Creating Professional Community for Teachers and Staff

About the Author

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The focus for this month's **Professional Practices for the 21st Century Leader** is Standard 7 of the **Professional Standards for Educational Leaders 2015**: **Professional Community for Teachers and Staff**. My 25 years of experience as a teacher, principal, director, and mother have reinforced the belief that the vast majority of us in the field of educational leadership are passionately interested in improving the lives of all students in our care. The **Professional Standards for Educational Leaders** compel education leaders to approach every decision based on what is best for the students in our care. At the end of each day I reflect on two essential questions:

1. **Did I make a difference today for our students?**
2. **Did I focus on what matters most for their learning and their well-being?**

Professional Standards for Educational Leaders 2015

- **Mission, Vision, and Core Values**
- **Ethics and Professional Norms**
- **Equity and Cultural Responsiveness**
- **Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment**
- **Community of Care and Support for Students**
- **Professional Capacity of School Personnel**

- **Professional Community for Teachers and Staff**
  Effective Educational leaders foster a professional community of teachers and other professional staff to promote each student's academic success and well-being.

- **Meaningful Engagement of Families and Community**
- **Operations and Management**
- **School Improvement**

Yesterday & Today
Where We've Been and Where We're Going

Professional Community for Teachers and Staff

Used calendar day and times for workshops	Develop conditions that promote effective professional development, practice, and learning
Posted mission statement in main office	Empower and entrust staff with collective responsibility for meeting mission, vision, core values
Held students responsible for failures or not meeting goals and credited teaching for success	Promote mutual accountability for each student's success
Assigned teacher buddy for school support and sought district support for poor performance	Develop and support working relationships to promote improved capacity and practice
Consulted an expert to provide workshop or in-service	Design and implement job-embedded and other professional learning opportunities
Implemented district-initiated programs and projects	Encourage faculty-initiated improvement programs and practices

Access Yesterday & Today graphics at www.justaskpublications.com/areas-of-focus/instructional-leadership/

In 2012 the **National Institute for Excellence in Teaching** published **Beyond Job-Embedded: Ensuring That Professional Development Gets Results**. Their research moves leaders to develop and support explicit protocols for planning and structuring collaborative teacher meetings so that the critical shift from "trying it out" to "figuring out solutions" occurs reliably across collaborative teams. When this happens, teachers can see the impact of teaching strategies on student learning and become invested in changing classroom practices to get better results. Too often I've been witness to the effects of "trying it out" with students who needed us to have "figured it out."

Many districts and schools have incorporated job-embedded professional development as they strive to become professional learning communities (PLCs). When this happens, school morale is enhanced, teacher performance improves, new teachers stay in the profession, and students achieve high standards. Districts and schools must strive to find ways to create structures and assign specific authority and responsibility to those charged with supporting it, overseeing it, and reinforcing it at every turn.

In order to establish PLCs, leaders must develop an infrastructure that guarantees a "yes" on each of these four questions:
- Do all teachers experience high quality professional learning? How do you know?
- Does the professional learning increase teachers' knowledge and skills? How do you know?
- Do teachers use their new knowledge and skills to implement new strategies in the classroom? How do you know?
- Do the classroom strategies improve students' learning? How do you know?

The "how do you know" part of the question should cause leaders to examine the evidence and look at instructional practices, student work, formative assessments, and more.

What's a Principal to Do?
Principals have a clear and robust role to play in professional learning. As instructional leaders of their schools, principals are bestowed with implementation of job-embedded professional learning and its impact on learning. I always considered myself as the lead learner and spoke about my learning frequently. Principal roles that support distributed professional learning include:
- As head of the school leadership team, the principal models the collaborative process of analyzing student data that will guide the collaborative group work. In some cases, the group sets the goals and presents them to the principal and leadership team.
- Working with other members of the leadership team, the principal regularly examines formative assessment data, drilling down to classroom and student level to identify gaps that exist. Team members then identify strategies for supporting students.
- The principal observes collaborative team meetings, reviews meeting notes, and offers feedback and guidance.
- The principal establishes a leadership learning group that studies leadership issues.

It's About Time!

I learned early in my first principalship that I wasn't in control of very much in the building. Budgets were provided with little flexibility; staffing came from a central hiring authority, although I was able to select among those approved; materials came from the warehouse. However, there was one thing I did control - time! How we scheduled the school; how we used our staff; how we supported our learners; and how we learned together were all within our span of authority. "Awesome!" I thought. "We can do this."

A June 2016 *JSD* article by Joellen Killion titled "Establish Time for Learning: Finding Time to Collaborate Takes Creativity and Commitment" validated my practice. The seven steps outlined in the article are not a procedure to increase time available for professional learning. Rather, they provide a process to figure out how to increase the time in which educators are engaged in professional learning. Use these steps as a starting place to look for minutes in the day that can be reallocated to priorities such as collaborative teams.

