Professional Learning Community

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Contrary to prevailing perceptions, in the MetLife Survey of the American Teacher: Challenges for School Leadership for 2012, principals and teachers express confidence in their ability to teach to the Common Core Standards. The survey also reveals three compelling findings: 1) teachers and principals (50% and 40% respectively) see declines in school funding and lack of parent engagement as the two major challenges they face for this school year, 2) teachers believe any professional learning must include opportunities to collaborate among themselves and administrators, and 3) both teachers and principals are experiencing increased levels of stress and job-dissatisfaction. The MetLife report presents us with a profile of teachers and administrators open to collaborative forms of professional learning, while at the same time, they express frustration and stress as they work under a cloud of budgetary restraints. At present, the PLC may just be the answer by offering a framework for professional learning augmented by authenticity, collaboration and equity in a stressful environment (Markow, Marcia & Lee 2013).

Unfortunately, the PLC is misrepresented owing to pressing compliance issues and budgetary expediencies. In their study of 40 districts across 20 states espousing the PLC, Ermeling & Gallimore (2013) observed two examples of misrepresented models of PLC: the first is driven by compliance issues and the second one is workshop-inspired. It is reflected in ad hoc groupings of coordinators, teachers and administrators mandated by the state or district to work on specific initiatives such as training on new curriculum materials, analysis of district assessments, or implementation of high-stakes test preparation.

The compliance-driven PLC is shaped by accountability not by thoughtful steps toward building a learning collaboration among equals. Then there is the workshop-driven PLC where local administrators and coordinators attend a one to three-day workshop led by prominent leaders in the area. The attendees leave the workshop enthused and motivated to be part of a cadre of “teach-the-teachers. Unfortunately, after a few weeks at their local sites, they quickly realize they lack the “nuts-and-bolt” to operationalize authentic PLCs. They discover they lack “…enough detail on where to start the journey and how to keep moving forward” (Ermeling & Gallimore, p.44). Ermeling & Gallimore; Vescio et al, (2008) conclude that the 40 districts the PLCs were deficient in key characteristics of the PLC: 1) time for collaboration, 2) focus on instructional inquiry and improvement in the classroom, and 3) specific, tested implementation strategies. Where is the equity for student? Where is the equity for teachers and administrators in a top-down driven PLC model? Where is the collaboration? How authentic can a top-down driven PLC be?

This writer conceptualizes equity to be the driving force of the PLC model. Equity is often taken for granted as an expected outcome rather than recognizing it as the most essential element of any authentic PLC. The PLC has to be framed by the concept of equity—fairness and the democratic principles of access, collaboration and cultural sensitivity. This article will explore the equity principle, the definition of the PLC and its characteristics, and finally a brief roadmap to creating a PLC and some useful suggestions.

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What is the Equity Principle?

A PLC that practices the equity principle makes accommodations for differences so that all will learn and improve instruction so that all students will demonstrate improved learning. (Lindsey, Roberts & Terrell, p.166). Essential factors to consider are:

- Culture:
  We live in a multicultural society and understand that that culture is a predominant force in our lives and plays a powerful role in shaping our beliefs, practices, and decisions. Culture is not monolithic but fluid. Lindsey, Roberts & Campbell-Jones say: “You are your culture, you live your culture, and you express your culture whether you intend to or not.” (Lindsey, Roberts, & Campbell-Jones, p. 20). Therefore, it is necessary to develop a self-awareness of our identity and the identities of others as we engage in collaborations.

- Diversity and Inclusion:
  Diversity refers to many differences that may be present in a PLC based on race, socioeconomics, power, privilege, class, ethnicity, gender, language, age, ability, sexual orientation, and other differences that distinguish one person and his group from another. Inclusion in a PLC means that the diverse groups are represented and included in all aspects of PLC activities.

