Chapter 11

ROLE OF PRINCIPAL

TOOLS:
Tool 11.1 Essays by Dennis Sparks. 8 pages
Tool 11.2 Benefits of collaborative professional learning. 1 page
Tool 11.3 Key learnings for collaborative professional learning teams. 1 page
Tool 11.4 Principals’ strategies for increasing staff capacities for continuous learning. 1 page
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Tool 11.7 How to launch a community. 2 pages
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Where are we?

Our principal demonstrates his or her support for collaborative professional learning.

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In our school, when teams of teachers meet, the principal trusts them to accomplish their work.

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Our principal provides feedback to teams about their learning plan and progress on a regular basis.

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Our principal provides the resources and support requested.

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To say that the success of collaborative professional learning rests in the hands of the principal may be an overgeneralization; however, to a large degree, it is true. Principals’ commitment, investment, and involvement in collaborative professional learning is essential to its success within a school. To create, organize, and sustain collaborative professional development within their schools, principals have several essential responsibilities. They are responsible to:

- Set clear expectations and expected results;
- Create time for collaborative professional learning in the schedule;
- Provide training and development;
- Receive and review plans;
- Accept that change is a process, not an event;
- Monitor actions and results;
- Encourage “out-of-the-box” thinking; and
- Handle resistance.

**Set clear expectations and define results**

Principals have a responsibility to establish clear expectations about teacher collaborative professional development. Often working in partnership with teacher leaders, principals clarify whether collaborative professional development is a responsibility of every staff, some staff, or those who volunteer to participate. Further, they clarify whether teachers are expected to collaborate with one or more teams within the school, across schools, in the district, or across districts. Some schools set an expectation that teachers meet with one collaborative learning team related to their content area or level and another that is focused on a schoolwide area of interest. For example, a middle school music teacher may meet with other teachers across the district for her content-focused team. This team works to analyze curriculum, develop common assessments, examine student work, and to develop common units of instruction. This same teacher meets with a school team on infusing critical thinking into all classes. In this second team, the music teacher works with colleagues from other disciplines to identify the critical thinking skills they will stress at each grade level, develop their own understanding about how to integrate these skills into their classroom activities, and develop recommendations for other colleagues about how to integrate these skills into their classes.

Principals also set clear expectations for results. Working with each team and using the data analysis process as background, the principal helps each team understand how its actions can influence student suc-

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We found clear evidence that the administrator is key to the existence of a professional learning community.

cess. By stressing that the primary purpose of collaborative professional learning is student academic success, principals help teachers focus their collaborative work on the intended results. Secondary benefits of building a collaborative culture, deepening teachers’ content knowledge, and expanding their content-specific pedagogical repertoire occur when teachers are successful in working collaboratively. Principals can monitor for all of these results.

Create time for collaborative professional learning in the schedule

One of the most significant contributions a principal can make to guarantee success with collaborative professional learning is to provide time within teachers’ workday for it to happen. Chapter 7 addresses this issue in greater depth. It is primarily the principal’s responsibility to lead the charge, form the task force to study options for making time available, and for being the spokesperson within the community who advocates for teacher learning time. The principal cannot turn over this responsibility to an assistant or a group of teacher leaders. He or she must be fully present and involved in these actions to signal the importance of this issue.

Provide training and development

Successful collaborative professional learning does not happen magically. To be successful, teams benefit from some initial opportunities to learn about the value of collaborative professional learning, the essential skills for team development, and strategies for team learning. By providing opportunities for teacher leaders or even the entire staff to learn some of the foundational knowledge and skills necessary for success, principals increase the likelihood that the transition to collaborative professional learning will be smooth.

Receive and review team plans

Principals review a team’s plans for learning and provide feedback to the team, discuss with them how to provide the resources and support they request, and help them accomplish their plan. Principals visit team meetings periodically to learn about the team’s work and to offer support. Ongoing communication between the team and the principal is essential to keep the principal informed and to support the principal in finding ways to share learning across teams and to use each team’s learning to achieve the school’s goals.

Accept change as a process, not an event

When collaborative professional learning is launched in most schools, there is a period of adjustment for everyone. As teams learn to work together, to be more responsible for their own professional learning,
to make good choices about how to use their time, etc., principals have an important role to provide training, support, and coaching to teams. Principals remind teams that nothing is perfect immediately, that teams will feel uncomfortable and even be unsuccessful initially, and that they will improve both their effectiveness and efficiency over time. This means principals’ standards for teamwork change as teams mature and their work becomes more focused. The principal is ready to step in to facilitate, guide, teach, and/or provide resources, support, or resource personnel to help all teams reach an acceptable level of productivity.

**Give feedback actions and results**

Principals actively monitor team actions and results. They do this primarily by reviewing team-meeting logs. However, principals may meet with team leaders or with teams to learn about their work, observe their interactions, and to provide feedback on their work, their results, and their interactions. Principals can expect to receive periodic reports that include student data from benchmark or common assessments. By giving feedback regularly, principals and teams clarify expectations, improve their work as a team, and are more likely to focus their work on what will improve teaching and learning.

**Encourage “out-of-the-box” thinking**

Principals encourage teams to look beyond their own knowledge, skill, and practice by connecting them with print, human, or electronic resources that will move them beyond their current understanding. Principals look for resources that will introduce teams to new ideas, approaches, and strategies. When principals take an active role to ensure teams have access to resources, they stimulate learning and demonstrate their confidence in teams to accomplish their goals. Principals also have an important role in creating a safe environment that encourages risk taking, experimentation, and learning from each trial. It is important for principals to hold the view that experiences that do not produce intended results might be more powerful learning experiences than those that do.

**Handle resistance**

Resistance is inevitable. Some teachers will be uncomfortable working collaboratively. Some will initially believe that working collaboratively is additional work. Others simply prefer to work in isolation because it is what they have always done. Principals, when establishing expectations, clearly communicate each teacher’s responsibilities so that no confusion exists. If teachers are unwilling to work in collaborative learning teams, principals want to be prepared to handle such resistance. Most teachers, once they work through the challenges of shifting from outside-in to inside-out professional learning, value collaborative learning, especially if the focus of their learning is directly related to their own classes and students.

Principals may use the series of essays by Dennis Sparks, executive director of the National Staff Development Council, to help them consider the benefit and their role in creating a culture for collaborative professional learning within their schools. These essays appear in Tool 11.1.

Tool 11.2 includes a list of benefits of collaborative professional learning drawn from the research of Shirley Hord on professional learning communities.

A third resource, Tool 11.3, is a list of essential skills and knowledge for principals to consider in designing the training and development for teams and/or team leaders.

Tool 11.4 lists principals’ strategies for increasing staff capacity for continuous learning.

Tool 11.5 describes how principals establish the
structures to support collaborative professional learning.

