Creating Professional Learning Communities: The Work of Professional Development Schools

If professional learning communities offer opportunities for improving the teaching and learning process, then developing strong professional development school (PDS) partnerships establish an appropriate framework for that purpose. PDS partnerships, however, can be less than effective without proper planning and discussion about the aims of those partnerships. We argue that creating effective partnerships requires time upfront to establish ground rules, clarify the tasks to be undertaken, identify supports required for successful implementation, and ensure that a shared vision and mission exist between partners. Utilizing essential questions for organizing such a collaborative venture, and illustrating effective partnerships in three schools, the researchers describe strategies for developing P–12 professional learning communities that are positive, effective, and durable.

In our experience as faculty liaisons to our network of 12 professional development schools, we observe that our public school partners sometimes lack practical or collaborative strategies that allow for refocusing energies and articulating priorities (Doolittle & Rattigan, 2007; Murphy & Meyers, 2008). We also observe that schools, in general, struggle with meeting the multiple priorities generated by...
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the intensification of No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB; U.S. Department of Education, 2001) benchmarks. Further, Fullan (2007) and Reeves (2004) reported the absence of leaders who are highly skilled in the change process; Housman and Martinez (2001) found that “teachers and principles in low performing schools tend to work in isolation from one another rather than as colleagues in a professional learning community” (p. 7). Our own extended conversations with our public school partners suggest that agreement about student learning outcomes and support systems for improving instruction were absent (Mazzeo & Berman, 2003).

In this article, we posit that critical elements for engaging in school improvement efforts reside in effective professional development school (PDS) partnerships. First, we define the architecture of an effective PDS and the role of learning communities in improving learning. Then, we present three examples of PDS partnerships where this intersection and concomitant school improvement is currently taking place. Finally, we share key insights about this process and offer implications for school-university partnerships.

**Defining the Challenges of Standards-Based Reform**

A Center on Education Policy (2007) report asserts that the NCLB Act is partially responsible for recent gains in state-level test scores. At the same time, critics counter that schools and state departments of education simply lower standards to create the illusion of raising academic achievement (Reeves, 2004). With annual testing determining whether a school or district lapses into corrective action under existing NCLB regulations, failure to achieve Adequate Yearly Progress inevitably predicts the imposition of new layers of rules and regulations. Compounding what already resembles an endless cycle of intense efforts aimed at producing change, responding to bureaucratic mandates dissipates the time and energy available for improving teaching and learning.

In addition to the already cumbersome accountability reporting required of schools and districts, other interruptions detract from a school’s core mission (Doolittle & Rattigan, 2007). One such concern relates to the growing need to respond to multiple sets of stakeholders, standards, and competing views of teaching and learning that intrude on classroom operations (Elmore, 2004). A second issue includes the need for meeting multiple sets of standards, namely national, state, and even PDS standards with each set creating additional layers of bureaucratic challenges and confusion about learner outcomes. For example, teachers are expected to know and address content standards at both the national and state level (National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education, 2000), yet, such standards do not always align, creating confusion about what teacher learners are expected to know and do. Consequently, this confusion may result in fragmented efforts to improve teaching and learning (Elmore, 2004).

Doolittle and Rattigan (2007) reported that teachers may have exposure to different innovations in both content and curriculum, however, most lack clarity about what constitutes best practices. Moreover, rarely, are they proficient in implementing these innovations (see New Jersey Department of Education Quality Single Accountability Continuum Reports, 2007, available from http://www.nj.doe.edu). Doolittle and Rattigan argued that the lack of adequate common planning time and support for professional development confirm Little’s (1990) observation that schools become distanced from efforts to improve learning when school cultures maintain norms of privacy and isolation. Often manifested in an “isolating and compartmentalized structure” (Darling-Hammond, Mullmaster, & Cobb, 1995, p. 103), such norms limit and discourage meaningful interaction between teachers. As a result, effective teaching practices are seldom shared and shoddy teaching is rarely identified or confronted (Little, Gearhart, Curry, & Kafka, 2003).
What Is a Professional Development School?

Centering on student needs, university and school faculty recognize that learning, grounded in research and practitioner knowledge, occurs best in a real-world setting. With the ability to generate new knowledge, school–university partnerships benefit multiple stakeholders and incorporate the potential to impact policy. Blending expertise and resources through redesign and restructuring supporting their complex mission, PDS partners agree to be intentional and transparent in meeting the needs of a diverse body of students through their focus on building learning communities. Agreement with PDS goals becomes critical in bridging reform strategies that close the research and practice gaps identified in teacher preparation programs. To avoid the in name only status of many partnerships, the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (2000) provides standards to ensure rigor and accountability.

