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ENHANCING ACHIEVEMENT IN HIGH POVERTY ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS THROUGH
BUILDING PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES

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NCLB and therefore most state education agencies direct their school improvement efforts toward monitoring achievement through high stakes tests, increasing the number of highly qualified teachers in each school, rewarding individual teachers and schools for increasing achievement, providing staff development organized around principles of best practice particularly in reading, and providing sanctions for failure to improve. Despite these efforts the achievement gap between poor students and students of color and their more advantaged, white peers persists and may have even increased over the last decade (Amrein & Berliner, 2003; Lee, 2006). Clearly, schools alone cannot remedy the achievement gap. Real progress requires coordinated efforts to reduce inequities in areas such as housing, social services, mental and medical health services, dental health services, and after school and summer enrichment opportunities (Books, 2004; Rothstein, 2004). However, there is also a strong role to be played by school improvement. The focus in this paper is on the significance of school context in building the capacity to enhance student achievement.

Fullan (2003) states that a major flaw in the majority of current reform strategies is that they are based upon individualistic assumptions rather than a systems approach. While he does not argue against increasing the knowledge and skills of individual teachers, nor against the importance of hiring highly qualified teachers, he explains that the context in which teachers and students learn is the more significant factor. Coupling attention to professional development with a focus on context and school culture sits at the heart of school reform that focuses on building capacity through professional learning communities. This reform moves professional

development beyond merely supporting the acquisition of new knowledge and skills for teachers toward helping teachers rethink and reinvent their practice (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995). This model of professional development ultimately requires school reform that creates a fundamental change in institutional structures to incorporate the essential characteristics of professional learning communities (PLC).

This paper provides a description of the core characteristics of PLCs, the tasks schools must accomplish to establish them and the process used by the Lastinger Center for Learning to support schools in this effort. Established in 2002, the Lastinger Center at the University of Florida is focused on improving the academic achievement of students in elementary schools serving poor and minority children by improving the quality of teaching, learning, and leadership. Through multiple initiatives that target teacher and principal professional development, the Lastinger Center helps schools create collaborative cultures through whole school reform. Currently, fourteen schools in four different counties in Florida (Miami-Dade, Duval, Alachua, Collier) are partnered with the Lastinger Center through the Florida Flagship Schools Network. This network, created in 2003, targets elementary schools that have 90% or more students receiving free or reduced lunch; 90% or more students who are African-American, Hispanic, Haitian-Creole, or children of immigrants; high teacher turnover rates; high percentages of students reading below grade level; and high student retention (failure) rates. These schools have a history of low achievement as measured by results on Florida's standardized test measures and school grades. Prior to becoming Lastinger schools, all of the schools received Florida Department of Education-designated D or F grades at least once since the state began the school grading system.

The Lastinger Center has developed a comprehensive school improvement approach targeting individual teachers, whole faculties, small teacher teams, principals and other educational

leaders in the systematic and comprehensive examination and refinement of school culture, teachers' perspectives and practices, and student learning through multi-year collaboration. Our model begins with school culture because it is the foundation for all learning, however, it is important to keep in mind the ultimate purpose of this school improvement effort is enhanced student achievement. The guiding assumption of our work is that schools need leaders (administrative and teacher leaders) with the skills and dispositions to build professional learning communities with the supports, resources, conditions, and expectations that are needed for teacher learning to drive student learning. That is, the core goal is to create a school environment that enables teachers and administrators to rethink and reinvent their practice with an unwavering focus on student achievement. After a description of the essential characteristics of PLCs and the core goals/tasks required to establish one, we will describe the strategies used to support schools in their reform efforts.

Key Characteristics of a Professional Learning Community

The concept of a professional learning community is based on Senge's (1990) description of the learning organization within the business sector. Modified to fit the world of education, the learning community strives to develop collaborative work cultures for teachers (Thompson, Gregg, & Niska, 2004). The literature suggests five to eight key characteristics of professional learning communities.