- Norms of Collaboration:
  Establish rules of behavior based on respect, willingness to speak one’s truth, stay engaged and institute forms of communication to ensure that all members of the PLC can voice their observations, suggestions and concerns and share in decision-making, and will have what they need to learn. (Garmston & Wellman, 2009)

- Learn more about our Cultures:
  Know about the culture and history of the dominant and subgroups in your PLC. Be aware of how they may influence our personal biases, and practices.

- Create an environment to be curious and ask questions:
  Is this fair? Has everyone in the group equal status? Is power shared among the group? Who benefits from what we have learned? How do we know our PLC is equitable for all of us and our students?

What is a PLC?

The most recent model of professional development is the PLC. The PLC concept began about twenty years ago as a response to change of practice for school improvement and has gained greater attention in an era of world competition, professional accountability for student achievement. The rationale for the PLC is grounded on the premise that improved student learning is contingent upon improved teacher practice in the classroom. Therefore, the professional learning community is one where teachers and administrators organize themselves into a group of practitioners committed to continuously seek to learn, share, and operationalize what they have learned with the shared goal of assuring that “all children” in their school have equitable opportunities to learn at the highest standard”. The principle goal of the PLC is professional learning that translates into a transformation of instructional practices in the classroom evidenced by improved student learning. Most researchers note the following characteristics of the PLC:

- Collaboration:
  Supportive and shared leadership in a collegial and facilitative environment

- Focus on teacher learning:
  Collective learning among staff and application of that learning to improve academic achievement for all students

- Shared values and vision, consistently communicated

- Teacher authority:
  Teachers in the PLC have authority to make decisions about the processes of their PLC and aspects of school governance (Vescio, Ross & Adams, pp.10 – 15)

- Supportive and consistent structural arrangements that ensure time to meet and talk during the work day/week; small school size and physical proximity of staff to one another, interdependent teaching roles, well-developed communication structures that preserve lessons learned, school autonomy, teacher empowerment, collegial relationships, and trust

- Reflective practice based on peer review and feedback to assist and support the individual in the classroom

- A PLC is not:
  - A tool to evaluate a teacher’s performance for continued employment
  - A mandated initiative required by state or district level
  - A “one-shot” workshop delivered to a large group

What is the Roadmap to Creating a PLC?

A well-designed plan is flexible and focused on the team’s goal (Jolly, p. 32). The learning cycle:

1st Starts with the data and looks carefully at them to prioritize teacher learning needs.

2nd Prepares a team plan – thoughtful reflection, discussion and exploration of possible ideas, and examining different strategies for reaching the goal and deliberating on which approaches they will use.

3rd Discusses beliefs and assumptions about students, teaching and learning as related to the team’s goal

4th Examines current reality: what knowledge and skills do the members of PLC already possess and can share

5th Look for any gaps between what they know and what they need to know; Identify areas for research and study

6th Develop an initial team plan: After reflection, team is ready to write the first draft of an initial plan (Jolly, pp. 32-37)
In the Beginning - Take Your Time in Reaching Consensus with:

⇒ Formulating a clear vision of your PLC
⇒ Making sure you agree on norms of behavior – emphasize commitment to staying engaged, speaking respectfully and honestly; trusting the process and assuming honest intentions
⇒ Asking follow-up questions and paraphrase what you hear to make sure you understand
⇒ Agreeing on regularly scheduled time to meet and sticking to the schedule
⇒ Chunking your plan into smaller pieces that have short timelines – no more than two weeks
⇒ Plan and carry out activities that are doable and realistic – avoid grandiose and complicated tasks

References:
Jolly, A. (2013). Create a learning team road map: A well-designed plan is flexible and focused on the team’s goals. Learning Forwards, 34(2), 32-37.
www.learningforward.org/standards/learning-communities
Click on link to start video: http://video.ascd.org/services/player/bcpid18377529001?bckey=AQ~~,AAAAAmGjiRE~escbD3Me8-wT_coVb7sTe18vG6vv3Oyk&bctid=2616767355001

