Chapter 4

Reinventing PLCs: Teachers Coaching Teachers at the Onset of Change

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ABSTRACT

Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) are widely implemented as a model for ongoing professional development of inservice teachers. Although PLCs have many promising attributes, they are rarely utilized as a vehicle for promoting district or school wide change. This chapter reintroduces PLCs as a tool for an effective launch of literacy policy through utilization of teacher led collaboration at the inception of new initiatives. Reinventing and providing authentic purpose, structure, accountability and responsibility to the framework of PLCs has great potential for unleashing the benefits of the model. Within this chapter, you will gather these new insights related to the tenants of high functioning PLCs and how they can be best applied to initiating and maintaining successful reform efforts.

INTRODUCTION

In an era of mandate upon mandate, teachers seek a sense of control. Although they lead their PK-12 classrooms day to day, they often feel powerless when changes in policy impact their work. Although most news of change is shared by administration, there are additional routes for delivering messages that proactively engage teachers in understanding and relaying details linked to literacy related policy. Professional Learning Communities, or PLCs, is one such model.

As Little (1990) defined, professional learning communities are, “thoughtful, explicit examination of practices and their consequences” (p. 520). Often we view this process as something that teachers explore after new policy has already been implemented, in attempt to best comprehend the rationale behind the initiative and the associated shift in resources, standards and assessment. Rather, there is a need for a

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framework that presents PLCs as a vehicle for professional growth at the onset of a conversation related to change. It is this approach, that ultimately allows for teachers to participate in the evolution of new policy that authentically links to best practices in literacy instruction.

Within this restructured model of PLCs, teachers are presented with the new policy and work together with guidance of a literacy coach to understand all that it entails. This includes, not only the characteristics of the policy, but the theory and practical tools that support the change. It therefore, becomes the PLC team’s charge, to gather all of the necessary information for examining and presenting the new policy to their teacher peers in a succinct, informative and engaging manner. This delivery of the material related to the policy becomes critical in the success in the rollout and effectiveness of the new mandate.

As with all work in PK-12 settings, time is always of the essence when embarking on a new journey as a school or district. For this reason, it becomes essential to construct a consistent model of forming, monitoring and assessing progress within the PLC, especially when being utilized as a vehicle to launch new policy. Moreover, when a structure is present within a system’s framework for change, transparency within the transition emerges. As Darling-Hammond (2009) notes, “professional development is more effective when schools approach it not in isolation but rather as a coherent part of a school reform effort” (p. 2). It is the collaborative nature of a PLC designed to launch a new policy that truly provides clarity and cohesion when moving toward a new and shared goal.

Within this chapter, readers will gain valuable information related to the framework for implementation of PLCs at the onset of organizational change. More specifically, the following will be provided:

- A revisit and reflection on the theory surrounding the pillars of professional learning communities (PLCs).
- An introduction to professional learning communities as a tool for initiating organizational change.
- An introduction of the reinvented framework for effective PLC construction and management.
- A discussion of technology as a tool for supporting the functions of PLCs.

Many valuable models of professional learning communities exist, but rarely are they noted as a beneficial step in initiating school or district wide literacy reform efforts. So often, topics for PLC exploration are generated ex post facto. This chapter presents a framework for encouraging the use of professional learning communities at the onset of change. In this model, teachers coach teachers in the direction of achievement for all.

BACKGROUND

When designing this structure for PLCs as a tool for exploration or deeper understanding of reform efforts, three foundational elements are paramount. These three pillars rooting the model of the effective PLC are based on the work of DuFour and include: ensuring that students learn, a culture of collaboration, and a focus on results (DuFour, 2004, p. 8). First, with any instructional change or professional development opportunity, the ultimate goal is that student learning improves. For this reason, the framework begins with attention on student learning, specifically as the key indicator of successful PLC work.

Additionally, a culture of collaboration must be set as priority as the PLC model is introduced. Although collaboration is at the center of professional learning community work, harmony in collaboration is not always automatic or guaranteed. Therefore, collaboration becomes an essential piece that