Five key characteristics are commonly described (DuFour, 2004; Louis & Marks, 1998; Newman and Associates, 1996). First, shared values and norms must be developed with regard to such issues as the groups' collective "views about children and children's ability to learn, school priorities for the use of time and space, and the proper roles of parents, teachers, and administrators" (Newman et al., 1996, p. 181). A second characteristic is a clear and consistent focus on student learning. DuFour (2004) notes that this shifts schools from a focus on teaching

and best teaching strategies to a focus on learning. The third characteristic is reflective dialogue about curriculum, instruction, and learning. Fourth is the deprivatization of practice to make teaching public and support the individual and collective learning of teachers. Fifth is a focus on collaboration in analysis of student learning and decision-making related to key aspects of learning, school structure and process.

This fifth characteristic supports each of the others by moving teaching from an individual to a collective process. That is, in a professional learning community there is time during the school day where teachers and administrators are expected to get together to build the collective capabilities of their colleagues. Teams of teachers gather, not to discuss logistics or schedules, but to analyze student work or dig into the deeper implications of curriculum or instructional strategies. Although expressed slightly differently, these five characteristics (along with three additional characteristics) were confirmed as critical to PLCs in a large-scale, multi-site study of professional learning in England (Bolam, McMahon, Stoll, Thomas & Wallace, 2005). Bolam et al. (2005) added three characteristics to this list: mutual trust and respect; participation in networks; and inclusive membership.

The call to establish professional learning communities in schools is common today. In fact, Florida has mandated that all schools become PLCs. DuFour (2004) cautions that using the term PLC does not demonstrate that a learning community exists. Vescio, Ross, and Adams (in press) conducted a literature review of the impact of PLCs on changes in teaching practice and student learning and concluded that the existence of key characteristics is critical in PLC impact. Researchers reported that student achievement gains varied with the strength of the professional learning community in the school (Bolam et al., 2005; Louis & Marks, 1998) or with the specific focus of the efforts of teams or small communities of teachers (Supovitz, 2002; Supovitz &

Christman, 2003). These later researchers found that achievement improved only when collaboration was focused around the connections between teaching practice and student learning.

