



The Importance of Professional Learning Communities
to Improve Classroom Instruction

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Statement of the Problem

Students today are struggling to reach high levels of academic achievement. Arkansas consistently ranks in the bottom third in terms of academic success compared to the other forty-nine states. In the state of Arkansas benchmark testing, a score of 50 percent is regarded as proficient. When the Arkansas Department of Education (2010) released the 2009 Arkansas benchmark testing results, they stated that 38 percent of all eighth grade math students did not earn a proficient score, 38 percent of seventh grade students taking the literature test did not earn a proficient score, and 68 percent of seventh grade students taking the science test did not earn a proficient score. The national challenge of achieving academic success was brought to light with the passage of No Child Left Behind in 2001(NCLB).

According to the Commission on No Child Left Behind (2007), this piece of legislation has changed our entire educational process by demanding that teachers produce improved achievement scores, and then holding them accountable for the quality of education within the schools. A study led by Lemke (2004) stated even more alarming statistics when compared to students of the same age from other countries. In this study, a group of fifteen-year-old students were tested academically with twenty-seven other countries. The results showed that the United States students fared twentieth out of twenty-eight countries. To further support the need for change, the Alliance for Excellent Education (2007) stated that on the average there are seven thousand students dropping out of high school every school day. When summed up, that comes to over one million students dropping out of just high school each year because the students' needs could not be met. The teachers were unable to show the relevance of school for the child's later life.

In order for all to succeed, change needs to take place. Fullan (2000) observed that teachers and principals were increasingly operating under a microscope. Many of the decisions a teacher or principal makes have to fall in line with state and local standards. Because a school's curriculum must align with external standards, the demands on the school are greater than ever for better performance and accountability. He describes the teaching workplace as complex, uncertain, and unpredictable. In the report of the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future (1996), experts told us that school reform cannot succeed unless it changes its focus to create conditions in which teachers can teach well. The authors of the study concluded that many times schools had inconsistent expectations. The authors of the study further concluded that real school improvement was not going to happen by administrators mandating change, but rather by teachers working together to help the children learn to their full potential.

Caskey (2007) asserted that with all the changes the government has instituted with NCLB, the debate about what best practice in teaching is at an all-time high. Pugach and Johnson (2002) concluded that one major element of implementing school reform is to have teachers learn and work together in order to achieve a common goal. Developing a Professional Learning Community (PLC) is one way in which teachers could learn and work together to help students increase achievement levels. According to Pugach and Johnson (2002), through the implementation of PLCs, teachers are able to enhance their professional knowledge, reduce stress in the professional workplace, and create a professional teacher network. The North Central Association Commission on Accreditation and School Improvement (NCA), which is responsible for more than 8500 schools in 19 states, reported its own conclusion in regards to PLCs in the school workplace.

Working at complementary levels -- the school and classroom -- the NCA school improvement and PLC process reinforce and strengthen one another. They are not mutually exclusive, but rather mutually supportive. If we want to ensure that no child is left behind, we must understand the important relationship between the NCA school improvement process and PLC.... The use of PLCs at the classroom level has dramatically increased teachers' ability to implement a guaranteed and viable curriculum, monitor student progress with colleagues on school improvement goals and curriculum objectives, and improve the teaching and learning process. The strong link between school improvement goals and PLCs at the classroom level allows all children to be successful. (Colliton, 2005, pp.1-2)

With the research being conducted and laws being put into effect today on how to best educate students compounded by the evidence that the needs of many students are not being met, it is time to look at how teachers can best utilize their time and God-given talents to meet the needs of all students. This review of literature explores the relationship of professional learning communities and student achievement.

Definition of a Professional Learning Community

What exactly is a PLC? There are many definitions of a PLC, and this study will identify several common elements among them. Hord (1997) defined a PLC as a group of educators who not only seek out new learning methods, but then impart that information with the overall goal of improving the students' educational outcome. Reichstetter (2006) shared the same thought as Hord, but added the extra emphasis on regular collaborative meetings with a shared curricular-focused vision. DuFour et al.(2006) added several key components to their definition of a PLC.

They added the idea of collective inquiry and action research to help better serve their students. They also included the idea that learning is continuous and job-embedded for all educators.

To summarize the previous PLC definitions, a PLC is a continuous, goal-driven, student-focused, collaborative effort among educators to teach the children in the best possible way. This literature review examines what a PLC is, how one can be implemented, the benefits of a PLC, and the obstacles that may be encountered while implementing a PLC.

Background of Professional Learning Communities

The idea of teachers collaborating with each other to improve the various teaching methods and ultimately the learning of the students started to gain steam in the mid-1980s when Rosenholtz (1986) emphasized the idea that more meaningful teacher collaboration meant more continuous learning. Although she did not use the term Professional Learning Community, the idea of an organized collaboration group was emphasized. Three years later, Rosenholtz (1989) continued to push for school reform with an emphasis on improving the quality of learning by the use of organized collaboration.

