

Learning Communities: Professional learning that increases educator effectiveness and results for all students occurs within learning communities committed to continuous improvement, collective responsibility, and goal alignment.

Professional learning within communities requires continuous improvement, promotes collective responsibility, and supports alignment of individual, team, school, and school system goals. Learning communities convene regularly and frequently during the workday to engage in collaborative professional learning to strengthen their practice and increase student results. Learning community members are accountable to one another to achieve the shared goals of the school and school system and work in transparent, authentic settings that support their improvement.

Engage in Continuous Improvement

Learning communities apply a cycle of continuous improvement to engage in inquiry, action research, data analysis, planning, implementation, reflection, and evaluation. Characteristics of each application of the cycle of continuous improvement are:

- The use of data to determine student and educator learning needs;
- Identification of shared goals for student and educator learning;
- Professional learning to extend educators' knowledge of content, content-specific pedagogy, how students learn, and management of classroom environments;
- Selection and implementation of appropriate evidence-based strategies to achieve student and educator learning goals;
- Application of the learning with local support at the work site;
- Use of evidence to monitor and refine implementation; and
- Evaluation of results.

Develop Collective Responsibility

Learning communities share collective responsibility for the learning of all students within the school or school system. Collective responsibility brings together the entire education community, including members of the education workforce -- teachers, support staff, school system staff, and administrators -- as well as families, policy makers, and other stakeholders, to increase effective teaching in every classroom. Within learning communities, peer accountability rather than formal or administrative accountability ignites commitment to professional learning. Every student benefits from the strengths and expertise of every educator when communities of educators learn together...

Collective participation advances the goals of a whole school or team as well as those of individuals. Communities of caring, analytic, reflective, and inquiring educators collaborate to learn what is necessary to increase student learning. Within learning communities, members exchange feedback about their practice with one another, visit each other's classrooms or work settings, and share resources. Learning community members strive to refine their collaboration, communication, and relationship skills to work within and across both internal and external systems to support student learning. They develop norms of collaboration and relational trust and employ processes and structures that unleash expertise and strengthen capacity to analyze, plan, implement, support, and evaluate their practice.

While some professional learning occurs individually, particularly to address individual development goals, the more one educator's learning is shared and supported by others, the more quickly the culture of continuous improvement, collective responsibility, and high expectations for students and educators grows. Collective responsibility and participation foster peer-to-peer support for learning and maintain a consistent focus on shared goals within and across communities. Technology facilitates and expands community interaction, learning, resource archiving and sharing, and knowledge

construction and sharing. Some educators may meet with peers virtually in local or global communities to focus on individual, team, school, or school system improvement goals. Often supported through technology, cross-community communication within schools, across schools, and among school systems reinforces shared goals, promotes knowledge construction and sharing, strengthens coherence, taps educators' expertise, and increases access to and use of resources.

Communities of learners may be various sizes, include members with similar or different roles or responsibilities, and meet frequently face-to-face, virtually, or through a combination. Educators may be members of multiple learning communities. Some communities may include members who share common students, areas of responsibility, roles, interests, or goals. Learning communities tap internal and external expertise and resources to strengthen practice and student learning. Because the education system reaches out to include students, their families, community members, the education workforce, and public officials who share responsibility for student achievement, some learning communities may include representatives of these groups.

Create Alignment and Accountability

Professional learning that occurs within learning communities provides an ongoing system of support for continuous improvement and implementation of school and systemwide initiatives. To avoid fragmentation among learning communities and to strengthen their contribution to school and system goals, public officials and school system leaders create policies that establish formal accountability for results along with the support needed to achieve results. To be effective, these policies and supports align with an explicit vision and goals for successful learning communities. Learning communities align their goals with those of the school and school system, engage in continuous professional learning, and hold all members collectively accountable for results.

The professional learning that occurs within learning communities both supports and is supported by policy and governance, curriculum and instruction, human resources, and other functions within a school system. Learning communities bridge the knowing-doing gap by transforming macro-level learning -- knowledge and skill development -- into micro-level learning -- the practices and refinements necessary for full implementation in the classroom or workplace. When professional learning occurs within a system driven by high expectations, shared goals, professionalism, and peer accountability, the outcome is deep change for individuals and systems.

Related Research

- **Bolam, R., McMahon, A., Stoll, L., Thomas, S., & Wallace, M. (with Greenwood, A., et al.). (2005, May).** *Creating and sustaining effective professional learning communities* (Research Brief RB637). Nottingham, United Kingdom: Department for Education and Skills.
- **Hord, S.M. (Ed.). (2004).** *Learning together, leading together: Changing schools through professional learning communities*. New York: Teachers College Press & NSDC.
- **Lieberman, A. & Miller, L. (Eds.) (2008).** *Teachers in professional communities: Improving teaching and learning*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- **McLaughlin, M.W. & Talbert, J.E. (2001).** *Professional communities and the work of high school teaching*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- **Saunders, W.M., Goldenberg, C.N., & Gallimore, R. (2009, December).** Increasing achievement by focusing grade-level teams on improving classroom learning: A prospective, quasiexperimental study of Title I schools. *American Educational Research Journal*, 46(4), 1006-1033.