place at READS Collaborative in Middleboro.

There is a tuition discount for applications postmarked by January 31, 2008. For more information on the Leadership Licensure Programs, visit www.mascd.org.

MASCD promotes the Whole Child Education Compact

- Each student enters school healthy and learns about and practices a healthy lifestyle.
- Each student learns in an intellectually challenging environment that is physically and emotionally safe for students and adults.
- Each student is actively engaged in learning and is connected to the school and broader community.
- Each student has access to personalized learning and is supported by qualified, caring adults.
- Each graduate is challenged by a well-balanced curriculum and is prepared for success in college or further study and for employment in a global environment.

If you would like to host or lead a community conversation on the education of the whole child in your school or district, please contact mfhayes@mascd.org and visit www.wholechildeducation.org for a host of resources.
What Is a “Professional Learning Community?"

By Richard DuFour

The idea of improving schools by developing professional learning communities is currently in vogue. People use this term 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.

The professional learning community model has now reached a critical juncture, one well-known to those who have witnessed the fate of other well-intentioned school reform efforts. In this all-too-familiar cycle, initial enthusiasm gives way to confusion about the fundamental concepts driving the initiative, followed by inevitable implementation problems, the conclusion that the reform has failed to bring about the desired results, abandonment of the reform, and the launch of a new search for the next promising initiative. Another reform movement has come and gone, reinforcing the conventional education wisdom that has come and gone, reinforcing the concept’s merits.

What are the “big ideas” that represent the core principles of professional learning communities? How do these principles guide schools’ efforts to sustain the professional learning community model until it becomes deeply embedded in the culture of the school?

Big Idea #1: Ensuring That Students Learn

The professional learning community model flows from the assumption that the core mission of formal education is not simply to ensure that students are taught but to ensure that they learn. This simple shift — from a focus on teaching to a focus on learning — has profound implications for schools.

School mission statements that promise “learning for all” have become a cliché. But when a school staff takes that statement literally — when teachers view it as a pledge to ensure the success of each student rather than as politically correct hyperbole — profound changes begin to take place. The school staff finds itself asking, what school characteristics and practices have been most successful in helping all students achieve at high levels? How could we adopt those characteristics and practices in our own school? What commitments would we have to make to one another to create such a school? What indicators could we monitor to assess our progress? When the staff has built shared knowledge and found common ground on these questions, the school has a solid foundation for moving forward with its improvement initiative.

As the school moves forward, every professional in the building must engage with colleagues in the ongoing exploration of three crucial questions that drive the work of those within a professional learning community:

* What do we want each student to learn?
* How will we know when each student has learned it?
* How will we respond when a student experiences difficulty in learning?

The answer to the third question separates learning communities from traditional schools.

Here is a scenario that plays out daily in traditional schools. A teacher teaches a unit to the best of his or her ability, but at the conclusion of the unit some students have not mastered the essential outcomes. On the one hand, the teacher would like to take the time to help those students. On the other hand, the teacher feels...
compelled to move forward to “cover” the course content. If the teacher uses instructional time to assist students who have not learned, the progress of students who have mastered the content will suffer; if the teacher pushes on with new concepts, the struggling students will fall farther behind.

What typically happens in this situation? Almost invariably, the school leaves the solution to the discretion of individual teachers, who vary widely in the ways they respond. Some teachers conclude that the struggling students should transfer to a less rigorous course or should be considered for special education. Some lower their expectations by adopting less challenging standards for subgroups of students within their classrooms. Some look for ways to assist the students before and after school. Some allow struggling students to fail.

When a school begins to function as a professional learning community, however, teachers become aware of the incongruity between their commitment to ensure learning for all students and their lack of a coordinated strategy to respond when some students do not learn. The staff addresses this discrepancy by designing strategies to ensure that struggling students receive additional time and support, no matter who their teacher is. In addition to being systematic and schoolwide, the professional learning community’s response to students who experience difficulty is

* **Timely.** The school quickly identifies students who need additional time and support.

* **Based on intervention rather than remediation.** The plan provides students with help as soon as they experience difficulty rather than relying on summer school, retention, and remedial courses.

* **Directive.** Instead of inviting students to seek additional help, the systematic plan requires students to devote extra time and receive additional assistance until they have mastered the necessary concepts.

The systematic, timely, and directive intervention program operating at Adlai Stevenson High School in Lincolnshire, Illinois, provides an excellent example. Every three weeks, every student receives a progress report. Within the first month of school, new students discover that if they are not doing well in a class, they will receive a wide array of immediate interventions. First, the teacher, counselor, and faculty advisor each talk with the student individually to help resolve the problem. The school also notifies the student’s parents about the concern. In addition, the school offers the struggling student a pass from study hall to a school tutoring center to get additional help in the course. An older student mentor, in conjunction with the struggling student’s advisor, helps the student with homework during the student’s daily advisory period.

Any student who continues to fall short of expectations at the end of six weeks despite these interventions is required, rather than invited, to attend tutoring sessions during the study hall period. Counselors begin to make weekly checks on the struggling student’s progress. If tutoring fails to bring about improvement within the next six weeks, the student is assigned to a daily guided study hall with 10 or fewer students. The guided study hall supervisor communicates with classroom teachers to learn exactly what homework each student needs to complete and monitors the completion of that homework. Parents attend a meeting at the school at which the student, parent, counselor, and classroom teacher must sign a contract clarifying what each party will do to help the student meet the standards for the course.

Stevenson High School serves more than 4,000 students. Yet this school has found a way to monitor each student’s learning on a timely basis and to ensure that every student who experiences academic difficulty will receive extra time and support for learning. Like Stevenson, schools that are truly committed to the concept of learning for each student will stop subjecting struggling students to a haphazard education lottery. These schools will guarantee that each student receives whatever additional support he or she needs.

**Big Idea #2: A Culture of Collaboration**

Educators who are building a professional learning community recognize that they must work together to achieve their collective purpose of learning for all. Therefore, they create structures to promote a collaborative culture.

Despite compelling evidence indicating that working collaboratively represents best practice, teachers in many schools continue to work in isolation. Even in schools that endorse the idea of collaboration, the staff’s willingness to collaborate often stops at the classroom door. Some school staffs equate the term “collaboration” with congeniality and focus on building group camaraderie. Other staffs join forces to develop consensus on operational procedures, such as how they will respond to tardiness or supervise recess. Still others organize themselves into committees to oversee different facets of the school’s operation, such as discipline, technology, and social climate. Although each of these activities can serve a useful purpose, none represents the kind of professional dialogue that can
transform a school into a professional learning community.

The powerful collaboration that characterizes professional learning communities is a systematic process in which teachers work together to analyze and improve their classroom practice. Teachers work in teams, engaging in an ongoing cycle of questions that promote deep team learning. This process, in turn, leads to higher levels of student achievement.

