

## **Transform Classrooms with Learning Communities**

By: Sharon J. Bolster, Ph.D. and Marilyn D Henley, Ph.D.

School improvement is a constant process. Schools have become adept at writing School Improvement Plans (SIPs) that they believe are certain to raise student achievement. And, usually there are improvements- but not to the level expected or desired. There are always students who fall through the cracks and don't meet the standards. Teachers and administrators shake their heads and wonder what happened. The answers to this frustration may lie in the responses to the following questions:

1. Did the staff focus on implementing the School Improvement Plan?
2. Was the staff *consistent* among and *across grade levels and content areas* in applying the strategies of the SIP?
3. Were the *follow-up* strategies *implemented* effectively?

The SIP contained all the important factors (i.e., needs assessment, goals, strategies, staff development, assessment, and evaluation), but somehow, at the end of the year, surveys indicate that not all of the teachers understood the strategies, and administrators recall not observing strategies during their visits to the classroom. The strategies were in the SIP, but were not *implemented* in every classroom.

There are many rationales for this result, but a significant explanation centers on the skills and attitudes of the teachers in the school. A school may have new teachers who are unaware of the strategies; experienced teachers who choose to use their tried-and-true strategies; teachers who are unsure how to implement the strategies; and teachers who try strategies once and file them away. This is obviously a professional development challenge that *one workshop or institute will not solve*.

The National Staff Development Council (NSDC) has organized effective staff development into three categories - *context, process, and content*. Included in the rationale for one of its Process Standards is the statement that, "the most powerful forms of professional development often combine learning strategies." The first standard under Context is that, "staff development that improves the learning of all students organizes adults into learning communities ...." Creating and using learning communities in schools can result in the combination of many powerful staff development strategies. In fact, 10 of the 15 strategies identified in *Designing Professional Development for Teachers of Science and Math* (Loucks-Horsley, et al., 1998) are best implemented by organizing learning communities.

### **What are professional learning communities (PLCs)?**

PLCs are small groups of teachers (3-5) working together on a *regular* basis for learning, joint planning, and problem solving. PLCs can be organized by grade levels, multiple grade levels, departments, or interdisciplinary groups. The members of each group interact with each other and depend upon each other for the accomplishment of specific goals. The group stays together long enough to form habits and conventions. An effective learning community cultivates an attitude of inquiry and focuses attention on student thinking and understanding. In a dynamic learning community, *everyone* learns.

### **How do you form a PLC?**

An ideal PLC is composed of three-five teachers. The structure and size of the school may require variations, but more than seven may be counterproductive. One teacher is selected by the others within the group to be the "lead teacher" and keep the group focused. The leadership function may be rotated among the members of the PLC every three to four months, but it is crucial that the leader have skills that keep the group functioning in a positive manner.

In some schools, PLCs meet during prep time, and in others they meet before or after school. The limited opportunities available for collaboration during the school day mean that the PLC must be organized and have a written plan for what topics will be discussed and what materials will be examined at each meeting so that all members are informed and can prepare prior to the meeting.

### **What does a PLC do?**

The PLC examines the strategies and goals of the School Improvement Plan and designs lessons to align with them. For example, when there is a goal of “improving writing”, all teachers, particularly the language arts teachers, pay attention to following their curriculum, using good practices, and following sound pre-writing and writing practices. However, when a PLC focuses on writing, they pool information, select specific strategies known to work, practice the strategies, give evidence of the effect the strategies have, and become more focused and skilled in meeting the goal. Through practice, discussion, and evidence of student work, it becomes more clearly evident what has sufficed in the past for most students and what works better for all students.

Many PLCs focus on lesson plans during their first meetings together. They may plan lessons for a week at a time, and as they become more experienced at the process, they can plan for a unit that may last several weeks. During the meeting time, teachers must discuss what they want the students to learn, how they are going to facilitate that learning, and what the students have already learned. It is not appropriate for one member to write a plan and bring it to the meeting for approval. Ideas and possible materials should be brought to the meeting to use in writing the lesson plan.

