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Professional Development in Learning Communities

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I was 24 years old when I obtained my first principal position. It was one of the most challenging years of my life. I felt that the students and teachers didn't respect me but feared me. I had staff with more teaching experience than I had life experience. I often heard from parents, "Do you have any kids?" in an accusatory tone. I thought for sure I hadn't heard God correctly and I needed to go back into the classroom as a teacher. I distinctly remember my turning point in understanding God's calling on my life. It was the summer after my 1st year, and I was talking with my mentor. I explained to her that I thought for sure this was a mistake and that God wanted me to return to the classroom, and she said to me the words that forever changed my perception of my role as a leader: "That building is now your classroom; those teachers are now your students." God's calling on my life had not changed. I was and am still, in my administrative roles, a *teacher*.

This analogy fits many of our roles as leaders. As we encourage professional development in learning committees, we are wearing our teacher hats through modeling, mentoring, evaluating, and celebrating the professional growth and success of the school staff by creating a culture and community of learning.

Modeling—Establishing a Love of Learning

In order for teachers to buy into professional development, the leadership needs to model a love for continuing education and learning. Because we are all teachers in our leadership positions, we know the importance of modeling when teaching a concept. Luke 6:40 states, "But everyone who is fully trained will be like his teacher" (NIV). This verse clearly indicates that we are to model what we wish our "students" to become.

One of the most important roles of the principal as the instructional leader is to develop the professional growth

of teachers. Thomas Sergiovanni (1994) labeled the instructional leader as the leader of leaders because he or she develops instructional leadership in teachers. Seeing ourselves as teachers and our teachers as leaders puts us in position of creating a collaborative learning community. Peter Senge (1990) described a learning community as an organization that uses creativity to devise localized solutions to problems—solutions consistent with the purpose and values of the overall organization.

One of the first steps to modeling a love for learning is to develop a shared mission statement—a purpose—that supports and values learning. Then all professional development initiatives are rooted in the mission of the school. Senge (1990) said the shared vision or mission statement should be one that connects the organization's people through a common aspiration. Christian schools have an advantage in creating a clear and focused shared vision because all Christian schools attempt to make an impact on the world for Christ. Senge would contend that individuals are "more likely to expose [their] ways of thinking, give up deeply held views, and recognize personal and organizational shortcomings" (209) when they have a shared vision. The goal of a building principal is to create—with the stakeholders of the school—a shared vision of student learning and spiritual development.

Professional development is no longer considered an isolated event for which the principal plans pre-year workshops, attending a few conferences and post-year workshops. Professional development now consists of attending and creating workshops that meet the needs of the learning community after collecting data and conducting a needs analysis on the outcomes of the school's shared vision. Following the workshops, the participants implement what they have learned, and the principal again collects data and analyzes the mastery of the information. Professional development

does not exist in a vacuum. Teachers will buy into this type of professional development only when they see their leaders model it in their own professional growth by showing a willingness to adapt to the needs of the organization.

Later in this article we will discuss how collaborative learning teams work together toward analyzing data that address the shared vision of the institution. The teams do so to see where professional development and changes can take place. As principals, we need to serve as models by being willing to have the same analysis conducted on our leadership. If the collaborative learning teams have analyzed various teacher and parent surveys about the school and if those surveys provide constructive feedback on the leadership, then a principal should investigate the professional development available to assist in the areas that are cited as concerns, particularly if those areas relate to the shared vision of the school. For example, if multiple sources note that the principal needs more skills in the area of behavior management and spiritual development of the student body, that principal should model his or her openness to this shared vision and learning community by seeking to improve in these areas. In addition, principals should highlight their strengths and celebrate their successes in an open, transparent manner just as these building leaders should celebrate and highlight the strengths of the school, the students, and the teachers. Professional development should also build off of strengths as well as weaknesses, because we can learn from one another. As the leader-teacher of the school, each of us is responsible for modeling our love for learning by creating a culture of professional development.

Mentoring/Encouraging—Coaching Collaborative Learning Teams

Another role that the principal often plays is a coach of collaborative learning teams. These teams are necessary to create a learning community. It is vital for the success of the principal that he sees his teachers as counselors, as in Proverbs 11:14: “For lack of guidance a nation falls, but many advisers make victory sure” (NIV). In addition, Proverbs 19:20 states, “Listen to advice and accept instruction, and in the end you will be wise.” We already discussed how a coach models the skill of professional growth and development. But the coach also needs to lead the organization into functioning as teams rather than as isolated individuals. Senge insisted that “team learning is vital because teams, not individuals, are the fundamental learning unit in modern organizations” and that “unless teams can learn, the organization cannot learn” (1990, 10).