At Boones Mill Elementary School, a K-5 school serving 400 students in rural Franklin County, Virginia, the powerful collaboration of grade-level teams drives the school improvement process. The following scenario describes what Boones Mill staff members refer to as their teaching-learning process.

The school’s five 3rd grade teachers study state and national standards, the district curriculum guide, and student achievement data to identify the essential knowledge and skills that all students should learn in an upcoming language arts unit. They also ask the 4th grade teachers what they hope students will have mastered by the time they leave 3rd grade. On the basis of the shared knowledge generated by this joint study, the 3rd grade team agrees on the critical outcomes that they will make sure each student achieves during the unit.

Next, the team turns its attention to developing common formative assessments to monitor each student’s mastery of the essential outcomes. Team members discuss the most authentic and valid ways to assess student mastery. They set the standard for each skill or concept that each student must achieve to be deemed proficient. They agree on the criteria by which they will judge the quality of student work, and they practice applying those criteria until they can do so consistently. Finally, they decide when they will administer the assessments.

After each teacher has examined the results of the common formative assessment for his or her students, the team analyzes how all 3rd graders performed. Team members identify strengths and weaknesses in student learning and begin to discuss how they can build on the strengths and address the weaknesses. The entire team gains new insights into what is working and what is not, and members discuss new strategies that they can implement in their classrooms to raise student achievement.

At Boones Mill, collaborative conversations happen routinely throughout the year. Teachers use frequent formative assessments to investigate the questions “Are students learning what they need to learn?” and “Who needs additional time and support to learn?” rather than relying solely on summative assessments that ask “Which students learned what was intended and which students did not?”

Collaborative conversations call on team members to make public what has traditionally been private—goals, strategies, materials, pacing, questions, concerns, and results. These discussions give every teacher someone to turn to and talk to, and they are explicitly structured to improve the classroom practice of teachers—individually and collectively.

For teachers to participate in such a powerful process, the school must ensure that everyone belongs to a team that focuses on student learning. Each team must have time to meet during the workday and throughout the school year. Teams must focus their efforts on crucial questions related to learning and generate products that reflect that focus, such as lists of essential outcomes, different kinds of assessment, analyses of student achievement, and strategies for improving results. Teams must develop norms or protocols to clarify expectations regarding roles, responsibilities, and relationships among team members. Teams must adopt student achievement goals linked with school and district goals.

For meaningful collaboration to occur, a number of things must also stop happening. Schools must stop pretending that merely presenting teachers with state standards or district curriculum guides will guarantee that all students have access to a common curriculum. Even school districts that devote tremendous time and energy to designing the intended curriculum often pay little attention to the implemented curriculum (what teachers actually teach) and even less
to the attained curriculum (what students learn) (Marzano, 2003). Schools must also give teachers time to analyze and discuss state and district curriculum documents.

More important, teacher conversations must quickly move beyond “What are we expected to teach?” to “How will we know when each student has learned?” In addition, faculties must stop making excuses for failing to collaborate. Few educators publicly assert that working in isolation is the best strategy for improving schools. Instead, they give reasons why it is impossible for them to work together: “We just can’t find the time.” “Not everyone on the staff has endorsed the idea.” “We need more training in collaboration.” But the number of schools that have created truly collaborative cultures proves that such barriers are not insurmountable.

As Roland Barth (1991) wrote, “Are teachers and administrators willing to accept the fact that they are part of the problem? . . . God didn’t create self-contained classrooms, 50-minute periods, and subjects taught in isolation. We did—because we find working alone safer than and preferable to working together.” (pp. 126–127)

In the final analysis, building the collaborative culture of a professional learning community is a question of will. A group of staff members who are determined to work together will find a way.

**Big Idea #3: A Focus on Results**

Professional learning communities judge their effectiveness on the basis of results. Working together to improve student achievement becomes the routine work of everyone in the school. Every teacher team participates in an ongoing process of identifying the current level of student achievement, establishing a goal to improve the current level, working together to achieve that goal, and providing periodic evidence of progress. The focus of team goals shifts. Such goals as “We will adopt the Junior Great Books program” or “We will create three new labs for our science course” give way to “We will increase the percentage of students who meet the state standard in language arts from 83 percent to 90 percent” or “We will reduce the failure rate in our course by 50 percent.”

Schools and teachers typically suffer from the DRIP syndrome—Data Rich/Information Poor. The results-oriented professional learning community not only welcomes data but also turns data into useful and relevant information for staff. Teachers have never suffered from a lack of data. Even a teacher who works in isolation can easily establish the mean, mode, median, standard deviation, and percentage of students who demonstrated proficiency every time he or she administers a test. However, data will become a catalyst for improved teacher practice only if the teacher has a basis of comparison.

When teacher teams develop common formative assessments throughout the school year, each teacher can identify how his or her students performed on each skill compared with other students. Individual teachers can call on their team colleagues to help them reflect on areas of concern. Each teacher has access to the ideas, materials, strategies, and talents of the entire team.

Freeport Intermediate School, located 50 miles south of Houston, Texas, attributes its success to an unrelenting focus on results. Teachers work in collaborative teams for 90 minutes daily to clarify the essential outcomes of their grade levels and courses and to align those outcomes with state standards. They develop consistent instructional calendars and administer the same brief assessment to all students at the same grade level at the conclusion of each instructional unit, roughly once a week.

Each quarter, the teams administer a common cumulative exam. Each spring, the teams develop and administer practice tests for the state exam. Each year, the teams pore over the results of the state test, which are broken down to show every teacher how his or her students performed on every skill and on every test item. The teachers share their results from all of these assessments with their colleagues,
and they quickly learn when a teammate has been particularly effective in teaching a certain skill. Team members consciously look for successful practice and attempt to replicate it in their own practice; they also identify areas of the curriculum that need more attention.

Freeport Intermediate has been transformed from one of the lowest-performing schools in the state to a national model for academic achievement. Principal Clara Sale-Davis believes that the crucial first step in that transformation came when the staff began to honestly confront data on student achievement and to work together to improve results rather than make excuses for them.

Of course, this focus on continual improvement and results requires educators to change traditional practices and revise prevalent assumptions. Educators must begin to embrace data as a useful indicator of progress. They must stop disregarding or excusing unfavorable data and honestly confront the sometimes-brutal facts. They must stop using averages to analyze student performance and begin to focus on the success of each student.

**Conclusion**

Educators who focus on results must also stop limiting improvement goals to factors outside the classroom, such as student discipline and staff morale, and shift their attention to goals that focus on student learning. They must stop assessing their own effectiveness on the basis of how busy they are or how many new initiatives they have launched and begin instead to ask, “Have we made progress on the goals that are most important to us?” Educators must stop working in isolation and hoarding their ideas, materials, and strategies and begin to work together to meet the needs of all students.

