Developing Effective Professional Learning Communities in a Small Catholic School

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INTRODUCTION

Professional Lounging Communities or Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), what type of PLC would schools like to see on their campus? The popularity of Professional Learning Communities has skyrocketed in recent years. Educational Leaders have incorporated PLC's in their schools to combat student learning gaps. The struggle that school administrators are facing is the effectiveness of PLCs. Teachers can attest to meeting as a department or with colleagues to discuss students or assessment information. However, the meeting may not have specific goals or real significance other than to have someone to vent to. By identifying the problems facing PLCs and implementing strategies to create effective PLCs , student success rates are proven to increase. Through teacher collaboration, peer discussion, and data analysis, teachers are able to implement new strategies in the classroom for those struggling students. Teacher insight into weak and effective PLCs allows for educational leaders to take into account what norms and structures need to put into place for PLCs to be successful.

Research shows that effective PLCs not only creates a culture of success among students, but also creates a culture of collaboration among colleagues that in turn creates a positive school culture. As student enrollment concerns rise, it is crucial for Catholic Schools to stay competitive. Schools can stay competitive by addressing student issues in content areas. Thus, the importance of effective Professional Learning Communities. How can a small Catholic School create effective Professional Learning Communities? Addressing the challenges that a school faces, finding solutions to combat the challenges, creating "buy-in" from the teachers, and developing a PLC framework that fits the school will allow for an effective PLC to take place.

LITERATURE

Professional Learning Communities, Defined

Research and texts on Professional Learning Communities stress that it is not a program but a process that the staff can only implement. There are various definitions of Professional Learning Communities. According to the text *Learning by Doing: A Handbook for Professional Learning Communities at Work*, a PLC is defined as "an ongoing process in which educators work collaboratively in recurring cycles of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve" (DeFour, DeFour, Eaker, Many, & Maattos, 2016, p.10). Therefore, the idea of PLCs is not a one time meeting of teachers to review data. The idea for PLCs is to create that collaborative, as well as, reflective process for teachers to share and evaluate strategies to assist their students. Authors, Mundschenk and Fusch (2016), define a PLC as " a group of teachers who generate timely responses to student issues that are based on intervention rather than remediation, and that generate action steps to ensure the implementation of high-quality evidence-based practices with fidelity" (p. 55). What stands out in this particular definition is the phrase "timely responses." For an effective PLC and the process to work for students, time is of utmost importance. Mundschenk and Fuchs (2016) provide a table that identifies "Essential Features of Professional Learning Communities" (p.55-56). The chart fleshes out what is needed for PLCs to be effective in any school.

Table 1

Crosswalk of PLCs and RtI Leadership Team

Element	PLC

Membership and Roles	Shared leadership with members Representing grade levels, content areas or specialized instruction
Focus	School improvement Achieving essential learning/development expectations Aligned with state standards
Vision	Shared vision, values, goals e.g. equity and access for all students
Evidence Used	District and school data from a variety of sources drives critical analysis an inquiry Frequent common assessments Action research
Communication Patterns	Established meeting times Open Dialogue
Collaborative Culture	Shared decision-making Feedback loop to all faculty as designated meetings
Systematic Interventions	School-wide interventions to assist students who need additional instruction or support

Research findings show that teachers value PLC sessions on their campus. The results of

Mundschenk and Fuchs's (2016) survey of PLC groups prove that teachers viewed PLCs as a

"highly acceptable way to further their professional development" (p. 59). Furthermore, the

following categories scored 70% or higher in viewing PLCs as "very or extremely helpful":

'Completing a Needs Assessment', 'Developing Data-based Decision Making', and 'Supporting

Implementation of RtI with PLCs' (Mundschenk & Fuchs, 2016, p. 60). Such data collected can

assist educational leaders in demonstrating how teachers can be active participants and as a

collaborative group, use their best practices to create student growth.

Author, Fatma Kalkan (2016), shared findings on "teachers' perceptions of professional

learning community, bureaucratic structure and organizational trust" (p. 1627). The findings

showed that teachers felt "that more shared and supportive leadership, shared value and vision

exist than supportive conditions in their school" (p. 1627). Schools often face many challenges

when developing PLCs. A major part of what teachers take into consideration is the "how?"

