

# EVOLUTION

## of the PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITY

Revolutionary concept is based on intentional collegial learning

BY SHIRLEY M. HORD

**L**et's start with the basics. People everywhere generally agree that the purpose of schools is *student learning*. Further, people are generally in agreement that the most significant factor determining whether students learn well is *teaching quality*. Teaching quality is improved through *continuous professional learning*. Today, the most promising context for continuous professional learning is the professional learning community. The three words explain the concept: Professionals coming together in a group — a community — to learn.

How did we arrive at the professional learning community as a structure for school improvement? We'll examine the concept's development.

### TEACHERS AS SOLE PROPRIETORS

For much of the history of education, teachers worked in what were architecturally characterized as egg crate schools. Teachers typically worked in classrooms with no communication with other adults. Cell-like classrooms and cultures promoted insulation and isolation from other staff, leaving classroom teachers as self-employed individuals, doing their own thing, whatever that was. Single teachers in individual classrooms were given the authority to teach whatever they knew of curriculum and instruction to a fairly homogeneous student population. Numbers of our schools and districts remain in this mode without any

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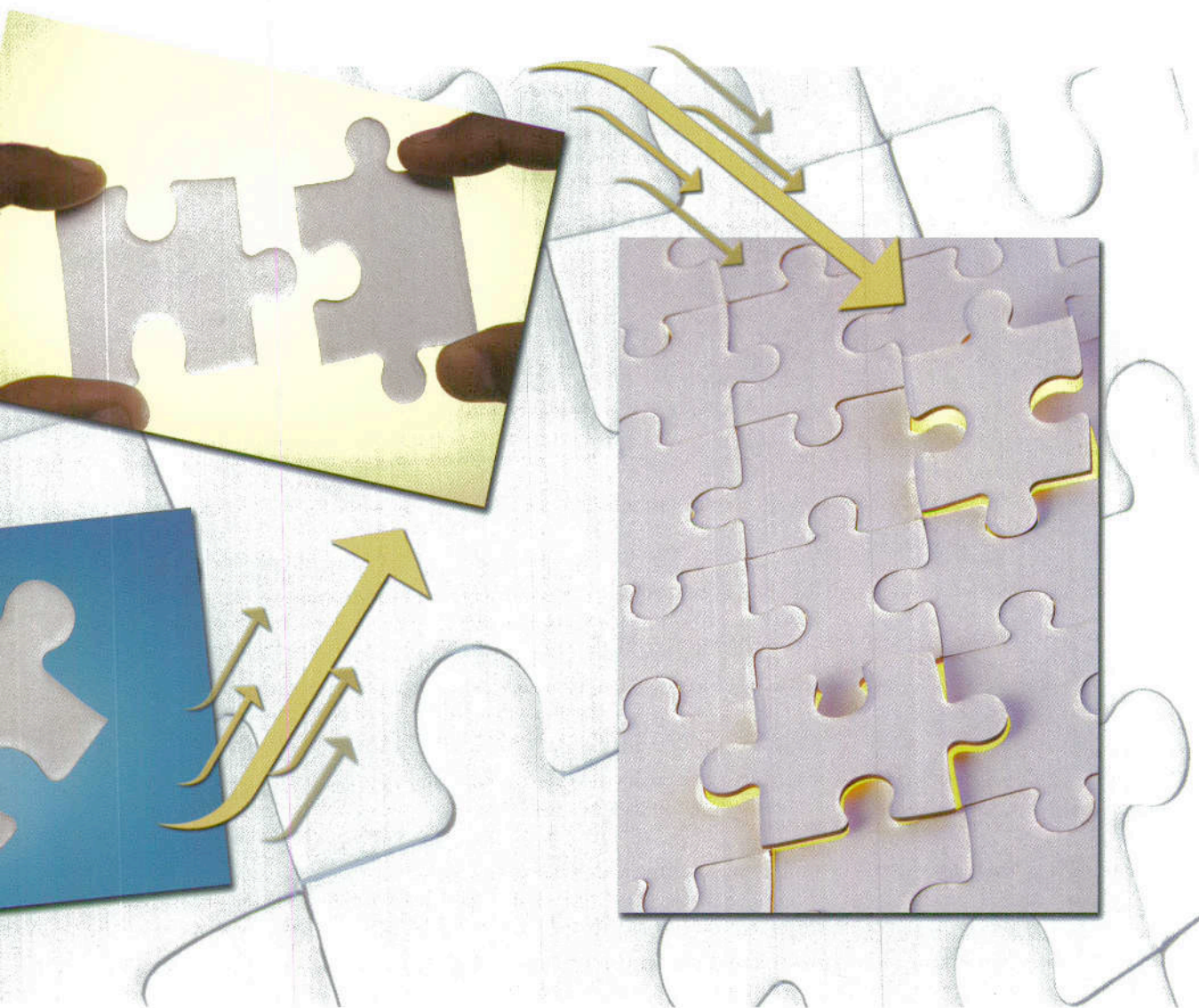
meaningful interaction among the professionals who work there.