Even the grandest design eventually translates into hard work. The professional learning community model is a grand design — a powerful new way of working together that profoundly affects the practices of schooling. But initiating and sustaining the concept requires hard work. It requires the school staff to 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 will rise. If they fail to demonstrate the discipline to initiate and sustain this work, then their school is unlikely to become more effective, even if those within it claim to be a professional learning community. The rise or fall of the professional learning community concept depends not on the merits of the concept itself, but on the most important element in the improvement of any school — the commitment and persistence of the educators within it.

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Leading Professional Learning Communities
By Andy Hargreaves

Professional learning communities (PLCs) are no longer unusual or controversial. Their advent is over, their establishment secured. While researchers and developers push them further ahead by showing how they can become more effective or mature (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006), professional learning communities will soon be as accepted as a part of school life as notebooks, performance evaluations, and good old-fashioned chalk. Today you can no more oppose the idea of teachers looking at their practices and at evidence of their students’ learning together as a basis for improvement than you could oppose the ideas of charity, virtue, or justice.

Best-selling books, guides, and training programs have raised awareness of the importance and impact of PLCs and provided practitioners with concrete advice about how to create and sustain them (Dufour & Eaker, 1998; Eaker, Dufour, & Burnette, 2002). Schools and districts are rebranding themselves as “learning communities”; systems are encouraging and investing resources in developing them (Fullan, 2007). The Canadian province of Alberta has even decided to mandate them! In name or in nature, PLCs will be an educational force to be reckoned with for years to come.

But let’s not celebrate victory prematurely. In principle, the idea of professional learning communities engenders broad support. It appeals to both the Left and Right, to those who value process as well as those who care about the product, to those who demand hard evidence and those who value soft skills, to evidence as well as experience, and to both relationships and results. The symbolic and inclusive appeal of ideas such as professional learning communities, like the very idea of community itself, can elicit enthusiasm, attract adherents, and build initial commitment. But the very inclusiveness and generality that lead to the attractiveness of ideas such as this can also be their undoing, when planning is followed immediately by implementation and impassioned rhetoric is converted into imperfect reality.

Professional learning communities can improve student learning or simply elevate scores on high-stakes tests, often at the expense of learning. They can heighten the capacity for community reflection that is at the heart of teacher professionalism, or they can enforce collective compliance with prescribed programs and pacing guides, which demean that professionalism. The things that pass for professional learning communities can broaden children’s learning, in terms of their curiosity about and mastery of themselves and their world, or they can narrow learning to an almost exclusive focus on literacy, math, and standardized basics. The best writers on and advocates for professional learning communities understand these distinctions and take a stand on them. But as Charles Naylor (2005) points out, the worst proponents of PLCs avoid such controversy and stick only to the generalities and technicalities of specifying goals, defining a focus, examining data, and establishing teams in ways that give no offense to their clients and that do not jeopardize their own commercial prospects.

For this reason, I have identified and analyzed seven different versions of professional learning communities. I review three forms that comprise communities of empowerment that engage people together to liberate learning and lift achievement for all students and four other forms that constitute communities of containment and control where the government and the state exercise technical and ideological control over educators and other subjects through manipulating leadership, evidence, data gathering, and particular kinds of supervision and teamwork. These different forms of PLCs come from my own and others’ research and from helping to develop professional learning communities with teachers, leaders, and policy makers around the world. This chapter sets out these multiple forms; examines their moral, professional, and educational strengths and weaknesses; and identifies implications for school leadership. The seven forms fall under two categories: Communities of Containment and Control and Communities of Empowerment.

### Communities of Containment and Control
1. The Titular Community
2. The Totalitarian Training Sect
3. The Autistic Surveillance System
4. The Speed Dating Agency

### Communities of Empowerment
5. Living and Learning Communities
6. Inclusive and Responsive Communities
7. Activist and Empowered Communities

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Communities of Containment and Control

1. The Titular Community

Some changes toward becoming professional learning communities are changes in name only (Fullan, 2007). Schools and school systems may retile themselves as learning communities, but they are not always entitled to be treated as such. Mandating that schools become professional learning communities runs this risk on a much greater scale - diverting effort and energy to symbolic changes of title rather than substantive changes that lead to real improvement. As a leader, you can’t just say your school is now a learning community. It also has to act like one.

2. The Totalitarian Training Sect

Far too many moves toward becoming professional learning communities are made in the context of closely prescribed and tightly paced instructional programs, along with control-oriented policies and leadership strategies that demand high “fidelity” or compliance from teachers. In these contexts of systemically imposed, highly prescribed literacy programs, professional learning communities can easily turn into what I have labeled “performance training sects” (Hargreaves, 2003). Here, analysis of student work and results is undertaken only in the context of tested literacy and math, and performed in the context of norms and values that demand “fidelity” to ideologically selected and commercially promoted programs imposed from the outside.

3. The Autistic Surveillance System

In these systems of surveillance, instead of being intelligently informed by evidence in deep and demanding cultures of trusted relationships that deepen learning and press for everyone’s success, professional learning communities turn into add-on teams of thrown-together staff who are driven by data in cultures of fear that demand instant results. Data-driven instruction ends up driving educators to distraction - away from the passionate enthusiasm for rich processes of teaching and learning in classrooms and enriched relationships with children, and into a technocratic, tunnel-vision focus on manipulating and improving test scores in literacy and mathematics by any quick-fix available - more test preparation here, after-school classes there, concentrating on cells of children who fall just below the failure line somewhere else. All of this does nothing to enhance the actual quality of teaching and learning.

If classrooms are to prepare all children with the wide range of knowledge, innovation, and creativity that will give them opportunities to participate at the highest levels of the new knowledge economy (Giles & Hargreaves, 2006; Hargreaves, 2003; New Commission on the Skills of the American Workforce, 2007), and if teachers’ work is to be enriching and engaging enough to attract and retain the most capable adults who will make up the next generation of the profession, then leaders must halt the degeneration of professional communities into the perverted inversions of what they so inspirationally once aspired to be. They must move beyond designing professional learning communities as data-driven teams that generate instant gains in tested achievement results to something that is more educationally inspirational, socially equitable, and professionally sustainable instead.

4. The Speed Dating Agency

When exhilarating, effective, short-term strategies are added to the questionable logic of short-term funding cycles and proposal timelines, within a policy culture characterized by demands for immediate improvement and a teaching culture already steeped in a present-time orientation, along with a performance-driven language in which teachers and principals refer not to engagement with learning but to the movement of students into the right achievement cells by “targeting” the right groups, “pushing” students harder, “moving” them up, “raising aspirations,” “holding people down,” and “getting a grip” on where youngsters are, the result is a combined pressure to preserve and perpetuate the short-term orientation of the present. Exchanges of strategies among communities of interacting professionals that do not challenge the core of how they teach keep educators’ eyes only on what is immediate. More reflective and self-questioning commitments to longer-term transformations in teaching and learning, which will ultimately benefit all students, are deferred to an ever-receding future.