Tool 11.6 describes ways the principal shifts the school culture and some of the roadblocks he or she may face in the process.

Tools 11.7 and 11.8 describe two principals who launched collaborative learning within their school. They share lessons learned to help other principals meet with success.

Douglas Reeves in his new book, *The Learning Leader: How to Focus School Improvement for Better Results* (2006), describes particular leadership actions that show demonstrable links to student achievement. These actions are not dependent on a principal’s style or personality, but rather are what a principal does. They include inquiring, using data to determine not only problems but also underlying causes (see Chapter 10); implementing, the degree to which aspects of a specific effort are correctly implemented at the school and classroom level; and monitoring, the way in which feedback to continuously support improvement and equity. This form of monitoring, as Reeves reminds his readers, is not evaluating or measuring.

No success in a school, no matter what it is, lies exclusively on the shoulders of principals. Teachers and teacher leaders are integral to every success and share responsibility for leadership. Principals work to distribute and share leadership throughout the system so that there are many leaders working hand-in-hand to meet the school’s goals. Collaborative professional learning is one way principals can share leadership for professional development and offer viable teacher leadership opportunities to teachers ready to accept leadership responsibilities.

**References**

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<td>The learning leader: how to focus school improvement for better results.</td>
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The principal's essential role as a learning leader

Skilled teaching in every classroom requires skilled leadership by principals. This reality is too often ignored when schools and districts make professional development decisions. And that is why I am devoting my columns this school year to the principal's essential role as a professional development leader.

I am convinced that high-quality teaching in every classroom depends on principals who make the success of all students their highest priority, nurture continuous improvement in teaching, and create energizing, interdependent relationships among all members of the school community. While effective principals delegate responsibility and distribute leadership, the ultimate responsibility for quality teaching in all classrooms falls squarely on their shoulders.

Across this school year, the columns in this series will examine what I believe are the essential ingredients in leadership for adult and student learning. My October column will argue that significant change in schools begins with significant change in leaders. What principals understand, believe, say, and do has a profound consequence on those around them. Different results, therefore, require new understandings, beliefs, words, and actions. In other words, if nothing changes, nothing changes.

In November, I will propose that successful principals possess richly-detailed visions of the student learning and teaching they desire in their schools. They can see in their mind's eye and describe in detail to others the quality of student thought and work the school desires and the type of teaching that will produce it. Likewise, they are crystal clear about the kind of professional learning that is aligned with their vision of student learning and high-quality teaching.

My December/January column will discuss how successful principals affect the knowledge, skills, and attitudes of individuals who are both above and below them on the organizational chart. These principals skillfully and persistently advocate for the policies, resources, and support that are essential in their schools. They also develop the leadership talents of teachers by delegating increasingly more complex responsibilities and nurturing the knowledge and skills necessary to successfully fulfill them.

In February, I will describe how skillful principals use various sources of information to create urgency for change, to establish plans, and to track progress toward important goals. Principals guide teachers, parents, and other community members in understanding and using various types of data and other forms of evidence. They also embed the study of professional literature in faculty, department, and grade-level meetings.

My March column will discuss ways in which principals who make staff and student learning a priority create relationships within schools that build a sense of common purpose, generate energy, and are mutually respectful and trusting. Such relationships speak to the heart as well as inform the mind, foster teamwork, create community, and develop a collective responsibility for the learning of all students.

In April, I will address how successful principals embed professional learning within the core day-to-day tasks of teaching and learning. Instead of leaving their classrooms and schools to be "in-service," teams of teachers learn as they analyze data, plan lessons, and reflect on the effectiveness of their work.

My May column will describe ways in which skillful principals strengthen subject matter understanding and instructional practice by drawing on the talents of teachers within their schools as well as on external sources of expertise.

Taken together, these columns will underscore my view that quality teaching in every classroom requires skillful leadership on the part of principals. There are no substitutes.
Principals first change themselves

What principals think, say, and do profoundly affects the quality of teaching and learning in their schools, the satisfaction they and the teachers with whom they interact derive from their work, and their ability to remain deeply engaged over many years in the demanding tasks of continuous improvement. Therefore, principals who desire significant changes in teaching, learning, and relationships within their schools begin by making significant changes in what they think, say, and do. As Gandhi expressed it, “We must become the change we seek in the world.”

Principals have the capacity to make a tremendous difference in their organizations through the values they embody, the beliefs they hold, the intentions they express, the depth of their understanding of critical issues, the clarity of their thought and speech, and the ways in which they interact with others. Such attributes can have a substantial affect — for good or for ill — on the moods and performance of countless individuals within the school community.

Some values, beliefs, intentions, understandings, and actions establish trust and respect, focus and energize staff members, tap and develop talents, and stimulate creativity. Others can have the opposite effect. This subject is addressed by Jim Loehr and Tony Schwartz in The Power of Full Engagement (Free Press, 2003). “Every one of our thoughts, emotions, and behaviors has an energy consequence, for better or for worse,” they note. Jane Dutton adds another dimension in Energize Your Workplace (Jossey-Bass, 2003). “[L]eaders can make a profound difference in activating and renewing energy by building and sustaining high-quality connections .... ,” she writes. “High-quality connections contribute substantially to individuals’ well-being and work performance. They also contribute significantly to an organization’s capacity for collaboration, coordination, learning, and adaptation, as well as its ability to keep people committed and loyal.”

Energy is created and performance improved when principals think, speak, and act in ways that connect the school community to larger, compelling purposes and strengthen relationships among teachers and between teachers and students and the families of those students. Energy is dissipated when principals and teacher leaders hold beliefs and act in ways that express resignation (“There’s nothing we can do” or “They won’t let us”) and dependency (“Tell us what to do”). Resignation and dependency undermine genuine collaboration, professional learning, and a school’s ability to find innovative solutions to pressing problems.

I recommend that principals and teachers develop a detailed vision of the school which they wish to create that is consistent with their values and then adopt beliefs, intentions, understandings, speech forms, and behaviors that are consistent with that result. In that way, the creation of schools with higher levels of purpose, energy, and performance begins with principals first changing themselves.

By beginning with the end in mind and first changing themselves, principals are far less likely to be interested in blaming or “fixing” others. Because they have experienced profound change themselves, they are far more likely to see possibility and opportunity in situations in which others may only see limitations. As they empower themselves, they empower everyone with whom they interact.
Principals possess a vision of quality professional learning

Successful principals possess richly detailed visions of the type of student learning and teaching they desire in their schools. They can see in their mind's eye and describe in detail to others the nature of teaching and the quality of student thought and work it produces. Likewise, they are crystal clear about the types of professional learning that will make that vision a reality. They can see, hear, and feel the kind of learning experiences and interactions that provide meaningful and sustaining bonds between members of the school community and produce increasingly sophisticated professional judgment and complex, intelligent behavior on the part of all teachers and leaders.

