



Christ the Teacher Catholic Schools

Centered in Faith ... Creators of Hope ... Founded in Love

Professional Learning

Communities

Team Guidebook

February 2004

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“Creating and supporting high levels of learning for all students”

Creating Professional Learning Communities

“Teachers in professional learning communities are more likely to be consistently well informed, professionally renewed, and inspired so that they inspire students.” Shirley Hord, 1997

A. Introduction

As Richard DuFour and Robert Eaker emphasize in their best-selling educational text *Professional Learning Communities at Work: Best Practices for Enhancing Student Achievement* (1998), “The most promising strategy for sustained, substantive school improvement is developing the ability of school personnel to function as professional learning communities.”

Teachers in successful schools are undeniably interdependent. Professionals working in concert produce cumulative effects in student learning. As more schools, districts, states, and provinces develop and attempt to implement clear standards and high expectations, the need for collaborative energy becomes increasingly clear. True educational reform requires schools to overcome the traditional isolation of teachers and develop professional communities.

B. What is a Learning Community?

“A core characteristic of the professional learning community is an undeviating focus on student learning.” Shirley Hord, 1997

A Professional Learning Community:

- **IS NOT** a prescription.
- **IS NOT** a new program.
- **IS** an **infrastructure**, or a way of working together, which results in continuous school improvement.

A learning community exists when a group of people commit themselves to continual learning and to supporting others in continual learning. A learning community stimulates ongoing, collective inquiry into teaching and learning. It involves everyone in highly visible learning experiences. You learn from each other, with each other, and for each other. You share the knowledge that is gained, the excitement and challenge that comes with learning difficult material and the benefits your learning produces.

A strong learning community provides you with the kinds of learning experiences you want to provide for your students. It models for students lifelong learning and the production of useful knowledge. It provides a sense of efficacy and self-confidence for you and your fellow teachers as you face increasing challenges. A learning community improves your professional life and that of your fellow teachers and produces higher student achievement. A learning community legitimizes change and makes it an accepted part of life at your school. Professional learning communities engages teachers in difficult discussions where hard questions about teaching and learning get asked.

The foundation of professional learning communities is the focus on learning, not teaching. Three common questions need to be addressed in developing a professional learning community:

- What do we expect students to learn?
- How will we know if students have learned it?
- What will we do if students have not learned it?

Although these questions seem so simple and every school could claim to have the answers, critically focusing on these questions with the goal of improving student learning taxes the best professional minds.

C. Outcomes of Professional Learning Communities for Staff and Students

“Teachers who spend more time collectively studying teaching practices are more effective overall at developing higher-order thinking skills and meeting the needs of diverse learners.” Darling-Hammond, 1998

What difference does it make if staff are communally organized? What results, if any, might be gained from this kind of arrangement? An abbreviated report of staff and student outcomes in schools where staff are engaged together in professional learning communities follows. This report comes from the summary of results included in the literature review noted above (Hord, 1997, p. 27).

For staff, the following results have been observed:

- reduction of isolation of teachers
- increased commitment to the mission and goals of the school and increased vigor in working to strengthen the mission
- shared responsibility for the total development of students and collective responsibility for students' success
- powerful learning that defines good teaching and classroom practice and that creates new knowledge and beliefs about teaching and learners
- increased meaning and understanding of the content that teachers teach and the roles they play in helping all students achieve expectations
- higher likelihood that teachers will be well informed, professionally renewed, and inspired to inspire students
- more satisfaction, higher morale, and lower rates of absenteeism
- significant advances in adapting teaching to the students, accomplished more quickly than in traditional schools
- commitment to making significant and lasting changes and
- higher likelihood of undertaking fundamental systemic change (p. 27).

For students, the results include:

- decreased dropout rate and fewer classes "skipped"
- lower rates of absenteeism
- increased learning that is distributed more equitably in the smaller high schools
- greater academic gains in math, science, history, and reading than in traditional schools and
- smaller achievement gaps between students from different backgrounds (p. 28).

D. Sample Professional Learning Community Teams

There are a number of ways that the team concept can be implemented in schools to promote collaboration. Here are some examples:

1. **Implement team concept by grade level or subject.** All teachers who share the same teaching assignment in a building or division (for example, all the third-grade teachers or all the ELA 9 teachers in a high school) can be grouped into a team that is responsible for identifying competency standards, creating assessment questions for the competency standards, discussing best practices, assessing student achievement, analyzing student performance and determining specific strategies for improving student performance. Other activities could include selecting instructional materials, planning and presenting staff development programs, participating in peer observation and coaching, developing schedules, or serving as mentors for new colleagues. In very small schools with only a single teacher for a grade level or subject, the teams can be formed according to several grade levels (kindergarten through third grade) or according to discipline (science teachers).
2. **Implement team concept on the basis of shared students.** Interdisciplinary teams can be created on the basis of shared students. These teams could focus not only on curriculum content, but also on the needs of a common group of students.
3. **Implement team concept in school-wide task forces.** Teams of staff members can be created periodically to consider a particular problem, develop recommendations for resolving it, and share their findings with the rest of the faculty.
4. **Implement team concept by area of professional development.** Teachers can be formed into teams to pursue training in a given area of professional development. For example, teachers interested in applying cooperative learning techniques in their classrooms could meet as a team to react to presentations on the topic, develop strategies for using the technique in the classroom, share related articles, plan peer observation and feedback sessions, or serve as a support group that discusses and analyzes successes and setbacks in its attempt to use the new technique.

