

Professional Learning Communities in WELS Elementary Schools

by

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Abstract

A professional learning community (PLC) is a structure in which supportive, professional relationships foster a collaborative culture that continually drives for successful change. The key characteristics of PLCs are shared beliefs, shared leadership, collective and focused learning, peer-sharing of practice, and supportive conditions. PLCs have been shown to yield positive school outcomes, primarily in the form of improved teacher efficacy and increased student achievement.

This study examines the extent to which professional learning communities are implemented in Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS) elementary schools. It also seeks to identify perceived barriers and potential helps to the implementation of PLC characteristics. A survey was sent to the teachers and principals of WELS elementary schools which gathered both quantitative and qualitative data on the state of professional learning communities in WELS elementary schools. The gathered data was analyzed to inform the findings and recommendations of the study.

Results of the study indicate that PLC characteristics are generally present in WELS elementary schools, save in the area of peer-sharing of practice. Additionally, definitive barriers to implementation as well as factors or resources helpful to implementation are identified.

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Chapter I: Introduction

Problem Statement

A professional learning community (PLC) is a structure in which supportive, professional relationships foster a collaborative culture that continually drives for successful change (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Hord & Sommers, 2008). Many factors and characteristics contribute to successful employment and maintenance of a PLC in a school, such as communication, relationships, collaboration, professional development, the use of data, shared vision, and principal leadership (DuFour & DuFour, 2006; DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Hord, 1997; Hoffman, Dahlman, and Zierdt, 2009). PLCs have been cited as structures within a school that cater toward the implementation of change processes and effective teaching practices (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Schmoker, 2011). Schools that exist as a professional learning community have realized striking results: increased scores in a number of subject areas, decreased student and teacher absenteeism, a safe and orderly environment for faculty, and smaller achievement gaps between students of different backgrounds (Holland, 2002; Hord, 1997).

While the benefits of PLCs are clear, the degree to which Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS) elementary schools use PLCs is not. Are many WELS elementary schools employing the methods of a PLC? If not, why not? Are there certain factors that prove challenging for school leaders to set up PLCs? Do those school leaders have a clear understanding of what a PLC is, how it is established and maintained, and the benefits it affords? Before making the case that more WELS elementary schools should exist as PLCs, a fuller understanding of the current state of PLCs in WELS elementary schools is needed.

Purpose of the Study

Encouragingly, students of WELS schools perform well academically. A recent study showed that the class of 2015 outperformed the nation in the areas of reading, language, and mathematics. It also reported that the longer students attend WELS schools, the better they do in outperforming the nation in the basic skills areas of reading, language, and mathematics (ECRA Group, 2015). Now, what could achievement look like in WELS elementary schools if the characteristics of professional learning communities were used routinely?

At the same time, WELS elementary schools face unique challenges in terms of educating their students. For example, it can be challenging for a faculty of three teachers to discuss effective assessment of Kindergarten reading when two of the teachers lack background and experience in primary grades instruction. It can be challenging for a principal who teaches full-time to plan and lead regular meetings during which effective literacy instruction methods are discussed. What challenges to effective instruction and assessment need to be overcome for PLCs to be implemented?

The purpose of this study is to better understand how professional learning communities are being used in WELS elementary schools. Perhaps some characteristics of a PLC are being implemented more so than are others. The study also seeks to identify factors that have caused barriers for the implementation of PLC characteristics, along with resources that may prove beneficial to implementation efforts going forward. An aim of the study is to provide information for WELS elementary schools that may help them work toward the model of a professional learning community.

Research Questions

This study will seek to research the following questions:

1. To what extent are the characteristics of a PLC, as defined in this study, implemented in WELS elementary schools?
2. What barriers exist to the implementation of PLCs in WELS elementary schools?
3. What factors or resources do WELS elementary school principals and teachers feel would be most helpful to implement PLCs?

An additional research question was originally included in the survey of this study:

“What factors or resources do WELS elementary school principals and teachers feel enhance the implementation of PLCs?” This research question was removed from the study, however, for a couple of reasons. First, a formatting oversight allowed some but not all participants to select an “N/A” response to questions in that section of the survey, and therefore the data collected for the research question may have been skewed. Second, the data gathered in that section of the survey created redundancy with the data gathered for the third research question (listed above).

Assumptions and Limitations of the Study

This study will rely on data gathered from the principals and teachers of WELS elementary schools. As participation in the survey is optional, a low response rate may impact the validity of the findings.

Also, the study is designed to gather information on the extent to which the characteristics of a PLC are implemented in WELS elementary schools. However, it is not a given that all WELS schools have implemented PLC characteristics. As such, the study may gather more data from schools that have not fully implemented PLC characteristics, and WELS elementary schools that do exist as a PLC may not be fully represented under all of the research questions.

Overview

Professional learning communities have been found to yield positive outcomes for schools. Unfortunately, WELS elementary schools, in many cases, simply do not possess the resources that are typically used to bolster PLC efforts as do their counterparts in the public sector. That being said, many of the characteristics of a PLC can be implemented effectively and beneficially regardless of faculty size, budget, and other such factors. And so this study seeks to examine the state of professional learning communities in WELS elementary schools. Once that has been established, work can be done to help those schools build on the success they are experiencing and meet some of the unique challenges they face, as professional learning communities could provide vehicles for WELS elementary schools to better carry out their mission of providing excellence in Christian education.

Chapter II: Literature Review

Introduction

Much literature has been written on the definition of a professional learning community; an abundance of writings on the characteristics of an effective PLC exists. Many different authors and organizations have written about the components of a successful PLC. Furthermore, the literature clearly identifies the positive outcomes of PLCs. “There is growing evidence that the best hope for significant school improvement is transforming schools into professional learning communities” (DuFour & Eaker, 1998, p.17). While the literature speaks clearly to the role of PLCs in education in general, little has been written on how PLCs play a role in WELS elementary schools. More research needs to be conducted on what PLCs look like in WELS elementary schools and how PLCs can be used effectively in their settings, along with the results of doing so.

Definition of a PLC

One purpose of this study is to determine the extent to which the characteristics of professional learning communities are implemented in WELS elementary schools. To do that, a common definition of the term must be used. As stated above, a professional learning community is a structure in which supportive, professional relationships foster a collaborative culture that continually drives for successful change (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Hord & Sommers, 2008). The literature shows five key aspects of a PLC: shared beliefs, shared leadership, supportive conditions, collective and focused learning, and peer-sharing of practice (Hord & Sommers, 2008; Hord, 2009).

Shared beliefs.

A set of shared beliefs is foundational to a professional learning community. A school's shared beliefs include its mission, vision, and values (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Hord, 2009), which guide its decisions and actions. Dufour and Eaker (1998) suggest that developing shared beliefs is "the first step in establishing the foundation of a professional learning community" (p.85). Furthermore, they suggest engaging educators in a process of describing desirable future school outcomes; this work of outlining vision statements can "motivate and energize people" (p.86). Song and Choi (2017) also find that shared beliefs motivate the members of a PLC: "In PLCs in which teachers and administrators share their underlying values and visions about student learning, ... teachers will strive harder to make their schools learning organizations" (p.7). In fact, shared vision statements "create a proactive organization that is focused on the future, and they create an agenda for action" (Dufour & Eaker, 1998, p.86). Hord and Sommers (2008) also speak to the importance of shared beliefs to a PLC:

"In the PLC, all are encouraged to participate in creating the vision and to keep it foremost in their minds while planning with colleagues and delivering instruction in the classroom. The vision dictates the parameters of decision making about teaching and learning in the school. As it reflects shared values and beliefs, the vision will focus staff members on how they spend their time, what topics they discuss, and how resources may be distributed" (p.10).

Shared beliefs drive the thinking and the work of a PLC by unifying and motivating its members.

Shared leadership.

Another critical aspect of professional learning communities is shared leadership (Hord, 2009). Shared leadership takes place when the responsibility for decision-making and results in

regards to student learning is distributed to the members of a group, as opposed to being held by an individual leader. Specifically applied to a PLC, shared leadership is held by the participants, not just by the principal or teacher-leader. PLCs require democratic participation and consensus “about the school environment and culture and how to attain that” (Hord & Sommers, 2008, p.10). In a three-year study of successful multi-district PLCs, Hoffman et al. (2009) report that “[a]lthough the director made the preparations before each PLC meeting, participants shared the leadership at each session” (p.39). Participants in a PLC are all included in making decisions and taking actions. In PLCs, this shared leadership also means shared responsibility: “One prominent value shared by teachers was collective responsibility for student learning” (DeMatthews, 2014, p.193). “Collective responsibility, in which all members feel accountable for all students, is at the core of intensified leadership” (Kruse & Seashore Louis, 2009, p.8). In fact, professional learning communities are most effective when leadership of student learning is held collectively (Hilliard and Newsome, 2013). This shared leadership, or collective responsibility, is truly a hallmark of professional learning communities.