Successful principals, therefore, devote time and energy to creating clarity and consensus within the school community regarding the most powerful forms of professional learning. To that end they engage the school community in the study of resources such as the National Staff Development Council’s Standards for Staff Development: Moving NSDC’s Staff Development Standards Into Practice: Innovation Configurations, and Designing Powerful Professional Development for Teachers and Principals. (All three publications are available at www.nsdc.org.)

As a result of study, reflection, and successive iteration of their collective vision, successful principals and the school communities they lead understand that high-quality professional development improves the learning of all students by continuously improving the day-to-day practices of teachers and educational leaders. It does so by promoting deep understanding of subject matter content, expanding teachers’ repertoires of research-based strategies, affecting educators’ beliefs about teaching and learning through dialogue and other methods, and stimulating a steady stream of goal-focused actions. Such learning is part of teachers’ daily work, not separate from it.

Successful principals and their school communities also understand that the most powerful forms of professional learning are based on sustained study of professional literature and candid, dialogue-based exchanges of views regarding the schools they wish to create; data-based assessment of current reality; and selection and successful implementation of the most effective strategies for bridging that gap. As part of their daily work, teachers engage in reading and discussion of research and other professional literature. Teachers brainstorm, examine data and student work, and give and receive feedback in the use of new practices.

The school community’s vision for professional learning also includes the kinds of topics discussed by faculty members, the manner in which they are discussed, and an appreciation of the energy generated by connections to a worthy purpose and to respected colleagues. Community members’ collective vision sees teachers and administrators speaking with one another in candid and respectful ways, cultivating trust by acting with integrity and interpersonal accountability, and developing school norms that support individual and collective responsibility for quality teaching and the learning of all students.

A clear, compelling, and richly detailed vision of leadership, teaching, student learning, and professional development is essential to the continuous improvement of instruction and achievement. Successful principals can succinctly and powerfully describe the alignment between the attributes of teachers’ professional learning, changes in teachers’ instructional practice, and improvements in student learning. Without such clarity and alignment most professional development and culture-shaping efforts will be of little consequence. High levels of learning and performance on the part of all students and teachers begin with such clarity of vision.
Principals partner with supervisors, teacher leaders

Leadership of the complex social organization of the modern school is far too demanding to be the work of just one individual. Therefore, successful principals invest energy in developing both their supervisors and teacher leaders through dialogue and other means to continuously improve teaching and learning.

Successful principals “develop up” on the organizational chart by skillfully and persistently educating district leaders about high-quality professional learning and advocating for the policies, data, tools, resources, and other forms of support that are essential in their schools. They ask their supervisors to evaluate them based on the quality of professional learning and the culture of their schools as well as on more traditional areas. They request regularly scheduled meetings to discuss goals and assess progress using various sources of evidence. These principals tap supervisors’ thinking about educational issues and enlist district administrators as allies and partners in the continuous improvement of their schools.

Successful principals develop the leadership talents of teachers by delegating increasingly more complex responsibilities to them and nurturing the knowledge and skills to successfully fulfill those responsibilities. They do so by arranging formal learning experiences for teacher leaders and aspiring administrators and by engaging teachers in more sophisticated and demanding leadership tasks. They also provide generous amounts of one-on-one time with teacher leaders that enables them to reflect on and extract lessons from their experiences and to create plans for future learning and work.

An important way in which principals distribute leadership within schools is to recruit, develop, and support teachers to serve in special assignments within their schools. These individuals may function as team leaders or committee chairs, as full- or part-time instructional coaches, or as mentors for beginning teachers or veteran teachers who are struggling with their assignments. As a result of principals’ efforts, teacher leaders feel well trained for their new roles and perceive that they and their principals are functioning as a team to improve the quality of teaching, learning, and job satisfaction in their schools.

Developing and distributing leadership within the school requires that principals be well grounded in instruction, curriculum, assessment, and professional development. While they do not have to know as much as teachers do about the fine-grained details of curriculum, instruction, and assessment, it is important that principals know enough to engage in deep and extended growth-promoting conversations with teachers about issues of teaching and learning.

Expanding the leadership capacity of others in the organization also requires sophisticated interpersonal skills. Successful principals are clear about their values and intentions, know how to succinctly and powerfully express their views, engage in dialogue to penetrate more deeply into the heart of issues, make requests for what they want, and act with integrity. They also know how to listen deeply and to honor the perspectives of others, even though they may not agree with them.

Principals who successfully promote high levels of learning in their schools know that they cannot do it by themselves. They understand the value of strong partnerships with their supervisors and teacher leaders. Most importantly, they know such partnerships are too important to be left to chance.
Information provides direction, inspires continuous improvement

"[L]eadership is about learning together, and constructing meaning and knowledge collectively and collaboratively. It involves opportunities to surface and mediate perceptions, values, beliefs, information, and assumptions through continuing conversations; to inquire about and generate ideas together, to seek to reflect upon and make sense of work in the light of shared beliefs and new information; and to create actions that grow out of these new understandings. Such is the core of leadership."

— Linda Lambert

Skillful principals use various sources of information to create a compelling common purpose for a school, to ignite a strong desire for improvement, and to inspire urgency for change. With teachers, they employ information to determine school improvement goals, select professional learning that supports those goals, track improvements in teaching and learning over time, and create internal accountability for results. They also know that traditional forms of information and analysis are often insufficient to motivate and sustain progress toward goals.

Successful principals use information to make decisions based on evidence rather than opinion. Information from multiple sources is disaggregated whenever possible and examined for its usefulness in improving teaching and learning. It shapes planning decisions, informs mid-course corrections, and determines the effectiveness of improvement efforts to achieve goals.

Effective principals know that simply giving teachers student performance data and research on improvement strategies is usually insufficient. They know information does not speak the same "truth" to everyone and that individuals and groups experience "objective" information in unique ways based on prior learning and experience. Because they know that school faculties represent a spectrum of "perceptions, values, beliefs, information, and assumptions," successful principals know the importance of melding these disparate views into a unifying force for improvements in teaching and learning without losing the intellectual vitality of such diversity. Consequently, through dialogue and various data-management and formatting tools, they guide teachers, parents, and others to understand and use information to empower them and support their individual and collective purposes.

Skillful leaders also understand the power of particularly potent forms of information — for instance, stories and images — to persuade and motivate. In The Heart of Change: Real-Life Stories of How People Change Their Organizations (Harvard Business School Press, 2002), John Kotter and Dan Cohen argue: "People change what they do less because they are given analysis that shifts their thinking than because they are shown a truth that influences their feelings." Emotion underlies lasting change, Kotter and Cohen believe, and that emotion is generated more by vivid stories and images than by a list of logical reasons for change. Emotion provides the passion and commitment that overcomes complacency and inertia and that enables individuals to alter habits.