Knowledge, Skills, and Tools for Establishing a Professional Learning Community

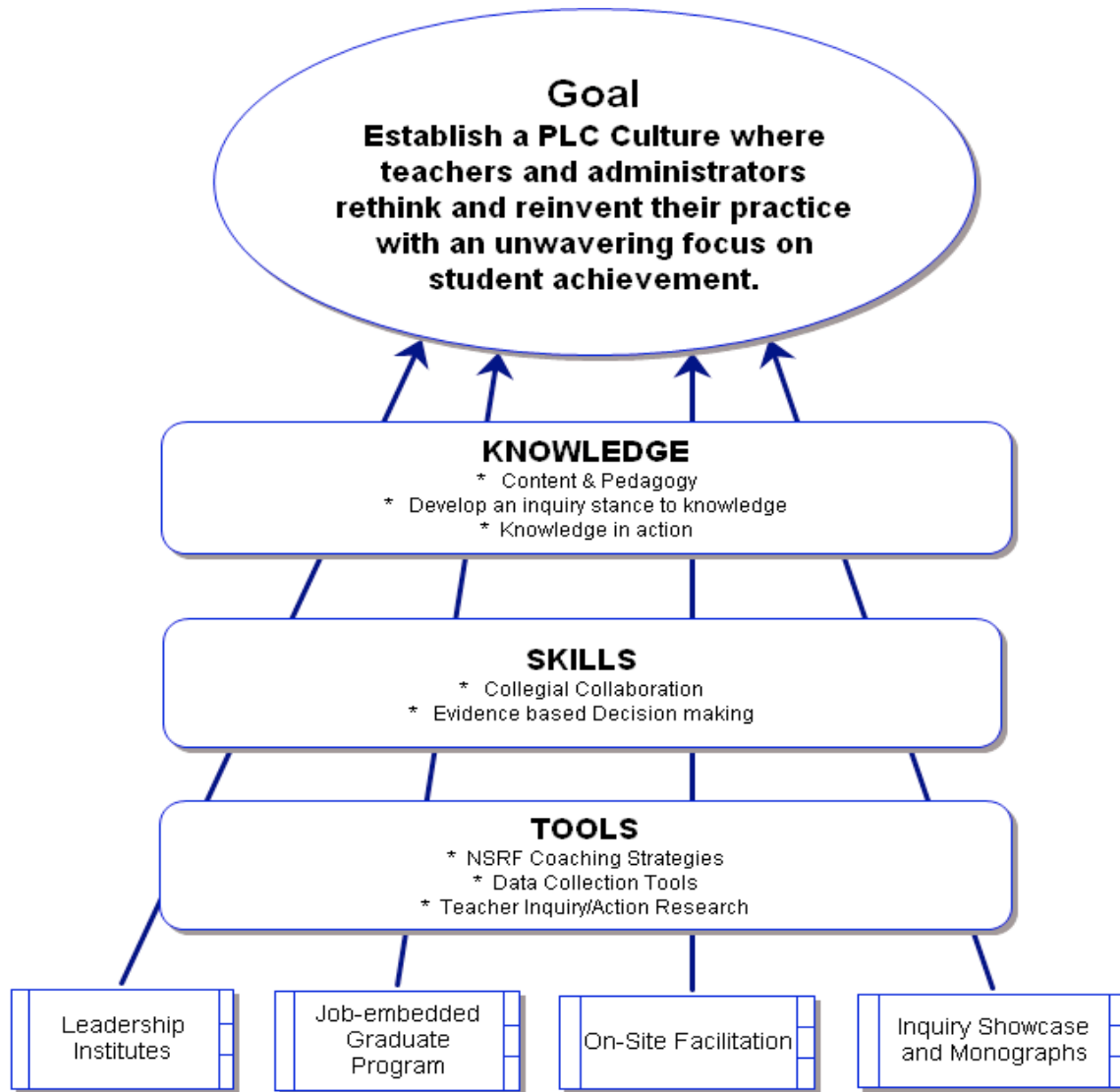
The recommendations from the literature are clear, however, the picture of a PLC is rather global. In our work with schools, we have found that school leaders (administrators and teacher leaders) readily accepted the concept of a PLC and understood the key characteristics; however, the specific actions necessary to implement a PLC were less clear. Additionally, the pressures of high stakes accountability often push leaders away from collective deliberation toward the haphazard grasping of initiatives and curricula that is neither systematic nor comprehensive. When this happens, teachers are mandated to comply and given few supports to make sense of the jumble. Such mandates may lead to slight improvements in test scores but are unlikely to result in the significant advances in student achievement necessary to close the achievement gap (Amrein & Berliner, 2003).

Given these pressures, leaders need specific guides to action or their global commitments to build capacity through improving school culture get lost. This is analogous to work in preservice teacher education that reports teachers need both conceptual tools to guide their work and practical tools as guides to specific action in implementing the conceptual goals (Grossman, Valencia, Thompson, Martin, Place & Evans, 2001).

Lastinger Center faculty members work with schools to increase the knowledge and skills of participants and to provide concrete, practical tools. In Figure 1, we present a graphic depiction of our conceptual framework which illustrates our overarching goals played out in four structures that support the development of essential knowledge, skills, and tools. In this paper,

we present a description of the knowledge, skills and tools that are the focus of our work with schools, and then describe the structures used to support school personnel in their learning and implementation.

Figure 1: Lastinger Center conceptual framework graphic



Knowledge

More significant than any discreet set of knowledge participants might develop, it is important that they understand the definition or stance toward knowledge that undergirds a professional learning community. Guided by Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999), we strive to help

participants understand the significance of developing “knowledge OF practice”. Cochran-Smith and Lytle explain that from this stance, it is assumed that “the knowledge teachers need to teach well is generated when teachers treat their own classrooms and schools as sites for intentional investigation at the same time that they treat the knowledge and theory produced by others as generative material for interrogation and interpretation.” (p. 272). The complex knowledge necessary for teaching cannot be given to teachers by experts, nor can it be derived solely from the practical knowledge of groups of teachers. From this perspective the development of an inquiry stance to knowledge generated by both experts and practitioners leads to enhanced capacity to teach well.