Under the shared leadership aspect of a PLC, the principal holds a paradoxical responsibility to its success. “Schools are trapped by a leadership dilemma: they require skilled, effective principals in order to outgrow their utter dependence on those principals” (Dufour and Eaker, 1998, p.181). Principals have succeeded in a professional learning community when the success of that community does not depend on them alone. To make this happen, they must envision themselves leading from the center, as opposed to leading from the top. A WELS elementary school principal, “like the Leader, has power, but is not a power wielder. He leads through humble service, not heavy-handed control” (Lauersdorf, 1991, p.3). They, joining their teachers, are collaborative. In a school where a group is working collaboratively toward its

collective goals, a leader is needed “who can let go of power and his/her own sense of omnipotence and omnicompetence and thereby share the leadership of the school” (Hord, 1997, p.17). DuFour and DuFour (2006) described the principal as the “lead learner” in a PLC. “A principal who is the lead learner is typically found engaging in professional development side-by-side with the teachers, modeling a high degree of engagement and participation, spearheading discussions and leading decision-making about curriculum, instruction and assessment” (Wilhelm, 2010, p.23). To be sure, the principal plays a paradoxical yet pivotal role in a professional learning community.

Supportive conditions.

The supportive conditions required by a professional learning community include two branches: structural factors and relational factors (Hord & Sommers, 2008).

The first aspect to the supportive conditions of a PLC has to do with how it is structured. Supportive conditions include a number of arrangements and resources including teacher learning support, time resources, and communication systems (Song & Choi, 2017; Hord, 2009). These factors provide conditions for the success of the PLC (Hord, 2009). The driver of the PLC, whether the principal or a teacher-leader or a leadership team, is responsible for establishing and maintaining supportive conditions:

“To create high quality teaching teams, a school’s administrative team must make sure that all the necessary resources are available when needed. Principals and administrative staff are most effective when they do not act intrusively as administrative superiors, but instead offer needed resources, emotional care, and support to make the transformation of campus culture possible” (Lee & Li, 2015, p.15).

Song & Choi (2017) add that “principals who demonstrate supportive leadership can provide PLCs with space and equipment along with necessary resources and financial support” (p.2). If a professional learning community is to be set up to succeed, it is to be provided with supportive conditions.

The second branch of supportive conditions within a PLC is solid relationships. Rubin, Abrego, and Sutterby (2015) note that both congenial and collegial relationships are found in schools working to develop into professional learning communities. Congenial relationships foster personal connections that support professional work, and collegial relationships strengthen the professional work done together by members of a PLC. In her study of professional communities in small Chicago schools, Holland (2002) observes that teachers were able to work toward their goals “because of the relationships of the faculty members” (p.24). Trust is reported “as the foundation for the mature adult relationships necessary in professional learning communities” (Cranston, 2009, p.11). Indeed, if schools are to succeed in establishing a PLC, supportive relationships must be developed. Participants in PLCs report the relationships they formed to be both rewarding and beneficial to the group’s work (Hoffman et al., 2009; Hudson, 2006). The literature is clear that relationships are an important aspect to professional learning communities.

Collective and focused learning.

The fourth defining aspect of a PLC is ongoing learning, or professional development, focused on student learning and instructional practices (Hord, 2009). As opposed to thinking of professional development as a quick fix aimed at generalities or vague goals, it is focused on teaching and learning and embedded in the school’s culture. Certainly there is value in one- or two-day workshops or attendance at teachers’ conferences, but these forms of professional

development do not alone compose the body of the professional development of a PLC (Fullan & Stiegelbauer, 1991). Rather, teachers are rooted in ongoing study and practice that affects teaching methods and student learning (National Staff Development Council, 2001; Hord & Sommers, 2008). Hord (1997) cites “an undeviating focus on student learning” as “[a] core characteristic of the professional learning community” (p.19). “This focus on student results means that a professional learning community assigns a higher priority to building the collective capacity of the group than the knowledge and skills of individuals” (Dufour and Eaker, 1998, p.261-262). In this way, professional development is applied consistently and analyzed objectively in a way that makes participants in a PLC owners of their professional growth. Importantly, “[t]he major emphasis is on collective learning, when individuals learn more than if they are learning independently” (Hord & Sommers, 2008, p.12).

Wasta (2017) makes the case for placing instructional strategies - and therefore student learning as a result - at the center of the work of a PLC:

“In effect, these teachers are designing and implementing their own professional development, focusing on an issue that they have identified as important to them. Over time, they will monitor both data streams - the change in their practice and the change in student performance - and these sources of information will guide the direction of their work” (p.70).

Again, this focus on teachers’ instruction and students’ learning causes teachers to take ownership of their professional development. In his report study on improving teachers’ classroom practice, Wenglinsky (2000) finds

“that while teacher inputs, professional development, and classroom practices all influence student achievement, the greatest role is played by classroom practices,

followed by professional development that is specifically tailored to those classroom practices most conducive to the high academic performance of students” (p.9).

And he agrees that this professional development should happen on an ongoing basis over the long-term: “[T]he study suggests that the more extended the professional development, the more it encourages effective classroom practices” (p.30). In fact, teachers need significant time, up to fifty hours, of instruction, practice, and coaching before successfully implementing a new instructional strategy (French, 1997). Similarly, Joyce and Showers (2002) find that it takes teachers at least twenty separate practices to master a new skill.

Essentially, professional learning communities offer participants opportunities to analyze what is and is not working in their classrooms and to develop classroom practices (Wasta, 2017). Ongoing professional development focused on the most practical operations of a school - teaching and learning - is a defining aspect of a professional learning community.

Peer-sharing of practice.

The first four aspects of a PLC lay the groundwork for the final defining characteristic: the peer-sharing of practice. Collaboration is a linchpin of this aspect of a PLC. DuFour and Eaker (1998) cite the creation of a collaborative environment as “the single most important factor in sustaining the effort to create a learning community” (p.130). Collaboration gives teachers what they need in order to carry out what is expected of them. In fact, “[t]eachers cannot be expected to significantly change their practices in isolation without the support of collaborative colleagues” (Rubin et al., 2015, p.149). Furthermore, Hord (1997) notes that “[t]eachers find help, support, and trust” (p.23) through collaboration. The majority of teachers in a study conducted by Hudson (2006) felt that meeting with other teachers was the most useful professional development activity in which they participated. Similarly, Wahlstrom, Seashore

Louis, Leithwood, and Anderson (2010) find that the specific practice of “creating structures and opportunities for teachers to collaborate” (p.14) was agreed upon by principals and teachers as an important aspect of instructional leadership. In fact, collaboration is such an important aspect to a PLC that it “must be embedded into the daily life of the school” (DuFour & Eaker, 1998, p.130) by making time for collaboration during the school day and year, providing the purpose of and structures for collaboration, teaching teachers to be collaborative, and holding teachers to professional responsibilities, both individual and collective.

This collaborative environment enables PLC members to carry out their shared work. As a group of professionals seeking to improve their craft, teachers within a PLC open their classrooms to one another. Hord (1997) describes the review of colleagues’ work as the norm in a PLC:

“This practice is not evaluative but is part of the ‘peers helping peers’ process. Such review is conducted regularly by teachers who visit each other’s classrooms to observe, script notes, and discuss observations with each other. The process is based on the desire for individual and community improvement and is enabled by the mutual respect and trustworthiness of staff members” (p.23).

In such a collaborative environment, teachers feel comfortable sharing both their successes and their failures in the interest of improved teaching and learning (Hord, 2008). “Staff members are honest and open about what the teacher knows and doesn’t know, and what he or she needs to learn” (Hord, 2008, p.13). Teachers work “together on various instructional strategies and programs...with the team’s work being the focus of attention” (Hord, 2008, p.11). Peer-sharing of practice incorporates the other aspects of a PLC and is one of its key characteristic.

Effectiveness of PLCs

While the purpose of this study is not to prove the effectiveness of PLCs, it is worthwhile to briefly present what the literature states about their benefits to schools, in addition to what was stated in this regard in the Introduction. Authors on professional learning communities assert that they provide two branches of benefits: improved student achievement and increased teacher efficacy.