When employed by skillful principals to improve student and staff learning, information can provide purpose, inspire change, and promote accountability. These principals know the value of information that speaks to the heart as well as the head. They also know that data rarely speak their "truth" to everyone in the same way and use that diversity of perspective to vitalize and strengthen the school community. Few tasks are more important to these leaders than helping the school community make sense of and effectively use information to benefit all students.
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR’S NOTEBOOK

Principals establish relationships that energize and foster teamwork

Principals who make staff and student learning a priority establish relationships within schools that are trusting, mutually respectful, and generate energy through commitment to a common and compelling purpose. Such relationships motivate the heart as well as inform the intellect, foster teamwork and the synergy it offers, and develop a shared responsibility for the learning of all students. High-quality connections among members of the school community are at the core of a productive school culture and promote the long-term retention of valued teachers.

The quality of relationships among adults in schools is a predictor of student learning, particularly in schools that are most challenged by the social ills of poverty and racism. High levels of trust, respectful and honest exchanges of views, and a shared commitment to worthwhile goals are some of the most important characteristics of these relationships. Without such relationships, few schools will take full advantage of available professional development resources.

Leaders’ language has a powerful effect on relationships and performance, and principals, whether they recognize it or not, are leaders of language communities. “Some language forms concentrate more individual and social energy than others do; they provide more focus, increase direction, and enhance capacity.” Robert Kegan and Lisa Lahey contend in How the Way We Talk Can Change the Way We Work (Jossey-Bass, 2001). They add, “Though every person, in any setting, has some opportunity to influence the nature of the language, leaders have exponentially greater access and opportunity to shape, alter, or ratify the existing language rules.”

For instance, the language of complaint, dependency, and resignation when regularly used by leaders can dehumanize the human spirit, infect others, and lead to organizational atrophy. Conversely, language that expresses commitment, integrity, and accountability energizes and sustains productive actions.

High-quality connections are built upon clarity and directness of expression, candor, and integrity. These qualities energize relationships and produce individual and collective results. Principals who are clear and direct are able to succinctly and in simple language communicate in various ways to the school community their values, intentions, assumptions, and requests. “Communicate” does not mean impose; rather it recognizes the principal’s essential role in formulating the “conversation agenda” of the school, engaging in dialogue-based conversations, and listening with empathy to the views of others.

Candor means forthrightly discussing “non-discussables” that are barriers to effective teaching and student success in many school communities, even when that discussion may generate conflict and tension. It also means talking about issues directly with everyone involved in decision making rather than with some people in “parking lot conversations.” Candor is not to be confused with demeaning, coercive, or otherwise disrespectful forms of communication offered under the guise of “honesty.”

Integrity has at its core doing what one says he or she will do. When principals make promises, they signal their commitment to action, and, when they fulfill their promises, they establish norms of interpersonal accountability within their schools.

When educators speak with clarity, possibility, and accountability, and when they interact with others in respectful and mutually satisfying ways, they empower themselves and those with whom they work to produce extraordinary results. Such interactions add purpose, joy, and energy to school communities, motivate staff members to sustain their collective effort over time, and increase the organization’s capacity to achieve stretching and worthwhile goals.

Dennis Sparks is executive director of the National Staff Development Council

“`The single factor common to successful change is that relationships improve. If relationships improve, schools get better. If relationships remain the same or get worse, ground is lost.”
—Michael Fullan
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR’S NOTEBOOK

Principals serve schools as leaders of professional learning

“Today, people believe that professional development should be targeted and directly related to teachers’ practice. It should be site-based and long-term. It should be ongoing — part of a teacher’s work week, not something that’s tucked on. And it should be curriculum-based, to the extent possible, so that it helps teachers help their students master the curriculum at a higher level.”

—James Stigler

The welfare of our children and the future of our nation depends on all students having quality teaching and supportive relationships with peers and adults. Principals of such schools have a clear vision of quality professional development and are able to communicate it in clear, compelling language to various audiences. They know the most powerful forms of professional learning are team-based and embedded in the core day-to-day tasks of teaching and learning — planning lessons, analyzing data, reviewing student work, and through honest conversations reflecting on the effectiveness of their efforts. Rather than leaving their jobs to learn, teachers learn as they do their day-to-day work. In these schools, professional learning is seamless with teaching rather than an added burden, and it continuously and incrementally improves the teaching of every teacher for the benefit of all students.

Successful principals know high-quality professional development deepens teachers’ understanding of what they teach, expands their repertoire of teaching strategies, affects educators’ beliefs about teaching and learning, creates a culture that supports teamwork, and produces a coherent stream of actions that continuously improve teaching, learning, and relationships within the school community. In these schools, teachers’ acquisition of content knowledge and new teaching methods is aided when they consider how students learn particular subject matter such as mathematics or science.

Successful principals also know the most powerful forms of professional development make cognitive demands on teachers and administrators and require the use of increasingly sophisticated professional judgment. Such professional learning skillfully blends the abstract and theoretical with the concrete and immediately useful. It asks teachers to stand back to gain a broader perspective, to carefully consider cause-and-effect relationships in their teaching, and to unceasingly search for ways to make an even greater difference in the lives of their students.

Because learning has a strong social component and because the synergy that comes from group problem solving often leads to innovative solutions, skillful principals use intact teams within schools as centers of professional learning. Team meetings occur for the most part during the school day because they are an important part of teachers’ responsibilities and benefit from the participation of all teachers. For various reasons, such sustained collaborative work is difficult to achieve after school and during summer months. When appropriate, teachers pursue professional learning outside their schools through courses, institutes, conferences, and cross-school or cross-district networks whenever such external resources are important for the achievement of school goals.

If a school so desires, it can significantly improve professional learning for its teachers within a year. It is critically important, I believe, that principals make the type of professional learning described here a high priority and set about realizing it with the sense of urgency it deserves. Students pass through our schools only once and are the ultimate beneficiaries of the quality teaching and supportive relationships such professional learning can produce in every classroom and throughout the school community.
Principals amplify teachers’ outstanding practices

Successful principals understand that schools that systematically identify, deeply appreciate, and spread the outstanding practices that already exist within them are also more effective in tapping external sources of expertise. Likewise, they understand that schools whose cultures are contrary to such appreciative and collaborative methods will derive few lasting benefits from most external resources because they lack the means through which more effective teaching methods become part of a school’s routine practice.

Successful principals know the quality of teaching and student learning in their schools can be significantly improved with the professional expertise that is already present within them. They also know that unleashing that expertise requires creating cultures where effective methods are appreciated and regularly shared.

In a May 2004 Educational Leadership article, Martin Haberman uses the term “star teachers” to describe individuals “who are so effective that the adverse conditions of working in failing schools or school districts do not prevent them from being successful teachers.” He estimates that 8% of teachers in such schools are “star teachers.”

