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Professional Learning Communities: A Case Study

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Abstract

In this era of testing and school reform, many schools are looking for ways to make their teaching practices more effective and collaborative. One way this can happen is through the use of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs). Gone are the days of the lone wolf teacher. The shift in education today is toward collaboration and communication. PLCs offer an effective way to ensure that these two vital elements are being pursued. This article looks at the implementation of a PLC in a rural school in Louisiana.

Introduction

“Recently, the lack of communication within the school has become a major issue because of the emphasis on accountability and the need to build collaboration across a faculty if any real progress is to be made” (p.35) This statement made by David Loertscher (2005) illustrates one of the major concerns schools are facing today. How, then, can faculties build collaboration? Many change leaders have turned to the idea of professional learning communities for the answer.

Professional Learning Communities are popular in current school improvement circles (DuFour, 2004). The concept of professional learning communities, however, is not new. It began in the realm of business with the understanding that organizations can learn. Change agents in education borrowed the concept from the business world in an attempt to improve student learning. These professional learning communities, or PLCs, have been implemented with the belief that if adults communicate about teaching and learning and if they do something about what they have talked about that student learning and achievement will improve (Thompson, 2004).

In the book *Implementing Change: Patterns, Principals, and Potholes* (2006) Hall and Hord state that “in schools where the professional staff- administrators and teachers- is organized in learning communities, they share an undeviating focus on student learning” (p.26). Professional learning communities are one innovation that is used in order for faculties to achieve such a focus. Hall and Hord identified five dimensions of professional learning communities. These were originally identified by Hord in 1997. They are: (1) shared values and vision; (2) collective learning and application, (3) supportive and shared leadership, (4) supportive conditions, and (5) shared personal practice (p.26). One school in which the faculty and staff have tried to implement a professional learning community is Parish School.

Overview

Parish: The parish in which this study took place consists of less than 10 schools. It has a population of less than 20,000. The per capita income for this parish is less than \$12,000.

School: The school in which the study took place will be referred to as the Parish School. It contains between 300 and 400 students. The school houses one parent facilitator and one principal as well as 17 teachers and four paraprofessionals.

Professional Learning Communities

Rationale, Initiation, & Implementation

The principal of Parish School was asked in an e-mail about the rationale for the use of professional learning communities (PLCs) in his school. He stated that the concept was adopted because “research indicates that schools that institute reform models on the PLC concept see vast improvement in student achievement.” He also said that initiation and implementation “began with parish administrators.” Initially the administrators attended national conferences and meetings with leaders in the PLC school reform movement.

The planning for implementation, according to Mr. Smith, began about four years ago at a parish-wide administrators retreat held during the summer. At that time, a consultant was hired to assist the parish in the process. It was also decided that each school would individually implement the PLC concept and each principal was responsible for conducting school level staff development in order to introduce the concept to the faculty and staff. He said that the process “was initiated by simply understanding the concept of a learning community that focuses on student learning and continuously asks three key questions: What should the student know and/or be able to do as a result of a lesson? How do we know that they know/can do it? What do we do if they don’t know it/can’t do it?”

In Parish School the teachers were all in-serviced using handouts, lecture, cooperative learning and videos. The teachers were involved in four sessions which covered several days of training. These sessions were: (1) Mission, vision, values and goals, (2) Collaborative teams engaged in collective inquiry, (3) Changing your school’s culture, and (4) Planning for planning a PLC model school (National Education Service, 1999). The implementation of PLCs did not stop at this nonuse level of orientation and/or preparation. The principal moved them into the mechanical use stage by using creative scheduling to allow common planning times. Aides and substitutes were used to cover classes in order to allow weekly meetings of collaborative teams.

Stages of Concern

Hall and Hord (2006) describe seven Stages of Concern, which are detailed categories addressing an innovation. These stages progress from concerns about the self to concerns about the task and finally to concerns about the impact the innovation is having. The stages are: (0) awareness, (1) informational, (2) personal, (3) management, (4) consequence, (5) collaboration, and (6) refocusing (p.140).

At Parish School, the teachers and administrators were asked to fill out a Stages of Concern Questionnaire found on pages 279 through 282 of Hall and Hord's 2006 text. This questionnaire was accompanied by a cover letter explaining why the researcher was asking them to fill it out.

Teachers often complain about not having enough time to work together and interact with their colleagues concerning curriculum matters (Loertscher, 2005). This holds true at Parish School. One of the respondents said that "time constraints limit opportunities for exploring and implementing 'the new system'." Another mentioned that "time to meet is a big concern. It is so difficult to free up time for this." A third person listed "time and resources available" as concerns.

Levels of Use

Hall and Hord, through their research, have developed the concept of the Levels of Use. This concept deals with behaviors which are classified at eight levels. These levels deal with the behaviors of people who have encountered a change. The first three levels encompass Nonusers, while the last five are concerned with Users of the innovation. The Nonuser levels are: (0) nonuse, (I) orientation, and (II) preparation. The levels dealing with Users are: (III) mechanical use, (IV A) routine, (IV B) refinement, (V) integration, and (VI) renewal (p. 160).

At Parish School, faculty and staff were asked to look at a Levels of Use chart. They were asked to read about each level and to circle the level at which they think they operate in relation to professional learning communities. Nine teachers and one principal responded. The majority of them (four) said that they thought they operated at the Refinement level, or level IV B. Three of the respondents replied that they were on level V: Integration. One of them answered that she was at the highest level, which is VI: Renewal. However, when the principal was asked to circle at which level he thought most of the teachers operate, he circled level III: Mechanical use. None of the respondents chose to write any additional notes about the Levels of Use.

Continuation Procedures

Currently, Parish School still continues to strive to be a professional learning community. Teachers collaborate in order to create common assessments. The initial scheduling of meetings during which aides and substitutes covered classes proved to be difficult. Therefore, the principal decided to allow time for collaborative teams to meet once a week during lunch. Internal memos document that teachers are reminded of this

weekly. Partner teachers still share a common planning time during which they meet at least once a week to plan and discuss student needs. Also, the faculty and staff have share times during their faculty meetings. During these times, teachers are encouraged to share knowledge they have gained at conferences, intervention strategies which they are using with their students, and other ideas of things that work and do not work in their classes.

Conclusion

When looking at the differences in how people responded to the Levels of Use questionnaire, it is obvious that the faculty and the staff have different ideas about where teachers are in regards to their level of implementation of the concept of professional learning communities. More communication might prove helpful in ensuring that everyone is on the same page. The principal might consider initiating more one-legged interviews with the faculty. He also could provide open-ended statements or questionnaires for the teachers to fill out in order to gain a better understanding of where the teachers think they are in relation to the innovation and why. An innovation configuration map might be drawn up in order to show the teachers and administrators what the innovation is supposed to look like.

DuFour (2004) states that “to create a professional learning community, focus on learning rather than teaching, work collaboratively, and hold yourself accountable for results” (p.6). The faculty and staff of Parish School are striving to do just that. While they have made some gains, more still could be done to further the development of a professional learning community in their school.

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