7 Steps to Establish Time for Professional Learning
1. Form a time study team
2. Examine assumptions about time
3. Understand existing time
4. Study time options
5. Form and adopt recommendations about time
6. Establish a plan to implement and evaluate accepted recommendations
7. Review time use and results

I remember being surprised when the speech pathologist came to see me shortly after I arrived for my first day as principal. Boxes piled high, she came in and after some brief pleasantries, told me she had always designed the master schedule and she handed it to me ready for the upcoming school year. I was taken aback and asked her how she did it and what priorities she used to create it. She said she needed to make sure that the students in special education were scheduled first, then the electives, then everything else.

Oops! There was no common planning anywhere. I knew that I needed to be able to work with teacher mentors, have learning team time, and be able to hold data chats with teachers. I couldn't turn around a failing school without those. I thanked her and told her I would study it and get back with her. I called a meeting of the team leaders, including the speech pathologist, and asked them if they would help with the schedule. My requirements were few, but clearly communicated:
- Common planning time for all teachers
- Long uninterrupted blocks for instruction
- Equitable student-free time
- Compliance with all federal, state, and district guidelines

This group revised the school schedule to allow for common planning time and an enrichment center for all students using Canady's parallel block scheduling model. Now, we could move ahead! Professional learning teams and goals were soon established.

Historical Perspective on Creating Cultures for Learning

Practitioners and researchers who influence our current practice include:
- Jon Saphier and Matt King's **Norms of School Culture**
  www.rbteach.com/sites/default/files/lilies.pdf
- Judith Warren Little's **Norms of Collegiality and Experimentation**
  https://gse.berkeley.edu/sites/default/files/users/judith-warren-little/HornLittle.Attending%20to%20Problems%20of%20Practice.pdf
- Terry Deal and Kent Peterson's Essential Culture Attributes
  www.ascd.org/ASCD/pdf/journals/ed_lead/el199809_peterson.pdf
- Rick DuFour and Robert Eaker's **Four Key Questions**
  www.solution-tree.com/presenters/plc-at-work
- Bruce Joyce and Beverly Showers' **Impact of Professional Development on Classroom Practice**
  http://literacy.kent.edu/coaching/information/Research/randd-engaged-joyce.pdf

Building Efficacy and Increasing Collaborative Skills

Building capacity appears most evident in the actions leaders take to build self-and collective efficacy among those being led. Efficacy is the fuel for high engagement in continuous learning and expands and extends knowledge and skills. If teachers believe in their individual capacity to address student needs and in the collective capacity of their team, learning community, school, and students benefit!

Understanding the value of conflict and how it contributes to a team's progress is key to fulfilling responsibilities to those being served and conflict avoidance can short change students. Kenneth Williams' statement resonates with me. He said, "One of the things I emphasize for good, productive conflict is a willingness to engage. Many times we will see cordial hypocrisy within a group." You've seen it too… everyone is nodding their heads yes, when they don't actually agree. When this happens, kids lose out on our expertise, wisdom, and advocacy because the group wanted to avoid conflict and did not get important ideas to surface.

My colleagues at Just ASK authored **Creating a Culture for Learning**, a comprehensive text that is a resource for leaders who are ready to act on their beliefs that all students can learn and that all adults must be committed to the success of all other adults. I encourage you not only read this book, but also to access the free tools and templates designed to support the constructs introduced in the text (www.justaskpublications. com/ccltemplates). Of particular note to me are the consensus building tools because it is so important to keeping all collaborative learning team members committed and unafraid of conflict. Eight tools to help build consensus, surface issues, and examine needs are presented on pages 93-95 of **Creating a Culture for Learning**.

My go-to quick group processing tool is **Fist to Five**. I have used this tool to take a poll of group members and overall group thinking or feelings at any point in discussions. When asked to show "**Fist to Five**", participants show:

- Fist to indicate absolutely not, or total disagreement
- Three fingers to indicate that the feeling is neutral about the topic or issue
- Five fingers indicate total agreement or comfort with the topic of issue

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Points to Ponder
Just ASK's
Non-Negotiables for Creating a Culture for Learning

- We believe and act on the belief that all students can learn!
- All adults are committed to the success of all other adults.
- We accept learning as the fundamental purpose of the school and examine all our practices in light of their impact on learning.
- We engage in, model, and promote collaborative practice.
- All the students belong to all of us.
- We establish and maintain an atmosphere of mutual respect.
- Isolation is not an option. Collaboration is a right and responsibility.
- We collectively develop clearly articulated norms that we adhere to in our work.
- We focus on results: That means we analyze assessment results together, make data-driven decisions, establish goals for specific measurable skills and knowledge, identify improvement strategies, and adapt instruction to meet student needs.