In a Winter 2004 JSD interview (www.nsdc.org/library/publications/jsd/sternin251.cfm), Jerry Sternin told me he believes there are individuals in virtually every school — he calls them “positive deviants” — who get better than average results and who offer pathways to success for other teachers. “Positive deviants,” Sternin told me, “are people whose behavior and practices produce solutions to problems that others in the group who have access to exactly the same resources have not been able to solve. We want to identify these people because they provide demonstrable evidence that solutions to the problem already exist within the community.”

Effective principals create school cultures that “amplify positive deviance” as a way to continuously improve teaching and learning and retain competent teachers.

The physical presence of the positive deviant in the community is important. In our JSD interview, Sternin said, “It’s natural for people to resist when someone tells them what to do. That’s part of human nature. It’s like the human immune system’s rejection of anything it senses as foreign. It’s the same thing at the psychological and emotional levels when an external solution is imposed on us. When the solution comes from within the system, the immune response isn’t activated.”

At the same time that they are “amplifying positive deviance,” successful principals ensure that teachers experience the benefits of interacting with teachers from other schools and with research or other sources of outside knowledge and skills. Teachers study the professional literature related to their goals, attend appropriate workshops and conferences, participate in networks, and invite consultants to their schools to help solve tenacious problems.

Successful principals demonstrate a deep appreciation of the talents that already reside in their schools and initiate cultural changes that spread effective practices. They understand that when their schools honor and effectively use internal expertise, teachers will more actively reach out to various sources of external guidance and motivation. Schools in which both adults and students thrive consistently draw on the talents that reside within them and pull toward them the sources of support that surround them.
Benefits of collaborative professional learning

**STUDENT BENEFITS**

- Decreased dropout rate
- Lower absenteeism
- Greater academic achievement in comparison to traditional schools
- Smaller achievement gaps between students from different backgrounds

**STAFF BENEFITS**

- Reduced teacher isolation
- Collective responsibility for student success
- Increased understanding of roles teachers play in helping all students achieve
- More satisfaction, higher morale, and lower absenteeism
- High-quality solutions to problems
- Increase confidence among all school community members

**TOOL 11.3**

### Key learnings for collaborative professional learning teams

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Principals’ strategies for increasing staff capacities for continuous learning

Examine own beliefs about collaboration and continuous improvement

Develop collective values and vision
   - Be student-focused
   - Use vision to recruit and develop quality staff

Share decision making
   - Establish structures and process for shared decision making
   - Promote shared decision making on substantive issues
   - Increase decision-making quality

Promote continuous learning
   - Create opportunities for teachers to learn
   - Connect professional development to school improvement goals

Encourage collaboration
   - Provide time for collaboration
   - Identify outcomes of collaboration

Provide support
   - Establish clear expectations
   - Develop relationships
   - Create structures for communication
   - Acknowledge human capacity for change

In the right context

The effective leader concentrates on a foundation of programs, procedures, beliefs, expectations, and habits

By RICK DuFOUR

An old story says Ralph Waldo Emerson often began conversations with acquaintances he had not seen in some time by posing the question: “What has become more clear to you since last we met?”

The *Journal of Staff Development* presented me with a similar challenge when it asked that I reflect upon an article I co-authored five years ago titled, “The Principal as Staff Developer” (Berkey & DuFour, 1995).

While I am relieved to conclude the ideas in that article have held up well, some things principals must do to fulfill their responsibilities as staff development leaders have become much clearer to me.

**IMPORTANCE OF CONTEXT**

Shortly after my article was published, the National Staff Development Council identified professional development standards to help schools and districts assess their programs. Content standards articulated the what of professional development — the knowledge and skills staff members should have. Process standards addressed how professional development should be delivered.

Although both the content and process of professional development are significant issues worthy of a principal’s attention, I have come to understand the most significant contribution a principal can make to developing others is creating an appropriate context for adult learning. It is context — the programs, procedures, beliefs, expectations, and habits that constitute the norm for a given school — that plays the largest role in determining whether professional development efforts will have an impact on that school.

In the right school context, even flawed professional development activities (such as the much-maligned single-session workshop) can serve as a catalyst for professional growth. Conversely, in the wrong school context, even programs with solid content and powerful training strategies are unlikely to be effective (DuFour, 1998).

When principals recognize how critical school context is to the effectiveness of professional development, important shifts begin. The primary arena for professional development moves from workshops to the workplace. Emphasis shifts from finding the right trainers or speakers to creating opportunities for staff to work together, engage in collective inquiry, and learn from one another. The artificial distinction between teacher work and teacher learning that exists in most schools is eliminated.

Opportunities for learning and growth are structured into routine practices. I am convinced the
single most effective way in which principals can function as staff development leaders is providing a school context that fosters job-embedded professional development.

I have also come to understand that the context principals should strive to create in their schools is the collaborative culture of a professional learning community. Creating a collaborative culture has been described as “the single most important factor” for successful school improvement initiatives, “the first order of business” for those seeking to enhance their schools’ effectiveness, an essential requirement of improving schools, the critical element in reform efforts, and the most promising strategy for sustained, substantive school improvement (Eastwood and Louis, 1992; Fullan, 1993; Newmann and Wehlage, 1995; and McLaughlin, 1995).

But if principals are to create this context of a collaborative culture in their schools, they must do more than encourage teachers to work together. The tradition of teacher isolation is too deep to be uprooted simply by offering opportunities for collegial endeavors. Collaboration by invitation never works. Principals who function as staff development leaders embed collaboration in the structure and culture of their schools. Teachers’ work is specifically designed to ensure that every staff member is a contributing member of a collaborative team. Creating an appropriate structure for teacher collaboration is vitally important, but also insufficient. Principals must do more than organize teacher teams and hope for the best. They must provide the focus, parameters, and support to help teams function effectively. More specifically, principals who are staff development leaders must:

1. Provide time for collaboration in the school day and school year. Providing time for teachers to work together does not require keeping students at home and/or an infusion of new resources.

Principals as staff development leaders work with staff to identify no-cost strategies that enable teachers to work together on a regular basis while students are on campus.

2. Identify critical questions to guide the work of collaborative teams. The impact of providing time for teachers to engage in collective inquiry will be determined to a great extent by the nature of the questions teachers are considering. Principals must help teams frame questions that focus on critical issues of teaching and learning.

3. Ask teams to create products as a result of their collaboration. The best way to help teachers use their collaborative time productively is to ask them to produce and present artifacts in response to the critical questions they are considering. Examples might
include statements of student outcomes by units of instruction, development of new units to address gaps between state standards and local curriculum, creation of common assessments and rubrics, articulation of team protocols or norms to guide the interactions of team members, or formulation of improvement plans based on analysis of student achievement data.