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ANNOUNCEMENTS

18th Annual New England Conference on Multicultural Education (NECME)
Welte Auditorium, Central Connecticut State University, New Britain, CT, **Wed. Oct. 16, 2013** - 8:30-3:30 pm Admission is free but you must register at [www.necme.org](http://www.necme.org)

2013 Annual Conference
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The Region II Equity Assistance Center (EAC), housed at Touro College’s Lander Center for Educational Research in New York City, is one of ten regional EACs funded by the U.S. Department of Education under Title IV of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. Operated as a collaboration between the Lander Center and Learning Innovations at WestEd; a research, development, and survey agency, the Region II EAC provides technical assistance on issues of race, sex, and national origin to state departments of education and school districts in New York, New Jersey, Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands. The Center’s primary goal is to promote equal access and opportunity to high quality education for all students. The Equity Assistance Center uses the Authentic Task Approach (ATA) developed by our partner, Learning Innovations, for its delivery of services. ATA is a systemic approach to helping districts identify and/or clarify problems, establish goals, and accelerate continuous school improvement. This model for service delivery offers two distinctive levels: a structured approach to addressing the specific issue or task – usually the impetus behind the request to the EAC – and an expanded process that is intended to build the capacity of districts for sustained progress and systemic change. The EAC works with state departments of education, school districts, and schools to build the capacity of teachers and administrators to more effectively address the unique learning needs of all student populations; improve school safety, and the awareness and understanding of bullying and harassment prevention; improve school engagement and create environments that are responsive to cultural differences; and increase access to science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) education and related areas, for minorities, women, English learners and individuals with disabilities. For additional information on the Comprehensive Centers Program, please click on the link: http://www2.ed.gov/programs/newccpindex.html

**Equity Assistance Center (EAC) for Region II**

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**Comprehensive Centers Program**

The Comprehensive Centers Program is authorized by Title II of the Educational Technical Assistance Act of 2002. The Centers provide technical assistance to State educational agencies (SEAs) that builds their capacity to:
1. Support local educational agencies (LEAs or districts) and schools, especially low-performing districts and schools;
2. Improve educational outcomes for all students;
3. Close achievement gaps; and
4. Improve the quality of instruction.

The fifteen Centers are regionally-based and seven provide expertise and services in specific, high-priority areas. For additional information on the Comprehensive Centers Program, please click on the link: http://www2.ed.gov/programs/newccpindex.html

**Regional Educational Laboratory Northeast & Islands (REL-NEI)**

The Regional Educational Laboratory Northeast and Islands (REL-NEI) serves New England, New York, Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands. REL-NEI’s mission is to help preK-16 educators at the state, district and school levels increase their use of scientifically based evidence to make decisions that lead to improved student achievement and reduced performance gaps among student groups. REL-NEI is operated by Education Development Center, Inc. in Newton, Massachusetts. EDC is an international nonprofit organization that conducts and applies research to advance learning and promote health. EDC manages more than 325 projects in 35 countries. Visit: www.relinei.org

**The Office for Civil Rights**

Visit the Office of Civil Rights site for information on the legal rights of parents and students, and for an online complaint form that can be used to file complaints of discrimination in education.

www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/index.html?src=mr

**Additional References for main article**:

- The Center for Character and Citizenship: http://www.characterandcitizenship.org
- The Center for Spiritual and Ethical Education: http://www.cssee.org/
- The National School Climate Center: http://www.schoolclimate.org/
- www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/index.html?src=mr

**Resources**

**Equity Update** provides the latest news and developments on education issues affecting New York, New Jersey, Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands students and educators. The contents of this newsletter were developed under grant #S004D110003 from the US Department of Education. However, those contents do not necessarily present the policy of the Department of Education and you should not assume endorsement by the Federal Government. To unsubscribe please email: michelle.sheikh2@touro.edu

EAC-Region2