

## **The School as a Professional Learning Community**

**An excerpt from DuFour and Eaker, ACSD/National Education Service**

Researchers both inside and outside of education offer remarkably similar conclusions about the best path for sustained organizational improvement. Consider the following findings:

*Only the organizations that have a passion for learning will have an enduring influence. (Covey, 1996, p. 149)*

*Every enterprise has to become a learning institution (and) a teaching institution. Organizations that build in continuous learning in jobs will dominate the twenty-first century. (Drucker, 1992, p. 108)*

*The most successful corporation of the future will be a learning organization. (Senge, 1990, p.4)*

*Preferred organizations will be learning organizations...It has been said that people who stop learning stop living. This is also true of organizations. (Handy, 1995, p.55)*

*The new problem of change...is what would it take to make the educational system a learning organization—expert at dealing with change as a normal part of its work, not just in relation to the latest policy, but as a way of life. (Fullan, 1993, p.4)*

*The Commission recommends that schools be restructured to become genuine learning organizations for both students and teachers; organizations that respect learning, honor teaching, and teach for understanding. (Darling-Hammond, 1996, p. 198)*

*We have come to realize over the years that the development of a learning community of educators is itself a major cultural change that will spawn many others. (Joyce & Showers, 1995, p. 3)*

*If schools want to enhance their organizational capacity to boost student learning, they should work on building a professional community that is characterized by share purpose, collaborative activity, and collective responsibility among staff. (Newmann & Wehlage, 1995, p. 37)*

*We argue, however, that when schools attempt significant reform, efforts to form a schoolwide professional community are critical. (Louis, Kruse & Raywid, 1996, p.13)*

Rarely has research given school practitioners such a consistent message and clear sense of direction. But even if educators are persuaded that creating a professional learning community offers the best strategy for school improvement, difficult questions remain. The best way to initiate consideration of these questions is to “begin with the end in mind” (Covey, 1989, p. 95)—that is, to describe the characteristics of a professional learning community, the conduct and habits of mind of the people who work within it, and its day-to-day functioning. A clear vision of what a learning community looks like and how people operate within it will offer insight into the steps that must be taken to transform a school into a learning community.

### **Characteristics of Professional Learning Communities**

1. **Share mission, vision, and values.** The sine qua non of a learning community is shared understandings and common values. What separates a learning community from an ordinary school is its collective commitment to guiding principles that articulate what the people in the school believe and what they see to create. Furthermore, these guiding principles are not just articulated by those in positions of leadership; even more important, they are embedded in the hearts and minds of people throughout the school. Mission, vision, and values are so integral to a learning community that each will be discussed in detail in later chapters.
2. **Collective inquiry.** The engine of improvement, growth, and renewal in a professional learning community is collective inquiry. People in such a

community are relentless in questioning the status quo, seeking new methods, testing those methods, and then reflecting on the results. Not only do they have an acute sense of curiosity and openness to new possibilities, they also recognize that the process of searching for answers is more important than having an answer. Furthermore, their search is a collective one.

Ross, Smith, and Roberts (1994) refer to the collective inquiry process as “the team learning wheel” and identify four steps in that process:

1. Public reflection—members of the team talk about their assumptions and beliefs and challenge each other gently but relentlessly.
2. Shared meaning—the team arrives at common ground, shared insights.
3. Joint planning—the team designs action steps, an initiative to test their shared insights.
4. Coordinated action—the team carries out the action plan. This action need not be joint action but can be carried out independently by the members of the team.

At this point, the team analyzes the results of its actions and repeats the four-step cycle.

This process enables team members to benefit from what Senge et al. (1994) has called “the deep learning cycle...the essence of the learning organization” (p.18). Collective inquiry enables team members to develop new skills and capabilities, which in turn lead to new experiences and awareness. Gradually, the heightened awareness is assimilated into fundamental shifts in attitudes and beliefs. Ultimately, it is this ability to examine and modify beliefs that enables team members to view the world differently and make significant changes in the culture of the organization.

3. **Collaborative teams.** The basic structure of the professional learning community is a group of collaborative teams that share a common purpose. Some organizations base their improvement strategies on efforts to enhance the knowledge and skills of individuals. Although individual growth is essential for organizational growth to occur, it does not guarantee organizational growth. Thus, building a school's capacity to learn is a *collaborative* rather than an *individual* task. People who engage in collaborative team learning are able to learn from one another, thus creating momentum to fuel continued improvement.

On the other hand, team *learning* is not the same as team *building*. The latter focuses on creating courteous protocols, improving communication, building stronger relationships, or enhancing the group's ability to perform routine tasks together. Collaborative team learning focuses on *organizational* renewal and a willingness to work together in continuous improvement process.

It is difficult to overstate the importance of collaborative teams in the improvement process. Fullan (1993) stresses their importance in *Change Forces*:

*The ability to collaborate—on both a large and small scale—is one of the core requisites of post modern society...(I)n short, without collaborative skills and relationships it is not possible to learn and to continue to learn as much as you need in order to be an agent for social improvement. (pp.17-18)*

4. **Action orientation and experimentation.** Professional learning communities are action oriented. Members of such organizations turn aspirations into action and visions into reality. Not only do they act; they are unwilling to tolerate inaction. They recognize that learning always occurs in a context of taking action, and they believe engagement and experience are the most effective teachers. Even seemingly chaotic activity is preferred to orderly, passive inaction.

An important corollary of the action orientation is a willingness to experiment—to develop and test hypotheses. Members of professional learning communities are often asked to develop, test, and evaluate theories. They reflect on what happened and why, develop new theories, try new tests, evaluate the results, and so on. This willingness to experiment is accompanied by a tolerance for results that may be contrary to what was anticipated. While traditional organizations tend to brand such experiments as failures and then seek to assign blame, learning organizations consider failed experiments to be an integral part of the learning process—opportunities to learn and then begin again more intelligently.

5. **Continuous improvement.** A persistent discomfort with the status quo and a constant search for a better way characterize the heart of a professional learning community. Continuous improvement requires that each member of the organization is engaged in considering several key questions:

1. What is our fundamental purpose?
2. What do we hope to achieve?
3. What are our strategies for becoming better?
4. What criteria will we use to assess our improvement efforts?

A commitment to continuous improvement is evident in an environment in which innovation and experimentation are viewed not as tasks to accomplish or projects to complete, but as ways of conducting day-to-day business, *forever*. Members of a professional learning community recognize and celebrate the fact that mission and vision are ideals that will never be fully realized, but must always be worked toward. In short, becoming a learning community is less like getting in shape than staying in shape—it is not a fad diet, but a never-ending commitment to an essential, vital way of life.

6. **Results orientation.** Finally, a professional learning community realizes that its efforts to develop shared mission, vision, and values; engage in collective

inquiry; build collaborative teams; take action; and focus on continuous improvement must be assessed on the basis of *results* rather than *intentions*. Unless initiatives are subject to ongoing assessment on the basis of tangible results, they represent random groping in the dark rather than purposeful improvement. Peter Senge (1996) notes that "the rationale for any strategy for building a learning organization revolves around the premise that such organizations will produce dramatically improved results" (p.44).