### TEACHERS AS TEAMMATES

During the 1980s, our systems experienced team teaching and open classrooms. Educators began to talk about teachers' workplace and its effects on teachers' morale, knowledge and skills, and other characteristics. A shift in the glacier of isolation and the breaking of the physical barriers to teacher interaction led to the idea of teachers coming together to share their work. While this new shared repertoire provided teachers with alternative ideas on teaching, the most significant result was an increase in teacher morale and motivation. They were not alone in their work, but had







colleagues. Though no one paid much attention to what teachers were doing when they met, schools expended significant effort to make these meetings possible. Many schools in many districts, some with great difficulty, scheduled grade-level and department meetings for elementary and secondary teachers.

These new structural arrangements that provided time for teachers to meet frequently led them to work on managerial issues: ordering books and other instructional supplies, scheduling study trips away from the school campus, organizing teaching schedules to make good use of videos or guest speakers who were expected to be in the building. In addition,

sometimes a teacher might report on a conference that he or she attended, or share an instructional activity he or she had used that students enjoyed. Teachers found these meetings to be useful in enabling them to become more organized and in sync with their colleagues' plans and activities for students. This pattern of teacher meetings is what many use today to describe their schools' professional learning communities.

#### TEACHERS AS COLLABORATIVE WORKERS

As teachers met, sharing their successes and failures with their team colleagues, they initiated team teaching and working together on various

instructional strategies and programs. Districts began to see value in encouraging teachers to collaborate. In their early introduction to schools, professional learning communities were characterized as places and opportunities for teachers to work collaboratively. Indeed, some teacher learning results from the collaborative work, although as a by-product, with the team's work being the focus of attention. Equating working collaboratively with professional learning community remains a theme popular with educators.

#### EDUCATORS AS LEARNERS

Then another shift occurred. Along came standards, identifying



what students were expected to achieve and, significantly, what educators were responsible to teach so that students reached the standards. Professionals can no longer rely on yesterday's schooling practices. Teachers and administrators need opportunities for intentional learning, preparing them to enable students to reach high standards. Today's schools are expected to be successful with a diverse student population, which requires a broad spectrum of curriculum, instruction, and assessment approaches. Research and exemplary practice inform school administrators and teachers about more effective ways of developing students into successful readers, mathematicians, writers, and scientists.

### EDUCATORS AS LEARNING PROFESSIONALS

*Professional learning community* — these three words indicate that the professionals in a school are coming together as a group, in community, for the purpose of learning. And what are they learning? The learning is not trivial, nor is it unplanned.

**The staff's decision about what to learn is based on deep exploration of student data to identify the needs of students and reflection on the extent to which the staff's work is producing the results intended.**

The question for professionals becomes: What should we intentionally learn in order to become more effective in our teaching so that students learn well? The community of professionals studies multiple sources of student data to see where students are succeeding in their learning and where they are performing poorly. Poor student performance in an area suggests that the professionals should undertake alternative approaches to teaching students in the identified area. This information drives the work of the community.