In 2003, author Robert Marzano—in cooperation with the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development—published *What Works in Schools: Translating Research into Action*. In the book, Marzano agreed with Kent Peterson

that the self-efficacy of teachers comes from their perception that they can cause change to take place in their schools. To develop that perception, teachers need to be an essential and valued part of the school's process for setting policy (Peterson 1994). To foster collaborative learning teams, Marzano recommended that schools take the following action steps (2003, 65):

1. “Establish norms of conduct and behavior that engender collegiality and professionalism.”
2. “Establish governance structures that allow for teacher involvement in decisions and policies for the school.”
3. “Engage teachers in meaningful staff development activities.”

The standards of the National Staff Development Council (NSDC) gave very similar recommendations. The NSDC explicitly referenced the importance of collaborative learning teams for professional development: “Staff development that improves the learning of all students organizes adults into learning communities whose goals are aligned with those of the school and district.” Further, the NSDC recognized the professional learning community as an effective way for teachers to learn from colleagues, engage in problem solving, and work to advance the achievement of students. Additionally, the NSDC described these collaborative learning communities as having the following characteristics (2009):

- meet regularly, preferably more than one time a week
- exist in the context of an organizational structure that supports collegial learning
- take collective responsibility for the learning of every student represented by the team members
- have a commitment to continuous improvement and experimentation
- consist of members who help one another in examining standards that students must meet, improving lessons, analyzing student work, and finding solutions to common teaching problems

Shirley Hord (2004) insisted that failing schools frequently lack the structures for strong communication among school staff, district staff, parents, and community members—structures that are typically observable in learning communities. Hord noted that low-performing schools were unable to achieve a staffwide understanding of and focus on improvement strategies and that the schools' leadership provided little support for teachers to learn new or more effective instructional practices in collaborative learning teams. Alternatively, Hord contended that schools in which teachers acted in collaborative settings to discuss instructional practices often gained greater student achievement results than schools that did not include such collaborative settings.

The idea of forming collaborative learning teams and professional learning communities has also gained the attention of professional organizations—often prompting those groups to reissue and revise standards and statements to include these new initiatives of professional development. The National

Association of Elementary School Principals (2008) clarified the essential responsibilities of principals in the publication *Leading Learning Communities: Standards for What Principals Should Know and Be Able to Do*, which stated the following:

Learner-centered leaders work with a common vision for the high achievement of all children and are clear about their performance results. Being learner-centered means that leaders create processes and structures that enable adults, as well as students, to participate and learn. These leaders are committed to increasing their own knowledge, skills and capacities through professional development, peer mentoring and the establishment and support of schoolwide learning communities. (5)

The National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) called on high schools to engage in these collaborative learning teams in order to improve student achievement. In *Breaking Ranks II* (2004), the NASSP urged principals to focus on the development of a professional learning community within each school as a primary improvement strategy.

Teachers often say that the reason they don't participate in professional development is that they do not receive the support to do so. As the building leader, a principal has the responsibility to provide the resources for teachers to be able to grow professionally. A principal can carry out this responsibility by giving time, money, and resources toward the shared goal of professional development. It is the principal's responsibility to provide these opportunities and resources to teachers so that they are able to collaborate as professionals. Professional development no longer consists of stand-alone, isolated events of attending workshops and in-services. It now involves collaboration among teachers, leaders, and other stakeholders, with a focus on student achievement. One of the biggest tasks of the collaborative learning teams is to determine how to collect and analyze relevant data in order to decide the areas in which professional development should take place.

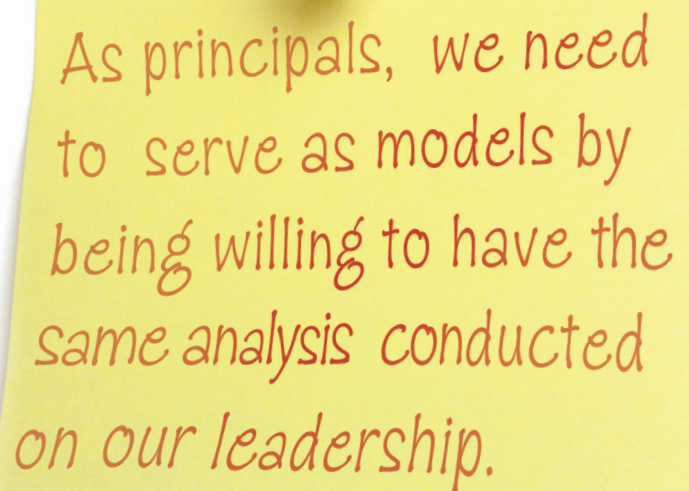
Evaluating—Teaching and Learning Through Data Collection