In the mid-1990s, the term PLC started to come to the forefront of educational reform. Barth (1991) criticized the teachers and administrators for not wanting to change the broken system of isolationism within school systems. He challenged the teachers and administrators to get out of the isolated classroom atmosphere and begin working together for the good of the student. In 1994, the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future (NCTAF) was formed with its chief purpose to help all teachers improve their teaching methods. The NCTAF (1996) stated that until teachers focus their efforts on the improvement of teaching, student learning will not increase.

DuFour et al. (2008) stated that in the early 2000s Richard DuFour, Rebecca DuFour, and Robert Eaker not only continued to improve on the research done by other experts in the field, but they also began to implement PLCs in the schools where they taught or administered. They saw first-hand the benefits a PLC could have for the staff and the students because they were involved with PLCs on a daily basis.

The NCTAF (2005) came out with another research study in which they expressed that the norm for teachers must include collegial interchange and not isolation. They also stated that communities of learning must become the building blocks for successful schools in the future.

Function and Implementation

There are many different ways to begin a PLC. DuFour (2004) wrote that in order for any successful change to occur in the school, several factors must be in place. First and foremost, the administrator or principal must be on board with the change. Marlin & Hutinger (2008) affirmed Dufour's position and then explained that because of the position that a principal holds, they can create the conditions necessary to begin a successful PLC. They continued by saying that this person must be willing to hold others accountable for the necessary changes to continue and ultimately to be successful. The principal who sees the benefits of a PLC will ultimately be the cheerleader, encourager, and even pusher at times. Without the administration behind the school reform, the necessary resources and time allocation for success will not be possible.

The NCTAF (2005) stated that whenever educational reforms take place, it is important to ask appropriate questions before the change is made. Does the change seek results rather than just activities? Does the staff have the commitment among themselves to take on such changes? Will the administration show the necessary commitment and allocate the necessary resources for such a change? If the answer is yes to these questions, then successful change such as a PLC

may occur. Eaker et al. (2008) continued that if the teachers involved could answer yes to the above three questions, then those involved within a school or district may undergo profound cultural shifts in every way they teach their students. Fullan (2007) added a warning stating that unless those involved are completely committed to such a change, there is no reason to believe that better results will be seen.

In order for a PLC to function correctly, the teachers involved have to see not only how it would affect their teaching styles, but also how it could improve their students' learning. Graham (2007) explained that once teachers' minds moved from how it would affect their teaching styles and practices to how it would affect and improve the students' learning, the process of building a successfully functioning PLC could move forward. DuFour (2004) stated that a PLC will work best when the group has a common bond. The common bond may be that a group of teachers are all involved in the same portion of curriculum. It may be a group of teachers working across the curriculum to improve the overall curriculum for the students. According to the Annenberg Institute of Reform (2005), PLCs can be district-based, cross-district, or even nationally-based. The main force driving the PLC will be its focus. DuFour et al. (2008) added to this when he said that if teachers share a common vision, commitments, and goals, then a PLC will be the building block of the organization. Kotter (1996) shared some points that an effective vision will have. An effective vision will be able to paint a picture of what the future will look like with the implemented changes. A vision will be able to stand the test of time. The vision will have to be realistic and flexible. The vision will also have to keep the group focused on what is most important. DuFour (2005) further explained that these teams need to work interdependently with common goals and visions, and then be held mutually accountable for the good of the student. Visions and goals mean nothing if they are only written on a piece of paper and not

implemented. On the other hand, DuFour (2008) stated that a properly written and executed vision and obtainable goals that are consistently met can energize the people because it gives them direction. The teachers can see where they want to go and what they need to do to get there.

Wei (2009) broke down the development of PLCs into distinct standards for which the community can be evaluated. The first standard of evaluation is based on how effective the community is at keeping focused on their vision and goals. It then breaks the organization of the community down into context standards -- being able to organize properly; process standards -- use the data and research available to help the student; and finally, content standards--being able to provide the proper knowledge and skills to help the student. Fullan (2000) looked at why certain PLCs were more successful than others. He pointed out the pattern for success. In this community, the teachers involved had to be committed to and focused on student work through assessments. In some cases, they had to be willing to change their whole way of teaching in order to get the best results. This could not just be a passing trend, but it had to continue on a lasting basis. Fullan (2000) further wrote that it takes about three years on the average for an elementary school to see a consistent change in the students' scores, and it takes about six years to see a consistent change in a secondary school.