In fully matured PDSs, university faculty exercise a significant role in the school and develop authentic relationships with faculty and staff so that teacher candidates spend considerable time reflecting with clinical teachers on their observations and experiences. Additionally, K–12 teachers may coteach or be in charge of college teacher preparation courses, and college courses may be taught at PDS partner sites; consequently, teachers learn from college faculty, college faculty learn from teachers, teacher candidates learn from both, and everyone, including the K–12 students, benefits (Teitel, 1997).

What a Learning Community Does

A learning community classroom functions in partnership with the entire school community, and also with stakeholders outside the school building. According to Putnam and Burke (2006), learning community members exhibit seven propensities: a sense of common purpose; viewing peers in the group as colleagues; seeking self/group actualization; perceiving outside groups as similar to one’s own group; individual and communal reflection; giving and seeking help; and celebrating accomplishments. Putnam and Burke stated further that learning community teachers act as educational leaders rather than classroom managers, and see learners from a developmental perspective because they recognize that everyone can learn, but at different rates and under different conditions. Learning community teachers and administrators enhance their effectiveness so that students benefit through five key organizational structures: supportive, shared leadership; collective creativity; shared values and vision; supportive conditions; and shared personal practice (Hord, 1997). Through these organizational structures, a PDS extends its school learning community to a college of education or university partner.

When a learning community has been developed through an effective PDS relationship, educational change can be effectively undertaken. PDS partners can begin by developing essential questions that move them through the change process effectively. Next we frame questions for leading change and illustrate their application in two partner school sites located within the PDS network of a mid-Atlantic university. We also describe a school–university event that has developed as an outgrowth of the formal PDS partnership. The schools in the case studies are all members of a Professional Development District within this PDS network.

Framing the Work of Professional Learning Communities

Over the years, we observed that, without intentionally pursuing systematic change, university PDS liaisons risk becoming glorified staff developers, metaphorically tossed amid a stormy sea of mandated programs and onsite crises. However, by focusing on a mutually agreed-upon educational initiative and using a systemic change model, real work can be accomplished and even sustained. To create an environment that supports professional learning communities, we argue that PDS partners must acquire a general understanding of the change process. We
also believe that they must infuse four critical components of group process to be successful: a clear understanding of the communication process; a clear mission, with goals and objectives; a strategy for accomplishing the group’s work; and group membership and group decision-making. Additionally, two features of the group communication process are essential: having opportunities for meaningful feedback, and having a mechanism or strategy to deal with group tension and defensiveness. Underpinning this is clarity of mission with a written set of goals and objectives (Napier & Gershenfeld, 2001).

Effective groups monitor themselves. Group members must ask, “Why are we here and what are we doing?” With the mission providing the vision and the heart of the group, PDS partnerships can then develop specific, quantifiable, and outcomes-based learning. As partners analyze goals, members can develop specific learning objectives to achieve the group’s goals. More specifically, the strategy for accomplishing the group’s work answers the question, “How will we achieve these goals and objectives?” Responding to these questions should help groups identify functional tasks and activities focusing on improving student achievement (Napier & Gershenfeld, 2001).

As PDS liaisons, starting by reviewing a rubric for guiding PDS school improvement work (Monahan & Doolittle, 2004), we developed our own essential questions for initiating change in a PDS. These could become a regular part of the organizational culture and serve to keep change efforts focused on the goals at hand:

1. Does the PDS have a shared vision, mission, and beliefs about teaching and learning?
2. What are the instructional priorities for the classroom, and how are they determined?
3. What changes has the PDS partnership produced that has resulted in the integration of theory and practice?
4. How are decisions about professional development activities made within the PDS?
5. How do the PDS partners jointly arrange for the implementation of new innovations?
6. How do the PDS partners decide upon goals and objectives, and how do they know that these are being met?
7. What systems are in place to evaluate the overall effectiveness of the PDS initiatives?

These questions help faculty initiate a focused change effort. However, integral to the group decision-making process are strategies for creating cohesiveness and productivity. In order for PDS partnership members to believe that their voice is important, decision-making that involves all stakeholders is key, since top-down decisions rarely increase productivity and erode group cohesiveness (Fox, 1987). In addition, PDSs must establish their own system for solving problems. Hirokawa’s (1980, 1983) research suggests that successful problem-solving groups tend to develop a systematic procedure that helps them analyze a problem in a step-wise fashion, reducing the tendency to leap to premature solutions.

