

The Keys to the Kingdom

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The School District as a Professional Learning Community

The improvement of teaching—common sense would dictate—must demand the improvement of teachers. But while the answer may appear straightforward, the complexity of K-12 culture makes the solution anything but cut-and-dry.

Our modern-day education system is a sprawling suburbia of independent neighborhoods and autonomous entities. Each school is its own territory governed by principals and teachers who are focused almost strictly on what occurs within that school or classroom. Considering this shuttered environment, it's no wonder that so much scrutiny is placed upon the shoulders of individual teachers.

But this is often the traditional approach to schooling, where the individual classroom teacher is seen as the primary agent for ensuring student learning. All teachers are not the same, though, nor are the students they teach. Some teachers allow late assignments to be turned in, tests to be taken over, or they insist that a project be worked on until it meets an acceptable standard—others are not as flexible and adhere to stricter guidelines. This results in uneven learning.

The professional learning community (PLC) model offers a more systematic approach to school improvement. Teachers are organized into grade level, course specific, or interdisciplinary collaborative teams in which educators work interdependently to achieve common goals. A process is put in place to ensure that teams clarify the essential learnings for each course, grade level, and unit of instruction; establish consistent pacing; create frequent common assessments to monitor student learning; and agree on the criteria they will use to judge the quality of student work. Each team then uses the evidence of student learning to identify individual students who need additional time and support, to discover problematic areas of the curriculum that require the team's attention, and to help each member become aware of his or her instructional strengths and weaknesses.

The collaboration and interdependence of these horizontal teams extends to vertical teams as well, beyond individual schools when district leaders become emphatic about certain conditions that must be evident in all schools. According to Dr. Rick DuFour, one of the nation's leading authorities on bringing Professional Learning Community concepts to life, these conditions are as follows:

1. A commitment to high levels of learning for all students
2. Teachers organized into teams and given time to collaborate
3. Teams that provide students with a viable curriculum for every course and grade level, frequently developed and varied common assessments, and the use of evidence-based learnings to fuel continuous improvement
4. A system of intervention that provides students with additional time and support when they experience difficulty in their learning
5. A plan for extending and enriching the learning of students who are proficient, giving more students greater access to more challenging curriculum and the support to ensure their success in that curriculum

A “district-wide” PLC approach to school improvement is anything but isolated. It’s a system that concentrates on interdependent relationships, connections, and interactions of the component parts of a larger system. The focus is on creating powerful systems that promote the continuous improvement of the entire district.

Success depends on all district leaders employing that delicate “tight/loose” balance: strict and strong when enforcing the essential elements of an effective PLC, yet flexible enough to allow each school to create their own unique strategies and processes for meeting these goals.

Collaboration between “neighborhoods” is, of course, crucial too. All schools in the district must learn from and support one another. Administrative meetings must evolve to become fiercely collaborative experiences where principals share and discuss the progress of their own professional learning communities and address any concerns. Other district administrators and educators can then be utilized for in-the-trenches problem solving. In this way, leaders at all levels are expected to take an active interest in and contribute to the success of each school in the district.

Student success should not be dependent on the idiosyncrasies of a specific teacher or even the unique culture of an individual school. With district-wide professional learning communities, the randomness of traditional educational practice is cast aside to make way for fluid, coordinated, multi-layered intervention. These coordinated efforts provide students with the additional support and timely assistance they need to succeed.

The PLC process doesn’t diminish the significance of the individual teacher. It connects them to become something bigger, something better. When teachers see their students consistently performing at higher levels on team-developed assessments, they become more receptive to changes in their instructional practice. Furthermore, the positive peer pressure of the collaborative team process fosters improvement.

The quality of the individual teacher remains paramount to student learning. But the best way to improve school districts is to organize teachers into collaborative teams that clarify what each student must learn and the indicators of learning the teams will track, to gather evidence of that learning on an ongoing basis and to analyze the results together. The PLC concept is indeed a school district’s best strategy for ensuring improved teaching through improved teachers.