4. Insist that teams identify and pursue specific student achievement goals. The driving force behind the effort to create a collaborative culture must be improved results. Principals foster improved results when they ask teaching teams to identify and pursue specific, measurable student achievement goals.

5. Provide teams with relevant data and information. When every teacher has access to information on his or her students’ performance in meeting agreed upon standards, on valid assessments, in comparison to other students trying to achieve the same standards, both individual teachers and teams improve their effectiveness.

Simply put, when teachers operate within the context of a learning community, they are more likely to develop professional competence. And it is principals who play the critical role in forging conditions that give rise to the growth of professional communities in schools (Louis, Kruse, and Raywid, 1996).

**RESULTS-DRIVEN LEARNING**

Some principals continue to cling to the notion that they function as staff development leaders when they offer a potpourri of professional development opportunities for staff. These peripatetic principals strive to expose their staff to every new educational fad in order to keep their schools on the “cutting edge.” This eagerness to pursue change and embrace every “new thing” results in what has been referred to as the “Christmas tree” school. Programs, training, and initiatives are simply hung on the existing structure and culture of the school like ornaments on a Christmas tree. Like ornaments, they never become truly organic or part of the tree. They dangle flimsily without ever being absorbed into the school’s culture.

Principals who function as staff development leaders recognize that professional development is a means to an end — improved student achievement. They work with faculty to identify the specific competencies that are most critical in helping staff achieve that end; they design purposeful, goal-oriented strategies and programs to develop these competencies; and they sustain the commitment to those strategies and programs until staff acquire and use the intended knowledge and skills. They assess the impact of professional development not on the basis of the number of offerings or initial enthusiasm for the offerings, but on the basis of improved results.

The emphasis on results also means that building the group’s collective capacity to achieve schoolwide goals must become a higher priority than the individual’s independent learning.

A famous symphony conductor once commented that while he wanted each violin player in the orchestra to work at becoming a better violin player, developing individual skills did not result in a great orchestra. He also had to help each section of the orchestra develop its ability to work together as a section. Finally, he had to ensure that each member and each section heard the music the same way, that they had a common sense of what they were trying to accomplish. Principals who function as staff development leaders function in much the same way. They want each 3rd grade teacher to work at becoming a better teacher, but they realize a focus on individual development will not create a great school. They must also help the 3rd grade team learn to function in ways that strengthen the entire 3rd grade. Most importantly, they must keep everyone in the school committed to a shared vision of improved learning for all.

**MODELING**

Principals who hope to encourage others to continue to grow and learn professionally must remember the words of Albert Schweitzer: “Example isn’t the best way to influence others — it’s the only way.” When principals model a commitment to their own ongoing professional development, when they demonstrate openness to new experiences and ideas, when they are willing to pose questions and engage in action research, they increase the likelihood that others on the staff will make a similar commitment.

No principal could ever hope to know enough to be a resource in every content area for everyone in the school. Therefore, principals must identify areas for their own professional development that offer the most powerful leverage points for advancing the school toward its goals.

Because the fundamental purpose of school is learning, principals must become students of the teaching-learning process. Because learning communities require shared vision and collective commitments, principals must become
skilled in building consensus and resolving conflict.

Because clarity of communication helps signal priorities and focus improvement efforts, principals must develop powerful strategies for communicating effectively. Because learning communities are results-oriented and committed to continuous improvement, principals must become proficient in gathering and reporting data in ways that are meaningful to teachers. Because the transformation of traditional school cultures into professional learning communities is a difficult task replete with obstacles, frustrations, and setbacks, principals must learn how to encourage the hearts of those with whom they work. This is by no means an exhaustive list. It is, however, representative of the kind of professional development principals could pursue to help those within a school accomplish their collective goals.

How can principals develop these skills? Read voraciously, secure a mentor, participate in a principal network, create a guiding coalition within the school to help generate, assess, and refine improvement strategies. Most importantly, look continuously for experiences that offer an opportunity for professional growth.

There is much wisdom in the adage, "Leadership cannot be taught, but it can be learned."

There are those who contend that school improvement initiatives have suffered because schools are too dependent upon their principals, that the influence of the principal must be lessened in order for schools to function as learning communities. I do not subscribe to that theory. In fact, I believe schools need strong, effective leadership from principals more than ever. But the nature of that leadership is not the autocratic "my-way-or-the-highway" model of the past. Principals who embrace their role as staff development leaders act in accordance with the tenets of servant-leadership. As Robert Greenleaf (1990) described this model of leadership:

"The servant-leader is servant first... It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead... The best test, and the most difficult to administer, is: Do those served grow as persons? Do they become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants? (p. 7).

When principals focus on creating an environment in which people are working toward a shared vision and honoring collective commitments to one another, an environment in which all staff are provided with structures and supports that foster collaborative efforts and continuous professional growth, an environment in which each teacher has someone to turn to and talk to when confronted with challenges, they address one of the deepest yearnings in the hearts of most teachers: To make a positive difference in the lives of their students. And in helping teachers address that fundamental need, they increase the likelihood that teachers will themselves become servant-leaders to their students. And that is what the principal as staff development leader is all about.

REFERENCES
Culture shift doesn't occur overnight — or without conflict

Staff members of every school face an inevitable question each year: What happens in our school when, despite our best efforts in the classroom, a student does not learn?

In traditional schools, the answer is left to the discretion of the individual classroom teacher, who is free to respond in different ways. The support a student will (or will not) receive depends on his or her teacher's practices, rather than a collective effort and a coordinated response. In truth, most schools play a form of educational lottery with children.

In professional learning communities, however, schools create a systematic response — processes to monitor each student's learning and to ensure that a student who struggles is provided additional time and support for learning according to a schoolwide plan. Furthermore, the response is timely. Students are identified as soon as they experience difficulty, allowing the school to focus on intervention rather than remediation. The response is directive. Students are not invited to seek extra help; they are required to receive the additional assistance and devote the extra time necessary to master the learning.

This coordinated system of support for students never occurs by chance. It can only occur when school leaders work with staff to develop a plan of intervention, carefully monitoring the implementation of that plan, and confront those who disregard it. Furthermore, an effective system of intervention is not merely an add-on to existing school structures and assumptions, but represents a natural outgrowth of strong school cultures dominated by certain unifying concepts.

Boone Mill Elementary School in Franklin County, Va.; Los Penasquitos Elementary School in Rancho Peñasquitos, Calif.; Freeport Intermediate School in Freeport, Texas, and Adair Stevenson High School in Lincolnshire, Ill., illustrate this systematic approach to responding when students do not learn (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Karhanek, 2004). The schools could not be more dissimilar in terms of size, geographic location, accessibility to resources, and the students and the communities they serve. Yet these schools share common themes.