One of the best ways to see success with a new practice is to model what you would like to see. Doolittle, Sudek, & Rattigan (2008) discussed not only how to model, but also what content to model. They emphasized the importance of staying focused on modeling the mission, vision and outcomes, and focused on how to achieve each of the outcomes. Each time the group met, they would agree on the specific purpose for that particular meeting. They would then match that with their mission, vision, and outcomes that were predetermined when they set up the PLC. By doing this, they knew they would be consistently modeling their mission, vision,

and outcomes. Cohen & Hill (2001) also stated the importance of modeling the practices that are desired. Along with modeling, comes the idea of creating opportunities for teachers to practice and then to reflect with each other on new and innovative strategies used in the classroom. Teachers want to feel comfortable while changes are being implemented. Since there may be a difference in methodology, implementing a PLC through modeling not only gets the teachers into their comfort zones, it also gives them the confidence to steer the group back on course if they begin to wander.

In an interview conducted with a twelve year veteran teacher, she discussed at length how the staff at her school began the implementation of PLCs through her school. As was mentioned earlier, getting the teachers to feel comfortable about the change was very important. The staff took an entire school year to first set up their goals and objectives and then to discuss the many changes that were about to occur. The administrator wanted everyone to be comfortable with such drastic changes. Throughout the process, modeling was a very important piece to the puzzle.

Benefits

Increased Professional Knowledge

Numerous studies identify various benefits a Professional Learning Community can provide to educators who join such a community. The first benefit Vescio, Ross, & Adams stated (2006) is that a PLC will increase professional knowledge and therefore enhance student learning. Teachers increase their professional knowledge when they surround themselves with other teaching professionals that share the common bond of always looking to improve their teaching techniques for the betterment of the children.

Cranston (2009) stated that in a PLC, learning is not an end to an activity, but rather a life-long learning commitment. Teachers continually look to improve their professional knowledge and then are eager to share that knowledge with their fellow colleagues for the benefit of their students. In an exit interview conducted by Graham (2007), the teacher stated that she had ten times more growth as a teacher during this past year because she was able to see things through ten other eyes. She realized the more her PLC acted as a group, the more they could learn from one another.

The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) (2004), which includes nations in northern Europe, stated that not only is life-long learning important, but also that if teachers are given time for professional development during the school day and not just on a designated day throughout the school calendar, they would be able to focus on a problem, research it, and ultimately share it with the rest of the learning community to improve the education of the student. Wei (2009) wrote that Arkansas is a leading state for PLCs. Ninety-six percent of its teachers are involved in professional learning throughout the year. In order for teachers to renew their state teaching license, they must have sixty documented hours of continuing education each year. Four professional development days are involved in developing PLCs within a school or district. The state of Arkansas hopes that learning new practices involving PLCs will result in higher teacher performance and ultimately higher student achievement.

Strathdees (2007) wrote about the educational reform taking place in New Zealand and England. These countries realized the education system was failing its students and a change needed to take place. They turned to PLCs because it would make the teachers collaborate together and ultimately improve the quality of teaching throughout the countries. New Zealand's

Minister of Education Trevor Mallard (2003) was so adamant about this change that in one of his speeches he told how the research showed that effective teaching by the classroom teachers could account for up to half of a student's educational knowledge. The more methods a teacher can use to teach a particular lesson, the better chance the child has at remembering the concept being taught. He then added that the key to improved education is when teachers who have a proven system of good sound teaching practices share their knowledge with other teachers in order to improve the quality of education in New Zealand.

Improved Communication

By creating a PLC, the communication among staff members will improve. As the lines of communication open up among staff members, trust will also increase. Graham (2007) stated that the feedback he gained from his study showed that as the learning community continued to learn from each other, they also grew to trust each other. This process continued to work in a circular pattern as the more they learned to trust each other, the more they would open up and communicate with one another. When this trust was finally perceived among the members of the community, they were able to discuss more substantive issues dealing with learning. The higher the trust level among the group members, the more substantive issues the community would be able to discuss. DuFour et al. (2008) continued with this point when he mentioned that it can be empowering when the members of the team realize the important contribution they can make to the overall team when trust and respect are evident in the PLC.

Coburn (2003) went one step further when he discussed communication in a PLC. She stated that not only is communication among a learning community beneficial, but communication among several learning communities is of even greater benefit. She stated that overlapping PLCs can help not only schools, but also districts to maximize their knowledge for

improved teaching and learning. Wenger (1998) echoed this point by stating that when PLCs operate in this manner, knowledge can be created, shared, organized, revised, and ultimately passed on to other communities. The Annenberg Institute for School Reform (2005) emphasized the point that when PLCs are able to overlap in sharing their information, it creates a stronger bond among those involved because they are all collectively discussing the best ways to teach and reach all students.

