K-12
BLUEPRINT
A planning resource for personalizing learning

Rally the Team!

Professional Learning Communities Are More than the Sum of Their Parts

Teachers are often members of many teams: grade-level teams, departmental teams, child-study teams, problem-solving teams, and countless others. When tasked with joining yet another team—a professional learning community (PLC)—it's no wonder teachers may be initially unreceptive.

Creating a new team structure inevitably generates questions: "Who will be on the new team?" "When will these new teams meet?" "What will the new team do?" All of these questions come from teachers' legitimate desire to understand how new PLC teams will affect their professional lives.

Effective teacher teams, whether labeled as PLC teams or otherwise, focus on clarifying essential outcomes by class, course, or grade level. They spend time developing common formative assessments and establishing targets and benchmarks for their students. Students benefit when teams of teachers focus on clarifying what kids should know and be able to do, create common formative assessments, design systematic pyramids of intervention, and provide more time and support to those students who need it in the course of initial instruction.

For students, the results include the following:

- Decreased dropout rate
- Lower rates of absenteeism
- Increased learning that is distributed more equitably in the smaller high schools
- Academic gains in math, science, history, and reading
- Smaller achievement gaps between students from different backgrounds[1]

Both students and teachers benefit when principals devote their energy to designating protected time for teams to meet during the school day, supporting the creation of smart goals targeted at improving student learning, and designing strategies for monitoring the work of teams in order to articulate, protect, and promote what is important.

The Center on Organization and Restructuring of Schools[2] conducted a five-year study that included analysis of data from more than 1,500 elementary, middle, and high schools throughout the United States, as well as field research from 44 schools in 16 states. Schools that were successful in linking their improvement initiatives with improved student learning were characterized by the following traits:

1. A focus on an agreed-upon vision of what students should learn

2. Teaching that requires students to think, to develop in-depth understanding, and to apply academic learning to important, realistic problems

3. Schools that function as PLCs in which teachers:

    - Are guided by a clear shared purpose for student learning

    - Feel a sense of collective responsibility for student learning

    - Collaborate with one another to promote student learning

    - Enjoy increased autonomy at the school site

When teachers and administrators begin taking ownership for poor student achievement, they will gain ownership of solutions that are developed as a team. Instead of creating yet another team (e.g., a "PLC" team) and attempting to define what this new team is supposed to do, principals would do well to help existing teams focus on promoting activities that help all children learn, which can create conditions that maximize the effectiveness of the existing team(s).

Great Teams Start with Great Leaders

Accountability for all students' success continues to rise. As principals and teachers attend conferences that spark their desire to transform their schools into PLCs and improve student learning, shared leadership becomes an urgent necessity. The school monarchy, in which sole responsibility for all important decisions is held by the principle, is an outdated and insufficient model today.

Leadership programs should model the reflective practice that they preach. Such programs must continue working to improve the development of principals' capacity, so they can in turn develop their teams. Leadership programs must strategically support principal development so that:

- In the principal's vision for the school, all students are succeeding, and he or she understands how to select and leverage continuous adult learning opportunities to translate this into reality;

- Principals see themselves as the learning leaders;

- Principals understand the difference between sharing leadership and delegation, and are able to do both when necessary;

- Principals have or develop the courage to hold fast when team decisions are unpopular with staff;

- Principals are willing to hold potentially uncomfortable discussions with teachers and hold them accountable for their actions at school.

Teachers on a typical leadership team initially represent a range of readiness levels to assume the role of leading their peers. Additionally, leading adults requires a different skill set than instructing students. Although an effective program provides both skill development and discussion opportunities to develop teacher leaders' confidence and readiness, the principal's leadership is pivotal. Highly effective principals maintain a balancing act of "stepping up" (being more directive) and "stepping back" (acting more in a guiding role). Over time, a principal who intentionally balances his or her leadership in this way creates a high-functioning team of teacher leaders who, in turn, become increasingly effective in leading their own teams of colleagues.

Team Leadership in Action

Mountain View Middle School principal Debbie Fay faced student achievement struggles and a toxic school culture. She immediately realized that developing teacher leadership was the only hope for improving the school.

When Debbie first began working with her leadership team, she spent much time listening, but her style was fairly directive. She accepted no excuses and simply did not allow the long-held practice of blaming students, parents, or feeder elementary schools. In every session, Debbie was the lead learner. She listened and learned along with the teachers, but her questions showed that she always remained a step ahead in order to guide their thinking.

