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FOUR STEPS TO NURTURE PLCs

By Joan L. Buttram and Elizabeth N. Farley-Ripple

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What role should principals play in professional learning communities (PLCs)?

PLCs provide fertile ground for teams to build collective action through shared routines, yet it is not always clear what specific steps principals should take to nurture and support such collaborations.

In 2010-2011, we spent time in four elementary schools in two Delaware districts to find out. We set out to learn about data use, focusing on teachers' collaboration in state-mandated PLCs dedicated to

grade-level teams' use of data to improve student learning. We surveyed teachers, interviewed both teachers and administrators, observed PLCs, and reviewed school documents. Although we learned a great deal about how teachers work together around data, we also discovered how principals can empower teachers through PLCs.

Our findings reveal that teacher collaboration is strongest when principals:

- Communicate a vision for collaborative professional learning;
- Create school cultures of high expectations for learning;
- Enhance teacher knowledge and skills; and
- Allocate and manage resources to support teacher collaboration, data use, and instructional planning.

Communicate a Vision

Each principal at the four schools we visited viewed PLCs as a vehicle for improving instruction, yet notable differences occurred in how principals articulated and communicated the role of PLCs in their larger improvement efforts.

One school, Allegheny Elementary, was particularly successful at this. At this high-needs, high-performing school, the principal emphasized team and leadership development through collaboration. The principal suggested that many teaching-related activities be collaborative, including discussing lesson plans, sharing activities, and discussing how students are doing.

In the schools where principals articulated a clear vision that conveyed district intentions, PLC collaboration was strongest, as evidenced in both observations and teachers' reported practices.

Create Cultures of High Expectations

Principals greatly influence the climate or culture of their schools by setting expectations for student learning and then consistently monitoring teacher and student performance. In our schools, all four principals saw PLCs as a vehicle for analyzing student data and improving instruction. The principal of Allegheny Elementary noted: "You have to be actively involved in the process and participate along with the team. I consider my role primarily to support the collaborative process of these teachers to create that kind of culture or team work."

This principal asked teachers to set not only long-term goals for student achievement, but also short-term quarterly goals for student growth. These grade-level goals were shared in faculty meetings and progress was reported in subsequent meetings at the end of each quarter.

At these meetings, staff celebrated when goals were attained. When goals were not reached, the PLCs were clearly disappointed, but the ensuing discussions focused on brainstorming possible explanations as well as suggestions for moving forward. This public setting of goals and progress reporting reinforced a

culture of high expectations for students *and* teachers, and fostered collective accountability.

Enhance Teacher Knowledge

All four principals provided teachers with assistance to enhance knowledge and skills, particularly related to using student data, identifying students who required interventions, or determining student progress.

But the schools differed in how engaged the principal was with teachers, either in PLCs or in faculty meetings. The principal at Allegheny Elementary, for instance, regularly attended PLCs as an active participant rather than monitor, modeled using data in PLCs and faculty meetings, created opportunities for teachers to use data, and provided training. Not surprisingly, teacher collaboration flourished in his school, according to teacher surveys and observations.

In contrast, the other three principals struggled to find time to regularly attend PLC meetings. They did not see their attendance as prime opportunities for them to enhance teacher knowledge and skills. Teacher collaboration occurred, but not at Allegheny's level.

Allocate and Manage Resources

The final mechanism for principals to support teacher collaboration is through direct management and allocation of resources, specifically time, data, and instructional expertise.

A Delaware state mandate required 90 minutes of PLC time each week, but did not specify when the time should occur. In our four schools, two principals, including the exemplary principal at Allegheny, provided about half of the time during the school day with the remainder before or after school; the other two principals offered time only before or after school. Scheduling time during the school day increased teacher collaboration.

All four principals acknowledged that teachers needed support to move from talking about data to making instructional decisions based on data. In all four schools, instructional specialists were available to help interpret student data, but in three schools, they attended PLC meetings sporadically or worked with individual teachers. In contrast, Allegheny's principal assigned an instructional specialist to each grade-level PLC, modeling and reinforcing expected behaviors. Embedding instructional support for teachers within the PLC structure increased the instructional capital of the team.

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