**Example 1: Creating Small Learning Communities**

An example of leveraging the PDS model occurred with one of our high school partners. Asked to respond to a new state initiative for improving the learning climate of secondary schools, a committee of administrators, guidance counselors, teachers, and university faculty were charged with investigating the piloting of a 9th-grade learning community using *Breaking Ranks II* (National Association of Secondary School Principals, 2004) as a framework for implementation. Considered resistant to change, the high school lagged behind the district’s other five schools in their efforts to improve student achievement. Although a school improvement team existed, there was no official university liaison to the committee. With the building administration expressing a preference for working in isolation, little communication existed between the high school and the university.

After the first few meetings of the committee, it became obvious that the group was stuck on
the complexities of transforming a typical high-school schedule into a small learning community for incoming 9th-grade students. Issues related to recruiting and releasing teachers for the pilot year, acquiring approvals from the board and school leadership team, and establishing an instructional philosophy and a framework obfuscated progress. The researcher’s meeting notes reflect this conundrum:

The team continues to wander through the various detours introduced by committee members. Sometimes the initiative seems headed in an entirely different direction than our original intent. We help by refocusing everyone on the task at hand. It’s amazing that there are so many departures [from the task at hand]. This is probably due to the team’s inexperience at truly collaborative or joint work. (November, 2006)

By modeling learning community precepts and focusing conversations on strategies for implementing the proposed change, university faculty kept discussions centered on the mission, vision, and the intended learner outcomes listed in our essential questions. Drawing on the research, university partners redirected conversations that headed toward possible abandonment of the project back to developing a collaborative 9th-grade learning community.

In late spring 2007, the principal finally suggested, “Perhaps we should adjourn until the fall.” Understanding that this statement represents Fullan’s (2001a) implementation dip, and, with the majority of work for implementing the innovation largely completed, university liaisons reiterated Fullan’s strategy of ready, fire, aim, reminding the team that, “In all likelihood, consensus [about the innovation] already existed as a comprehensive assessment plan had already been agreed to” (SLC Minutes, April, 2006). The team was persuaded to move ahead with the project rather than throw away a whole year’s work.

Throughout, faculty served as critical friends who asked tough questions, but were not viewed as adversaries or critics by school administrators or teachers. Helping the team navigate through a maze of best practices, university faculty identified factors crucial to the success of the project, including the need for generating sufficient monies for building staff capacity, creating the curriculum, monitoring and evaluation, and providing time for joint planning. Understanding that there are “too many disconnected, episodic, fragmented, superficially adorned projects” (Fullan, 2001b, p. 21) already operating in the school, faculty members were able to forestall detours as teachers became mired in matters unrelated to the project. Scheduled for piloting in fall 2007, the PDS building team and principal attributed their planning success “to the ability of the university faculty to keep them on track” (Principal, personal communication, May, 2006) and helped them work through their values and beliefs about what and who should change.

Example 2: Professional Learning Communities Over Time

In one of the partner elementary schools, focus group discussions with teachers led to the development and implementation of a character education program in 2002. Three recurring themes emerged: (a) the concern about an add-on curriculum to an already full teaching day of mandated curricular related lesson blocks; (b) the lack of character education curriculum materials; and (c) the lack of a clear understanding of the purpose and goals of the initiative.

In response, the principal, site coordinator, university liaison, and site-based management team organized a series of voluntary summer curriculum development workshops that paid teachers a modest stipend. After completing the workshops, character education curriculum guides that integrated social studies, language arts literacy, and science with a meaningful character education component for each grade level were completed and distributed to all the teachers in the school district. After teachers had acquired appropriate curriculum materials, they saw that character education could and should be infused into the core content areas (Sudeck, 2003).

In addition, the researcher constructed a faculty personal rating scale for character education. The scale consisted of 5 Likert-type statements
to which respondents could select a 0 to 4 rating where 0 = none and 4 = very clear. The survey was administered in January of 2002 and again in April of 2007, as a pre- and postassessment of the character education initiative. The purpose of the survey was to glean information about the school personnel’s understanding and involvement in the character education initiative and subsequent curriculum implementation. All teachers, administrators, support staff, and instructional aids took the survey in 2002 and 2007.

Of particular note are the responses to Item #1: “I have a clear understanding of the specific components of a character education curriculum.” In January of 2002, 80% of the respondents had “no understanding or a vague understanding;” as contrasted to the April, 2007 survey, in which 100% of the respondents had a “clear or very clear” understanding of the specific components of a character education curriculum.

Another important finding is that 91% of the stakeholders now have a “clear/precise sense of the vision and mission” of the character education initiative, in contrast with the previous survey, in which over half the respondents had “no idea or only a vague idea” of the vision and mission, with the remainder of respondents having an “OK” understanding.