### THE RESEARCH

While there is not a large body of research knowledge, there are significant study results that inform us about what and how the professional learning community functions. The literature reports the benefits to staff and to students when the staff is operating in a research-based professional learning community. We still have much to learn about how to initiate and develop a professional learning community in a school, and more studies are needed to follow the development of communities and their outcomes on student performance. However, we can identify five components of research-based learning communities from what we know already:

**Shared beliefs, values and vision.** A basic component of the professional learning community is the shared vision, mission, and goals that the staff members see as their common purpose. Further, the professional community constructs a shared vision of the changes and improvements on which they will work for the increased learning of students.

**Shared and supportive leadership.** This means sharing power, authority, and decision making within boundaries defined by district and/or state policy. Teachers become actively involved in the organization. They broaden their perspectives, develop a higher level of professionalism, and deepen their effectiveness. The principal is key for the initiation and development of any new element in the school, but the sharing principal soon develops the leadership potential of the staff and becomes the collaborating "guide on the side" rather than the "sage on the stage."

**Supportive conditions, both structural and relational.** The structural/physical conditions are those such as time to meet, a place to meet, and policies and resources that support the staff coming together for study and learning. Relational/human

capacities include the development of positive attitudes, respect, and high regard across all staff members as they engage in professional and social activities with one another. Trust is a significant factor for the community, and leaders should take steps to build this important capital.

These three components, or conditions, supply the infrastructure that supports the remaining two. The three serve as the shell that provides the environment in which the heart and soul of professional learning communities — intentional learning — can occur.

**Collective intentional learning and its application.** The work of the professional learning community is the intentional learning that the community determines it should pursue. This whole-school decision by the community guides staff members as they meet to learn and work in grade-level or department teams, and as the entire staff comes together regularly and frequently to learn together. The staff's decision about what to learn is based on deep exploration of student data to identify the needs of students and reflection on the extent to which the staff's work is producing the results intended. This allows staff members to determine where they are succeeding with students and where they are not, and to identify priority student learning areas that need attention. The identified student learning areas provide the target for the staff's intentional learning.

Staff members study student needs to make decisions about the adoption of new practices or programs and accept the need for their own learning to employ the new knowledge and practices effectively. They plan precisely what they will learn, how they will engage in their learning, and the resources needed. They may ask if there are colleagues in the school, at other schools, in the district office or intermediate service



agencies that can facilitate their learning. Their learning is incremental, job-embedded, and ongoing so they become proficient with new instructional practices. The mastery of this learning and its implementation in classrooms is followed by another cycle of reflection, discussion, assessment, and consideration of new professional learning that contributes to staff's effectiveness with students. The process is continuous.

**Shared personal practice.** The transfer of new learning to the classroom is enabled by the practice of peers helping peers, the fifth research-based component. Teachers are invited to visit each other's classrooms to observe, take notes, and share observations. When this component is developed well in the professional learning community, staff members are honest and open about what the teacher knows and doesn't know, and

what he or she needs to learn. While this practice is a significant shift in the way that teachers and administrators work, it provides the support and conditions necessary for change. Research informs us about the significance of the coaching that educators use to support each other in deepening their learning and implementing new practices.

While there are instruments for assessing the presence or absence of the five research components, there is a quick means by which to gain insights about if and how the professional learning community members are engaged in their primary function, their own learning. Three questions addressed to the members can be very telling:


- What are you learning?
- Why are you learning that?
- How are you learning it?

These questions direct the mem-

bers' attention to the core purpose of the community's work — intentional professional learning for the purpose of improved student learning.

#### IN A NUTSHELL

A professional learning community is not just a place where faculty meet regularly or groups come together to work collaboratively. A true professional learning community is a way of organizing the educational staff to engage in purposeful, collegial learning. This learning is intentional for the purpose of improving staff effectiveness so all students learn successfully to high standards. The professional learning community serves to promote quality teaching, the prime factor in whether students learn well. Thus, the professional learning community supports the school's purpose — high-quality student learning. ■




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SOURCE: J Staff Dev 29 no3 Summ 2008

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