In our work, we provide readings for participants on topics such as school culture and professional learning communities, the role of inquiry in the teaching and learning process, school leadership, and teacher efficacy. In addition, each school provides professional development around topics such as vocabulary development, reading comprehension, and mathematical thinking. Although every topic is important, it is developing an understanding of the inquiry stance that provides the foundation for our work with schools. For this reason, modeling the process of developing knowledge through collaborative, reflective conversation and through deliberative inquiry is more significant than any discreet knowledge conveyed.

Increased knowledge, however, is necessary but not sufficient to change educator practice. This knowledge must be translated into action in the classroom in order to impact student learning. In our model, participants are supported with coaching and modeling as they attempt new strategies and new curriculum. Teacher inquiry is also utilized as a structure to help teachers systematically study new knowledge and practices to provide evidence about effectiveness and impact on student and teacher learning.

Skills

Collaboration and evidence-based decision-making are the key skills that help to build the capacity of school personnel within the professional learning community. A critical step is for participants to understand the difference between congenial collaboration and collegial professional collaboration. Congeniality refers to the friendly, cordial associations teachers have with one another in the work place such as teacher room discussions about plans for the weekend, last night's College National Championship Football Game, or the latest episode of "American Idol." Another actualization of congeniality might be celebrating faculty members' birthdays and special occasions together. According to Roland Barth (1990), congeniality is defined as "people enjoying each other's company (p. 30)." Every school and organization needs congeniality. However, too often in schools, congeniality is confused with collegiality.

Barth draws upon the work of Judith Warren Little to explain the difference between collegiality and congeniality:

Judith Warren Little (1981) offers a good operational definition of collegiality in schools. Collegiality is the presence of four specific behaviors, as follows: Adults in schools *talk about practice*. The conversations about teaching and learning are frequent, continuous, concrete, and precise. Adults in schools *observe each other* engaged in the practice of teaching and administration. These observations become the practice to reflect on and talk about. Adults engage together in *work on curriculum* by planning, designing, researching, and evaluating curriculum. Finally, adults in schools *teach each other* what they know about teaching, learning, and leading. Craft knowledge is revealed, articulated, and shared (p. 31).

Collegial collaboration requires that teachers adopt a whole school rather than a “my classroom” approach and that principals trust teachers to act in the best interest of the school. While few school leaders would argue against professional collegiality, achieving it in schools requires that teachers and leaders develop new skills, such as:

- Achieving consensus about things such as school mission, views about how children learn and the role of families in learning, and school priorities
- Creating time during the school day where teachers and administrators are expected to get together to build the collective capabilities of their colleagues
- Creating a safe environment where all educators can improve their practice by making their practice public, developing new knowledge, sharing successes as well as dilemmas, and making direct connections to student performance
- Leading evidence-based, text-based, and reflective conversations where all voices are heard and the conversation stays focused on the topic at hand
- Ensuring inclusive involvement in all decisions related to teaching and learning
- Encouraging and supporting teachers’ exploration, inquiry, and innovation into classroom practice
- Challenging ineffective practices by in a constructive and supportive way.

The second and related fundamental skill for school improvement within a professional learning community is evidence-based decision-making (cites and stronger definition?). Again, although widely advocated and universally accepted as important, school leaders and teachers need skills, such as the following, to create and maintain evidence-based practice as a school norm:

- Collecting evidence to make teaching practice public (e.g. peer observation and coaching, use of formal data collection instruments).
- Adopting an on-going “inquiry stance” (e.g. all professional development activities include collection of formal or informal evidence of impact on student learning)
- Analyzing formal and informal evidence of student learning (e.g. standardized assessments and classroom based assessments) collaboratively, regularly, and systematically.
- Examining data about progress toward the establishment of a professional learning community within the school
- Examining data about student and teacher engagement
- Using collected data to make decisions about “next steps” (e.g. in professional development, in school routines and policies, in classroom practice).

In order to develop schools as PLCs, school leaders must not only practice these essential skills themselves, but lead their faculties in developing these skills in ways that transform educator practice.