The challenge of leadership here is to move beyond immediate satisfaction to the task of simultaneously engaging staff in the more difficult, demanding, and personally challenging quest for longer-term transformation. Drawing on our strategic work with the schools and on key business literature concerning how to address the long and short of

The mission of the Massachusetts Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development is to promote quality teaching and learning in Massachusetts by fostering instructional and curriculum leadership. The purpose of MASCED Perspectives is to share diverse experiences and perspectives of educators across the Commonwealth and to stimulate discussion and further thought on educational topics relevant to this mission. Educators are invited to join MASCED by going to www.MASCED.org.
organizational change (e.g., Dodd & Favaro, 2007), some strategies for moving beyond the short term include the following:

- Allocating equal funding to short- and long-term goals
- Placing long-term items on meeting agendas before short-term ones
- Establishing overlapping planning teams with long- and short-term emphases
- Setting out intermediary mid-term goals over 1 or 2 years
- Identifying clear indicators of progress toward longer-term objectives (e.g., measures of changes in teacher attitudes and behaviors, or in levels of student engagement)
- Solving short-term problems using long-term principles such as always acting ethically, respectfully, and inclusively, even when firing people or confronting performance problems
- Comparing like with like—so that performance is compared fairly to schools in the same “ball park,” not to those in an entirely different league.

Communities of Empowerment

5. Living and Learning Communities

Strong professional learning communities are not merely a matter of goals and teamwork, meetings and plans concerned with evidence and achievement. They are a way of life that does not focus only or always on tested literacy but on all aspects of learning and also caring for others within the school. A study by Chris James and his colleagues of ten outstandingly successful primary schools serving disadvantaged communities in Wales reveals that while these schools, which are characterized by high-quality teaching and superb leadership in stable environments with little staff turnover, do pay proper attention to the basics of literacy and numeracy, they also extend far beyond these basics into an enriching, engaging, and enjoyable curriculum that expands students’ horizons and deepens their connections to their learning and to each other (James, Connelly, Dunning, & Elliot, 2006).

At their best, members of professional learning communities deliberate intelligently about what kinds of learning count as achievement, and courageously question, challenge, and subvert imposed prescriptions that diminish that learning. In this respect, strong and sustainable professional learning communities are also ethical learning communities (Campbell, 2005). They are communities in which teachers discuss and determine how to act in the face of instructional fixations with the excesses of testing - such as cultural bias in test items and whether teachers should interpret and mediate them for their students even though that might be illegal; or paying attention to the learning needs of second-language students by communicating with them in their first language even when this is officially forbidden (Sanchez, 2006).

Professional learning communities are, in this respect, empowered all the way up the line, and across it. People know how to manage up and assert their needs in relation to superiors - teachers with principals, and principals with superintendents - as well as manage down. They engage in lively, vigorous debates of how best to improve learning and raise achievement through grown-up norms of dialogue that respectfully question existing practice, where this is warranted. Professional learning communities are not families in the sense of the principal being the benevolent but emotionally controlling matriarch or patriarch, while the teachers serve as surrogate children. Interestingly, in the study by James and his colleagues of the 10 highly effective Welsh schools, educators did not refer to their schools as families - since, as James points out, mature cultures do not replay or replace the hierarchical emotional dependencies of family life within official school settings.

In strong and sustainable professional communities, improvement is evident throughout the life and learning of the school, across a broad and enriching curriculum, in fulfilling relationships as well as earnest performance, and in an empowered environment of grown-up norms where people can challenge one another, manage up as well as manage down, and where confident principals and superintendents can encourage as well as endure all of this as everyone strives to find the strategies and solutions that can support improved learning and increased achievement among all students.

6. Inclusive and Responsive Communities

Finland is a nation that has endured almost seven centuries of domination and oppression - achieving true independence only within the last three generations. In the context of this historical legacy, and in the face of a harsh and demanding climate and northern geography, it is not surprising that one of the most popular Finnish sayings translates as “It was long, and it was hard, but we did it!”

Technological creativity and competitiveness do not break Finns from their past but instead connect them to it in a unitary narrative of lifelong learning and societal development. All this occurs within a strong welfare state that supports and steers (a favorite word in Finland) the educational system and the economy. A strong public system of education provides education free of charge as a universal right all the way through public school and higher education—including all necessary resources,
equipment, musical instruments, and free school meals for everyone. Science and technology are high priorities, though not at the expense of the arts and creativity. Almost 3% of the nation’s GDP is allocated to scientific and technological development; a national committee that includes leading corporate executives and university presidents, and that is chaired by the prime minister, steers and integrates economic and educational strategy. Finland contains essential lessons for societies that aspire, educationally and economically, to be successful, as well as for sustainable creative knowledge societies and schools that want to behave more like professional learning communities. Building a future without completely breaking from the past; supporting not only pedagogical change but also continuity; fostering strong connections between education and economic skills development without sacrificing culture and creativity; raising standards by lifting the many rather than pushing a privileged few; connecting private goals to the public good; developing a highly qualified and regarded profession that brings about improvement through trust, cooperation, and responsibility; embedding and embodying instructional leadership into almost every principal’s weekly activity; and emphasizing principles of professional and community-based rather than merely managerial accountability—these are just some of the essential lessons to be taken from Finland’s exceptional educational and economic journey.

Yet it is important to acknowledge that Finland’s integration of the information economy and the welfare state as a continuous narrative of legacy and progress that defines the national identity is not without its blind spots. Having been an embattled and oppressed historical minority, Finland remains a somewhat xenophobic society, suspicious of immigrants and outsiders, and threatened by those who challenge or diverge from the Finnish way of life (Castells & Himanen, 2002). Without a willingness to accommodate higher rates of immigration, the impending retirement of large proportions of Baby Boomer employees (as many municipal administrators described to us) will also increase the financial burden on the welfare state and jeopardize the basic sustainability of Finland’s economy and society that depends on it.

Taking the cue from Finland but also thinking beyond it, inclusive and responsive communities care about and serve their diverse students in ways that make sense and work for them culturally; they recruit, retain, and engage highly qualified teachers who thrive on the empowerment, discretion, and support that are at the heart of professionalism; they are sustained by deeply held ethics of trust, collaboration, and responsibility; and they are part of a great social vision where commitment to the public good, as evidenced in private sacrifice and redistributive taxation, is principled and strong.

7. Activist and Empowered Communities

It is helpful here to move from Finland in the far north to the edgy streets of culturally diverse Los Angeles to find a stronger test of how professional learning communities might need to become more socially inclusive and activist communities, if they are to create the shake-up in society and bureaucracy that is necessary for lifting up their students and their schools.