PLCs will be developed. Kalkan's (2016) survey lends itself to prove that when teachers feel that

the organization in which they work promotes organizational trust, a more positive response to

PLCs increases. On the other hand, if the "perception of coercive bureaucracy increase, their

perceptions of professional learning community and organisational trust decrease" (Kalkan,

2016, p. 1629). Trust is a huge factor among the relationship between teacher and educational

leaders. Teachers look to the educational leaders to find solutions to the obstacles that hinder the

availability of time for PLCs.

Challenges of Professional Learning Communities

A major factor for administrators who are wanting to develop PLCs in their schools is the

fear teachers feel about change. Again, in Kalkan's (2016) findings, "primary school teachers did

not perceive their school structure as effective, in other words, they thought their school

structures had features of coercive bureaucracy" (p. 1631). Currently, at Catholic School Y,

there has been a transition of administration, thus instilling a sense of fear for teachers. The fear

is of "another" change that faculty has to endure by "another" administrator. Teacher attitudes

towards new implementations plays an important part of how administration carries out the

transition. Communication from the administration with teachers and the administration's use of

power and authority also affects teachers' outlook on culture and climate of the school (Kalkan,

2016). The current administration has created a positive school climate and is working with the

school community to create a school culture of collaboration.

 The other obstacle that creating effective PLCs in Catholic School Y is understanding

that designing time in the schedule to allow teachers to work together. Peer discussion is

essential when creating PLCs. "There is an unmistakable need for continuing conversations to

help teachers shift toward acceptance of the idea that data must be used in order to critically

analyze and reflect on instructional procedures and their impact on student learning"

(Mundschenk & Fuchs, 2016, p. 60). In order for PLCs to be truly effective, time in the schedule

for groups of teachers to work collaboratively is a must.

 Which leads to the next obstacle that faces Catholic School Y. Since teachers are

accustomed to work individually, shifting the mindset of working collaboratively could be an

unwanted change for some teachers. Being that the school only has one teacher for each grade

level, it is common for teachers to teach in isolation without collaborating with lower or higher

grade level teachers. Teachers at first may feel uncomfortable with sharing ideas and

experiences. In Kelly and Cherkowski's (2015) study, they found that PLCs "provided a novel

opportunity to connect with colleagues to share their private practices with the aim of improving

all of their teaching" (p. 19). The goal is for teachers to come out of their "world" and share how

their teaching could help other teachers. When the challenges that face schools are addressed and

proper professional development is provided for teachers to effectively implement a PLC, it only

enhances the success of the students and the school itself.

Strengths of Professional Learning Communities

As reviewed through teacher perceptions in surveys, as well as taking a look at the challenges of developing PLCs leads to the overall strengths of having effective PLCs at Catholic School Y. If implemented correctly and effectively, PLCs enhance the nature of professional learning, teach the teachers to reflect on methods, and to properly analyze data for student growth.

When trust is present among colleagues, the nature of professional learning is enhanced. "When there is a trusting, caring environment the members of the community are more likely to engage with others in the learning process, and therefore, take more risks with a level of support evident on a daily basis" (Kelly & Cherkowski, 2015, p. 5). Trust leads to greater buy-in by the teachers. In a small school like Catholic School Y, because teachers have worked in the same building for many years, there is a sense of comfort and trust. The study by Kelly and Cherkowski, focuses on a small school that was seeking to change reading results and the district put a PLC structure in place. In order to make sure PLCs were effective, they created a framework that was conducive to their small school. The district funded teacher release time focused on PLC meeting days, created a structure for the PLC which detailed specific goals and roles, and the district implemented a collaborative inquiry team approach (Kelly & Cherkowski, 2016, pp. 8-9). In implementing the following framework, the school saw a positive transformation in their reading program across their campus. Such is the goal for Catholic School Y.

Another strength of PLCs besides collaborating with colleagues is creating stronger collegial relationships. Effective PLCs are to be a time where "members can feel safe to lower their defences to be able to take steps toward meaningful learning" (Kelly & Cherkowski, 2015, p. 17). It is important to remember that the learning is not only for the students but also the

teachers. When teachers show ownership of their learning, they buy-in to the process and allows

them to step back and have a different perspective in their teaching methods. At times, when

teachers become complacent and comfortable in their classroom setting, they deny that

improvements need to be made.

Self reflection during PLCs is another strength that makes the process effective. As

teacher converse and open up on similar challenges they face in the classroom with honesty, they

learn that PLCs are not for judgement, but rather, for support. "Teachers had their own sets of

challenges and areas of growth, but through conversations held in a community of trust they

could now see how they could support each other through some of their shared challenges and

opportunities" (Kelly & Cherkowski, 2015, p. 18). Once teachers open up, they are open to try

different teaching methods and vocalize their needs without fear or doubt.