Tools

To scaffold schools in their school improvement efforts, the Lastinger Center provides tools that help structure and support the work. Faculty scaffold the work of Lastinger participants through three practical tools

NSRF Coaching Strategies. The National School Reform Faculty initiated a professional development approach organized around the use of Critical Friends Groups with professional learning communities to enhance teacher and student learning (Dunne, Nave, & Lewis 2000; McDonald, Mohr, Dichter, & McDonald, 2003; NSRF, 2006). Begun in 1995 with funding from

the Annenberg Foundation, the National School Reform Faculty have developed tools to support the facilitative leadership skills needed to support adult learning within professional learning communities and directed toward enhanced student learning. In collaboration with NSRF, Lastinger faculty provide leadership institutes where Lastinger school leaders learn about the nature and structure of learning communities and critical friends work. In addition, they experience and learn how to use structured conversation guides (protocols) to support reflective conversations about teaching practice, school structure, and evidence of student learning using formal and informal data. (For further information and for access to protocols see the NSRF website, 2006).

Data collection tools. Lastinger faculty have found or created a set of data collection tools that enable school leaders and faculties to assess their progress in establishing a professional learning community, school culture, instructional practices, and teaching efficacy. Specifically, the tools include:

- PLC progress checklist--We developed an informal checklist of the practical manifestations of the conceptual characteristics of a PLC. This list helps school leadership teams to initiate and monitor their progress toward establishing a PLC (See Appendix A).
- School Culture Survey. Lastinger staff administer and analyze data from a school culture survey developed by Gruenert & Valentine, (1998). The survey provides data on faculty perceptions of school culture around the variables of: Collaborative Leadership, Teacher Collaboration, Professional Development, Unity of Purpose, Collegial Support, and Learning Partnership. School leadership teams collaboratively

- examine the data to assess progress, set goals related to school culture, and monitor progress in meeting goals.
- Teacher efficacy assessment. Drawing on the work of Louis and Marks (1998), we added ten items to the school culture survey to assess teacher efficacy (Louis & Marks, p. 787). Lastinger staff collect and analyze this data and present it to school leaders who use it to assess progress and set goals related to teacher efficacy.
 - Instructional Practices Assessment. The Instructional Practices Inventory (Painter & Valentine, 1996; Valentine, 2005) is an observation-based instrument that provides a whole school portrait of levels of: Student Engaged Instruction, Teacher Directed Instruction, and Teacher/Student Disengagement. Lastinger staff collect and analyze the data for schools and meet with school leaders to explain the data and facilitate conversations about teaching practice. This instrument does not monitor individual teaching practice but can give a global picture of the levels of teacher and student engagement in learning at the school level.

Teacher Research/Action Research Strategies. One way an inquiry stance is actualized and visible in practice is through teachers' engagement in their own research. The teacher research movement has been touted as a critical tool for generating knowledge about teaching and learning and furthering educational reform efforts (Lieberman & Miller, 1990; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993; 1999; Carr & Kemmis, 1986; Kincheloe, 1991; Miller, 1990). Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1993) define teacher research as “systematic, intentional inquiry by teachers” (p.5). McKernan (1988) suggests that teacher research is the “rigorous examination of one's own practice as a basis for professional development” (p.154). Teacher researchers gain a better

understanding of why they behave as they do and consequently make better choices in their classroom practice (Oberg, 1990).

Hence, Lastinger faculty provide support for teachers within Lastinger schools to learn the process of teacher research and continually cycle through the process of teacher research each school year. Elements of the teacher research cycle that Lastinger faculty facilitate include posing questions or “wonderings,” collecting data to gain insights into wonderings, analyzing the data along with reading relevant literature, making changes in practice based on new understandings developed during inquiry, and sharing findings with others (Dana & Yendol-Silva, 2003).

Structures to Support Schools in Establishing PLC

The reform structures provided by the Center in supporting school reform include an array of services tailored to the specific school or district context. These structures include leadership institutes, an on-line graduate degree program, on-site school facilitators, and an inquiry showcase. A brief description of each structure follows.

