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Historically, teaching has been an isolated profession in which educators were given little or no time to collaborate, share ideas, engage in dialogue, etc. However, education has evolved to encompass more of a collaborative approach through the development of professional learning communities. Professional learning communities (PLCs) shift the focus of school reform from restructuring to reculturing (Louis 2006). PLCs are seen as a powerful staff development approach in which school change and improvement can be an outcome. Fullan and Senge (Fullan, 1993; Senge et al., 2000) report that the creation and implementation of learning communities is crucial to the future success of schools facing the possibility of change.

There are many characteristics of PLCs as outlined by Richard DuFour. First, PLCs operate under the mission that students are to learn as opposed to ensuring that students are taught. The shift from a focus on teaching to a focus on learning has numerous implications for both educators and students. To accomplish this, educators must consider three essential questions: What do we want each student to learn?, How will we know when each student has learned?, and How will we respond when a student experiences difficulty in learning? Participating in a PLC enables educators to identify effective teaching practices that maximize student success.

DuFour later explains that educators who participate in a PLC understand that they must work together. In a PLC, teachers and administrators share a vision which is focused on student learning and success. Students benefit from the expertise of various educators who share a vision focused on student learning and a commitment to improvement (Reichstetter, 2006). Participating in PLCs allows educators to build capacity within a district by working as members of ongoing, high-performing collaborative teams.

Last, PLCs monitor their effectiveness based on results. Within a PLC, teachers work to identify the current levels of student achievement, establish a goal to increase achievement, work together to achieve the goal, and report the progress. Teachers collaborate to analyze the data and disseminate the information to the staff to make it relevant to their teaching practices. Moreover, teachers collaborate across disciplines to discover what works best for students.

When we as mentors speak to coaches, there is an overwhelming belief that establishing PLCs

could improve their schools. So why haven't they become an ubiquitous part of school life? Getting PLCs off the ground is not always easy. With conflicting schedules, mounds of paperwork, and additional responsibilities, teachers are not always keen on giving up what little time they have to engage in this kind of activity. PLC organizers need to be creative in scheduling convenient times to meet. For example, groups can meet during their lunch period. This will not only create a relaxed, personable atmosphere, but will also prevent PLC members from losing their free time.

A mantra to follow when getting started with PLCs is, "Work with the willing". By forming around a core of enthusiastic participants on a topic of shared interest, a coach can avoid selling the idea while ironing out the kinks of how the group needs to be run. It's better to have a few interested professionals who are dedicated to showing up regularly than a larger group that is sporadic in their attendance. One example of a group that formed very organically around a topic grew out of a conversation that a PLC coach overheard. Teachers were fuming about the bad press that the "Waiting for Superman" documentary was creating for education. Seizing the opportunity, the group agreed to read the book that spawned the film. The success or failure of a school's first attempt will spread to the rest of the building. The first group should be the advertisement that pulls others into the fold.

Perhaps the most crucial value to follow for sustaining professional learning communities is consistency. Whether your group is to meet every month, every week, or every day, keeping a regular schedule of meetings is essential to participant attendance. Undoubtedly, there will be times when school schedules clash; however, meetings should always be rescheduled. Many PLC's operate under the belief that in order to improve student learning, job-embedded learning for educators must be continuous (DuFour, DuFour et al., 2006; Haar, 2003; Phillips, 2003). If the group allows for other things to get in the way of their meetings, the purpose becomes devalued and inevitably participation will fizzle.

Professional learning communities can be a way for educators to connect with colleagues, share best practice, or develop a school-wide program. PLCs encourage teachers to improve themselves and their schools between coach visits. The spark that the group creates will need to be fanned to become a flame, and that fire will need to be fed if it is to spread across a school.