Jeannie Oakes and her colleagues at the University of California, Los Angeles, argue that conventional change and reform strategies fail because the learning and teaching envisaged does not have clearly articulated goals concerning social justice other than those narrowly concerned with tested achievement and achievement gaps (Oakes, Rogers, & Lipton, 2006). Moreover, the strategies for bringing about change are directed at and driven by school and school system professionals; students and parents are rarely involved other than as targets for or consumers of the change effort. In this sense, neither the means nor the ends of most change efforts - nor the theories of action that underpin them - challenge or confront the structures of power and control in society that systematically protect the schools, programs, and instructional strategies that are especially advantageous for white elites and their children.

In response, Oakes and colleagues (2006) draw on John Dewey’s principles of participative inquiry as well as American traditions of community activism and organizing to propose classroom and school-level changes that raise achievement and secure wider improvement by connecting low-achieving poor and minority students to university researchers and teacher inquiry networks that train and support them to inquire into, and then act upon, the conditions of their own education and lives. Such forms of collaborative inquiry are not merely culturally responsive pedagogies that respond to the culturally variable learning styles of diverse students, nor are they simply acts of cooperative instruction or intellectual creativity that enhance cognitive achievement. Rather, in line with the legacy of Paulo Freire (2000), these practices, which Oakes and colleagues help to create in practice as well as in theory, increase achievement and improve the conditions for other people’s achievement by helping students inquire into, understand, and want to act on the conditions that affect the lives and education of themselves and their communities – dilapidated buildings, large class sizes, divisive tracking practices, inadequate books and materials, shortages of qualified teachers, and restricted opportunities to learn.
These pedagogically transformative practices are linked to an activist orientation among involved students and also among those parents and local communities who relentlessly challenge bureaucrats and legislators with evidence-based arguments as well as disruptive strategies and knowledge, with the aim of providing genuinely equal opportunities for the poor alongside the affluent.

In these circumstances, school principals and superintendents are not just building managers or even instructional leaders; they are leaders of their students, their fellow professionals, their wider communities—and indeed of their societies as a whole in collective pursuit of a greater social good as professionals, community workers, and citizens.

Conclusion

So much of what passes for professional learning communities amounts to a corruption of their fundamental principles and purposes - being little more than a change in title, a hyperactive diversion, an autistic obsession with numbers and targets, or a pretext for insisting on compliance and imposing control. It is up to all of us to make certain that professional learning communities do not degenerate into new forms of domination or distraction, but that they become and remain all that their creators intended for them: places of collaboration, learning, community, and hope, where professionals, parents, and community members strive and struggle to ensure that their schools and all their students are the best they can be.

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References

General Observations

As one reads about learning communities, whether the articles included in this bibliography or the chapters in this book written by the faculty and staff who have designed and implemented learning communities, there are clear themes that rise to the level of general observations about what makes learning communities work and why. We have picked four of the most striking to highlight in this chapter.

Academic Affairs-Student Affairs Partnership

For freshman residential learning communities in particular, the stronger and better the academic affairs-student affairs partnership, the more effective the learning community. Faculty and student affairs professionals bring different sets of knowledge and skills to the table. Faculty are experts in their discipline and the content of the academic courses they teach. Student affairs professionals are experts in student intellectual and moral development, and they understand the culture of the residence halls and how students live their daily lives. They are also more likely to be conversant with popular culture. When they draw on each other's strengths and expertise in creating a learning environment that seamlessly combines in-class and out-of-class elements, the result is a powerful learning environment that is greater than the sum of its parts. The partnership must be an authentic one, however, for it to be effective. If it appears to the students that the faculty and student affairs professionals value in- and out-of-class learning differently or if they act in ways that signal differences in status and power, the students will follow suit and much of the value of the attempted collaboration will be lost. When faculty and student affairs professionals forge collaborations that operate successfully on both the explicit and implicit levels, they create and model for the students the best kinds of learning environments.

Time on Task

Students who live together and take classes together spend more time on academic pursuits—the “time on task” that is so critical to the learning process. Because they are in classes together, they are more likely to be responsible for themselves and each other about attending class regularly. They are also more likely to complete academic tasks. When help is just a door or two away if they get stuck on a problem, don't understand the text, or aren't clear on how to complete an assignment, they are simply less likely to give up and do something else instead. Finally, they are more apt to attend an evening lecture, review session, play, or concert. They are encouraged by faculty and student affairs professionals to attend, it is easy to communicate about such activities, and when they make plans as a group they are less likely to decide not to go at the last minute.

Deeper Learning

Closely related to time on task is the deeper learning achieved by students in residential learning communities. They are more likely to participate in class—asking questions, answering questions, and sharing their insights—request help when they need it, and take intellectual risks. Because of the community they have built, they feel more comfortable with their classmates and their faculty. They also talk more about what they are learning in class as they walk to and from classes, eat together in the dining hall, or spend out-of-class time with faculty and student affairs professionals. Finally, they tend to form natural study groups, collaborative learning environments that are more effective in most cases than studying alone. They are engaged in their learning. In some instances, these benefits extend to nearby students who are not actually part of the learning community but are drawn into academic conversations and join in study groups.

Building Relationships

An important factor contributing to a student's success and satisfaction is building a relationship with a faculty member or student affairs professional early on in her or his academic career. Learning communities can extend dramatically the network of relationships with faculty...
and student affairs professionals that students develop. Imagine the power of developing multiple such relationships as a first semester freshman. Even if these particular relationships do not endure, and many of them do, the student has learned much about how to develop other relationships with faculty and student affairs professionals in the future.

**Common Themes**

Despite the wide variation among the many kinds of learning communities at Syracuse University, the lessons learned from establishing each of these learning communities contain a number of common themes and threads. The faculty and staff involved in creating learning communities inevitably go through similar stages as the learning communities evolve: determining what kind of a learning community they want, creating the academic component(s), establishing learning objectives, recruiting students, assessing the impact of the learning community, and using the assessment to make changes.

**Learning Objectives**

Each learning community at Syracuse University is expected to develop learning objectives, and each learning community struggles with this task. Trying to clarify exactly what the learning community is attempting to do turns out to be a significant part of the development of the learning community as it forces the faculty and staff to find just the right words to describe, in a way that everyone can agree upon, exactly what the learning community is striving to do for the students enrolled in the learning community. As people work on the learning objectives, they learn that faculty, administrators, and residence life staff often do have the same goals and concerns; they just use different language. Writing everything down forces people to negotiate the language and goals. The learning community staff also learn that it is important to revisit learning objectives each year as their understanding grows and as different faculty and staff participate in the learning community.