Leadership Institutes

Leadership institutes are held each summer and three or four times per year. The institutes are designed for varied purposes. Optimally, each team of district leaders and/or school based leaders (including faculty leaders) begins with a three-day summer institute designed to enable leaders to develop an understanding of professional learning communities and learn skills such as NSRF protocol-based strategies for coaching colleagues in examinations of school culture, teaching practice, and student learning. The summer institute is followed by three half-day institutes during the school year. Prior to each half-day institute Lastinger staff administer and analyze formative assessments to assist in data-driven decision making related to school culture, teacher efficacy, and

teaching practice. At half-day institutes principals and faculty leaders collaboratively discuss readings designed to develop new knowledge, examine the focus data about their progress in changing their school culture or teaching practice, and design/revise action plans for school improvement.

An essential component of the institutes is the opportunity for networking. School leaders come in teams so they experience team engagement in making decisions about school reform in their particular context. However, the institutes also are designed so that teams interact with teams from other schools in their own district and with teams from at least one other district. Teams share their plans and serve as critical friends for one another. In this way, teams scaffold each other to move outside their comfort zones to try unfamiliar approaches that may have great potential for success.

Job-embedded, On-line, Graduate Degree Programs

A second structure that scaffolds the development of leadership skills is job-embedded, on-line graduate degree programs where teachers and principals develop knowledge and skills. School-based university faculty members facilitate learning and provide classroom support and feedback as teachers implement new strategies and design inquiries to measure impact on student learning and teacher practice. Current programs emphasize the development of teacher leadership for school improvement and the development of executive administrative leadership skills. The enrollment of cohorts of teachers within a school, or cohorts of principals/administrators within a district also creates a network of support for teachers and administrators. By acquiring new knowledge, and gaining new skills collaboratively, they reinforce one another and make it more likely that their collegial interactions will impact others in the building. The key element of these graduate programs is that they are job-embedded. Instructors and on-site facilitators help teachers make connections from theory to practice as well as link new learning to current district curriculum, mandates, and

support structures. Teachers in the graduate program also serve in roles such as Teacher Inquiry Leaders to share their learning with colleagues not enrolled in the graduate program. In this way, new learning has the potential to have greater, more immediate impact on whole school improvement than a typical graduate degree program focused on individual learning.

On-site facilitators

External facilitators are embedded within schools for two purposes. First, they facilitate and support school restructuring efforts and the development of action plans based on formative and summative school data. Facilitators meet regularly with school leaders as they make, implement, and assess the impact of plans for professional development activities. In this way, facilitators work with school leaders to scaffold the developing capacity of leaders and teachers. Although the level of involvement varies, at its best, the external facilitator becomes an additional source of leadership and expertise working with the core school leadership to make decisions about how to build teacher capacity. For example, in one school the Lastinger facilitator helped school leaders initiate and structure inclusion meetings to address the needs of the students who were struggling the most in academics and behavior (Bondy & Williamson. 2006).

Lastinger facilitators also lead or help to facilitate teacher inquiry in meetings where educators learn about the inquiry process and receive support (either from external facilitators or colleagues in the role of teacher leader) as they engage in individual or collaborative inquiry cycles. At these meetings, teachers use NSRF protocols (e.g. Tuning protocol, Collaborative Assessment Conference) to develop plans for inquiry, to analyze data and plan next steps, and to determine how best to represent their learning in formal presentations.

Inquiry Showcase and Monographs

A culminating year-end Inquiry Showcase in each district and a published monograph of inquiry write-ups from showcase participants allow teachers to share their findings with a larger audience beyond their own schools. The Showcase serves several purposes. First, it is a networking opportunity where teachers learn about inquiry happening throughout the state in similar schools. Teachers present and attend sessions where teachers share the knowledge they have developed about how to meet children’s needs and scaffold their academic development. Second, the Showcase stimulates teachers to try new ideas in teaching and in data collection. In this way attending the Showcase helps to sustain teachers’ efforts in inquiry and provides motivation to try ideas that push them beyond their “comfort zones.” Third, the Showcase validates for teacher, district leaders and teacher educators the significance of teacher-generated knowledge, and the importance of evidence-based practice. Teachers learn with and from each other, validating their expertise. The Showcase and the Leadership Institutes which provide a context for networking with other teachers and leaders engaged in school reform help to build synergy. This synergy enables educators to analyze successes and challenges in other contexts as they learn from and with each other. In addition, the Lastinger Schools network connects schools to foundations and organizations that can help support these under-resourced schools. For more information about the Inquiry Showcase, go to the website of the Center for School Improvement (2006).