Since the end of the school's participation in the program, Debbie's leadership style with her teachers has continued to evolve. As her teacher leaders gained confidence and skill—stepping up and taking initiative in all facets of curriculum, instruction, and assessment— Debbie began stepping back more often. Instead of always directing, she brought more ideas to the staff and leadership team and requested input and decision making as a group. The teacher and team creativity blossomed as a result.

The direct involvement of Debbie and her two assistant principals, Mark Hasson and Lori Holland, was instrumental in launching teacher collaboration. Each administrator was responsible for a group of teacher teams in a content area, and they sat in with the teams as they were beginning the collaborative process. The administrators modeled involvement and helped troubleshoot problems. Teacher leaders came to be the cheerleaders for the curricular and master schedule changes. Also, as teams became comfortable discussing and trying research-based instructional strategies, Debbie invited members of the leadership team to do classroom walk-throughs to see the strategies in action.

Today, Mountain View Middle School's collaborative team meetings are visited and observed by teachers and administrators from all levels. The strategies that are discussed during collaborations can often be seen immediately in classrooms following the team meetings. Student achievement has improved dramatically, and achievement gaps are closing.

Like teachers, principals and other administrators need continued development. Lack of confidence or skill or poor situational awareness may cause principals to abdicate leadership, fail to follow through, prevent them from allowing teachers to share leadership in meaningful ways, or even reverse team decisions when a few reluctant staff members complain. A principal lacking courage will find ways to avoid addressing unprofessional behavior, and squelch his or her teacher leaders' belief in their principal's ability to lead difficult change.

All Together Now: Special Education Teams Have Much to Offer

There is a long-standing belief that special education students cannot be successful in general education curriculum. Thus, special educators often develop their own specialized curriculum materials and assessments. If done poorly, separate and specialized curricula developed in isolation by individual teachers can actually lower expectations and have a negative impact on student learning.

Collaboration between educators of general curriculum and those of special education can allow special educators to determine when to preview and spiral the general curriculum, and promotes powerful collaboration around how to effectively teach learning targets.

The emerging literature on the role of special education in PLCs highlights two benefits that come from special education teachers' participation on collaborative teams:

1. Educators of general education and special education become interdependently engaged in routine discussions about standards and essential outcomes, and since team meetings are focused on student learning, special education teachers are more attuned to the pace of instruction and what is most critically related to the standards being taught.

2. Special education teachers possess extensive expertise related to differentiation and ways to meet the needs of struggling learners. As teachers build relationships with one another, they are more likely to take advantage of the specialized knowledge and skills their colleagues who teach special education possess.

Another powerful benefit of adding special education teachers to collaborative teams is improved pedagogy. Blanton and Perez(2011)[3] found that the classroom practices of both general and special education teachers improved when working together in PLCs. Furthermore, it was showed that the inclusion of special education teachers on collaborative teams actually played a key role in the success of those teams.

According to Shipley (2006)[4], general educators benefit from the inclusion of special education teachers on collaborative teams because special education teachers "have a toolbox of tricks to increase learning, aid in organization, and reduce behavioral problems in the classroom…[Being part of a team] enables the special education teacher to not only help special education students, but also general education students who are struggling and might otherwise fall through the cracks. It also enables the special educator to bring instructional strategies into the classroom that the general educator might not be familiar with or think about using, but all students can benefit from its implementation."

Research on PLCs indicates that, as shared leadership becomes the norm for all schools, student outcomes improve dramatically and achievement gaps will close. When teachers begin taking ownership alongside administrators to address problems of poor achievement, they also gain ownership of the solutions developed as a team.

[1] Hord, S. H. (1997). Professional learning communities: Communities of continuous inquiry and improvement. Southwest Educational Development Laboratory. Retrieved from http://www.sedl.org/pubs/change34

[2] Newmann, F. M., & Wehlage, G. G. (1995). Successful school restructuring: A report to the public and educators. Madison, WI: Center on Organization and Restructuring of Schools. Retrieved from http://www.archachieve.net/smallschools/Rationale/AuthenticLearning/authenticlearning.pdf

[3] Blanton, L. P., & Perez, Y. (2011). Exploring the relationship between special education teachers and professional learning communities: Implications of research for administrators. Journal of Special Education Leadership, 24(1), 6–16.

[4] Shipley, J. B. (2006). Professional learning communities: Where does special education fit in? Senior Honors Theses. Department of Special Education: Eastern Michigan University. Retrieved from http://commons.emich.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1030&context=honors