As teachers become comfortable with the purpose of PLCs and understand the benefits of

an effective PLC, teachers can begin to expand PLCs to analyzing student data to create goals for

the grade levels. When teachers begin to feel a sense of ownership and see the value of PLCs,

students will soon reap the benefits of the approaches that teachers will try in order for progress

to be made.

SCHOOL RECOMMENDATION

Catholic School Y, although small, can use its size a bonus instead of viewing itself

limited because of it. The recommendation is for the following:

1. Survey the teachers.

2. Provide Professional Development on PLCs.

3. Create a Framework suitable for the campus.

4. Design a schedule in which PLC groups are able to meet.

5. Allow for feedback and additional learning opportunities for PLCs.

By surveying the teachers, the administration will have a better understanding on how teachers define PLCs, view PLCs, and their expectations of PLCs. When the administration has a clear perspective, they are able to provide the proper professional development for the campus. It is crucial that purposeful professional developments are conducted in order for effective PLCs to begin a proper process. In order for PLCs to be successful, teachers need to be properly trained. Training makes the difference between Professional Lounging Communities where teachers meet without purpose and discuss topics not associated with student growth and Professional Learning Communities that focus on student achievement. When administrators or districts put in money and time into meaningful professional development, teachers are more likely to buy-in to the idea of PLCs.

Next, the recommendation is to create a framework for the campus. Since Catholic School Y has one teacher per grade level (grades PK3 - 8th) it would be beneficial to group them in grade clusters. For example, PK3 to Kindergarten, First Grade to Third Grade, Fourth and Fifth Grade, and finally, Middle School, Sixth through Eighth Grade. Clustering the grades in this order is two-fold, teachers can share strategies for both struggling and advanced students between grade levels, and teachers are able to scaffold teaching objectives using vertical alignment. The benefit of being a small school is that teachers are able to work closely with each other to assist those students as they move up the grade levels. This is a perfect opportunity to collaboration and sharing strategies.

As part of the framework of the PLCs, it is recommended that administration assists at the onset with facilitating and modeling sharing teachers' professional learning needs. At the

same time, within the framework, PLCs are to have a common vision that is clear and an

implementation model is created and initiated.

In order for PLCs to discuss, plan, and carry-out any strategies shared, time must be set

aside. The recommendation for Catholic School Y is to design the schedule in a way that the

cluster grades are able to meet during elective time. Again, the benefit of Catholic School Y

being a small campus, elective times can be manipulated in a way that PK3-Kinder for example

have elective at the same time. PK3 can be assigned to PE, while PK4 is at the Library, and

Kinder is at music, for instance. This allows for the grade level teachers to meet and discuss ,

share, and strategize. By creating the schedule in such a way, this also allows for administration

to visit the PLC groups to either help facilitate, answer questions, provide possible goals, or

provide feedback on lessons.

Feedback from colleagues creates stronger professional relationships. PLCs provides

teachers the opportunity to freely discuss and share challenges that students may be having in the

classroom on a particular content. There are teachers who are stronger is one subject or another

that can provide feedback to lessons that another may be wanting assistance in. This PLC time

allows for teachers to break down content areas, student data, and go into depth on a particular

objective. Furthermore, if the cluster have a common content area that they would like to

strengthen, they can seek professional development in that specific area. With the support of the

administrator, workshops can be scheduled, or coaches can be brought in to help in the area of

weakness. Catholic School Y has the potential to begin the process of effective PLCs. With the

guidance of the administrator, district, and trained coaches, the PLC groups will be able to

implement successful PLCs.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the purpose of professional learning communities is not for complaining or gossiping amongst teachers, but rather an opportunity for professional growth with the purpose of student growth and success. Although schools may face challenges in beginning, the process of PLCs, with dedicated administrators, and willing teachers, can make a good school great. Through an individualized campus PLC framework, allotted time for teachers, and meaningful, purposeful professional development, PLCs can be effective. As teachers shift their mindset about change, and buy-in to the overall big picture of servicing our students, PLCs will sustain its purpose on campus. When the school culture establishes professional learning communities as an important part of the school system, it will change its perspective to a "positive and effective model for shifting teaching beliefs and practices" (Kelly & Cherkowski, 2015, p. 23).

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