The Importance of Modeling

Across the various structures used Lastinger faculty model the same skills, tools and stance toward knowledge that undergird our school improvement approach. That is they model an inquiry stance, a collaborative approach, and the structure of evidence-based decision-making. For example, leadership institutes require that each school bring a leadership team that includes

the principal and teacher leaders. They are structured to enable leadership teams within and across schools to use protocol based conversation guides (NSRF) to learn collaboratively from text, from data about their schools, and from one another and to collaborate to develop plans for next steps in their improvement efforts. Additionally, these institutes create a context for interacting with leadership teams from other schools in the Florida Flagship Network. Teams learn from one another as they share current practices in their schools and serve as critical friends for one another in fine-tuning their school improvement plans. Through this modeling participants experience the model as they learn it. The experience is as important as any knowledge or skill conveyed because it convinces participants of the value the model.

Not Schools Alone: The Role of District and Community

(SECTION TO BE DEVELOPED)

Conclusion

Appendix A: What does a Professional Learning Community (PLC) Look Like?

A PLC establishes shared values and norms with regard to:

- Definition of and importance of the school mission
- Views about children, their ability to learn, how children learn, and commitments to ensure all children are successful
- School priorities for use of time and space
- Appropriate roles of and connections among teachers, parents, students, administrators
- Value of research based knowledge about effective schools, child development, school leadership, academic content, and effective teaching practice

A PLC establishes a collaborative culture:

- There is time during the school day when teachers and administrators are expected to get together to build the collective capabilities of their colleagues.
- Teams gather, not to discuss logistics or schedules, but to examine research based knowledge, analyze student work, discuss formal and informal inquiries around the use of curricula, standards, or instructional strategies.
- Teams are intentional in their work, and use a set of collaborative strategies in order to create a safe environment where all educators can improve their practice by making their practice public, developing new knowledge, sharing successes as well as dilemmas, and making direct connections to student performance.
- Teachers make their practice public and invite peer observation and coaching.
- The collaborative structure drives ALL significant decisions in the school.
- The collaborative culture embraces the active engagement of parents as valued partners in the educational process.

A PLC establishes a deliberative and intentional process for staff development:

- Staff development is derived from a collaboratively developed common mission
- A leadership team that includes teacher leaders meets regularly to review staff development goals and processes and plan next steps.
- The leadership team makes all decisions about staff development for the school.
- Professional development around topics identified by teachers and leaders is on-going.
- All staff development incorporates an “inquiry stance;” that is, staff development moves beyond traditional “sit and git” presentations to include formal and informal opportunities to try strategies and examine the impact on student learning.

A PLC maintains a laser-like focus on student learning

- Teaching practice is made public and transparent and continually examined and re-examined.
- Teaching practice involves continual formal and informal inquiry around student learning.
- Analysis of evidence of student learning is regular and systematic.
- Examined evidence includes formal assessments (like standardized tests) and classroom based assessments grounded in particular lessons.

A PLC is data driven

- Teams examine data about progress toward the establishment of a professional learning community within the school
- Teams examine data about student and teacher engagement
- Teams examine formal and informal data about student learning

A PLC participates in a larger learning community

- School leaders regularly participate in the broader network of PLC schools
- School leaders use the network to make their work in establishing learning communities and enhancing student learning public
- School leaders bring school-wide data to the network to continually push the school forward in their agenda to establish and maintain a professional learning community and to strengthen student achievement.
- PLC teachers and principals share their inquiries publicly.

A PLC leader values and promotes collaboration

- School leaders build capacity for school improvement through encouraging and supporting teachers' exploration, inquiry, and innovation into classroom practice.
- School leaders trust the professional judgment of teachers
- School leaders encourage the school community to work toward the same goals
- School leaders challenge ineffective practices and encourage teachers to do the same
- School leaders make all decisions with student success as the focus
- School leaders lead through their actions

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