One of the most evident commonalities is that the staff in each school is emphatic about and fixated on the fundamental purpose of the school — high levels of learning for all students. There is no ambiguity and no hedging about their goal. No one suggests that all kids will learn if they are conscientious, responsible, attentive, developmentally ready, fluent in English, and come from homes with concerned parents who take an interest in their education.

There is no hint that staff members believe they can help all kids learn if class sizes are reduced, more resources are made available, new textbooks are purchased, or more support staff are hired. In these four schools, staff members embraced the premise that the very reason their schools exist is to help all their students — every one of the flawed, imperfect boys and girls who come to them each day — acquire essential knowledge and skills using the resources available to the school.

The collective commitment to high levels of learning for every student led these schools to assess the impact of their efforts and decisions based on tangible results. When teachers in a school are truly focused on student learning as their primary mission, they inevitably seek valid methods to assess the extent and depth of that learning. The teachers in these four schools all found that frequent common assessments, developed collaboratively and scored by every teacher of a grade level or course, were a vital resource in their efforts to monitor student learning. Doug Reeves (2004, p. 114-115) describes this process as "the gold standard in educational accountability" because these assessments are used to "improve teaching and learning, not merely to evaluate students and schools."

The teachers in the four schools embrace data and information from their common assessments because the assessments provide timely and powerful insights into their students' learning. They do not denigrate data that suggest all is not well, nor do they blindly worship means, modes, and medians. They have a healthy respect for the results of their common assessments because those assessments help them monitor the effectiveness of their teaching and identify individual students who are experiencing difficulty. Once those students are identified, the schoolwide system
of intervention ensures that the students immediately receive additional time and support for learning.

**HOW LEADERS CREATE A CULTURE COMMITTED TO LEARNING**

A critical element in creating these powerful school cultures is the principal’s leadership. Each is clearly committed to empowering staff, delegating authority, and developing collaborative decision-making processes, but none is unwilling to confront a staff member who violates the fundamental concepts of the school’s culture. Leadership is widely distributed in each school, with clearly delineated guiding coalitions overseeing the improvement process. The collaborative team structures in place in each school also encourage fluid situational leadership throughout the school. When a team discovers that one of its members has special expertise in a particular content area, in teaching a concept, in developing effective assessments, or in meeting the needs of a particular kind of learner, that member naturally assumes temporary leadership based on that expertise when the team focuses on that topic. The principals delegate authority and serve as leaders of leaders rather than the central problem solver of the school.

Nevertheless, in the early stages of implementing the changes that helped the school become a professional learning community, each principal faced challenges from one or more staff members who either aggressively or passively resisted the school’s new direction. The consistent way the principals dealt with staff challenges offers important insights into leading the professional learning community process. In every case, the principal met with the teacher privately, stated concerns very directly, and identified the specific steps the teacher needed to take to remedy the situation. Finally, the principal asked how he or she might help the teacher make the necessary changes.

The teachers did not always respond positively to these discussions. Some became quite emotional and defensive. The principals, however, did not hedge. They made it clear that the teacher’s behavior was unacceptable and that the need for change was imperative. They did so without rancor, but they left no doubt about their expectations. Perhaps there are schools that have made the transition to a professional learning community without conflict or anxiety, but I am unaware of any. Disagreements and tension are to be expected. The question schools must face is not, “How can we eliminate all potential for conflict as we go through this process?” but rather, “How will we react when we are immersed in the conflict that accompanies significant change?” In *Crucial Conversations* (Patterson, Grenny, McMillan, & Switzler, 2002), the authors contrast how teams respond when faced with conflict. Ineffective teams will ignore the problem, letting it fester and build until resentment and frustration lead to an explosion of accusations and recrimination. Good teams will take the matter to the boss and ask that he or she deal with the problem and find a satisfactory solution. Great teams will deal with the issue themselves, engaging in open dialogue and applying positive peer pressure to bring about the desired change.

The problem in schools is that teams almost never start out as great teams. Before they get to the point where team members can work together to resolve the matter, they likely will need the principal to help remedy the situation. A critical factor in creating the learning-centered culture of these four schools was the principal’s willingness to confront obvious violations of the concepts upon which those cultures were built.

Culture has been defined as “the way we do things around here.” Leaders shape the norms of behavior (and thus the culture) of their organizations in a number of ways. When principals work with staff to build processes to monitor each student’s learning and to develop systems of intervention that give students additional time and support when they experience difficulty, they create the structures that support the concept of learning for all. When they give staff clear parameters to guide their work but considerable autonomy in implementation, they increase the likelihood that staff members will embrace that concept. But when principals are unwilling to tolerate actions that violate the underlying values of the culture, they use a powerful strategy for shaping the norms of behavior within their school.

**REFERENCES**


How to launch a community

Educators seldom oppose the concept of a professional learning community. After all, who would be against the idea of a school in which the staff shares a sense of purpose, a vision of the school they're trying to create, and a willingness to commit to achieving that vision?

Who wouldn't want a school where teachers collaborate to find ways to help students achieve more?

Typically, educators are not against creating a professional learning community. They just don't know where to begin given all the demands on them.

Two principals who have faced that question have made amazing progress in less than one school year. Becky Burnette and Mike O'Brien are each new to their schools this year, but their schools are in strikingly different settings. Burnette is principal of an established elementary school in rural Franklin County, Va. O'Brien is principal of a new urban middle school serving one of the poorest sections of Buffalo, N.Y. Both are featured in the Video.

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Journal of Education (www.teachstream.com) on effective school leadership available in spring 2001. Their reflections on their experiences offer valuable insights for those hoping to initiate a professional learning community in their schools. Burnette’s observations are featured here; O’Brien’s will be featured in the next column.

DuFour: How did you introduce the topic of a professional learning community for your staff’s consideration?

Burnette: Before the start of the school year, I met with the entire staff in grade-level teams. We discussed their perceptions of the school and what could be done to improve it. While each team cited the competence and commitment of the staff among the school’s strengths, they also shared a common frustration over insufficient time to work together. I followed up these discussions by sending staff a summary of the conversations and an article on professional learning communities. In that letter, I made a commitment to work with them to build a master schedule that would provide time for teams to work together each week without impacting instructional time for students or individual preparation time. I met with each team again in the opening week of school, presented them with a draft of a team schedule, and worked with them to fine-tune it until they were enthusiastic about their schedule. In October, I took the entire School...
Improvement Committee to a conference on professional learning communities, and they became the champions of the concept to the rest of the faculty. They led the process that helped the faculty identify the shared vision, collective commitments, and specific goals of the school. The vision, commitments, and goals were, in turn, written into the annual School Improvement Plan.

**DuFour:** What has been your biggest challenge in promoting a professional learning community, and how have you responded to that challenge?