DuFour et al. (2008) described a real-life PLC in action and the benefits that can impact a district, a school, a classroom, and ultimately a student. He wrote about a third grade math PLC and how they laid out a specific set of goals, concepts, and dispositions for their math classes. The teachers involved started with a brainstorming session to determine the necessary skills the students needed to succeed in math for the following year. They then went back to analyze the second grade math standards. Once they finished analyzing the standards, they reviewed past assessments to see where the students had previously struggled. From this information, they went forward with a curriculum mapping project the entire PLC agreed to follow. All this work was done to help make sure that every student would succeed in the third grade math class no matter what teacher they were assigned. This not only helped the third grade math students, but it also helped the fourth grade math teachers since they knew that all students coming into the fourth grade were all taught the same concepts.

Fogarty and Pete (2009) added another twist to the idea of groups working together to gain professional knowledge. How often don't teachers go to workshops as the lone delegate for the school? Fogarty and Pete (2009) told teachers to go to these workshops in groups. Groups are more likely to discuss what they have learned not only on the ride home, but also in their PLC back at school. The more they discuss the various topics, the more likely they will be to

implement new and innovative strategies, strategies that will ultimately improve the overall learning of the students. The communication each teacher provides can ultimately help the education of a struggling child.

Reduced Isolation

Another benefit to building a PLC is tearing down the isolationism that is so rampant in school culture today. The NCTAF (2005) stressed the importance of a school culture which not only eliminates the old culture of isolationism, but rather fosters collaboration among a variety of experience. Young teachers wouldn't have a chance of getting into the culture of isolationism, but would instead be able to model new and innovative ideas to other teachers. Teachers with more experience would be led out of isolated classrooms and be able to share their teaching experiences with younger teachers with less experience. This culture of collaboration among teachers, although not widely practiced in the United States, is practiced in other countries that have shown academic success.

Schmoker (2006) painted an unflattering picture of educators who were allowed to educate students in their own little isolated world. He stated that this type of isolated atmosphere actually has no accountability. Who truly knows what is taught or how a concept is taught? Who really knows how the grade a student receives in classroom A compares with the grade received in classroom B even though they are taking the same course? When a teacher who has been permitted to teach in an isolated environment is confronted on the low grades the students received in class, they can simply reply that their expectations are higher than other teachers. He also stated that when teachers are allowed to remain in their isolated classrooms, the school is allowing the status quo to survive and thrive.

DuFour et al. (2008) described the attitude of isolation as a barrier to student learning. In a follow up report of the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, the authors Fulton, Yoon, & Lee (2005) added to this point when they stated that the biggest barrier standing in the way of student learning is a stand-alone classroom. They even go so far as to state that if teachers want to improve the learning which occurs in our schools today, teacher must be involved in a PLC.

DuFour et al. (2008) described several ways that PLCs break down teacher isolation. First, no one single teacher has all the answers on how to best teach. By being in a PLC, the teacher has someone to turn to when challenges come their way. They realize they can learn from their colleagues. When they work their way out of their isolated world in the classroom, they learn that other teachers are there to help. Second, by being involved in a PLC, teachers begin to realize they are on a team all working for the common good of the student. An isolated teacher will often find it difficult to see how the others around and the isolated teacher are all working together to help address the needs of the child. In a PLC environment, teachers realize they are on a team and their teammates are always there to help them succeed and ultimately the students to succeed. The process is in place with a specific vision and set of goals to educate the children entrusted to the teachers.

Increased Accountability

Dufour et al. (2008) continued by showing how PLCs create accountability within the school or system. Every member is expected to contribute to the continuous improvement of the school. How can an isolated teacher even know what problems or struggles exist among students in the school? By working together in a collaborative setting, teachers can bring problems to the table that others in an isolated environment may not even know exist. When a teacher is able to

teach in an isolated environment, the idea of accountability does not exist. Yes, they prepare for their few visits conducted by the administrator, but in the end they are able to do as they please. Teachers hold their students accountable for the work they do, but so often teachers do not want to hold themselves accountable to others in their profession. Kleinhenz & Ingvarson (2004) wrote that many times teachers regard the annual review conducted by the administrator as invalid and even at times an insult to their teaching practices. They often feel that many times it is done as merely a snapshot of the overall work done by the teacher in the classroom and not indicative of their entire teaching ability. Kleinhenz & Ingvarson do not deny annual reviews may be simply a snapshot, but they also contend that it should not be an excuse to let the teacher continue without any means of accountability. By forming a PLC, all teachers would be held accountable throughout the year by not only the administrator, who could observe the PLC's practices, but also by a system of peers who work closely together to form common visions and goals.

Johnson & Ridley (2004) wrote that teachers need to hold themselves accountable to a high standard of teaching for several reasons. High on their list of reasons is integrity. When a teacher opens up to a PLC, it also shows they are willing to be held accountable for all aspects of their teaching, which may include teaching methods, assessments, and grading. Earlier in this paper, it was stated how the NCLB mandates of 2001 changed the way schools operated and teachers taught. Phrases such as Adequate Yearly Progress and Measureable Student Achievement began to determine if a school or even a classroom was thriving or failing. By forming a PLC, schools now have a way to clearly see what is happening throughout the school building and even the district. Accountability helps to strengthen the curriculum by bringing the teachers of each department or grade together to discuss how best to teach the students.

