

Professional Learning Communities: Improving Learning for Teachers and Students

Schools across the country are actively and vigorously exploring ways to improve the learning and enhance the practices of their teachers. They are also searching for answers on how to foster a culture where teachers and staff work and come together as a community of learners. They are eager to learn new processes that use a variety of data and the input of many to inform, direct, monitor and support the changes for their new way of doing things. Schools are exploring all of these activities so that they can better do what is at the heart of their work-improving student achievement.

Increasingly, such goals are being met when teachers collaborate for the purpose of learning, reflecting, investigating, studying and testing new ideas in a supportive and encouraging environment. Such an environment allows teachers to engage in conversation about their work, openly and willingly. This scheduled time is created explicitly for teachers to think about, talk about and share their instructional practices, and provides them with the time and the opportunity to come together in learning communities. For many teachers, learning communities offer opportunities to pursue change and are the vehicles for collaboration and exchange of ideas. They use this setting for learning and for beginning the journey to change their classroom practices and routines to improve their students' achievement.

A learning community of teachers is a small number of individuals who have joined together to increase their capacities through new learning for the benefit of students. (Murphy & Lick, 1998) The group is usually composed of three to six persons who agree when and where to meet regularly. The focus of the groups' work is identified by analyzing a variety of school data or by defining a recognized need or interest. These sessions give educators an opportunity to use their new learning to support school improvement efforts, provide a means to engage teachers in long-range planning, give teachers a chance to work together as a team, and to engage in collaborative inquiry by placing the primary responsibility on teachers to work together toward a common goal. Learning communities may be of two types:

- Whole-faculty
- Independent or stand-alone

Whole faculty learning communities focus the entire school faculty of implementing and integrating effective teaching and learning practices that will increase student learning and decrease negative behavior among students. Whole faculty learning communities bring individual needs and institutional needs together in an organized setting. Involving all faculty members provides greater insurance that the work and efforts of the study groups will transform the school culture.

Independent or stand-alone learning communities are usually comprised of individuals within the school or a group of teachers whose students have a common need. The group may come together because they wish to investigate

ways to increase student learning, provide solutions to problems, study and test new strategies in their classroom, or enhance their teaching skills.

While there may be a difference in the composition and goals of whole-faculty and independent or stand-alone learning communities, both types of learning communities are driven and guided by concerns, practices and topics that focus on the needs of the students. If you would like additional information on implementing learning communities in your school, contact Renee Steinmetz at steinmetzr@nefec.org or 386-329-3811.

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