Determining what teachers want students to learn is both easier in some ways, yet harder in other ways, than in the past. States have “set standards” that provide a framework for learning. Too often, however, there are several challenges in teaching to those standards. All standards are not of equal weight or value, and some are subsets of another standard. Examining all of the standards for the various subject areas can be a daunting task. Marzano (2004) estimates that, “if all the standards identified in a state were taught thoroughly, school would have to be extended from K-12 to K-22.” PLCs can help the teachers make sense of the standards framework and determine what standards can be taught in groups or cross-curricular. They can identify the most important concepts on which to focus instruction.

Excellent teachers use *effective* strategies to teach important content. Not all teachers have the same gifts or skills in teaching. Not all teachers enjoy or understand all content as thoroughly as needed. In a PLC, the teachers who are not as creative in teaching math can depend on others to provide ideas, to suggest math tricks, or to provide math context for the real world. Teachers can share materials that they have developed with others who are less experienced and are just building their repertoire of materials.

### **Implementation of Plans/ Teaching**

It naturally follows that if the lessons are planned together, there will be common issues to discuss. Student work brought to the meetings will help answer the questions: How did the strategies work? How about the content? Were the concepts appropriate, or did students need more prior knowledge? These questions need to be discussed in PLC meetings. For units, the discussion on a topic will be ongoing. The focus always remains on the students. How well did the students do?

Keeping the focus on students is easy if teachers bring examples of student work. What did the students learn? What did the students miss? Teachers may have a perception that students are learning. Student work may show that several have missed the point or had misconceptions about the topic. Perceptive teachers soon discover that simple worksheets do not yield much useful

information. The PLC identifies ways to encourage students to practice skills in more meaningful ways, resulting in more effective assignments that involve higher levels of thinking.

Imagine that students have written explanations of how they solved specific math problems. What could be detected from examining those papers that couldn't be seen on a page of computations? What were the students thinking as they solved the problems? What processes were unclear? Teachers can identify which were the typical mistakes for the students at that grade level, and which were immature mistakes that need further development. It informs the teachers' work for the future.

### **How do teachers benefit from a PLC?**

Finding a strategy that encourages and/or supports individual teachers to change their behavior and/or to tailor their instruction so that more students are successful is a challenge. Teachers have often been excited by new information they may receive at a workshop or conference. However, when they return to the classroom, the new ideas or strategies may not be as easy to adapt as they had originally thought. After a few attempts, the strategy usually dies.

The PLC can help with this challenge. The teacher will have a support group that will offer advice regarding the new idea. The teacher explains the new idea as presented at the conference. The rest of the community asks questions, offers comments and assists in helping the teacher adapt the idea to his/her classroom. The reciprocal effect is that the other teachers in the community determine how the strategy will work in their classrooms, thereby extending the new idea to a larger circle of teachers. The new idea might become a topic of discussion over the next few days or weeks as all the teachers practice the strategy, report on how the process works, and share student products based on the idea.

There are many activities that can be conducted in a PLC that will help the teachers grow and learn from each other as they interact regularly. The attributes of an effective PLC are as follows: modeling, continual sharing of ideas, collaboration, high productivity, community, and practical applications.

When a small group of teachers participate in a Professional Learning Community, there is more focus, consistency, and follow-up to address the goals and strategies of the School Improvement Plan.

Without *focus*, teaching and learning throughout the school may not be addressing the standards, skills, needed areas, or goals of the SIP. Without *consistency*, teaching practices and content varies among teachers and across grade levels. Without *follow-up* the focus and consistency cannot be maintained.

### **Conclusion**

School improvement is a constant process. Learning communities is a strategy that will take the written School Improvement Plans and will bring them to life in the classroom.

### **About the Authors:**

Dr. Bolster has been a teacher, principal, and a college professor. She has also served as the Director of Curriculum and Assessment for the Arizona Department of Education. As an Assistant Professor at the University of South Carolina, she taught courses in curriculum, assessment leadership and teacher evaluation. She has also taught for Arizona State University West and Northern Arizona University. She received her Ph.D. in Educational Administration from the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

Dr. Henley has been a teacher, principal, special education director and federal programs director, and Assistant Superintendent. She also served as a Deputy Associate Superintendent for the Arizona Department of Education. She has taught courses in curriculum and assessment for Northern Arizona University. She received her Ph.D. in Educational Administration from Arizona State University.

*Currently, they are co-owners of Educational Cyberconnections, Inc. and its subsidiary, Power-Ed. Their company's mission is to develop online materials and work with schools and teachers to improve the educational opportunities for all students.*

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