Stress Reduction

Stress is all around us and can be found in almost any occupation. The stress a teacher feels is often accompanied by the feelings of isolation and alienation. Botwink (2007) stated how easy it is for teachers to become overstressed dropouts in the teaching profession. When teachers feel they have the weight of the world on their shoulders, they begin to feel stressed out by all that is happening around them. The NCTAF (2005) cited the fact that almost one in every two teachers leaves the teaching profession in the first five years of teaching. A major point in their study shows that novice teachers are often left alone to fend for themselves, leaving them overly stressed and ultimately burned out. New teachers only have what they learned throughout their college education as their experience. When novice teachers are on their own in their own classroom, it can become easy to get discouraged when everything does not go as originally planned. The Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS) Commission on Parish Schools (1999) stresses the importance of having a mentoring system where a newly assigned teacher will be paired up with another teacher in the school or nearby school to discuss what is going on in that teacher's classroom. By creating such a system, it is hoped that problems can be avoided or fixed before the teacher gets discouraged and stressed out.

Schlichte, Yssel, & Merbler (2005), stated that teacher educators should encourage networking and collaboration among the different students in their college class so when they get out into the teaching field, they have a bond established with fellow teachers. With established bonds being formed already in the college classroom setting, they already have a trusted confidant in their early stages of their first year of teaching. By creating social networks in their college years, they can concentrate more on their classroom while slowly creating trusted confidants in their school building during their first year of teaching. They often feel very

isolated within their own classroom with no one to turn to. Schlichte, Yssel, & Marbler (2005) conducted a study on first year teachers and their attrition rate. They did a case study on two first year teachers and their extreme opposite experiences. One felt lonely and isolated. Her input was not only unappreciated, but not asked for. The second teacher was placed in a school where collaboration was widely accepted and practiced. Her opinion was often sought after in the group and she was considered to be the expert in her field of education. After the first year, the lonely, isolated teacher resigned her position. She felt as if she was just dumped off at the school and expected to teach in her own isolated world. She had no one to lean on, no one to discuss curricular ideas to enhance the students learning. If she would have had a PLC to enhance her professional knowledge, she may be teaching yet today.

Stress in a teacher can build when a teacher, for whatever reason, cannot help get a child to reach their full potential. Teachers want to see their students succeed. The NCTAF report (2005) stated that students who had an ineffective teacher tested an entire year behind other students in the same grade. If a student has three or more continuous ineffective teachers, they may never catch up. The study went on to state that a strong collaborative group can curb the feeling of stress brought on by isolationism. The NCTAF further stated that one of the benefits of a collaborative group is that no one teacher can claim sole responsibility for the success of a student, and no one single teacher can be strapped with the failure of a student. The group as a whole is in it together, which eases the stress for all teachers involved. Using their collective minds, they can find a way to help all the students succeed.

Kokkinos (2007) noted several different factors in teacher burnout and stress. One of those factors was isolation. He concluded that teachers who were more extraverted showed less

signs of burnout. Elmore (2006) stated that the current traditional structure of schools not only allows for isolation, but in many cases fosters this structure.

Continuity

The main benefit of PLCs is to improve ways in which the students can learn. When conducted properly, PLCs reduce teacher turnover and improve the continuity of the curriculum. As a result student learning is improved. Drago-Severson and Pinto (2006) stated how many school principals named teacher turnover as one of many challenges and benefits to increased teacher learning. The principals listed teacher turnover as a challenge since it meant bringing in new teachers every year and then having a break in the continuity of the program. They also listed teacher turnover as a benefit because it allowed new teachers with new ideas to invigorate the current staff. By instituting PLCs, teachers are able to be plugged into a system and brought up to speed very quickly.

DuFour et al. (2008) told the story of a teacher being interviewed for a position in a school heavily involved in the PLC culture. This particular veteran teacher had not previously been involved in such a community, but was very eager to be part of one. The week before school was to begin, all teachers were to report to their various PLCs. He planned on the PLC meeting for a few hours and then having the remainder of the two days to work in his classroom. The PLC proceeded to use the two days to pour over every aspect of the curriculum, including past assessments and standardized test results. He quickly realized his entire way of teaching was being turned upside down. He found it very comforting to know he was a cog in a system with support all around him. The teacher was different, but the curriculum remained the same.

In an interview conducted with a twelve year veteran teacher, she commented that the format of PLCs used at her school will be changing from a horizontal structure involving two or

three teachers to a vertical structure involving the entire staff. The purpose behind the change is to ensure continuity of the curriculum through every grade level in the school. The administration and staff believe that by creating this continuity they can eliminate gaps in the curriculum.