**Recruiting Students**

Recruiting students for the first iteration of any learning community is difficult. There is no “product” for students to see when they visit the campus and no history to relate. Students are to be recruited for participating in a concept that is new and has no track record. To recruit students for the first year of a learning community, letters and personal contact are essential. After the first year, students who were in the learning community become the best recruiters, and the recruiting is much easier the second time around. Because most of the learning communities at Syracuse are residential, careful recruiting is needed so that students don’t select the learning community because they want a particular kind of housing; they need to be committed to the community.

**Bonding**

A learning community is not for all students, and learning communities should not be required. Many students, however, value educational experiences that get them involved, and learning communities provide natural opportunities for engagement and active participation. One of the best ways to jumpstart early bonding for students in the learning community is to hold a retreat. Overnight retreats are especially effective in helping students bond. Many Syracuse University learning communities hold their retreats at a near by ropes course. Activities on the ropes force students to communicate, to depend on each other for support (mentally and physically), and to bond with each other through this experience. Some learning communities create other ways of bonding. The Online Learning Community students put their bios and pictures online and also do an ice-breaker activity. The Interprofessional Learning Community always shares a meal together, either potluck, prepared by the participants, or brown bag. Planning some type of early bonding experience helps the members of the learning community connect with each other more quickly.
Academics

A strong academic component is vital for an effective learning community, and having a required course is imperative for good participation. If the course is an independent study, often it will not count toward graduation for students, and this excludes students who otherwise want to participate. Since the primary goal of learning communities is learning, developing a strong academic component is a major task. Students value the special relationships they develop with faculty when they are in a learning community. They also value educational experiences that get them involved, and learning communities provide those venues. Additionally, one of the benefits of teaching students who live together is that they can work together on projects outside of class or simply help and support each other.

Residential Learning Communities

Residential learning communities seem ideal and have enormous potential because students not only take classes together but also can do other related activities through residence hall programming. Creating residential communities, however, requires close cooperation with housing and residence life offices. First, the type of residence hall and the number of rooms for the learning community must be determined, and enough students have to be recruited for the particular learning community. It is also important to have a serious commitment from the director of the particular residence hall and to have the director involved in the actual planning. The resident advisor (RA) should also be committed to the learning community concept because the RA helps coordinate the residence life activities that tie into the learning community; carefully designed activities are a key component in creating a cohesive community. Also, clear delineation of who has primary responsibility for various community activities is vital.

Assessment

Everyone from administrators, residence life staff, and faculty want to know how the learning community is working, so assessment is expected and essential. It’s important not to over assess. Rather, assessment should be embedded in both curriculum and residential experiences so that providing feedback becomes part of the regular academic and social life. For example, keeping reflective journals can be required in a writing course, or students can respond to residence hall activities in a common journal. Group journals not only help to assess the learning community environment, but also help faculty become aware of issues such as students feeling overwhelmed or worried. One purpose of assessment should be to collect information for improving the learning community for the following year; faculty and residence life staff should also be included in the assessment effort because they, too, will have ideas for improving the community.

Quantitative assessment measures the grade point average and retention data that is important for administrators, but it doesn’t capture how students feel about the experience, or what should be kept, and what should be modified for the next iteration of the learning community. It’s important to use methods such as focus groups or interviews to collect valuable information from students that can be incorporated into the next year’s planning.

Student Voices

Above all, listen to students! Whenever possible, involve students in making change happen. Give students ownership and give them responsibility. Through ownership and responsibility they will feel more connected and will learn and gain more from being in a learning community.

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Making the Shift

Much has been written about the quixotic quality of educational innovation – here today, gone tomorrow. Seasoned educators recognize the pattern: good ideas followed by cautious optimism, hard work, and promising results. But once funding fizzles, institutional attention moves on. Who wouldn’t want to hunker down in the privacy of the classroom?

That learning communities explicitly value teaching and learning as the work of educational institutions explains their initial attractiveness to faculty. The classroom focus of learning community work, combined with skillful administrative support, accounts for learning communities’ staying power on wildly diverse college and university campuses. But, for those engaged in learning communities for some time now, a puzzle familiar to other educational innovators emerges: how to move successful pockets of innovation from the margins to the mainstream, from a priority for a dedicated group of individuals to the priority for an entire campus.

In our view, making this shift is essential to strengthening and sustaining learning communities. The problem is not as straightforward as simply “scaling up learning community work”; rather, the shift requires that learning communities, in all their iterations, evolve from a curricular innovation to a campus-wide educational reform strategy. Until this repositioning occurs, we will not be able to use the best of learning community work to address our most vexing and persistent problem in higher education – our collective failure to graduate the majority of students who come to college, dreams in mind, soon to be deferred.

For readers unfamiliar with the history of learning communities, we will begin with a brief account of their origins and evolution as an educational innovation. Then we will offer an approach on how to use learning communities as an institutional change intervention strategy, where the primary site for educational reform continues to be the classroom, but the aim is academic success for all students.

Learning Communities as a Curricular Reform

In its earliest renditions, learning communities sought to legitimize alternative curricular and pedagogical practices designed to improve the quality of students’ learning experiences: disconnected, scattered courses replaced by interdisciplinary studies and theme-based curricula; formulaic testing and rote learning replaced by reading/writing intensive student inquiry; and, to offset a pervasive lecture model, versions of team teaching and active learning (Hill 1985; Cross 1998; Smith, MacGregor, Matthews, and Gabelnick, 2004). For many faculty, the creative work of designing integrative curriculum and the engaged student learning that resulted was, and continues to be, worth the collaborative effort.

On most campuses, the opportunity to be co-learners in the classroom while learning new teaching strategies from colleagues leads to invigorating faculty conversations. This cultural shift from teaching as a private matter to teaching as community property (Shulman 2004) has been an enriching and sustaining aspect of learning community practice not only for faculty but for advisors, counselors, and librarians whose involvement and contributions to successful learning community initiatives became evident.
as campuses customized various learning community models to fit their needs (Pedersen 2003; Smith, Williams, and Associates 2007).

In the more than two decades since learning communities became synonymous first with curricular reform and then with student engagement and improved student persistence and retention (Tinto, Goodsell-Love, and Russo 1994; Tinto 1997; Taylor and Associates 2003; Engstrom and Tinto 2007), learning communities have become a credible educational innovation that counts as a success story. Growing numbers of campuses register their programs in the national learning community directory2 and campus teams attend institutes to learn how to start learning communities or to strengthen existing programs. And, as is the case with many effective innovations, the grass roots appeal to faculty, the involvement of student affairs professionals, and administrative support continue to be essential to success (Levine Laugraben, Shapiro, and Associates, 2004).

Learning Communities as a Promising Educational Reform

In 2004, when the two of us began leading the National Summer Institute on Learning Communities, we asked campus teams to send us a “campus fact sheet” to better understand the institutional context in which these campus teams did their work. As we poured over information on how many students were enrolled, whether they worked full or half time, their race and ethnicity, first and second languages, and figures on persistence and retention, we began to be troubled that existing and proposed learning community programs, for the most part, benefited comparatively few students. Indeed, a very small fraction of students on any given campus experienced the engaged learning associated with quality learning community work or the supportive friendships that develop among students and sustain them through difficult times in the academy, well beyond their learning community experience.

