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DEVELOPING A SUBSTANTIVE PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITY

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ABSTRACT

Most schools suffer from what Doug Reeves has called, "initiative fatigue" as they are deluged with new initiatives, programs, and tasks. As a result, veteran staffs are likely to respond to a proposal for yet another initiative with resignation and cynicism. So how does a principal convince a staff that implementing Professional Learning Community concepts is worthy of their collective effort and commitment? This article advises that leaders should acknowledge rather than ignore initiative fatigue; make a long-term commitment to implementation; use data to demonstrate the need for improvement; provide staff with the time, structures and support to engage in the collective exploration of the critical questions of PLCs, and sustain the focus on those questions until they become the essence of the school's culture.

The publication of *On Common Ground: The Power of Professional Learning Communities* (DuFour, DuFour, and Eaker, 2005) clearly established that the leading educational researchers in North America endorse the PLC concept as the best hope for substantive school improvement. So the question confronting practitioners is, "now what?" How do we take this powerful model from the conceptual and theoretical to the practical and pragmatic? How do we bring the model to life in our schools when change is so difficult? While all school leaders must find their own solution to these challenges and address them in the unique context of their schools, the experiences of others can shine light on the effort.

San Clemente High School in the Capistrano Unified School District of Orange County, California is in its fifth year of the PLC journey, a journey that has led to significant growth in virtually every academic area and has changed the culture of the school – despite significant reductions in resources during that period. Three of the most significant challenges staff confronted in the effort to implement PLC concepts at San Clemente were Credibility, Capacity and Sustainability.

Credibility – PLC The Anti-Reform

Veteran educators often respond to proposal for change with cynicism, and with good reason. Given the annual rise and fall of educational fads, the frequent arrival and departure of turn-around administrators, and the election and ouster of yet another “education” politician, it would be irrational for them to respond in any other way. In this very real and very understandable context, how can a staff be convinced that the Professional Learning Community model offers a concept with the potential for staying power?

First and foremost leaders must acknowledge rather than ignore the brutal facts of the history of educational reform. They must recognize the existence of the school reform perpetual motion machine. They must do their homework and share their findings. At San Clemente the administration presented a brief summary of the dozens if not hundreds of reforms and nomenclature that had washed upon the school in waves over the years. The staff laughed, and cried, together at the history of futility caused by political shifts, unfunded mandates, poor training, half-hearted implementation, and unwillingness to sustain the effort through the inevitable challenges. At the conclusion of this history lesson, the power and simplicity of the Professional Learning Community was presented to the staff as the antithesis of feckless reform.

When asked directly, San Clemente teachers could find no fault with the four critical questions of learning that drive a PLC:

What is it we want students to learn?

How will we know if students have learned it?

What will we do if students have not learned?

How will we deepen the learning for students who have already mastered essential knowledge and skill?

They agreed that the consideration of these questions represented the very essence of the profession. The building administrators then proposed that if the faculty agreed to engage in collective inquiry into these questions, the school would commit to a multi-year effort to use the questions as the basis of its school improvement plan. The staff supported that proposal, and since the decision came from within, from the site level rather than an outside entity (district, state, federal), the initiative began with a modicum of good will. Then, with each passing year that the administration honored the commitment to maintain its focus on these questions, skepticism gradually began to give way to passion, purpose and commitment. *Credibility* is not established overnight. But as commitments are kept, focus is maintained, positive results accrue, and evidence of success is celebrated, even a skeptical staff can come to believe in the power of PLCs.

Putting a PLC Structure into Place (Capacity)

Collaboration and collective inquiry are essential to the PLC concept, but only if teachers remain focused on the right issues. San Clemente High School began its collective inquiry when the principal presented the staff with straight-forward data: 32% of the school's students had failed one or more classes over four consecutive school

years. This came as a shock to a staff that considered their school one of the best in the state. Several teachers actually became angry that information that had traditionally been kept secret was now being publicly discussed at a faculty meeting. One teacher stood up and said "I teach the curriculum and if students choose not to do the work, it's not my problem!" Other teachers raised objections to the data. "How many of those kids have poor attendance problems?" "How many of those kids don't do their homework?" "How many of those kids come from dysfunctional homes?" "How many had failed to develop minimum proficiency in the middle schools?" "How many were transfer students?" The principal's response to each question was, "I don't know, and it troubles me that none of us know." At the end of the meeting the staff was asked to consider a simple question: "Is it acceptable for 32% of our students to fail in a school that says it is committed to learning for all students?"

As emotions cooled the staff turned its attention to the third question driving our PLC - what will we do if our students have not learned. A watershed moment occurred when the staff acknowledged that the failure rate was unacceptable and that there were steps they could and should take to reduce it. Teachers were organized into collaborative teams by courses. The schedule was altered to provide them with time to collaborate during their contractual day. Teams created norms to guide their work and to help members clarify their expectations of one another. Common assessments were created to monitor student learning on a timely and consistent basis. Structures and processes were put in place to help teams stay focused on the critical questions. A school-wide system of intervention was put in place to provide struggling students with additional time and support for learning. The issue of the student failure rate began to be addressed in each department and across the school as staff examined data from the macro school-wide state testing to the micro subject team common assessments. All of these steps helped develop the *capacity* of teachers to work in collaborative teams.

Attention to rather than ignorance of results actually fueled the PLC process at San Clemente. Evidence of incremental improvement was shared with the staff and celebrated throughout the school. The failure rate dropped by 50 percent. The pass rate on the California High School Exit Exam increased from 63% in 2001 to 93% in 2005. The California Academic Performance Index rose 52 points and has increased annually for the past five years. The number of students taking Advanced Placement/International Baccalaureate exams has increased from 400 in 2000 to 1,250 in 2005, yet the pass rate remained above the national average. The number of students taking the SAT has increased 103%, yet math scores increased from 460 to 545 and verbal scores from 425 to 545. The number of students taking the PSAT increased 300% and the score level increased 3 to 5 points in math, verbal and writing.

The San Clemente experience confirmed Jim Collins (2001) finding:

Tremendous power exists in the fact of continued improvement and delivery of results. When people see tangible results, however incremental at first, and see how the results flow from the overall concept, they will line up with enthusiasm. People want to be a part of a winning team. They want to contribute to producing visible, tangible results. They want to feel the excitement of being involved in something that works. When they feel the magic of momentum, when they can begin to see tangible results - that's when they get on board (p.175).

PLC, A Path of No Return (Sustainability)

Leaders must acknowledge that significant change is difficult. Collins describes the change process as trying to turn a giant flywheel. It takes a great initial effort to push the wheel to make just one rotation. Yet, each turn becomes a little easier and over time, the

wheel turns at a great speed with little effort. So it is with the Professional Learning Community process. Success breeds success and with success comes *sustainability*. At San Clemente, the PLC process is no longer the principal's initiative or yet another in a long list of reforms. As the benefits of the PLC process for teachers and students alike have become more evident, as teachers have become more skilled in meaningful collaboration, as leaders of the process have emerged across the faculty, PLC work has become "the way we do things here."

I was standing by the water cooler last week when I overheard a group of teachers discussing the changes we had gone through over the past five years. One teacher wondered if we would ever go back to "the way it was" In an excited tone, a colleague responded, "It's too late now. We know too much. We couldn't live with ourselves if we went backwards now." It took two days to wipe the smile off my face.

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