The Commission on Parish Schools (2010) in the WELS school system outlines how schools can collaborate on curriculum development. Since seventy-seven percent of WELS elementary schools have one hundred or less students. Many of these schools use a multi-grade set-up. This type of set-up lends itself well to a vertical type of group throughout the grades. This will create curriculum continuity and ultimately help the child to succeed in school.

Student Results

Many of the benefits that have been talked about have dealt with the teachers. Yes, it is true that PLCs do help strengthen the way schools may be run and the way teachers teach. What is truly amazing and arguably the best benefit for implementing a PLC are the proven results for the students. As DuFour et al. (2008) stated, in a well-run, goal-driven PLC, there is a commitment to help all the students to succeed, not just the students who are naturally gifted. It's easy to see success in gifted students through their grades. Because of the efforts of teachers that work together in a PLC, the needs of more students will be met.

Dufour et al. (2008) stated how the teachers and administrators at Adlai Stevenson High School, in Illinois are committed to being involved in PLCs. One area especially to take notice of is in the area of advanced placement classes. Students attending Adlai Stevenson High School are encouraged to take at least one advanced placement class even if they are ranked in the bottom third of their class academically. In 2006, Stevenson High School had almost 70% of its graduates take an advanced placement test compared to 25% nationally. The teachers decided the

best way to meet the needs of all the students taking advanced placement classes was to meet weekly to not only discuss teaching methods which would help the students master the needed information to pass the advanced placement test, but also discuss how to meet the needs of the struggling students in these classes. Within their PLC, they decided that at least one teacher would be available each day for tutoring. Because each section of the class was taught at the same rate, whenever a struggling student came in for help, the concepts were fresh in the teacher's mind and would be able to better meet the needs of the students. DuFour et al. (2008) shows the percentage of students taking advanced placement classes at Adlai Stevenson High School who scored a three or above on the various advanced placement tests. The following shows the national average/the school average:

Adlai Stevenson High School Advanced Placement Tests
Percent of students scoring higher than a three on a five point scale

	National Average	School Average
Biology	61	98
Calculus AB	61	92
Calculus BC	81	100
Chemistry	58	93
English Language	51	95
English Literature	62	96
European History	70	90
Government	55	78
Physics B	60	98
Physics C	71	95
Psychology	68	94
Studio Art	66	100
U.S History	53	80

These scores not only show the hard work the students put into these classes and tests, but also the commitment the teachers have toward the overall success of each student.

DuFour et al. (2008) wrote that what makes this even more special is the fact that Adlai Stevenson High School also mails out a survey to students who had graduated one year earlier and five years earlier about their past experiences at the high school. An overwhelmingly repeated response is the description of the staff as loving, caring, compassionate, and empathetic. It's a win-win proposition. The teachers benefit with the use of improved teaching practices, and the students benefit because they have caring individuals willing to do most anything to help see them succeed.

Obstacles

Fear of Change

One of the biggest obstacles to any type of change is fear of the unknown. There are teachers who fear getting out of their comfort zone. People by nature do not like change. A study was conducted by Deutschman (2007), in which he looked at how well people are open to change. He asked his patients what they would do if their only options were either changing their lifestyle or dying soon; nine out of ten said they would choose to refuse change or could not sustain the necessary change even if it meant saving their lives. By nature we often do not like change; we are afraid of it.

Whenever real change needs to take place in the school environment, the entire culture needs to be changed. Blanchard (2007) hit it on the head when he stated that if change is introduced into a school system, the old culture has to be erased before the new culture can be put into place. DuFour et al.(2008) also stated that it is impossible for a PLC to take place and grow if educators don't accept the fact that a change is needed. The change needed to take place is not an easy one. In fact, Schlechty (2005) referred to it as a disruptive change because it is asking teachers to do something that they may have never done before. DuFour (2008) did not

hide the fact that no matter how carefully schools and administrators plan for such a change in schools, the change will not come easily or quickly.

Barth (1991) wrote how a change was needed in the classroom to eliminate isolation among teachers. Fifteen years later, Barth (2006) stated the fact that little had changed in the structure and culture of most schools. Teachers still teach in their self-contained classroom. Many of our school systems still continue to foster, as he puts it, "parallel play" instead of meaningful collaboration.

Graham (2007) noticed that even though the school he was studying decided to move toward implementing PLCs, he found it was very difficult to change the culture from "it's about what I teach" to "it's about how and what the students learn." Because the teachers were so deeply rooted in what they have always done, it was difficult for them to change from isolationism to a new culture of teacher collaboration. People by nature do not like change; they are so used to staying at their comfort level that they do not want to upset the status quo unless they are convinced that the status quo needs fixing. Bezzina (2005) wrote about the early stages of reform on the island of Malta. One of the first steps the school district did was to conduct interviews among the various teachers. One by one the teachers, many of whom had been teaching for years, told of their fears of change and the unknown.