Coming together is a beginning, staying together is progress, and working together is success.

Henry Ford

DEVELOPING PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITY NORMS

Learning Community: _____

Members: _____

Goal(s): _____

When establishing norms, consider:	Proposed norm:
TIME <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When do we meet? • Will we set a beginning and ending time? • Will we start and end on time? 	
LISTENING <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How will we encourage listening? • How will we discourage interrupting? 	
CONFIDENTIALITY <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Will the meetings be open? • Will what we say in the meeting be held in confidence? • What can be said after the meeting? 	
DECISION MAKING <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How will we make decisions? • Are we an advisory or a decision-making body? • Will we reach decisions by consensus? • How will we deal with conflicts? 	
PARTICIPATION <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How will we encourage everyone's participation? • Will we have an attendance policy? 	
EXPECTATIONS <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What do we expect from members? • Are there requirements for participation? 	

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES GOAL SETTING WORKSHEET

Team Name: _____ **Team Leader:** _____

Community Members: _____

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Question being addressed _____

Identify a SMART goal for your team: (Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Results Oriented, and Timebound)

(cont'd on next page)

**PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES
GOAL SETTING WORKSHEET
(cont'd)**

<p style="text-align: center;">ACTION STEPS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What steps/activities will be initiated to achieve this goal? • What products will be created? 	<p style="text-align: center;">DESIGNATION</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who will be responsible for initiating or sustaining the action steps? 	<p style="text-align: center;">TIMEFRAME</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is a realistic timeframe for each phase of the activity? 	<p style="text-align: center;">RESULTS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What evidence will you present that you are making progress toward your goal?

TEAM MEETING SUMMARY

Team Name: _____ **Meeting Date:** _____

Team Leader: _____

Team Members Present: _____

Team Members Absent: _____

Team Goal(s) _____

Topics/Meeting Outcomes _____

Questions/Concerns _____

Administrator Comments _____

Administrator Signature

Date

MID-YEAR REFLECTIONS SURVEY

Team Name: _____

Date: _____

Please reflect on your experiences as a member of an instructional team this school year and respond to the following questions:

		Strongly Agree 5	Agree 4	Neutral 3	Disagree 2	Strongly Disagree 1
1	I know the norms and protocols established by my team.	5	4	3	2	1
Comments:						
2	Members of my team are living up to the established norms and protocols	5	4	3	2	1
Comments:						
3	Our team maintains focus on the established team goal(s).	5	4	3	2	1
Comments:						
4	Our team is making progress toward the achievement of our team goals(s).	5	4	3	2	1
Comments:						
5	A collaborative culture is promoted in our school.	5	4	3	2	1
Comments:						

CRITICAL QUESTIONS FOR TEAM CONSIDERATION (sample)

Team Name: _____

Team Leader: _____ Date: _____

Consider the following statements in relationship to your team and indicate the level to which the statement is descriptive of your team:

This is not true of our team.		This is true of some but not all of the team.		Uncertain.		Our team has addressed this issue.		We have consensus and act in accordance with our consensus.	
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

- | | |
|---|---|
| <p>1. _____ Each member of our team is clear on the intended outcomes of our course in general as well as on the specific outcomes of each unit.</p> <p>2. _____ We have aligned the outcomes of our course to the provincial curriculum.</p> <p>3. _____ We have identified the prerequisite knowledge and skills needed to master the intended outcomes of the course or unit.</p> <p>4. _____ We have identified strategies and created instruments to assess whether students have the prerequisite knowledge and skills.</p> <p>5. _____ We have agreed on how to best sequence the content of the course to help students achieve the intended outcomes.</p> <p>6. _____ We have agreed on the criteria we will use in judging the quality of student work in key areas of our courses such as writing, speaking and projects.</p> <p>7. _____ We have taught students the criteria we will use in judging the quality of their work and have provided them with examples.</p> <p>8. _____ We have developed formative assessments that help us identify strengths and weaknesses of individual students.</p> | <p>9. _____ We have developed summative assessments that help us assess the strengths and weaknesses of our program.</p> <p>10. _____ We have established the proficiency level we want all students to achieve on our summative assessments.</p> <p>11. _____ We have identified content and/or topics that can be eliminated so we can devote more time to essential curriculum.</p> <p>12. _____ We have analyzed student achievement data and established measurable team goals that we are working together to achieve.</p> <p>13. _____ We have identified team norms or protocols to guide us in working together.</p> <p>14. _____ We adhere to our team norms.</p> <p>15. _____ We are continually looking for new ways to help students achieve at higher levels.</p> |
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