We also noticed that proposed learning communities were not connected to well-known curricular trouble spots (Malnarich and Associates 2003, Malnarich 2005). We also noticed that the students who were not succeeding in their studies were exactly the students that the democratization of higher education was intended to serve (Cross 1971). Building on our earlier recognition that learning community work needed to be intentionally and purposefully connected with and informed by leading practice on cultural pluralism and equity, (Lardner and Associates 2005), we began to see how to work with campuses so that learning community programs become educational reform efforts. Since learning communities do have a proven worth in relation to student engagement, persistence, and retention, how might we move faculty’s creativity as curricular designers of engaging learning to those trouble spots in the curriculum where students typically do not fare well? How might we direct that same creativity to examining questions of student success and achievement, finding patterns within the classroom and across the campus that might shape pedagogical practices?

These questions frame the work campuses do at the National Summer Institute, and the plans developed by teams reflect their hard work on designing learning community programs as educational, rather than curricular reforms. For many campuses, that distinction between educational and curricular reforms is hard-won and goes against “ordinary” ways of thinking because it invites teams to be bold, yet grounded, in their aspirations for students’ learning — to appreciate that teaching and learning is truly “community property” (Schulman, 2004). In reflecting on the experiences of the hundred plus campuses that have come to the National Summer Institute on Learning Communities since we began directing it, in tandem with reviews of research about other educational reforms, we draw these working conclusions about what sustainability requires:

- Sustaining a learning community initiative requires that its goals be clearly aligned with larger institutional goals; it must be equally compelling for faculty as a place to do their best work. Even when learning community programs begin as educational reform efforts, they need regular re-focusing, given the number of variables juggled to offer successful
programs. In a way, what sustainable learning community programs become good at is maintaining focus in two directions: students’ experiences within the learning community program, and the institutional context in which the program is situated.

- Sustainable learning community programs put learning community offerings right in the middle of students’ pathways. Students juggle a host of demands on their time and their financial resources. Rather than hoping to woo these necessarily pragmatic students into stepping off their paths, strategic campuses design learning community programs that help students move along those routes. A classic example is linking a developmental course with a college-level course, especially if the developmental course is typically a prerequisite for the college-level course. By taking the two courses together, students progress towards their goals and they develop academic skills in reading, writing or math by putting those skills to use in another course simultaneously.

- Sustainable learning community programs do not ask faculty to risk too much to get started. Instead, they focus on encouraging faculty to begin by developing integrative assignments—assignments that explicitly link and build upon the substance of two or more classes. The process of designing integrative assignments, a process which is now a core practice at the National Summer Institute, allows faculty to discover common ground with other teachers in terms of what matters most for students’ learning. The heuristic streamlines the process of collaboratively designing an assignment that builds on carefully chosen core learning outcomes, and in the tradition of democratic education, it invites faculty to frame the assignment in terms of a larger public issue or question. Campuses characterized by webs of integrative assignments are more likely to sustain their learning community programs than are campuses with wholly coordinated, fully team-taught programs that engage only a tiny fraction of students.

- As a result of focusing on developing integrative assignments, student learning also moves to the center of the learning community program. Sustainable learning community programs are those that can answer two central questions: what kind of learning are we for in this program? And is evidence of this learning present in student work? Early findings from the National Project on Assessing Learning in Learning Communities suggest that using the collaborative assessment protocol8 to look at students’ work refocuses and re-energizes learning community programs at all stages in their development. Programs discover areas where they need to work— including rethinking the purpose of the campus learning community program and frankly assessing competing demands on faculty time.

One way to capture the shift in thinking we are suggesting is to consider this example. When we began working at the Washington Center, the most frequently used exercise was called “designing learning communities in an hour.” Like our colleagues, we recognized the energy and the creativity that this exercise unleashed. Faculty imagined they had no constraints on their time or their teaching, no budget or administrative constraints, and in groups of three or four they picked a theme or question they all wanted to explore. They designed wondrous activities for students— with the assumption that all were ably prepared to do college-level work— then faculty went back to their “real jobs.” The exercise seeded ideas, but the imagined learning community program remained imaginary. Shortly into our tenure as directors, we replaced that exercise with a heuristic for designing integrative assignments. It, too, has the merit of unleashing creative possibilities for faculty, but it also asks teachers to focus on important learning outcomes with real students in mind, to design a doable integrative project in which students use their learning to address a public issue, and that students make their learning public. Many of these integrative assignments— or versions of them— are included in course syllabi. The difference between the two exercises illustrates our point about sustainability and intentionality.

In Conclusion
Learning communities can have powerful consequences for everyone involved. To become an educational reform, though, this transformative power needs to be focused on the critical issue of student achievement on campuses. That means involving and creating wider campus conversations and providing opportunities for faculty to develop working relations with each other that are tenable and practical. Until we shift our collective attention to the students whose time with us is brief indeed, learning communities will continue to serve the fortunate few, while the many drift away— and so too the promise of this educational innovation to become a means for educational equity.

References


1Learning communities can be found on more than 600 campuses in the United States—both majority- and minority-serving institutions— including private and public, rural and urban, residential and commuter.

3http://www.evergreen.edu/washcenter/project/documents/National-ProjectonAssessingLearning.doc

Emily Lardner and Gillies Malnarich work with educators in two- and four-year post-secondary institutions to develop strategies and practices leading to the success of all students by organizing and developing institutes, retreats, workshops, and publications, frequently in collaboration with other professional groups who share a similar mission. Co-directors of the Washington Center (www.evergreen.edu/washcenter) since 2000, they lead its national learning communities work, which includes the annual summer institute and a new project on designing and assessing integrative learning, as well as other curricular reform, educational equity, and faculty enrichment initiatives.

Emily has taught academic writing and introductory composition courses for many years and continues to do so in Evergreen's Evening and Weekend Studies program.

Gillies has taught developmental education and sociology in popular education programs, community schools, universities, an urban community college, and currently teaches in Evergreen's Evening and Weekend Studies program. Before joining Emily at the Washington Center, she worked with educators and campuses throughout British Columbia on system-wide practices related to abilities-based teaching and assessment, faculty development, and institutional effectiveness.
Strategies for Vice-Principals to Support and Sustain Learning Communities

By Frank Rothwell

For learning communities to function properly and efficiently within a school they need the support of the administration and more specifically of the vice-principal(s). The best way for vice-principals to support learning communities is to ensure there is order in the building, that they are communicating effectively with parents and teachers, and that they take seriously their role as instructional leaders.