Allotment of Time

Another obstacle that needs to be overcome is time. The typical school system has a teacher teaching for seven hours, correcting the papers for the day, planning for the next day, and then having time left over for outside interests. If a PLC is going to thrive in the school, time has to be created for the teachers during the day. Louis and Kruse (1995) emphasized that a regular time to meet and talk is necessary for PLCs to operate effectively. In Parry's study (2007), the

school involved in the study decided to initiate PLCs throughout the school. The problem came when the teachers wanted a common planning time for teacher collaboration. One of the teachers even noted that they felt that ninety minutes of common planning time was needed each week, and without this common planning time the entire PLC would fall apart.

Trust

Another obstacle to implementing a successful PLC is the idea of forming new collegial relationships and building the trust needed to be successful. In a study conducted by Christopher Bezzina out of the University of Malta (2006), the teachers interviewed noted that growing such collegial relationships takes time and effort. Group decisions take more time, especially in the beginning stages as teachers get to know and trust each other, their motives, and decisions made within the group.

Cranston (2009) conducted concluding interviews with teachers involved in a study about implementing a PLC. One teacher commented that she didn't know how comfortable teachers were in critiquing each other. It takes time for people in general to get to know others. Until this comfort level grows, those involved may not open up completely due to the fact they do not know how the message will be received. They may not have the comfort or trust level needed to offer or to receive such critiques from the very beginning of the PLC.

Fad Label

The "fad" label can quickly threaten to derail PLC. Maddux (2003) stated that the problem with fads is not so much that they come and go quickly, but the fact that they sweep so many educators along for the ride. Each time a new fad comes and goes, it makes it that much harder to be willing to accept the next great educational need. This, of course, goes for PLCs. Until PLCs are a proven educational entity, there will be those who will view this as the next

great fad to come and go. Hunt (2005), showed how educators love to jump on the bandwagon of the latest and greatest education fad out there, only to be met with disappointment and failure. Maddux (2003) continued that thought by stating that the reform starts with educators being infatuated with the reform, then realizing that the innovation was unrealistic to begin with. From there the reform quickly moves to disillusionment when the educators realize it is not producing the results in a timely manner. Finally, the reform is abandoned never to be seen again. Hunt (2005) argued that before we jump into such new reforms, we should take a step back to look at how the new reform or fad will help the overall outcome of education. If the reform is something worthwhile, then plan accordingly before you jump in.

It Works For All

The last obstacle is the idea that one reform fits all. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2005) there are approximately 48,000,000 students in the public school system in approximately 95,000 public schools, in approximately 14,000 school districts. Broughman, Swaim, and Keaton (2009) also reported that there are approximately 33,740 private schools serving just over 5,000,000 students. There can be no one right fix for every school and school district. Just because it succeeded in one school does not mean it will succeed in every school, but what educators and administrators need to remember is that it does not mean to throw the entire reform out the door and label it as just another fad.

Questions

A review of literature on PLCs has answered several questions.

Question # 1 What is a Professional Learning Community?

A PLC is a group of teachers coming together with a predetermined vision and set of goals for the distinct purpose to collaborate the best means in which to meet the needs of every one of their students.

Question # 2 How is a PLC implemented?

The first step in implementing a change this large is to get the administrator on board. Without the administrator's backing, the teachers involved will be fighting a losing battle. The next step is to slowly get everyone involved comfortable about the change even if it takes an entire year. During this process the vision and goals can be established. Once the vision and goals are created, the teachers involved begin collaborating on the changes that need to take place.

Questions #3 What are the benefits of implementing a Professional Learning Community?

PLCs demonstrate the importance of collaboration for the overall success of the child. Collaboration, first of all, gets the teacher out the isolated little box that teachers can so easily fall into. By staying out of the box of isolation, the teacher is able to collaborate with other teachers on how to implement good, sound educational practices. At a time when accountability of our school systems and teachers is at an all-time high, it is also just as important to have a professional school culture of collaboration rather than isolationism. Repeated studies (NCTAF 2005, Cranston 2009, Graham 2007, OECD 2004, AISR 2005) show the benefits of having a Professional Learning Community to foster collegiality, develop trust among peers, create a system of accountability, and ultimately develop an educational plan which works in the best interest of every student in the school.

Question # 4 What are some obstacles that could be a stumbling block to a successful Professional Learning Community?

Make no mistake about it: while PLCs have their benefits, there are also plenty of obstacles that need to be overcome in order to implement a Professional Learning Community. Studies have shown (Deutschman 2007) that people do not like change, and implementing a PLC in a school system can be a radical change in the teaching culture.