Regardless of whether a change is voluntary or imposed, it involves grappling with some unpleasant emotional responses such as loss, anxiety, and struggle (Marris, 1975). Schön (1971) described zones of uncertainty within which these responses to change take place. Both Marris and Schön suggested that real change involves working through these zones, confronting them, and being able to move forward in a systematic way. Understanding that the meaning of the change will rarely be clear at the outset and that participants generally experience a sense of disequilibrium (Fullan, 2007) helped stakeholders jointly develop a sense of the purpose and goals of the initiative. Equally important, periodic reviews of the project helped members of this professional learning community identify their contributions and build on key ideas. As a result, 6 years later, this work continues. Members constantly revisit their mission and revise the program focus, refining and improving the program, which has won official recognition from the U.S. National Character Education Partnership (available at http://www.character.org).

**Example 3: Beyond Formal Professional Learning Community Relationships**

At a second elementary school, 4th-grade students and their teachers participated in a semiannual field trip to the elementary physical education methods class taught at the university. Intended as a culminating activity, candidates revised and applied microteaching presentations by writing a lesson plan and then teaching it to their peers. Reflecting on what went well, what they would change, and how they thought it would work with elementary classes, candidates then taught a similar lesson to an elementary group. Both teacher candidates and students then reflected on the experience. Finally, the elementary students created a bulletin board in their school and sent cards to the teacher candidates. Typically, students wrote in their cards that they had a “lot of fun” and that they “learned a lot.”

As part of their course assessment, the teacher candidates responded to a course survey, created by the instructor as part of the student course evaluation. The survey consisted of three open-ended response items, one of which asked what course component helped most in preparing candidates to teach elementary-level physical education. The field trip previously described was overwhelmingly mentioned as beneficial in their response on the spring 2007 survey. A typical response to the question was:

> My favorite part [of the course] and the most helpful for me was the culminating teaching experience. To me this is where I see my activities and skill themes [fundamental movement skills] come to life. It is very different teaching a movement or theme to a college student than to an elementary student. (May, 2007)

Interestingly, the field trip activity resulted from past teacher candidates’ survey responses re-
questing contact with real elementary students as part of the course.

For this event, both classroom and physical education teachers accompanied their students to campus and observed that the experience was “great for the kids.” This activity extended the PDS relationship by expanding the scope of the learning community already established. It was a democratic undertaking where teacher candidates ran the show and where the school and university faculty were observers.

**Lessons for the Researchers**

When we assembled as a team to analyze our field notes, surveys, meeting minutes, and classroom observations, we recognized that each school learning community had its own set of unique challenges for improving the teaching and learning process. The schools in our examples were unfamiliar with educational change models and lacked sufficient capacity to initiate, implement, or institutionalize the initiatives by themselves. In example 1, the existing PDS structure allowed university faculty to act as critical friends and prevented abandonment of the 9th grade learning community project. In example 2, educational change was seen as successfully operationalized by emphasizing effective group processes. Example 3 demonstrates how a university faculty member, building on existing relationships, implemented a collaborative teaching activity benefiting both elementary students and teacher candidates.

We realized how developing a common mission and vision aimed at improving student achievement across our 12 school–university partnerships contributed to the success of these three efforts. Multiple opportunities to discuss our professional learning community values not only developed the necessary trust with school partners, but also helped build commitment to the improvement process. Subsequently, partners reported on their growing clarity about what is important and their practical efforts to improve learning.

In sum, we contend that effective PDSs help schools function as effective learning communities. Clearly, our projects would not have experienced success without the PDS architecture in place, because it supplied an infrastructure for improved communication and connectedness, trust, and equity between school and university partners. We concur with Fullan, Hill, and Crevola’s (2006) claim that “shared vision and ownership are less a precondition for success than they are an outcome of a quality process” (p. 88). Further, as we consider how school district personnel struggle with multiple challenges, we acknowledge that sustainable change requires time and effort given to a systemic, inclusive process that is monitored through each stage of implementation.

Inasmuch as real change requires time for implementation, it is necessary to build capacity and deal with faculty concerns early on, when communicating and obtaining agreement about the intended outcomes of the partnership. Because a PDS partnership provides a venue for considering, analyzing, and addressing a nonlinear change process, participants can learn to address their concerns during each phase of the change process. Because educational change is complex, PDS partnerships can provide a supportive, yet rigorous structure with attention centered on research-based models and systems. Such a productive environment evidences a strong and positive relationship between and among stakeholders, leading to expanded teacher commitment, openness to innovation, and meaningful professional involvement (Murphy & Meyers, 2008; Sheppard, 1996).

**References**

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