One benefit of PLCs is improved teacher efficacy. When more members of the school community - namely, teachers - are included as decision makers, group efficacy is likely to rise (Kruse & Seashore Louis, 2009). Similarly, teachers who participate in professional learning communities are less isolated, demonstrate more satisfaction and higher morale, and make teaching adaptations more quickly than teachers in traditional schools (Hord, 1997).

A second benefit of PLCs, resulting from improved teacher efficacy, is increased student achievement. When PLCs are implemented diligently and supported sufficiently, they tend to lead to significant improvements in student performance (DuFour, Eaker, & DuFour, 2005). Goddard, Miller, Larsen, Goddard, Madsen and Schroeder (2010) state:

“Our findings are consistent with prior literature on collaborative learning communities, which find that student achievement improves when teachers have more time to plan together, with a focus on instructional improvement (Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009; Louis et al., 2009). Our work also replicates and extends the findings of Goddard et al. (2007) by finding a significant, positive link between teacher collaboration and student achievement” (p.17).

Students in schools structured as professional learning communities have seen higher gains in a number of subject areas than students in traditionally structured schools (Lee, Smith, and Croninger, 1995).

Barriers to PLCs

While well-structured PLCs demonstrate effectiveness in terms of student success and teacher capability, there are certainly barriers to establishing them and experiencing said benefits. One of the purposes of this study is to identify the barriers that exist to implementing PLCs in WELS elementary schools. The literature reveals several barriers for schools.

One barrier for schools seeking to establish a PLC is an unclear definition of what exactly constitutes a professional learning community. While authors and practitioners agree on some of the aspects of PLCs, the proposed characteristics are many, and it can be challenging for school leaders to grasp a concrete understanding of what defines a PLC. “A problem facing research on professional learning communities has been a conceptual one, and while some suggest that the term defines itself, oversimplifications offer little to a meaningful conceptual understanding” (Cranston, 2009, p.2). Also, the term professional learning community “has been used so ubiquitously that it is in danger of losing all meaning (DuFour, 2004, p.6). In other words, in addition to the challenges caused by the multi-faceted definition of PLCs, simplistic descriptions of PLCs and misuse of the term may cause just as much difficulty for school leaders as the help they intend to give.

Additionally, certain factors can be barriers to the steps of implementing a PLC. The implementation of a PLC often requires a change in a school’s culture. This change in culture can be difficult to manage because many aspects of an organization’s operation - many unseen and difficult to pinpoint - need to be addressed, which can take years of diligent focus (Collins,

2001). A change in culture toward a PLC does not happen overnight, and when the turnover of administration, faculty, and staff is taken into consideration, potential barriers to implementation become obvious. Another barrier to the establishment of PLCs is the size of a school's faculty. Schools with a large faculty can face the challenges of teacher isolation and differing visions, both of which can be prohibitive to the work of forming a PLC (Klonksy, 2002).

There are additional barriers unique to WELS elementary schools seeking to establish PLCs. Many WELS elementary schools, though they do not face the challenges that schools with large faculties encounter, actually have the challenge of implementing a PLC with small faculties. Wisconsin public schools have, on average, 27 teachers per school (Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, 2016). WELS elementary schools, in comparison, average 6 teachers per school (Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, 2017). (The actual number of WELS teachers per elementary school is likely lower; the number of Lutheran Elementary School teachers reported also includes teachers of Early Childhood Ministries that are part of an LES.) Many WELS elementary schools with small faculties lack the set-up that larger schools have to operate collaborative groups, such as interdisciplinary teams or grade-level peer groups, as part of a PLC.

A potential option for some WELS elementary schools is to collaborate with other nearby WELS schools, but, again, many do not have that luxury. Several geographic districts of the WELS operate a small number of Lutheran Elementary Schools. For example, the Dakota-Montana district has only five, the North Atlantic two, and the South Central seven (Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, 2017). The lack of nearby schools with which to collaborate certainly could be prohibitive to joint PLCs.

A final barrier to WELS elementary schools establishing PLCs has to do with a challenge for WELS principals. “Over 80% of WELS principals say their administrative time is inadequate” (Meyer, Treptow, Rademan, Sievert, and Brown, 2015). It is true that once a PLC is established effectively in a school, shared leadership distributes responsibility amongst the participants. But until that transition point has been reached, the principal is responsible for the organization and set-up of the PLC. Most WELS principals already report that they feel strapped for time, even before taking on the responsibility of implementing a PLC. And this requires work: “facilitating the meeting where the strategic priorities were identified, developing the PLC model, building understanding of the PLC’s form and function, and arranging all details in the preparation for the PLC” (Hoffman et al., 2009).

Summary

A professional learning community is defined by five aspects: shared beliefs, shared leadership, supportive conditions, collective and focused learning, and peer-sharing of practice (Hord & Sommers, 2008; Hord, 2009). The five aspects are interwoven, beginning with the development of shared values and vision for the school. Relationships and other supportive conditions fostered for the participants are foundational to their professional development, which is ongoing and focused on their shared practice of improving student achievement and instructional practices. All this is encompassed by shared leadership of the participants, with the principal serving as a leader of learning.

Professional learning communities can affect distinct and difference-making benefits for schools which establish PLCs in a structured way. A number of barriers stand in the way of this, though. It may be challenging for WELS elementary schools, in particular, to establish PLCs, but the work is worthwhile, especially in terms of teacher efficacy and student performance.

Chapter III: Methodology

Introduction

Again, while PLCs can provide benefits to schools, it is not clear the extent to which their characteristics have been implemented in WELS elementary schools. This study seeks to shed light on the state of PLCs in WELS elementary schools. Data were gathered on the level of PLC characteristic implementation, along with perceived barriers to implementation and potential aid to future implementation efforts.

Research Questions:

The data gathered in this study was used to answer the following questions:

1. To what extent are the characteristics of a PLC, as defined in this study, implemented in WELS elementary schools?
2. What barriers exist to the implementation of PLCs in WELS elementary schools?
3. What factors or resources do WELS elementary school principals and teachers feel would be most helpful to implement PLCs?

Research Design and Procedures

This study was designed to gather both qualitative and quantitative data through a survey (described below). The researcher communicated with the WELS Commission on Lutheran Schools (CLS) to coordinate an email to be sent to the principals and teachers of WELS elementary schools, which asked them to participate in a survey. The email included information about the researcher, a summary of the study, an explanation of how participation in the survey would help the researcher complete the study, a link to the electronic survey, and the deadline for completion. This email was sent on October 18, 2018, on behalf of the researcher from the CLS to all principals and teachers of WELS elementary schools with an email address on file with the

CLS. Follow-up emails were sent in the same fashion to the same audience on October 26 and November 5, 2018. Responses to the survey were gathered by Google Forms in a spreadsheet, allowing for simplified viewing and analysis.

Population and Sample

Data were collected from the subjects of the study: the principals and teachers of WELS elementary schools who participated in the survey. At the time of the study there were 294 WELS elementary schools. Of the principals and teachers at those schools, 1,556 had email addresses on file with the CLS, which were included in the email recipient list. The email bounced to twenty-one (1.4%) of the email addresses it was sent to and was received by 1,535 (98.6%) email addresses. In total 194 (12.6%) of the recipients participated in study by completing the survey. Of those participants fifty-nine (30.4%) were principals and 135 (69.6%) were teachers.

Instrumentation

The researcher asked the CLS to email the survey, along with its description, to the principals and teachers of WELS elementary schools. The electronic survey was created with Google Forms. The questions of the survey are listed in the Appendix. Responses to the survey were also gathered within Google Forms and exported to a Google Sheets file.

Data Analysis and Procedures

This study was designed to be descriptive; both quantitative and qualitative data were gathered and analyzed. By gathering both types of data, a certain degree of triangulation was made available to the researcher.

Two opening questions asked respondents to identify whether they serve as a principal or teacher and about the size of their K-8 faculty. This information allowed for further interpretation of data and more detailed findings.

Quantitative data was gathered in the second series of questions, using a Likert scale and relating to the degree to which the aspects of a professional learning community exist in the school (Research Question #1). This was done by using the Professional Learning Communities Assessment-Revised (Oliver et al., 2010). Participants were also given the option to make comments, providing qualitative data.

A set of choices about the barriers to implementing PLCs (Research Question #2) and the resources that would be helpful to implement PLCs (Research Question #3) were provided to participants, also with a Likert scale. They were also able to provide their own “Other” responses to these questions, along with comments.