Time constraints have to be dealt with. Researchers have stated that the ability to produce blocks of time for teachers to collaborate could make or break a successful PLC. First and foremost, time has to be given to the teachers for the purpose of getting everyone comfortable with this change of culture. This has to be implemented before the school year begins. If everyone involved does not feel comfortable, the entire process could be derailed. Time also has to be planned out during the school day to allow important concepts and methods to be discussed among the teachers. If this is not done on a regular, predetermined basis, important information may be forgotten and the PLC may not survive.

Questions # 5 Can a Professional learning Community be successful if the trust level of everyone involved is not at a high level to begin with?

Cranston (2009) and Bezzina (2006) each conducted studies with collegial relationships and PLCs. Both stated that in order for a PLC to operate at its best, the colleague trust level also had to be at a high level. Teachers need to know they will not be looked down upon or criticized for the information they contribute to the group. They also stated that this level of trust was something that would come gradually as each member got to know each other.

Question # 6 What if those involved do not see improved results right away?

The best answer to this is that every reform takes time. Fullan (2000) wrote that it may take between three to six years to see the results that the reform was intended to show. Too often the plug is pulled on a new reform simply because the results were not seen immediately. When

times like this arise, the group needs to go back to their vision and goals. In their vision and goals, they should have a time period and expected results within that time period listed for all to see.

Conclusion

As I look at all the information gathered, several questions were still unanswered in my mind. The first and most applicable to me was the question, "Can a PLC be successful in my school setting?" I see the benefits it can bring to a school, its staff, and ultimately the students at the school. Currently, there are three staff members at Grace Lutheran in grades K-9. It is a very close-knit staff that certainly has no trust issues. We often try to confer about events that may have taken place throughout the day, but there is nothing formal about this information being passed on. It usually takes place in passing through the halls after the school day has ended or while waiting to copy papers for the next day. Every study emphatically stated that time was one of the key issues to a successful PLC. The problem facing my staff is the lack of time available to be away from the classroom. After school, a teacher may be needed to work the after school care while another teacher is busy excusing students at the front door. I can truly see how certain obstacles could get in the way of implementing a successful program such as a PLC.

Since larger schools may have more than one classroom for each grade, they may have more options to create PLCs than do schools with a multi-grade set-up. Grace Lutheran is very limited in its opportunities because it has three teachers teaching grades K-9. The teachers in each of these grade level PLCs could then share the professional knowledge they have with each other. Teachers in a small school setting such as Grace Lutheran do not have this professional opportunity. It would also be very difficult to join a PLC in the school district because they often meet during their daily professional work hour or during their staff meetings.

I do also see advantages in implementing a successful PLC in a small school setting. Each teacher is able to know each student as an individual child of God. We can quickly see their strengths and weaknesses and adapt our lessons accordingly. Since all three staff members have class with every child in the school at some point during the week, we are able to share important strategies that have been proven to work with each student.

As a staff, we are also able to work together to make sure there are no gaps in the curriculum frameworks from grade to grade and classroom to classroom. We are also able to look together at test scores and daily work to see if every objective has been met for each subject. If there are gaps, we can collectively brainstorm how we as a staff can fill in the missing gaps. These efforts usually take place during the summer months when the necessary time is available to do such extension work. The more we work together in these efforts, the better the overall education the students receive.

Despite all the information written about PLCs, I am not aware of any studies that have been conducted on the possibilities of implementing an online PLC. This type of study interests me for two reasons. First, Grace Lutheran only has three teachers on staff. As I mentioned before, it makes it very difficult to collaborate with teachers of the same grade level if there is no one else in the school that teaches in the same grade level. Second, according to the WELS Schools Statistics, 258 of the 334 WELS schools have 100 students or less. With 77% of WELS schools having 100 students or less, many of these schools also have very few teachers on staff. If an online PLC could be implemented across the country, it could network all our WELS schools into the PLC of their choice. Teachers would have access to new and innovative teaching strategies to help their teacher satisfaction, and ultimately improve the education of their

students. This would not be an easy task, but I believe with modern technology such as conference calls, social networking, or even through a program such as Moodle it could be done.

Recommendations for Further Study

I believe further studies should be conducted on the following topics involving PLCs:

- a longitudinal study to explore the correlation between PLC involvement and student achievement scores;
- a study to compare satisfaction of staff members who are involved in PLCs and staff members not involved in PLCs;
- a study to explore the feasibility of creating a common vision and set of goals involving an online PLC format;
- a study to explore the feasibility of implementing a foreign language PLC within our WELS schools system;
- a study to explore the optimal time allotment needed to run a successful PLC:
and;
- a longitudinal study involving staff members in a PLC in regards to improved teacher communication.

I believe PLCs are beneficial to the teaching profession. The studies conducted have shown that when conducted correctly, PLCs can improve the teacher's learning techniques and ultimately the students' learning. As with any new teaching idea, everyone involved should proceed with caution when implementing a PLC making sure it is a good fit with the vision and goals set for the school.

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