

Professional Learning Communities and the NCA School Improvement Process

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Schools across the NCA network are using professional learning communities as a tool to improve classroom instruction. This article examines the strong relationship between the NCA school improvement process and professional learning communities. Together, the two provide a powerful combination to ensure that no child is left behind.

Introduction & Definitions

A professional learning community (PLC) is a group of professionals working and learning together to ensure high levels of learning for ALL students. The characteristics of a professional learning community are:

1. shared mission, vision, values and goals that are embedded in the hearts and minds of people throughout the organization;
2. collective inquiry - the engine of professional growth and renewal;
3. collaborative teams - the organizational structure that supports improvement in student learning;
4. action orientation that focuses on results versus good intentions; and
5. an understanding that continuous improvement in teacher and student learning is the way business is done in schools not a task to complete (DuFour & Eaker, 1998).

Do these characteristics sound familiar? NCA CASI bases its school improvement process on the same set of characteristics. Research on effective methods for improving schools is embedded in the NCA school improvement process. NCA has worked with schools for several decades to put these characteristics of improvement into practice at the school level. DuFour and Eaker (1998) have been successful in implementing these concepts at the grade/course level. Working at complementary levels – the school and classroom, the NCA school improvement and PLC processes reinforce and strengthen one another. They are not mutually exclusive, but rather mutually supportive. If we want to ensure that no child is left behind, we must understand the important relationship between the NCA school improvement process and PLC.

Three Critical Questions

Three critical questions are central to our work as educators. Those questions are:

1. What do we want our students to know and be able to do (curriculum)?
2. How will we know our students are learning (assessment)?
3. What will we do if our students are not learning (strategies/interventions)?

Over the past several years, DuFour and Eaker (1998) have brought these three questions to the forefront of our consciousness in their work with the concepts related to professional

learning communities. However, these are not new questions. These questions are at the heart of the NCA school improvement process, a professional learning community at the school level. If we are to have a comprehensive, systemic approach to school improvement we must ask these questions at the district, school, and classroom levels (Glatthorn, 1994).

What do we want our students to know and be able to do?

The district's job, with input from stakeholders, is to create a curriculum blueprint for all of its schools. A quality curriculum is achieved by focusing on mastery objectives, limiting scope and sequence, recommending best instructional practices, and providing support for implementation of identified curriculum. When the curriculum is received at the school level, it is important to map the curriculum horizontally and vertically to guarantee that all children will have the opportunity to learn the required curriculum (Marzano, 2003).

This discussion at the school level is a vital part of the NCA school improvement process. Teachers take into consideration assessment data that allows them to know the strengths/weaknesses of the students in their school. From this data, school-wide improvement goals emerge. When grade/course teachers know the required curriculum and the areas of students' strengths/ weaknesses, they are able to plan their daily lessons. These lessons address school improvement goals and other learning needs of students as identified by the grade/course level teacher.

When teams of grade/course level teachers meet in their regularly scheduled PLC, they can review student achievement data, identify student needs, and determine how to best meet those needs. The use of PLC at the classroom level has dramatically increased teacher's ability to implement a guaranteed and viable curriculum, monitor student progress with colleagues on school improvement goals and curriculum objectives, and improve the teaching and learning process. The strong link between school improvement goals and PLC at the classroom level allows all children to be successful.

How will we know our students are learning?

Many districts involved in the NCA school improvement process have developed K – 12 assessment plans. This allows schools to use the data provided to monitor improvement in student learning related to the achievement of their school improvement goals. Of course, there is more student assessment needed at the school and classroom level if students are to be successful learners. Stiggins (2001), a nationally known leader in classroom assessment, asserts that educators need to understand when to use assessments for evaluations of programs and how to use student-centered classroom assessments that guide students to improve their learning.

Schools that are involved in the NCA school improvement process make time for staff development to ensure that teachers are engaged in developing or using assessments of learning (program evaluation) and assessments for learning (performance assessments). When assessment data is reviewed at the school level, improvement plans are updated as necessary. When grade/course level teams share assessment data, it allows colleagues to improve the teaching and learning process in their classrooms. Linking these discussions solves the problem as to how to implement strategies outlined in the school improvement

plan. In fact, some NCA schools are now identifying PLC as the major organizational structure for implementing the strategies of the school improvement plan.

What will we do if our students are not learning?

The district plays an important role in identifying best instructional practices. Best practices are embedded in the curriculum development process and communicated to schools. Based on a school's improvement goals, staff selects practices (strategies/interventions) that need to be implemented at their school. Professional development, both group and individual, is provided. Within the grade/course PLC teams, colleagues can also support each other as new practices are implemented. Through teamwork, members of the PLC may also discover new ways to address school improvement and individual student learning goals.

What happens to students when the district, school and/or classroom teacher fails to ask these three critical questions?

If at any level the three questions are not addressed, there will be students who fall through the cracks. For example, school boards set graduation requirements. Once these graduation requirements are determined, the district develops curriculum that maps out essential learning for each required course. This opens the door for a guaranteed curriculum for all students across all schools. If this does not occur, it is possible for inconsistent implementation of identified standards and benchmarks to occur creating an equity issue for students between school buildings. At each building, the school improvement team also needs to ensure that curriculum requirements are communicated to staff and curricular goals are coordinated and achieved at each grade/course level. Lastly, it is important that grade/course teaching teams monitor student achievement of the curriculum and work together to effectively implement best practice to address individual student needs.

Advantages of Systemic School Improvement

When we understand that the three critical questions need to be asked and acted upon at all three levels of the organization (district, school and classroom), no child will be left behind. Understanding the roles and responsibilities at each level and how they interact will ensure equity for all students (guaranteed curriculum/ opportunity to learn) and improve the overall quality of the school program for all students. When all stakeholders in and related to the organization are focused on achieving the mission that all children will learn, schools and classrooms are transformed. There is potential for achievement gaps to close while continuing to improve the entire learning process for all students. Resources such as staff development, common assessments, and financial support can be targeted to meet specific, well-articulated needs.

NCA and PLC play important, supporting roles in answering the three critical questions. The two go hand in hand. The NCA school improvement process focuses on the school as a whole giving guidance to classroom teachers. Through professional learning communities, teachers can take that guidance and collaborate with one another to identify and make necessary changes in their instruction to achieve individual student and school-wide goals.

References:

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