

# Keys to Successful Professional Learning Communities



In education, a professional learning community offers a team of five to ten participants an opportunity to meet on a regular basis to study topics of interest related to instruction and student achievement. The work by the group is in-depth, ongoing, and systematic. The very nature of this approach to professional development also helps to form strong collegial bonds among members. (Center for Teaching and Learning, 2006)

There are also documented benefits for students in schools where professional learning communities are utilized, including greater academic gains than in traditional schools, a closing of the achievement gap among students of different backgrounds, decreased dropout rates, and reduced absenteeism. (Berlinger-Gustafson, 2004)

Generally speaking, a major hallmark of professional learning communities is that they are not groups working to meet their own needs. Rather, they are communities of learners that are dedicated to improving student learning. (Kornelis, 2003)

There are many things facilitators and school leaders can do to ensure the success of professional learning communities. Here are 10 keys to establishing your successful professional learning community:

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## **1. Stimulate intellectual curiosity and conversation and be prepared to support significant changes**

Don't expect everyone to automatically be willing to jump on the professional learning community band wagon. Some participants may be reluctant to try new ideas or techniques because they are perceived as a break with the past, lie outside existing paradigms or conflict with existing values and norms. In some cases, they will require the teacher to acquire new knowledge and skills. Be sure to encourage participants to try some of the new techniques that are discussed at your professional learning sessions and provide opportunities for prospective participants to learn about learning professional communities through discussion and reading. Offer to support them in whatever way is necessary. Often, once an initial group has formed and has had some success, others will want to join in the initiative.

## **2. Develop trust**

A lack of trust will prevent participants in a professional learning community from engaging in meaningful conversation and exposing their classroom practices to their peers. Trust will emerge when teachers interact in professional and supportive ways and develop a sense of solidarity and connection with each other.\

### **3. Monitor and evaluate the impact of your learning community**

Every cycle of learning and attempting something new in the classroom should be followed by gathering and analyzing data to determine what works and what practices should be continued. Also, gather data from the group on how they think the process is working and take suggestions for improvement.

### **4. Find the time while modeling flexibility**

Be sure that adequate time is provided for professional learning community activities. As time is a precious commodity in schools, be sure to manage your time carefully. While you should approach every professional learning community meeting with a definite plan in mind, don't hesitate to adjust plans for the comfort and benefit of your group.

### **5. Articulate beliefs**

Be sure that your group knows that the work of a professional learning community is consistent with the belief that the purpose of schooling is for all students to learn. This should be the foundation for all work of your learning community. (Marx, 2005)

### **6. Focus on the application of learning materials**

The content of your professional learning community meetings is the foundation for your activities. The main objective is not to teach content, but to provide the content as a resource for them to improve instruction

### **7. Integrate content and communication to define shared goals**

Be sure your sessions involve conversation and activities centered around the content and especially its application. (Downes, 2001) Your professional learning community should be built around teaching and learning goals that are meaningful and authentic for the participants.

### **8. Create a sense of the whole with respectful inclusion**

Make sure each member feels like a part of the community at large. Encourage the development of a web of interactions among the group members, both in and outside of meetings. Be sure it is an ongoing exchange. Have participants share experiences and discuss methods that work in the classroom. Often, one teacher can be experiencing a problem and the teacher next door has the answer. However, if they never share, they can't learn from each other. Have participants collect as many points of view or perspectives on a topic as possible so as to build a sense of community and to allow participants to make informed decisions.

### **9. Progressive discourse toward knowledge**

Keep all participants actively involved. In a series of professional learning community meetings, you might want to have a different participant (each meeting) summarize the important points from the last meeting. Be sure all participants are contributing and allow them to reflect and be cognizant of the fact that their knowledge and skills are gradually building with each meeting.

### **10. Mutual appropriation**

Each person in the learning community should have another person within the community act as his or her mentor while (s)he tries new things. This gives all participants someone to work with as they try new things between meetings. (Wilson, 2004)

Source: [www.embeddedlearning.com/2007](http://www.embeddedlearning.com/2007) - 10 Keys to Establishing Professional Development Communities