**Burnette:** The biggest challenge was to ensure that teams used their collaborative time in ways that focused upon and enhanced student achievement. To meet that challenge, I facilitated each team in establishing operational norms or protocols that would guide their work. I also helped each team identify their specific student achievement goals. We worked together as a staff to ensure that each team’s goals were connected to and would advance our schoolwide goals in student achievement. Finally, I created weekly feedback sheets so teams could keep me informed of their activities and give me timely notice of any problems they were encountering. I respond in writing to each team’s feedback sheet each week.

Teachers were very responsive to this process. Problems arose when individuals did not fulfill the commitments of their team norms. At that point, I had to confront some staff members regarding their behavior, and work with some teams to resolve disputes and redirect their focus back to students. I have found that while confronting a colleague may not be pleasant, it can be absolutely necessary to reinforce the tenets of a professional learning community.

**DuFour:** What insights or advice could you offer a principal interested in creating a professional learning community in his or her school?

**Burnette:** First, principals must become knowledgeable about the characteristics and challenges of a professional learning community. They need to read, attend workshops, network with others, and receive training on professional learning communities. They must model the personal professional development they will ask of teachers.

Second, they must build a guiding coalition of key teacher leaders to assist with the effort. The initiative cannot and should not depend solely upon the principal.

Third, principals must present the concept of a professional learning community within the context of the school’s current improvement initiative. Teachers must come to regard the professional learning community not as one more thing, or a radical departure, but as an evolutionary step in their efforts to improve their school. Our teachers were very conversant with the Effective Schools and Basic Schools models. We made sure to present the professional learning community model as congruent with and an extension of those earlier initiatives.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, principals must be willing to take action. In an earlier principalship, I was reluctant to initiate the professional learning community concept in my school because I was not sufficiently confident in my own understanding and competence. I procrastinated, feeling I needed to read more, study more, attend another conference, etc. I have discovered the best way to learn about professional learning communities is to work through the concept in my school. I now appreciate the adage that “understanding follows action.” So my best advice to a colleague interested in helping a school get started in building a professional learning community is to resist the temptation to procrastinate. As Nike would say, “Just do it.”
Getting everyone to buy in

New beginnings give principal opportunity to shape his team

In my last column, Becky Burnette, a principal of a small elementary school in rural Virginia, described her efforts to introduce the concept of a professional learning community in her school.

This column presents Mike O’Brien, who faced the same challenge in a different context — the opening of an urban middle school serving one of the poorest sections of Buffalo, N.Y.

Dufour: How did you introduce the topic of a professional learning community for your staff’s consideration?

O’Brien: I was in the unique position of recruiting a new staff for a new building, and I decided to take full advantage of the opportunity. I made several informational presentations throughout the district for potential candidates interested in working at the school. From the outset, I described the school as a professional learning community. I cited compelling research to support the model. I emphasized that every teacher would function as a member of a grade-level team or curriculum extension team. I told interested candidates that they would be required to attend nearly 120 hours of professional development during the spring and summer preceding the opening of school.

These informational sessions were followed by interviews of interested candidates. I designed the interview to ascertain which candidates were willing both to accept responsibility for student learning and to function effectively as members of teams.

Once the staff was selected, we conducted intensive professional development sessions to develop awareness of current research and best practices in education. We began to speak a common language and, ultimately, developed the common mission, shared vision, collective commitments, and specific goals that were to serve as the foundation of our professional learning community.

Dufour: What has been your biggest challenge in promoting a professional learning community, and how have you responded to that challenge?

O’Brien: Providing time for teachers to meet as teams is critical. I carefully designed the master schedule so all members of a teaching team had their contractual preparation period at the same time. This meant scheduling their students to a curriculum extension during the same period. Additionally, I made provisions in the schedule so each team could meet with me and/or my designee three times per six-day rotation.

Assisting teams to function as effective teams, or teams that impact student achievement in a positive manner, is another challenge. Our teams have established group norms and achievable goals. Most importantly, my continued presence helps ensure that the teams remain focused on key issues pertaining to learning. In this early phase of development as a professional learning community, we have maintained a sense of teamwork and collaboration.

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learning community, I think it is critical not to abandon teams, but to be present and offer strong focus and support.

**DuFour:** What insights or advice could you offer?

**O'Brien:** Approach teachers as professionals with a strong work ethic. Introduce professional learning communities as the best hope we have for student success and suggest: “If we are going to labor so hard, let’s not labor in vain. If we’re going to dig for gold, let’s at least dig where the map says we can expect to find gold!” I have found teachers to be more responsive when they feel assured their work ethic isn’t being questioned and everything is more a matter of redirecting our effort, energy, and resources.

Also, begin with the end in mind. Articulate a vision statement that assures success for all students. There is absolutely no sense in soliciting collective commitment statements to a vision that would do anything less. The vision statement should reflect current research and best practice. Most importantly, resist the temptation to sell your vision as the principal, and genuinely allow the vision to be a shared vision. If the staff’s fingerprints are not on the design of the vision, they will not commit to it in a substantial way.

Finally, reference the vision to the point of risking redundancy. References to our vision are made in morning announcements, memorandums, and at every faculty meeting.

**COMMON THEMES**

Although Becky Burnette and Mike O'Brien work in two very different environments, common themes emerge from their experience in initiating the professional learning community process in their schools.

1. **Honor the history and acknowledge the strengths.**

   Burnette made a point to meet with the entire staff in teams to probe the school’s history and what made it special. O'Brien made certain to recognize the work ethic and expertise of each person on his staff as he opened a new school. Both made it clear that they were honoring, not denigrating, the past efforts of their staff.

2. **Solicit shared hopes.**

   Burnette asked a veteran staff member what might be done to make a good school even better. O'Brien offered a picture of the school that was to be created and asked for those who were stirred by the image to join him in making it happen. Both spoke to the hearts of their colleagues.

3. **Build a shared vision.**

   Both principals used the information and feedback from staff to offer a vision of what the school might become. More importantly, they took the time to work with staff to develop ownership for that vision.

4. **Provide a conceptual framework for improvement.**

   Both used the professional learning community model as a conceptual framework for advancing improvement. They built a common vocabulary about school improvement and presented staff with comprehensive research affirming the direction their schools were taking. In short, they were staff developers.

5. **Align school structures to support a professional learning community.**

   Both Burnette and O'Brien stressed the importance of building a schedule that gave teachers time to work together in meaningful ways. They also created structures to give students additional time and support if they were having difficulty.

6. **Keep the focus on learning.**

   Both principals created systems to monitor teaching teams to ensure team time remained focused on student learning. They called on teams to analyze student achievement data and develop and implement strategies to improve the results.

7. **Communicate priorities.**

   O'Brien and Burnette both stressed the need for consistent communication about the school's commitment to the professional learning community model. The reflections of these two wonderful principals offer valuable insights to all of us interested in improving schools.