Limitations

One limitation to the methodology was a relatively low response rate of 12.6%. One possible reason for the low response rate is the length of the survey. In fact, two comments were given in the survey on its length. Busy principals and teachers may not have had the time to commit to a survey of its length. A smaller amount of data was analyzed due to the low response rate.

Second, the questions of the survey ask participants to agree or disagree on a continuum with statements about PLC characteristics at their school. This may have allowed for a subjective view of participants’ own school to be expressed and may have affected the validity of the findings.

Summary

Both quantitative and qualitative data were gathered in this descriptive study. Responses to the research questions were gathered in an electronic survey sent via email to the principals and teachers of WELS elementary schools in the fall of 2018. The survey was created and responses were gathered using Google Forms. A relatively low response rate and the possibility for subjective views to be expressed were limitations to the study.

Chapter IV: Results

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to determine the extent to which PLC characteristics are implemented in WELS elementary schools, along with factors that may hinder implementation efforts and that could help future efforts. Certainly a goal of any WELS elementary school is to improve upon the way in which it carries out its mission, and PLCs can help a school with that goal. So how are PLCs being used in WELS elementary schools? Are there factors or resources that would be of benefit to WELS elementary schools as they seek to implement the characteristics of a PLC? This study seeks to answer such questions; a survey was sent to the principals and teachers of WELS elementary schools in order to identify themes on the state of PLCs in their schools. The data gathered were used to answer the following research questions:

1. To what extent are the characteristics of a PLC, as defined in this study, implemented in WELS elementary schools?
2. What barriers exist to the implementation of PLCs in WELS elementary schools?
3. What factors or resources do WELS elementary school principals and teachers feel would be most helpful to implement PLCs?

Data Analysis

- 1. To what extent are the characteristics of a PLC, as defined in this study, implemented in WELS elementary schools?**

The first main section of the survey asked participants to rate PLC characteristics as they are found in their schools. This was done using the Professional Learning Communities Assessment-Revised (Oliver et al., 2010). Fifty-two PLC characteristics were listed under six categories: shared leadership, shared beliefs, collective and focused learning, peer-sharing of

practice, supportive conditions - relationships, and supportive conditions - structures. Eleven characteristics were listed under shared leadership, nine under shared beliefs, ten under collective and focused learning, seven under peer sharing of practice, five under supportive conditions - relationships, and ten supportive conditions - structures. Participants rated the PLC characteristics as they are found in their school on a Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = agree, 4 = strongly agree). The survey responses were analyzed to determine the percentage of participants who felt the PLC characteristics are present in their schools.

According to the data most of the six categories of PLC characteristics, in general, were deemed present in the participants' schools. In fact, more than 50% of participants indicated that the characteristics of all categories but peer-sharing of practice are present in their schools (see Figure 1). The characteristics of shared leadership, shared beliefs, collective and focused learning, supportive conditions - relationships, and supportive conditions - structures were indicated to be present in the schools of more than 50% of the participants.

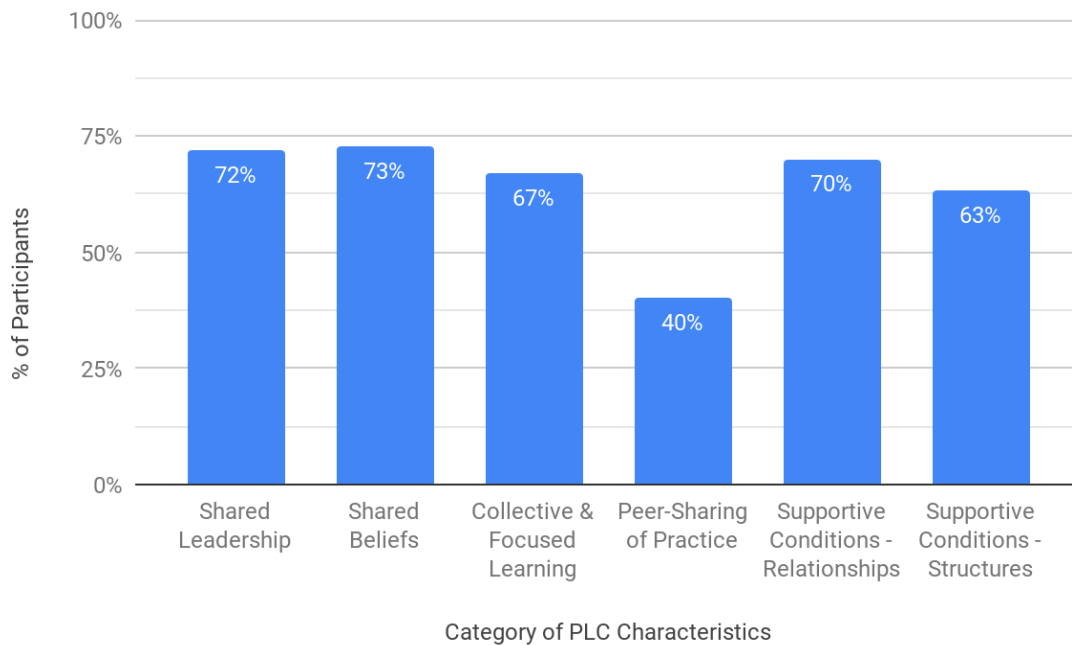


Figure 1. Percentage of participants who indicated the characteristics of PLC categories to be present in their schools

Certain PLC characteristics were found to be the most highly evident in WELS elementary schools. Of the fifty-two PLC characteristic included in the survey, forty-three were indicated by more than 50% of participants as present in their school. The top 10% (the top five) of the fifty-two characteristics were identified, based on participants' responses: caring relationships exist among staff and students that are built on trust and respect, decisions are made in alignment with the school's values and vision, the principal incorporates advice from staff members to make decisions, school staff members are committed to programs that enhance learning, and appropriate technology and instructional materials are available to staff. One of these characteristics was from the shared leadership category, one from shared beliefs, one from collective and focused learning, one from supportive conditions - relationships, and one from supportive conditions - structures (see Table 1).

Table 1

List of PLC Characteristics Found to be Most Evident (Top 10%) in WELS Elementary Schools

PLC Characteristic	Category	% of Participants
Caring relationships exist among staff and students that are built on trust and respect.	Supportive conditions - relationships	92%
Decisions are made in alignment with the school's values and vision.	Shared beliefs	87%
The principal incorporates advice from staff members to make decisions.	Shared leadership	85%
School staff members are committed to programs that enhance learning.	Shared beliefs	84%
Appropriate technology and instructional materials are available to staff.	Collective and focused learning	82%

In addition to the most evident, certain PLC characteristics were indicated to be significantly less evident. In total nine characteristics were indicated by less than 50% of participants to be present in their schools (see Table 2). More than half of these PLC characteristics, including the four least evident, were from the peer-sharing of practice category, the only category to be indicated, as a whole, by less than 50% of participants to be present in their schools. Two of these less evident characteristics were from the category of collective and focused learning, and two were from the category of supportive conditions - structures.

Table 2

List of PLC Characteristics Found to be not Evident in WELS Elementary Schools

PLC Characteristic	Category	% of Participants
Staff members regularly share student work to guide overall school improvement.	Peer-sharing of practice	23%
Opportunities exist for staff members to observe peers and offer encouragement.	Peer-sharing of practice	25%
Staff members provide feedback to peers related to instructional practices.	Peer-sharing of practice	27%
Staff members collaboratively review student work to share and improve instructional practices.	Peer-sharing of practice	27%
Time is provided to facilitate collaborative work.	Supportive conditions - structures	38%
The school schedule promotes collective learning and shared practice.	Supportive conditions - structures	40%
Staff members collaboratively analyze student work to improve teaching and learning.	Collective and focused learning	45%
Opportunities exist for coaching and mentoring.	Peer-sharing of practice	45%
Staff members collaboratively analyze multiple sources of data to assess the effectiveness of instructional practices.	Collective and focused learning	45%

Findings were also made based on school size, which can be related to PLC implementation efforts. For example, a large school with one teacher per grade level may be set up well for peer-sharing of practice: a group of primary grades teachers could meet to discuss developmentally appropriate practices that are working well in their classrooms. On the other

hand, a small school with only a handful of teachers might find more ease in developing a shared mission due to the smaller number of stakeholders involved. So participants' survey responses were also studied based on the size of their respective school faculties. Responses were divided into the groups of large schools (nine or more faculty members), medium schools (five - eight faculty members), and small schools (two - four faculty members) (see Figure 2).