What makes the vice-principal role challenging is the expectation from students, teachers, parents, and the principal for reactionary, on-the-spot decision making which consumes a typical day. Abiding by the following guidelines can help to keep the focus on supporting teaching and student learning in the various learning communities set up throughout your building:

1. Be Where the Students Are!
   Vice-principals need to do everything in their power to remove any and all obstacles that have the potential to inhibit quality teaching. This starts and ends with ensuring that students are behaving appropriately, getting to classes on time, and being respectful to each other, their teachers, and the school.

2. Create and Support Collaboration Time
   Work to build collaboration time in your schedule. Our faculty collaborates departmentally during four mornings and five afternoons throughout the school year during the regular school day. For morning collaboration, the buses drop students at the regular time and students are allowed to use the library, go to the cafeteria, or go to the gymnasium for 45 minutes until school starts. In the afternoons, the buses pick students up one hour early; any students with after school responsibilities stay and go to these same areas for an hour. Vice-principals divide their duties so that some are supervising the halls and common areas while others are walking through collaboration meetings and later dialoging with department chairs. We also pay two substitutes to help supervise so that collaboration is not disrupted and is as productive as possible.

3. Be Mobile, Deal with Discipline Issues Immediately, ‘Overcommunicate,’ and Close the Loop Quickly
   Get out from behind your desk and go solve the problem! No one wants a negative situation to linger. When a student has violated a school policy it is important that the vice-principal deal with the issue swiftly. This generally means the teacher needs to be heard, there needs to be a face-to-face meeting with the student resulting in a resolution to move forward. Regardless of the resolution, it is imperative that it is communicated with everyone (student, teacher, parent, guidance counselor, etc.).

   Be mobile! Avoid calling students down to your office and having them wait around and miss class time. This tends to meet your needs, not theirs. Consider the use of handheld personal data assistants (PDA’s) and

- Be where the students are!
- Create and support collaboration time
- Be mobile, deal with discipline issues immediately, ‘overcommunicate,’ and close the loop quickly
- Do ‘walk throughs’ and dialogue with teachers about teaching
- Do not ask anyone to do anything that you would not do yourself

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cell phones so you have the flexibility to go to the student's classroom, pull them into the hall, and look up teacher and parent phone numbers there on the spot. We carry Nextel phones, a walkie-talkie, a PDA and we may soon be carrying portable alcohol testers. There are enough office spaces throughout the building so we can pull a student from a class, walk into a nearby office, deal with the issue, and return the student to class almost immediately.

Also, follow up with teachers. Busy vice-principals err by making a swift decision but neglecting to communicate this to the teacher who originally brought the issue to their attention. As a result, the teacher in question can feel unsupported and devalued. Keep a list of "emails to send" for when you get back to your desk, and be sure to send them before you leave for the day.

4. Do 'Walk Throughs' and Dialogue with Teachers about Teaching

Your role as an instructional leader will not be respected and embraced with the faculty in your school if each time you get an opportunity to converse with them you bring up the Red Sox/Yankees rivalry. You want to show teachers you support them and what they do even in disciplines outside your comfort level. Still, it's important that you take time to talk with your teachers about teaching.

The best way to do this is to make it a point to get into classrooms. In 45 minutes, you can get into nine different classes for 5 minutes each. In each class, jot down some notes and follow up your visit with a compliment or a question about something you saw that you'd like to know more about. By doing this, you have opened the door to have a positive, healthy communication about what you should be talking about!

In my experience, informal communication via a quick email or a post-it note on the desk or in a mailbox is effective. In a brief message ask a question about the lesson or a student; this way you will be assured of a response from the teacher. Taking the time to do this regularly builds a culture that is positive and creates positive ties between administration and teachers. Teachers are willing to work with us and seek our assistance when they need help instead of avoiding us when things are going badly.

5. Do not Ask Anyone To Do Anything That You Would Not Do Yourself

If there is graffiti in a hallway, and you walk past it and do nothing about it then you have just sent the message to any and all that have witnessed this that graffiti on the wall at your school is "OK." We all know graffiti on the wall is not OK, so it is important to fix it as soon as possible. Open a custodian's closet, grab some paper towels and graffiti removal spray, and clean it yourself. If your cafeteria is messy, move around with a barrel and interact with kids as you motivate them to throw away their trash and clean the table. Pick up trash as you walk through the halls or while you are outside on bus duty. Students respect the building more if they see all adults take this attitude, and the custodians may be more inclined to be helpful in the future for a bigger emergency.

Take the same approach with your secretary. When it comes time to stuff envelopes or enter data, we schedule time to do it together. By working with each other, fewer mistakes are made, and we get to communicate with each other. The job also gets done much more quickly, and she knows I respect the things she does for the office and for the students.

Finally, if you give students a community service consequence, don’t assign them a task and leave them alone to complete it. Instead, change your clothes and get right in there with them. It is a great way to find a connection with a student who might be struggling to make good choices in school. By working this way, a culture of respect is further enhanced in the building, and it pays dividends in classrooms.

In Conclusion

By following these guidelines you should find that the school will run more smoothly, teachers will have more quality time with their students, and learning communities will be supported and allowed to function optimally.

Frank Rothwell has worked as a public high school educator for the past fifteen years. He has worked as a teacher, department chairperson, and currently as a vice-principal at Framingham High School in Framingham, Massachusetts. He can be reached via email at: frothwel@framingham.k12.ma.us.

Coming in June

Repeat of Classroom Walkthroughs Institute with Jerry Goldberg Teachers

WINTER 2008
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- Educating the Whole Child
- Professionalizing the educator workforce — Massachusetts House 451/Senate 284 will insure high quality teaching and leading in all of the Commonwealth’s schools.
- High school redesign

Your voice can make a difference. Our goal is to have all MASCD members actively involved in advocating for the priorities above. Becoming an Educator Advocate is a first step that will enable you to easily communicate with policymakers, especially when the timing is crucial. To become an Educator Advocate, go to www.mascd.org and click on “Become an Educator Advocate.”

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11th Northeast ASCD Affiliate Leading & Learning Conference
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Becky and Rick DuFour

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We are now accepting submissions for prospective publication in the summer 2008 issue of Perspectives, An International Look at National Standards.

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Guiding questions in considering your contribution to this issue include:

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- How would national standards make the U.S. more competitive with other nations?
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Interested authors are invited to submit a 1-2 paragraph proposal describing the intended focus of the article and how it addresses one or more of the focus questions, as well as a brief biographical statement, including the author’s related experience or expertise. Articles may range from 1000-1500 words and should:

bring forth an essential question and the tensions and challenges within the topic, inform readers of new and useful ideas and/or practices, explore some of the obstacles, “forks in the road”/choice points, and questions that are raised in what you are trying to do to provoke, entice, and stimulate readers to continue the discussion beyond the article itself. Author’s Guidelines are sent upon acceptance of article proposals.

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