

Why Follow the Leader When You Can All Be Leaders?

toolkits

How Principals Can Create Collaborative Communities of Professional Learning

Developing and sustaining leadership is not something that many schools or school districts strategically consider. But internal leadership development can preserve the core of a school or district's culture and allow it to stand strong against change.

With that said, no single individual has the necessary skill and authority to bring about sustainable change in an organization. Members of strong professional learning communities (PLC) recognize that if schools and districts are to weather the storms of change, leadership development must be a purposeful, planned, and formal component of their culture. PLCs lay the foundation for developing leaders and leadership capacity as a means to create a critical mass of leaders who will sustain the focus on school improvement as key individuals come and go.

The role of the principal is critical in creating a collaborative environment. There is certain fundamental knowledge and skills that principals must possess and do in order to create a collaborative workplace environment for teachers. If principals know what it takes to foster a collaborative environment but aren't doing it, then on-site training, mentoring, and peer assistance could be important first steps. If, on the other hand, principals don't even have the basic declarative knowledge necessary, the remedy could include external trainings, coursework prior to certification, and book studies, to name a few.

Collaboration among teachers, when used effectively, is one strategy that has proven itself a useful practice to improve instruction and student achievement. As the instructional leader and direct supervisor of classroom teachers, principals are in a unique position to directly influence collaboration that takes place between and among teachers.

Leadership and collaboration, separate and by themselves, are necessary but not sufficient conditions for improving student learning. Rather, teachers and administrators must work together to improve student learning. It's up to the principal to purposefully distribute power so that leadership emerges in productive ways. Specifically, the principal must know of structures, systems, and processes to distribute the work of leadership throughout the staff, and then successfully implement those structures, systems, and processes.

What makes a leader?

Leadership is about facilitating learning and seeking out adaptive solutions to adaptive problems. The organization itself must be modified through continuous improvement, and this is where leadership is distinguished from mere management. When leadership is about learning, it is also about meeting the professional needs of everyone in the system.

The principal must be knowledgeable about learning, for both adults and students, and must possess the skills necessary to create an atmosphere of learning. The knowledge and skills include innovation, a focus on continuous improvement of the system, the knowledge to distinguish between adaptive and technical problems, and the ability to deal with those problems in the most appropriate ways.

The leader's function is also to provide opportunities for teachers to work together in self-managing teams to improve their own instruction, always with the expectation for improved learning. Collective work, collaborative environments, and collegiality are critical. If the principal and staff are not sharing in the processes and practices of school, then it is not a shared endeavor, and it is not building capacity for leading.

Fostering collaboration is the route to high performance. It's about leaders with a combination of profound humility and intense professional will that lead to lasting greatness. They are unassuming leaders who develop others, create shared commitments, and mobilize the collective energies of the staff. In other words, they create shared endeavors, such as providing opportunities for staff to be involved in developing school policies, providing opportunities for staff input on all important decisions, and using leadership teams in decision-making. Principals, then, are leaders of leaders that involve staff in developing school policies and in providing input to important decisions.

Tips for School Leaders:

- Balance management and leadership.
- Help prepare educators to understand and appreciate all students.
- Create supportive learning environments and a culture of adult learning.
- Have high expectations for staff achievement.
- Help deepen educators' content knowledge and ability to provide instruction and assessment so students can meet high academic standards.

- Help provide educators with knowledge and skills to appropriately involve stakeholders outside of the classroom.
- Use multiple sources of data as diagnostic tools.
- Actively engage the community.

It is clear that building leadership capacity of staff is an important role of designated leaders. It is also evident that improvement in student learning is dependent on building a collaborative culture. Involvement in collaborative activities encourages exchange among staff members while assuring teachers that their knowledge of schooling is respected. Once they know this, they become committed to change, are willing to take risks, and are dedicated to self-improvement.

Talk the Talk. Walk the Walk.

The difference between more effective principals and their less effective colleagues is not what they know; it is what they do.

First, principals must clearly and frequently talk with teachers about instruction that is focused on the attainment of explicit academic goals. Second, principals must recognize and celebrate superior practices. They must persist in the face of obstacles and implement decisions based on staff input. Principals must also develop protocol training and usage, grouping strategies for teachers, an incentive system, a PLC model by observing teaching and assessment with other principals, and study groups with joint lesson planning.

Transforming a school into a PLC is one strategy for continuously improving student achievement by increasing the learning capacity of building staff. The PLC is composed of collaborative teams whose members work interdependently to achieve building goals. The teams share a common understanding that learning, not teaching, is the central purpose of school.