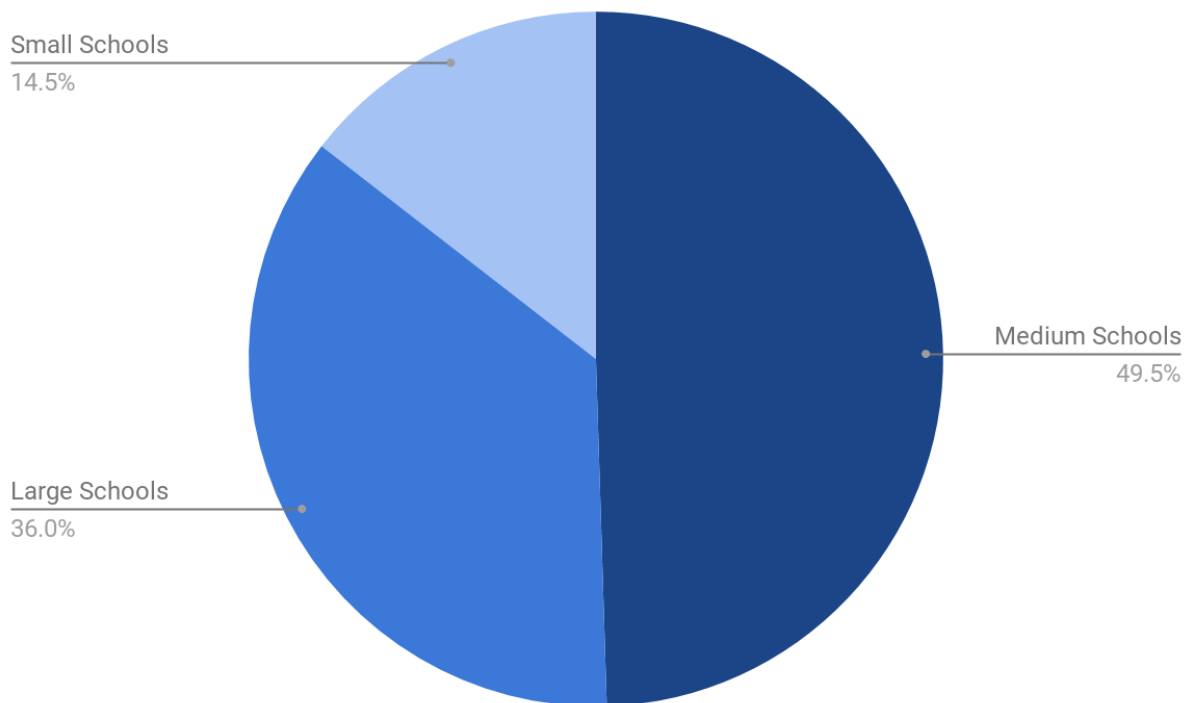


Figure 2. Breakdown of participants' schools by faculty size

The data revealed that, in general, PLC characteristics were evident at relatively consistent levels between schools of differing sizes. While PLC characteristics were most evident in large schools and least evident in small schools in all but one category (shared leadership), no statistical difference existed between the level of implementation based on school size (see Figure 3). The statistical insignificance was determined by an analysis of variance (ANOVA) after calculating the means of the characteristics in each of the six PLC categories

(see Table 3). The category of PLC characteristics closest to statistical significance was supportive conditions - structures ($F(2, 7) = 2.058, p = 0.147$). Since no statistical difference was found, a Tukey post hoc test was not required.

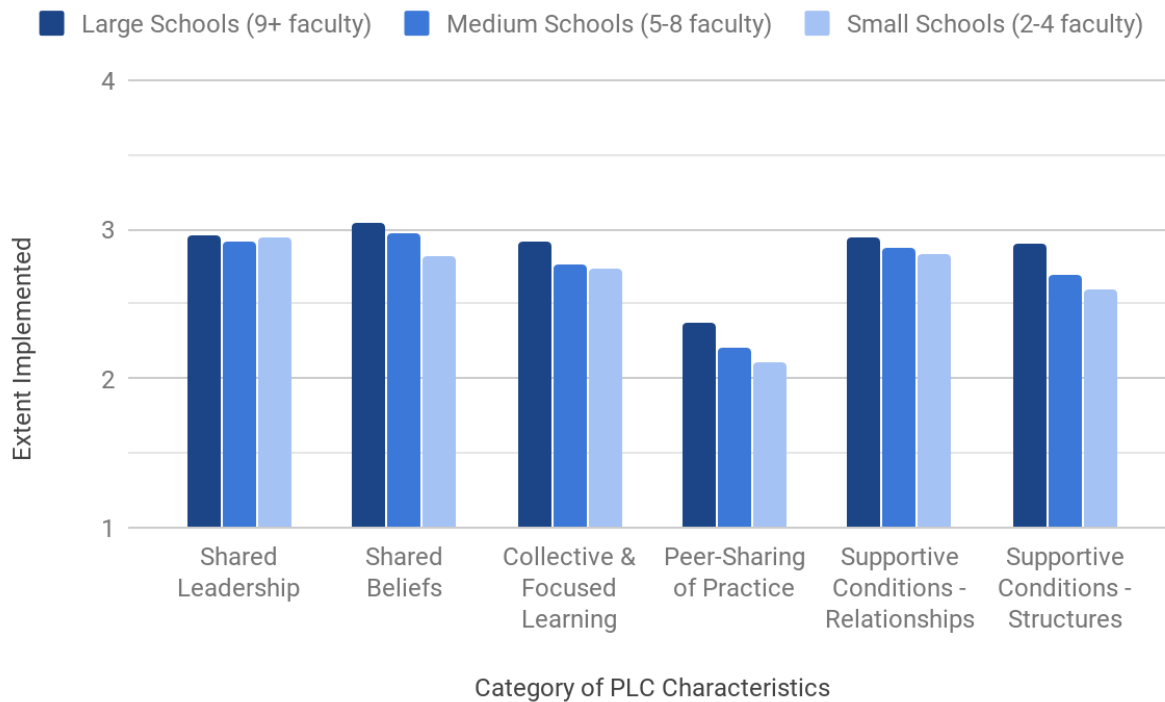


Figure 3. Comparison of PLC characteristics categories implementation by school size, determined by the number of faculty members

Table 3

Differences in Implementation Levels of PLC Characteristics Categories Based on School Size

Measure	<i>F</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>
Shared Leadership	0.07	2, 30	0.936
Shared Beliefs	1.76	2, 24	0.194
Collective & Focused Learning	0.84	2, 27	0.442
Peer-Sharing of Practice	0.64	2, 18	0.540
Supportive Conditions - Relationships	0.19	2, 12	0.828
Supportive Conditions – Structures	2.06	2, 27	0.147

2. What barriers exist to the implementation of PLCs in WELS elementary schools?

The second main section of the survey asked participants to rate factors that are barriers to implementing the characteristics of a PLC in their schools. Participants used a Likert scale (1 = not at all a barrier, 4 = very much a barrier) to indicate whether or not thirteen different factors are barriers to implementation efforts at their schools. They were also able to describe other barriers they feel exist.

It was found that nine of the fourteen factors were indicated by less than 50% of participants to be barriers to implementation of PLC characteristics at their schools: challenges of changing the culture of the school; administrative, teacher, or staff turnover; strained relationships between teachers; teachers' differing vision for the school; challenges of forming teacher-teams due to small faculty size; hindrance from working with another WELS elementary schools; reluctance of teachers to participate; lack of time for principal to plan and organize; and lack of funding for professional development. Five factors were indicated by more than 50% of participants as barriers to implementation (see Figure 4).