When we wear the hat of a teacher and see our building as a classroom, we quickly realize that we need diagnostic data on our school in order to see where growth should take place. Just as a math teacher looks at test scores and calculations to determine where to begin to teach a math concept, a building principal needs to collect data on her learning community to see where growth can occur. When this data collection takes place in the spirit of collegiality under a shared mission, it is no longer threatening to teachers to be observed, because the observations and evaluations of teachers take place as the same kind of analysis as that of, for example, parent and student surveys, achievement tests, and student

behavioral referrals. A culture of data analysis is cultivated in the school for improvement and professional development.

Here is an example of how evaluation and data collection can work in a learning community that has a shared vision and for professional development. A collaborative learning team analyzes the student achievement scores to determine how to assist students who are not performing to their full potential. It is determined through this group that differentiating instruction in the school curriculum would be helpful for improving these scores; so resources, time, and workshops are geared toward learning how to implement differentiated instruction. Teachers receive opportunities to observe one another and to collaborate on how they differentiate instruction. Principals' observations and evaluations of teachers focus only on differentiated instruction when the principals visit and observe instruction, and then data is collected again to determine whether differentiated instruction did indeed improve student achievement scores.

We could discuss other examples of evaluation and data collection for the purpose of professional development in such areas as critical thinking, time on task with students, and behavioral referrals. The idea is that collaborative learning teams determined the area of professional development



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by analyzing the available data. Thus the leader in the building needs to be skilled in how to appropriately collect meaningful data for analysis.

In addition, if a Christian school's shared vision is centered on creating disciples for Christ, then what data collection is taking place to determine whether these students are indeed developing beneficial spiritual attributes? There is a shift in how schools are supporting their values; they are

doing so not only through professional development but also through data analysis that shows the progress toward the schools' mission of student educational and spiritual development. For example, teachers can assign to students a before and after personal philosophy paper. Then a team of educators can analyze the papers, using a scoring rubric to determine whether the study body is obtaining Christ-centered values.

Celebrating—Rewarding Learning Communities

Just as we teach our faculty to reward student success, we also need to reward the success of our teachers and collaborative learning teams. And as previously stated from the recommendations of National Staff Development Council (2009), for a principal to establish a professional learning community, he needs to understand and implement an incentive system that ensures collaborative work. Validation and social recognition are two of the greatest rewards a teacher can receive. We all can relate to moments when we received praise from a parent or a student for what we had done in their lives. This praise means more to teachers than any tangible reward that they can receive. A principal needs to find a way to celebrate the success of teachers who are open to working in collaborative learning teams; a principal can do so simply by acknowledging the achievement. Schools can give this type of recognition in a variety of ways through their own publications, websites, and reports that they make public to parents. Acknowledging the teachers as leaders also provides the validation and intrinsic motivation for teachers to continue to participate in professional development. Teachers want to be seen as professionals. Allowing them to be decision makers in the school is a natural reward in the process.

Providing resources and time is another way to reward and encourage the teachers and to treat them as professionals. Sending them to workshops that focus on data analysis and asking them to present workshops on what the school discovered when functioning as collaborative learning communities are excellent ways to acknowledge their professional development. Attending these conferences gives them time to continue to grow as professionals. The collaborative learning team meetings should also include extra time to discuss the data. Making these meetings interesting by providing food and fun also provides a way for teachers to enjoy networking as professionals. These meetings should no longer consist of teachers' being "talked to" about what needs to happen for change. Rather, the teachers receive information to analyze, and they discuss what needs to happen for change, and this process takes more time. Also, collecting data from teachers is a way to acknowledge, encourage, mentor, and model professional development. This style of professional development allows teachers a voice in the school, and this is a reward that everyone would value.

When thinking of rewards, I also think of the biblical image I love of the Good Shepherd; the sheep know His

voice, and He knows His sheep (John 10:3–4). The sheep do not want for anything because they lie in green pastures and they are beside still waters (Psalm 23). Just as the sheep would not want to leave the Good Shepherd's field, teachers should not want for anything in their schools. The effective principal, like the Good Shepherd, must know his or her sheep and provide for their needs. As leaders, we encourage professional development in learning communities by remembering our original calling as teachers who model, mentor, evaluate, and celebrate the professional growth and success of the school staff by creating a culture and community of learning.

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