Student learning and achievement increase when educators engage in professional development focused on the skills they need to address students' major learning challenges. Professional learning, often called, professional development, can occur in a formal setting, such as a workshop, or seminar, or in an informal context, such as discussions among colleagues, independent reading and research, observing a colleague's work, or learning from a peer. See **Chapter Four** in *Creating a Culture for Learning* for an amazing listing of professional learning formats (mini-TOC on page 142) and use Formats for Professional Learning Self-Assessment (Access Tool-41 at www.justaskpublications.com/ccltemplates) to celebrate the possibilities you are already using and to identify over two dozen formats you might use. I am certain you will find them useful in developing and supporting a wide-range of professional learning opportunities for teachers and staff.

Finding Time and Funding For Professional Development

The literature is full of what quality professional development means in schools, how job-embedded collaborative endeavors can improve teacher performance and therefore increase student outcomes, but there is little guidance to identify the costs.

To begin, consider the idea that a budget should reflect the priorities of the organization. If professional learning that increases educator effectiveness and results for all students is at the forefront, it requires prioritizing, monitoring, and coordinating funds and other resources for educator learning.

Allan Odden compiled a cost structure for professional development. The cost components he lists are:
• Teacher time used for professional development
• Training and coaching
• Administration of professional development
• Materials, equipment, and facilities
• Travel and transportation

He notes, "Time is the largest cost." Odden's cost structure includes time for teachers for training and for on-going collaborative, and some individual, work. He recommends training would be student-free time, which could be during intensive summer institutes or on various days during the school year. In addition, principals can design school master schedules so teachers have common student-free time allowing them to meet during the day; to do that, principals could examine elective classes and programs scheduling. Robert Canady provides multiple ideas on how these can be scheduled to provide additional periods in the day and allow collaborative time for teachers. Some high schools schedule four 90-minute blocks per day, where teachers are assigned to teach three of those blocks allowing the remaining block to support job-embedded learning.

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In order to deploy resources for an effective professional development program that aligns to accepted **Learning Forward's Professional Development Standards** and the **2015 Professional Standards for Educational Leader**, school and district leaders need to:
• Eliminate all current professional development, program improvement, and other training programs that are not focused on the strategic instructional and curriculum programs of the school and district and redeploy those resources to the prioritized learning activities.
• Capture the bulk of the student-free days that have been given to teachers for their own use and use them and any additional days for curriculum-based professional development aligned to school priorities.
• Organize the school into collaborative teams so all teachers have the time to interact.
• Provide activities and support to help all teachers incorporate their new learning into their repertoire of teaching strategies.

- Examine alternative uses of time, including early dismissals or late starts.
- Consider the use of in-school field trips, community service projects, performing arts events as ways to gain time during the school day or support additional release time for teacher learning.

Additionally, Title I has a strong professional development component and requires that a portion of the school budget allocation be designated for professional learning. The purchase of an instructional coach may suffice the set-aside requirement for professional development. Title II funds are usually held at the district level and used for district-wide initiatives. I strongly recommend that principals serve on district budgeting committees and make school priorities clear.

Some of this is easier written than done and there may be push back from some stakeholders around the reallocation of resources to fund and support professional learning, especially when it involves redistribution of time. However, there are many more stakeholders who believe in and support professional learning as an important vehicle for improving student learning. Persevere—it's worth it!

Points to Ponder
DuFour on Attributes of Professional Learning Communities

Rick DuFour and his colleagues have identified ten attributes of professional learning communities. He, and others, are adamant that professional learning communities are not a series of meetings or events, but rather organizations that operate with the following mindset:
- Clarity of the knowledge and skills all students should acquire
- Agreement on and consistently applied assessment practices
- Development of formative common assessments
- Use of formative assessments to assess and provide students with timely intervention
- Use of data to assess effectiveness of instruction
- Establishment of SMART goals
- Commitment to and focus on improved instructional practices
- Sharing of research-based practices
- Determination to help all students achieve at high levels
- Use of team time to focus on student learning

Resources and References

Solution Tree PLC Web Resources
- www.allthingsplc.info/about
- mkt.solution-tree.com/plc-journey-workbook?gclid=CI_nloyNzM4CFQtZhgodYFoOXQ

Youtube Resources
- **youtube/r2UCLZDWdyA**: A video features a 4th collaborative learning team meeting at Seven Hills Elementary School in Justin, Texas
- **youtube/uoWzAuvofgw**: This video of a high school collaborative team unpacking the 9th grade English Language Arts standards for writing was produced as part of a partnership between NJIT and the NJDOE to provide support for NJ educators in the Online Professional Learning Exchange.

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