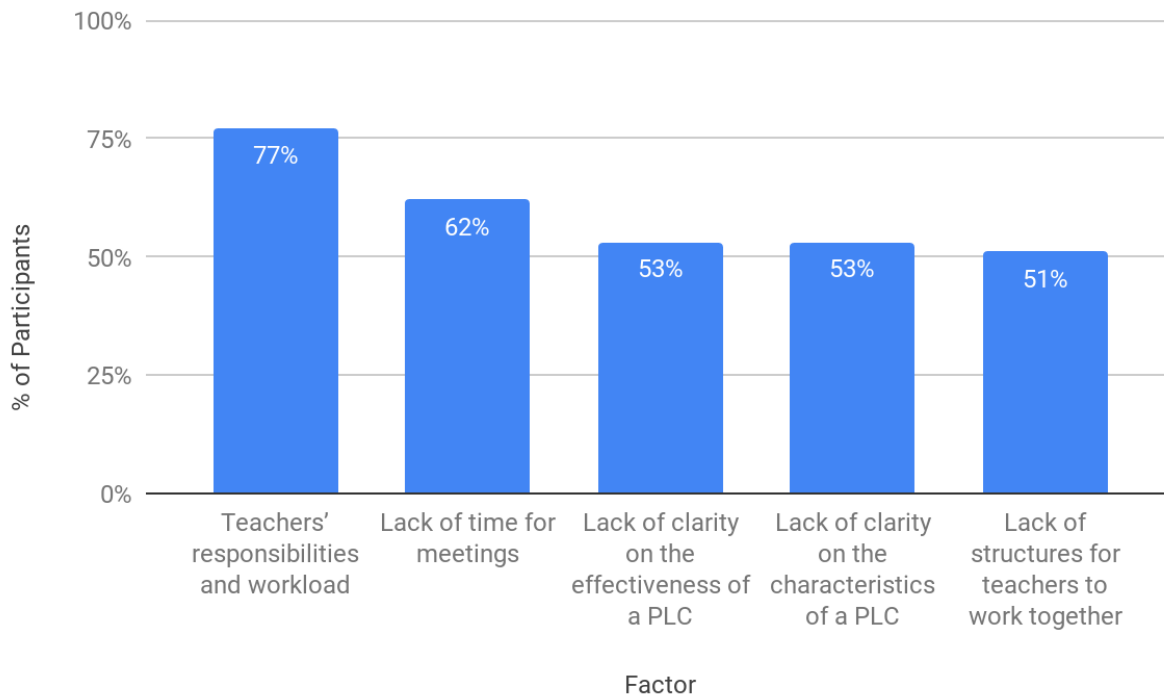


Figure 4. Percentage of participants who indicated respective factors as barriers to implementation of PLC characteristics

Seven additional comments were received on barriers to PLC implementation. The comments were coded to determine if they aligned with any of the fourteen barriers provided in the survey. Two comments pertained to unfamiliarity with PLCs, and one pertained to a hindrance from working with another WELS school. Both of these barriers were provided in the survey. Additionally, two comments each were received on a lack of shared leadership and resistance to change. These two barriers are in addition to the fourteen provided in the survey.

3. What factors or resources do WELS elementary school principals and teachers feel would be most helpful to implement PLCs?

The third main section of the survey asked participants to consider factors and resources that might assist them in PLC implementation efforts. They were asked to use a Likert scale (1 = wouldn't be helpful at all, 4 = would be very helpful) to rate the helpfulness that twelve different

factors and resources would provide. Participants were also given opportunity to list other factors or resources perceived to be helpful to implementation.

Each of the twelve factors or resources was identified by at least 60% of the participants as potentially helpful to the implementation of PLC characteristics. Increased technology for faculty use received the lowest amount of favorable responses at 62%, while 95% of the participants indicated that collective, ongoing professional development focused on teaching and learning would be helpful. Table 4 lists the response to each factor or resource.

Table 4

Helpfulness of Different Factors and Resources for Implementation of PLC Characteristics

Factor or Resource	% of Participants
Collective, ongoing professional development focused on teaching and learning	95%
Peer-sharing of practice to gain feedback	90%
Principal training on the aspects of a PLC	90%
Teacher training on the aspects of a PLC	90%
A culture of shared decision-making	89%
Designated and scheduled time for whole-faculty professional work	89%
Time spent on developing a shared vision	84%
Intentional relationship- and trust-building between faculty members	82%
Additional funding for professional development	80%
Arrangement to work with another WELS elementary school	79%
Additional administrative release time for the principal	73%
Increased technology for faculty use	62%

Five additional comments were received on the helpfulness of different resources or factors to PLC implementation efforts. The comments were again coded for the purpose of

determining whether they aligned with the factors and resources provided in the survey or if they were additional suggestions beyond what was provided in the survey. Two of them aligned with options provided in the survey: teacher training on PLCs and an arrangement to work with another WELS elementary school. Three other suggestions were given beyond the factors and resources provided in the survey: developing teachers' complementary skills, development of teacher leaders, and a culture of shared decision making.

Summary

This study was conducted to answer three research questions regarding the state of professional learning communities in WELS elementary schools. WELS elementary schools have implemented certain characteristics of PLCs. Five out of the six general categories of PLC characteristics are evident. Also, certain specific PLC characteristics are highly evident. However, there is room for growth. Only 40% of participants indicated that peer-sharing of practice takes place in their schools, and certain PLC characteristics are much less evident than others. This is due to the fact that barriers to implementation exist. The definition and benefits of PLCs could be clarified for principals and teachers as they seek to implement PLC characteristics. Principals and teachers also feel that their current level of responsibilities, as well as the lack of time and structures for PLC work, are barriers to implementation. They also identified a number of factors and resources that would be helpful to implementation efforts that include training, collaborative work in a number of ways, and the support of fiscal resources and time.

Chapter V: Summary, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Introduction

This paper has set out to describe professional learning communities and the extent to which they are implemented in WELS elementary schools. PLCs are structures in which supportive, professional relationships foster a collaborative culture that continually drives for successful change (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Hord & Sommers, 2008). Schools that exist as PLCs have recognized positive outcomes, most notably in the forms of increased teacher efficacy and increased student achievement. There are, however, barriers to implementing PLCs for schools, WELS elementary schools included. The survey administered during this study yields both encouragements and areas for improvement: certain PLC characteristics are rather evident in WELS elementary schools; others are not. Additionally, hurdles have been identified, along with desired ways of overcoming them.

Summary of the Results

The results of this study can be used to help WELS elementary schools understand professional learning communities, come to terms with the potential challenges of implementing PLCs, and identify ways to effectively take advantage of the benefits of PLCs. This study sought to answer three questions in particular:

1. To what extent are the characteristics of a PLC, as defined in this study, implemented in WELS elementary schools?
2. What barriers exist to the implementation of PLCs in WELS elementary schools?
3. What factors or resources do WELS elementary school principals and teachers feel would be most helpful to implement PLCs?

Responses to the questions of the survey indicate that the characteristics of a PLC are implemented to an extent in WELS elementary schools. Five of the six key categories of PLC characteristics are evident. Peer-sharing of practice is the one that is not. Furthermore, forty-three out of fifty-two PLC characteristics provided in the survey are indicated as present in WELS elementary schools. Nine characteristics are not evident; five of the characteristics are from the category of peer-sharing of practice, two from collective and focused learning, and two from supportive conditions - structures. Additionally, PLC characteristics are implemented at a relatively consistent level across WELS elementary schools of varying sizes. No statistical difference in the level of implementation from large to medium to small schools was found during an ANOVA test.

This study sheds light on factors perceived to be barriers to PLC implementation by WELS elementary school teachers and principals. Of the fourteen factors listed in the survey of the study, five are shown to be barriers. Additional comments from participants also provide indications of potential barriers. The barriers to implementation of PLC characteristics in WELS elementary schools primarily pertain to the following: the current level of responsibilities and workload that teachers carry, lack of time for teachers to meet, a lack of clarity on PLC characteristics and effectiveness, and a lack of structures provided for teachers to work together.

In addition to the factors that would get in the way of PLC implementation, the study gains insight into what teachers and principals feel would be helpful to implementation efforts. All twelve factors or resources listed in the survey are seen as potentially helpful by the participants. The most helpful factors and resources center on increased collaboration and training: collective, ongoing professional development focused on teaching and learning; peer-sharing of practice to gain feedback; teacher and principal training on the aspects of a PLC; a

culture of shared decision-making; and designated and scheduled time for whole-faculty professional work, among others.

Conclusions

WELS elementary schools are blessed with the privilege of providing Christian education to assist families and prepare young people. Professional learning communities can provide ways for them to do so with higher and higher levels of excellence. By and large, WELS elementary schools are implementing the characteristics of PLCs. Shared leadership, shared beliefs, collective and focused learning, and the supportive conditions of relationships and structures are all present in WELS elementary schools. Although they are being implemented at varying levels, the fact that they are evident provides cause for celebration.

On the other hand, peer-sharing of practice is less evident, and five of the nine individual PLC characteristics found to be not evident are from the category of peer-sharing of practice. This is concerning, especially as teacher collaboration is an element so critical to the success of a PLC (DuFour and Eaker, 1998; Hudson, 2006; Rubin et al., 2015; Wahlstrom et al., 2010).