Team Effort

Making the transition from a focus on teaching to a focus on learning requires a major shift in thinking for most teachers. Therefore, successful principals recognize that creating an effective PLC goes beyond assigning people to teams and requires changes in the very culture of the school.

Teacher teams represent another important structure for promoting leadership as members are called upon to develop skills in team organization, facilitation, and curriculum development and assessment. The collaborative team structure is specifically designed to allow teacher leadership to flourish. The situational leadership opportunities that occur through the day-to-day work of PLCs provide teachers with real-world experiences and applicable skills to be used when other leadership opportunities arise.

Leadership development does not occur on its own. PLCs are environments in which developing leadership capacity co-exists with and is crucial to sustained, substantive school improvement efforts. Schools and districts committed to PLC concepts will create tiered leadership structures that provide multiple opportunities for leadership.

Keys to a Developing a Successful PLC

Leaders of PLCs sincerely and passionately accept learning rather than teaching as the fundamental purpose of schools. Learning leaders embed the learning mission into the day-to-day operations of the school. They intentionally work to develop the leadership capacity of the staff by creating structures that allow teachers to fully participate in leadership processes. As such, principals should follow the six steps below:

1. Create a formal leadership development plan that strategically and systematically uses PLCs as a means to develop the leadership capacity of your personnel.
2. At the district level, develop a succession and management plan that identifies critical leadership positions in the district and spells out how the district will train and develop individuals to become eligible for those positions when they become available.
3. Create a framework that provides for lateral and vertical capacity building throughout the organization. Identify specific activities and experiences that teacher leaders could take advantage of at the school level.
4. Develop leadership teams at each school. These guiding coalitions can help disperse the leadership load throughout the school by distributing responsibilities amongst team members.
5. Put teachers into collaborative teams and appoint one as leader of each group. Provide professional development for these teacher leaders and provide regular mentoring and coaching for them throughout the year.
6. Make leadership development a specific, essential job function of all administrative and supervisory job descriptions. Administrators and supervisors should be called upon to provide evidence of their attention to developing the leadership capacity of employees in their schools or departments.

Leading the Leaders

Leaders in PLCs go beyond simply assigning individuals to teams—they create processes to ensure those teams focus on the critical questions associated with student learning. They monitor the work of the teams through specific products that flow directly from team collaborative dialogues. They recognize that while certain critical issues must be addressed and certain important tasks must be accomplished, they grant schools or districts considerable autonomy and freedom in terms of how these things get done on a day-to-day basis.

Other keys to creating a successful PLC include the following:

- **Know Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment:** The development of common assessments and instructional innovation are likely outcomes of PLC activity over time. Knowing what changes in practice will occur allows the principal to anticipate needs, concerns, or problems and devise strategies to respond.
- **Optimize Conditions:** Providing time for PLC work and the development of trust among the faculty are two conditions that are critical.
- **Stimulate Intellectual Curiosity and Conversation:** In addition to providing opportunities for teachers to learn, principals need to ensure they have a plan for enhancing their own learning and understanding in this area. Novices and veterans alike can benefit from inviting other principals who have a PLC in their school to form a study or action research group.
- **Serve as a Change Agent:** Look for ways to show that progress is being made and celebrate accomplishments. Part of the change agent responsibility for principals is a close examination of current practice with an eye toward making the entire organization more supportive of the PLC concept.
- **Monitor and Evaluate Impact:** The PLC inquiry process is continuous. Principals should develop a specific plan for obtaining feedback on group process and collecting other data to share on a regular basis.

- **Model Flexibility:** Principals demonstrate flexibility when they anticipate concerns and are ready to adjust plans as needed. They may need to provide information about the research on PLCs and student achievement and encourage others to take a risk. Some times allowing teachers to work things out on their own is the most effective approach.
- **Articulate Beliefs:** Principals must consistently communicate a personal belief that thoughtful discussions between faculty and staff will result in increased achievement. The principal is also responsible for pointing out instances when practices and behaviors do not align with the ideas and beliefs that guide PLC activity. Meeting the responsibility of ideas and beliefs effectively will help with the development of a shared vision.

There is mounting evidence that leadership makes a difference in student achievement. Researchers also agree that an effective PLC enhances instructional practice in the school and increases student learning.

PLCs offer educators the best hope for substantive school improvement. The successful implementation of that concept will depend upon the skill and will of those who lead the process. The most capable leaders will be those who define their role as the shapes and keepers of a culture committed to learning—for students and adults.