TRANSFORM
PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

Bimonthly action brief that examines an essential professional learning topic; showcases system, school, and teacher leader perspectives; and features valuable tools to advance practitioner knowledge and skills.

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3 keys to keep learning communities focused on the learning

Professional learning communities have proliferated dramatically over the past several years, becoming almost commonplace as a strategy for addressing student learning problems. Much to the disappointment of many educators, though, the presence of learning communities does not always bring significant changes in student learning.

Simply renaming a group a PLC or gathering everyone into one room to work does not make a learning community. Teachers, principals, and district-level leaders may come together in the same room and discuss a shared topic. The results may seem positive at first. Work gets done. People share. End products are submitted. But after a few weeks or months, educators may notice that student learning does not change, or that the group's activities are still frustratingly similar to previous activities. Nothing really changes.

One of the most common reasons for ineffective learning communities is a lack of focus on the actual learning of the adults on the team. Getting together to work on lesson plans or common assessments may be a form of collaboration, but if those actions don't build the knowledge and skills of the educators participating, it is not effective professional learning.

In effective learning teams, the point of collaboration is collective improvement of practice for the purpose of better learning for students. The point is not to comply with a schedule to meet weekly, to become skilled collaborators, or to create a trusting professional environment. Those outcomes are all desirable for a high-functioning team, but they are insufficient in and of themselves.

In order to keep the focus on effective professional learning, there are three critical elements that effective learning communities have: Continuous improvement, collective responsibility, and alignment and accountability.

Continuous improvement

"Learning communities apply a cycle of continuous improvement to engage in inquiry, action research, data analysis, planning, implementation, reflection, and evaluation." (Learning Forward, 2011)

Embedding a system of continuous improvement into a learning community

ensures that effective learning remains the primary purpose and focus of the activities. The following cycle of continuous improvement is a map to guide learning communities through an effective learning process. With this as the foundation, learning remains the focus and common, everyday distractions do not hijack a group's focus or time.

In a cycle of continuous improvement, team members:

1. Analyze educator, student, and school data to identify student learning needs.
2. Define educator professional learning goals based on student learning needs.
3. Select and implement evidence-based designs for professional learning to achieve professional learning goals.
4. Provide job-embedded coaching and other forms of assistance to support transfer of learning.
5. Inform ongoing improvement in teaching, leadership, and learning.
6. Assess and evaluate the effectiveness of the professional learning.
7. Tap external assistance when necessary.

The cycle of continuous improvement is not a checklist that can be completed in one meeting. Instead, it is a series of ongoing and recursive steps that lead to high-quality learning.

If an activity does not align with this cycle of continuous improvement, team members can ask if it is an appropriate use of the community's time and resources

Collective responsibility

"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 and are supported by local communities whose members value education for all students." (Learning Forward, 2011)

Learning Forward BELIEF

More students achieve when educators assume collective responsibility for student learning.

School and system leaders can build a culture of collective responsibility by sharing leadership and supporting the staff's growth. When leaders build the capacity for effective collaboration and leadership within the staff, educators are empowered to take responsibility for their own learning and the learning of others.

To harness the power of collective responsibility, administrators and teachers:
- Build a shared commitment to the success of all students.
- Encourage all learning community members to share successes and challenges openly so they may benefit from the wisdom of the group.
- Make sure that all teachers experiencing a challenge know they are not facing that challenge alone.
- Establish opportunities for teachers and staff to regularly work and learn together toward a shared goal of ensuring a higher quality of instruction for students.
- Give teachers and staff time to learn and work together.
- Develop the ability of individuals to develop trust, take risks, and expose themselves to the vulnerability of open and honest feedback and growth.

(Hirsh, 2010)

Education leaders who value collective responsibility empower teachers and other group members to contribute their expertise to the learning process. This allows every member of the group to benefit from the wisdom of other educators who are focused on shared learning goals.

Alignment and accountability

"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 Forward, 2011)

The work of effective learning communities aligns with school and system learning goals—such teams do not operate in isolation. Professional development that doesn't align to school and system goals results in learning that is unconnected to a school's highest priorities, syphoning off limited resources and lowering the possibility that professional learning will have a meaningful impact. Effective learning, on the other hand, moves the entire school closer to shared goals.

In an aligned system where members share responsibility for all students, they also hold each other accountable for working toward shared goals, supporting each other professionally, and improving results for all students.

While leaders hold communities accountable for results, they are themselves responsible for ensuring policies and structures that provide enough time, resources, and other supports to create high-quality, ongoing, and job-embedded learning environments.

Additionally, leaders don't allow themselves or others to hijack a group's time or agenda. Seemingly innocent encroachments upon a learning community's time, such as making announcements or dictating discussion topics, can interfere with a learning community's effectiveness.

Continuous improvement, collective responsibility, and alignment and accountability form the mainstay of an effective learning community. Without them, collaboration becomes the end goal – collaboration for collaboration's sake – stopping well short of the actual goal of improving student learning.

References
Hirsh, S. (2010, Sept.). Collective responsibility makes all teachers the best. *T3 6*(1), 1.

Learning Forward. (2011). *Standards for Professional Learning*. Oxford, OH: Author.