There is no statistical difference in the degree to which PLC characteristics are implemented in WELS elementary school based on faculty size. This shows that, while there may be different challenges for schools unique to their size, all schools can work toward a PLC structure and reap the benefits they provide, regardless of size. While WELS elementary schools may lack the number of teachers that are typically used in PLCs in their public school counterparts (Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, 2016; Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, 2017), they are still making an effort to employ PLC characteristics.

Barriers do indeed exist to the implementation of PLC characteristics in WELS elementary schools. The barriers indicated by participants show that they feel more structure,

time, and training for the sake of clarity are needed to better employ the characteristics of a PLC. These concerns are significant. Appropriately supportive structures are needed for PLC members to meet expectations (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Hord & Sommers, 2009; Lee & Li, 2015; Wahlstrom et al., 2010). Time has been found to be a necessary ingredient to successful PLC implementation (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; French, 1997; Hord, 2009; Song & Choi, 2017). Both oversimplification of PLCs and overuse or misrepresentation of the term can cloud the proper definition of a PLC and their respective benefits (Cranston, 2009; DuFour, 2004). The need for clarity was borne out in the survey of this study, as several comments were received by participants indicating the presence of either frustration or confusion at the misuse or overuse of the term “professional learning communities” or a perceived lack of practical application to WELS schools. These findings on barriers to PLC implementation have implications, in particular, for school leaders as they discern how best to use school resources and plan faculty professional development.

WELS elementary school teachers are looking for help in implementing PLC characteristics. For one, those in WELS elementary schools feel that additional training on PLCs for both teachers and principals would assist them in their implementation efforts. Participants’ inclinations toward factors and resources that would increase collaboration highlight the desire of WELS elementary school teachers and principals to work together with their fellow professionals. So while peer-sharing of practice is the least evident category of PLC characteristics, there exists a strong desire for it to increase. This is telling, as, again, collaboration is such a hallmark of successful PLCs (DuFour and Eaker, 1998; Hudson, 2006; Rubin et al., 2015; Wahlstrom et al., 2010). WELS elementary school teachers and principals also understand the importance of collective and focused learning, and they feel it would be

highly helpful to PLC implementation. Building the collective efficacy of teachers is one intended outcome of PLCs (Dufour and Eaker, 1998; Hord & Sommers, 2008), and WELS elementary school teachers and principals desire it.

Recommendations

WELS elementary schools are privileged to provide Christian education to thousands of young people. How can they become more intentional and effective in their implementation of professional learning communities to enhance the use of a model that affects improvement? Five recommendations are given: 1) Maintain a foundation of shared beliefs; 2) Provide more information on PLCs; 3) Address the time factor; 4) Provide structures that support collaboration; 5) Support and focus on practice-based professional development. Future studies of PLCs in WELS schools, especially of those definitively structured as PLCs, would be beneficial.

Maintain a foundation of shared beliefs. A treasure held by WELS elementary schools is their shared purpose. While aspects of mission may vary based on ministry context, all WELS elementary schools are blessed with the end goal of assisting parents in the training of their children, to prepare the students entrusted to their care for success in this life and to equip these young people with the Word of God. Not only does this shared purpose provide mutual support and encouragement between WELS elementary schools and their teachers, it also acts as a foundation for work in professional learning communities. Everything that happens within a PLC is aimed at enhancing what a school does and its teachers' craft. So long as WELS elementary schools maintain their general set of shared beliefs, they will hold a solid starting point for the development of specific goals, procedures, modes of operating, professional discussions, and the like within the PLCs they operate. They should regularly review their purpose and mission

statements, and their shared beliefs should be maintained, nurtured, fiercely protected, and clearly communicated as highly valuable and as foundational to PLC implementation efforts.

Provide more information on PLCs. WELS elementary school teachers and principals feel that additional training on PLCs would be a helpful. More information on what PLCs are, how they are structured, the positive outcomes they can affect, and how they can be tailored for used in WELS elementary school settings would address the identified barrier of a lack of clarity on PLCs. Professional learning communities provide a model for school improvement, particularly in the way of increased teacher efficacy and improved student achievement, that can be taken advantage of by WELS elementary schools - just as they could implement and reap the benefits of other initiatives (i.e. STEM, literacy-focused instruction, teacher-train-teacher models). The fact that PLCs can be used as a structure to enhance the implementation of school improvement efforts, these other initiatives included, by means of group discussion, shared learning, and collective efforts should be clearly communicated to the principals and teachers of WELS elementary schools. This increased communication on PLCs could include presentations at federation or district teachers' conferences or in continuing education programs and courses provided by synod affiliates. Principals and teachers who may have an interest in and passion for PLCs are encouraged to share information on PLCs with stakeholders at their schools. WELS elementary schools would be well-served to understand that PLC characteristics are applicable to their settings and that PLCs are vehicles for school improvement, and so more information on PLCs would be beneficial.

Address the time factor. A major concern of WELS elementary school teachers and principals in terms of implementing PLC characteristics is time. In fact, the top two barriers, teachers' responsibilities and workload and lack of time for meetings, are incredibly telling about

what teachers and principals feel toward what is needed. This concern is legitimate and needs to be addressed if PLCs are to be implemented to a larger extent than they are currently. How can teachers and principals be expected to work on developing PLC characteristics - and therefore experience the positive outcomes of PLCs - if they do not have the time to faithfully do so?

One approach is to clarify the intention of PLCs. PLCs are not meant to add additional time and responsibilities to the already-heavy workload of teachers. They are meant to streamline their work, to provide a means to become both more effective and efficient in what they do. One identifying mark of PLCs, collaboration, gives teachers opportunities to ask questions, make decisions, draft plans, and analyze practices that they otherwise would do independent of each other. By taking time to work together on their craft within the structure of a PLC, teachers reduce the amount of time spent on duties they would typically carry out in isolation.

That being said, deliberate thought and concerted effort should be spent on figuring out ways to provide teachers the time needed to be successful in a PLC. This may require a bit of a departure from traditional scheduling norms, but, encouragingly, practical and feasible approaches exist. Among other possibilities, schools could make time for PLC work by lengthening each school day of a 175-day school year by only five minutes. This would create about fourteen hours of additional time that could be spread out over the course of the school year for PLC work. One breakdown of this time would be to hold two or three ninety-minute PLC meetings per quarter. Progress certainly could be made on PLC implementation with this newfound time. WELS elementary school leaders are encouraged to be proactively thoughtful about the arrangement of teachers' time.

Along these lines, schools and congregations are encouraged to ensure that principals have sufficient administrative release time for the organizing and development of PLC

structures. This requires fiscal resources, but the investment would be toward leadership that sets teachers up to develop and grow in their practice, thereby benefiting students and helping schools better carry out their mission.

Provide structures that support collaboration. While a high level of collaboration carried out intentionally within a PLC holds much promise for improved school outcomes, there is a glaring need for more collaboration in WELS elementary schools. Again, the only category of PLC characteristics that is not evident in WELS elementary schools is peer-sharing of practice, and five of the nine not-evident PLC characteristics (including the four least evident) come from that collaborative category. WELS elementary schools are encouraged to provide structures supportive to collaboration.

One such structure is the provision of appropriate time, addressed above. Other means to support collaboration exist, as well. These supports would be especially beneficial if carried out after PLC members have had time to discuss and determine change efforts or improvement goals.

Peer-observation and feedback is a way to allow teacher pairs or teams to provide specific encouragement to one another. Various faculty members (i.e. a teacher's aide, a teacher not responsible for recess supervision, the principal during administrative release time) could be used to occasionally but routinely step into another's classroom, perhaps for only fifteen minutes. This would allow for one teacher to observe another, not for the sake of evaluation, but for gaining insight for feedback and encouragement on the previously-discussed goal. Brief follow-up meetings would provide opportunities for teacher pairs or teams to debrief with observation notes, suggested improvements, and encouragement on successes that set a pathway for continued work forward.

Ideally these peer-observation set-ups would be structured for teachers of similar grade levels. However, many WELS elementary schools operate with a smaller number of teachers, which does not lend itself ideally to the structure. WELS elementary schools in this situation are encouraged to work together with other similar schools. Some schools are located close enough to another that would allow two faculties to work together within a joint PLC. Schools not nearby to another could provide for a similar, though likely altered, PLC structure with another school through the use of technology. Technological tools are readily available to share documents and videos and to conduct meetings online.

WELS elementary schools are encouraged to creatively and diligently make use of available resources in a way that will provide collaborative structures for PLC work, either within or between schools.

Support and focus on practice-based professional development. The factor identified in this study as the greatest potential help to PLC implementation is collective, ongoing professional development focused on teaching and learning. Also of note: While additional funding for professional development is a potential help, there is not evidence of lack of funding for professional development as a barrier. This indicates the need for tailored professional development as an aid to the implementation of PLC characteristics.

WELS elementary schools are encouraged to make use of a particular type of professional development that both lends itself to work in a PLC and can be enhanced within the structure of a PLC: practice-based professional development. While there is certainly value in conferences, workshops, and formal continuing education courses, practice-based professional development is highly practical and has a direct impact on what teachers do in the classroom. The intention of practice-based professional development is to give teachers opportunities to

develop a particular skill within the environment of a PLC before and while using the instructional or assessment strategy in the classroom, thereby providing ongoing support to the teacher on the path to mastery. Again, teachers need up to fifty hours of practice and coaching (French, 1997) or twenty separate practices (Joyce & Showers, 2002) before mastering a new skill. PLCs should be recognized as structures within which teachers' skills can be fostered and grown to reach higher levels of individual and group efficacy and, in turn, increased student achievement.

WELS elementary schools would be well-served to focus this ongoing, practice-based professional development on the foundational aspect of classroom practice: teaching and learning. They are encouraged to make research- and data-based decisions on which instructional strategies have been proven to be effective and are most appropriate and applicable to the identified needs of their students and that align with their larger objectives for long-term learning outcomes.

Recommendation for future study. Future studies of PLCs in WELS schools, especially of those definitively structured as PLCs, would be beneficial. Such studies could communicate the ways in which PLC characteristics are implemented in the settings of WELS schools along with the realized positive outcomes of PLC implementation. Also beneficial would be studies on the ways in which these schools structured as PLCs have sustained the model over time. Other studies could focus on the structure and practices of federation-based PLC models. Collectively, such studies could prescribe PLC practical implementation processes and encourage WELS schools to better take advantage of the benefits professional learning communities provide.

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Appendix

Survey Questions

Section 1

1. Are you a principal or teacher?
2. How many faculty members serve on your K-8 staff?

Section 2: PLC Characteristics

Please rate the following PLC characteristics as they are found in your school according to the scale: 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = agree, 4 = strongly agree.

Shared Leadership

1. Staff members are consistently involved in discussing and making decisions about most school issues.
2. The principal incorporates advice from staff members to make decisions.
3. Staff members have accessibility to key information.
4. The principal is proactive and addresses areas where support is needed.
5. Opportunities are provided for staff members to initiate change.
6. The principal shares responsibility and rewards for innovative actions.
7. The principal participates democratically with staff sharing power and authority.
8. Leadership is promoted and nurtured among staff members.
9. Decision-making takes place through committees and communication across grade and subject areas.
10. Stakeholders assume shared responsibility and accountability for student learning without evidence of imposed power and authority.

11. Staff members use multiple sources of data to make decisions about teaching and learning.
12. Please provide any comments about shared leadership at your school that you feel would be beneficial to this study.

Shared Beliefs

13. A collaborative process exists for developing a shared sense of values among staff.
14. Shared values support norms of behavior that guide decisions about teaching and learning.
15. Staff members share visions for school improvement that have an undeviating focus on student learning.
16. Decisions are made in alignment with the school's values and vision.
17. A collaborative process exists for developing a shared vision among staff.
18. School goals focus on student learning beyond test scores and grades.
19. Policies and programs are aligned to the school's vision.
20. Stakeholders are actively involved in creating high expectations that serve to increase student achievement.
21. Data are used to prioritize actions to reach a shared vision.
22. Please provide any comments about shared beliefs at your school that you feel would be beneficial to this study.

Collective and Focused Learning

23. Staff members work together to seek knowledge, skills and strategies and apply this new learning to their work.

24. Collegial relationships exist among staff members that reflect commitment to school improvement efforts.
25. Staff members plan and work together to search for solutions to address diverse student needs.
26. A variety of opportunities and structures exist for collective learning through open dialogue.
27. Staff members engage in dialogue that reflects a respect for diverse ideas that lead to continued inquiry.
28. Professional development focuses on teaching and learning.
29. School staff members and stakeholders learn together and apply new knowledge to solve problems.
30. School staff members are committed to programs that enhance learning.
31. Staff members collaboratively analyze multiple sources of data to assess the effectiveness of instructional practices.
32. Staff members collaboratively analyze student work to improve teaching and learning.
33. Please provide any comments about collective and focused learning at your school that you feel would be beneficial to this study.

Peer-Sharing of Practice

34. Opportunities exist for staff members to observe peers and offer encouragement.
35. Staff members provide feedback to peers related to instructional practices.
36. Staff members informally share ideas and suggestions for improving student learning.

37. Staff members collaboratively review student work to share and improve instructional practices.
38. Opportunities exist for coaching and mentoring.
39. Individuals and teams have the opportunity to apply learning and share the results of their practices.
40. Staff members regularly share student work to guide overall school improvement.
41. Please provide any comments about the peer-sharing of practice at your school that you feel would be beneficial to this study.

Supportive Conditions - Relationships

42. Caring relationships exist among staff and students that are built on trust and respect.
43. A culture of trust and respect exists for taking risks.
44. Outstanding achievement is recognized and celebrated regularly in our school.
45. School staff and stakeholders exhibit a sustained and unified effort to embed change into the culture of the school.
46. Relationships among staff members support honest and respectful examination of data to enhance teaching and learning.
47. Please provide any comments about relationships at your school that you feel would be beneficial to this study.

Supportive Conditions - Structures

48. Time is provided to facilitate collaborative work.
49. The school schedule promotes collective learning and shared practice.
50. Fiscal resources are available for professional development.

51. Appropriate technology and instructional materials are available to staff.
52. Resource people provide expertise and support for continuous learning.
53. The school facility is clean, attractive and inviting.
54. The proximity of grade level and department personnel allows for ease in collaborating with colleagues.
55. Communication systems promote a flow of information among staff members.
56. Communication systems promote a flow of information across the entire school community including: central office personnel, parents, and community members.
57. Data are organized and made available to provide easy access to staff members.
58. Please provide any comments about structures at your school that you feel would be beneficial to this study.

Section 3: Barriers to Implementation of PLC Characteristics

1. PLCs have five key characteristics: 1) shared beliefs, 2) shared leadership, 3) supportive conditions, 4) collective and focused learning, and 5) peer-sharing of practice. Please rate the following factors that are barriers to implementing the characteristics of a PLC in your school according to the scale: 1 = not at all a barrier, 4 = very much a barrier.
 - a. Lack of clarity on the effectiveness of a PLC
 - b. Lack of clarity on the characteristics of a PLC
 - c. Challenges of changing the culture of the school
 - d. Administrative, teacher, or staff turnover
 - e. Lack of structures for teachers to work together
 - f. Strained relationships between teachers
 - g. Teachers' differing vision for the school

- h. Challenges of forming teacher-teams due to small faculty size
 - i. Teachers' responsibilities and workload
 - j. Lack of time for meetings
 - k. Hindrance from working with another WELS elementary schools
 - l. Reluctance of teachers to participate
 - m. Lack of time for principal to plan and organize
 - n. Lack of funding for professional development
 - o. Other: _____
2. Please provide any comments about factors that are barriers to implementing the characteristics of a PLC at your school that you feel would be beneficial to this study.

Section 4: Potential Helps to Implementing PLC Characteristics

1. PLCs have five key characteristics: 1) shared beliefs, 2) shared leadership, 3) supportive conditions, 4) collective and focused learning, and 5) peer-sharing of practice. Please rate the following factors or resources that would be helpful to your school's efforts to implement the characteristics of a PLC according to the scale: 1 = wouldn't be helpful at all, 4 = would be very helpful.
- a. Time spent on developing a shared vision
 - b. A culture of shared decision-making
 - c. Designated and scheduled time for whole-faculty professional work
 - d. Intentional relationship- and trust-building between faculty members
 - e. Collective, ongoing professional development focused on teaching and learning
 - f. Peer-sharing of practice to gain feedback
 - g. Principal training on the aspects of a PLC

- h. Teacher training on the aspects of a PLC
 - i. Additional funding for professional development
 - j. Addition administrative release time for the principal
 - k. Increased technology for faculty use
 - l. Arrangement to work with another WELS elementary school
 - m. Other: _____
2. Please provide any comments about factors or resources that would be helpful to your school's efforts to implement the characteristics of a PLC that you feel would be beneficial to this study.