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Leading Professional Learning Communities Toward Efficacy

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As Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), defined by DuFour et al (2008), continue to sweep into schools across the nation, school administrators need the tools to assess the productivity of the teachers’ collaborative teams. PLCs provide the structure for teachers to analyze student achievement data and design common formative assessments. The PLC Efficacy Rubric discussed in this presentation was developed for use in the College Ready in Mathematics and Physics Partnership grant funded by the National Science Foundation to provide school administrators the tools to evaluate teachers’ collaborative work and guide them to increased success. This presentation introduces the five indicators of PLC efficacy and the descriptors for each indicator, which may be applied to other non-educational settings.

Keywords: Collaboration, Principal, School Administration, Professional Learning Communities, Action Research

Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) are not new, but their influence continues to grow, especially as schools witness their influence on student achievement. Schaumburg Township School District 54 Superintendent Nicholas Jay Myers credits the PLC process for raising the percentage of students meeting or exceeding standards from 2005 to 2011 from 76% to 90% in reading and from 80% to 94% in math (2012). While such gains attract education administrators to adopt the PLC process for their schools, many school leaders struggle to find strategies to hold faculty accountable to the process, for dysfunctional PLCs not only waste teachers’ time, but may poison them against other productive collaboration.

The PLC Efficacy Rubric addressed in this presentation is derived from DuFour et al’s 2008 Revisiting Professional Learning Communities at Work and was initially developed for use in administrator workshops funded by the National Science Foundation’s College Ready in Mathematics and Physics Partnership. The grant partnership sought PLCs as a mechanism to ensure that pedagogical changes adopted by teachers in the grant-funded workshops were adopted into continued practice. DuFour et al define PLCs as “educators committed to working collaboratively in ongoing processes of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve” (2008, p.14). While several authors have provided guidance to school administrators on implementing PLCs and working with teachers in PLCs, many school leaders need a focused and rigorous measure to determine PLC success. Too many biases can cloud the administrator’s assessment of PLC progress, most notably, his existing perceptions of a teacher’s quality of instruction and other work. PLC efficacy should be evaluated based on DuFour et al’s principles, not assessed on the classroom strengths of its individual teachers.

The PLC Efficacy Rubric is comprised of five indicators of effectiveness: Shared Vision, Collaboration, Reflective Dialogue, Administration, and Depth of Change. This presentation will consider each of these indicators and the criteria for assessing them, but before elaboration on each indicator, it merits note that the indicators themselves could be applied to other administrative circumstances in which employees are expected to collaborate toward a shared goal. The descriptors are specific to educational settings, but many could be altered for other industries, particularly marketing and sales, but also medicine, and of course, higher education. Each of the indicators is vital to long-term success of the collaboration process.
Shared Vision

The development of a mission and vision statement is requisite in most organizations now, and within similar organizations, the language rings very familiar. Within educational organizations, vision and mission statements often reference “excellence for all students,” “success for all,” and “continuous learning.” The memorized or inculcated phrase is not the target of PLC Shared Vision. While administration may stress the importance developing an agreed upon, concise explanation of the school’s vision and mission, that type of activity is not the intent of measuring PLC Shared Vision. Instead, the administrator should look for documental and anecdotal evidence that teachers in each PLC understand the point of collaborating in a PLC, that they can articulate their unique roles within the PLC, and that they can provide evidence of times they have acted to achieve their PLC’s goals.

School administrators should collect evidence on Shared Vision and the other four indicators or PLC efficacy through multiple methods over the course of the entire year. The rubric can be used to score PLCs, but scores are not the intent of the tool. Instead, administrators should share the PLC Efficacy Rubric with teachers at the beginning of the year, when they are charged to work as PLCs so that they know what is expected of them. At least quarterly, an administrator should assess the PLC and determine its level of efficacy so that he can guide the members to perform at higher levels. For example, if review of the rubric reveals that two of the PLC members are not committed to the PLC vision of authentic data analysis and continuous monitoring of student progress through common formative assessments, the principal can meet with those two members individually to discuss methods of increasing their contributions to the PLC.

Collaboration

Collaboration is the heart of PLC work. Teachers must collaborate to analyze data and to design and implement common formative assessments. School administrators often see teachers who “get along” and believe that demonstrates their collaborative practice. While school administrators all prefer for teachers to get along, that in itself is not enough for PLC collaboration. Administrators should visit the weekly PLC meetings at least once a month, and preferably more often. Some visits should be scheduled, but PLCs should acknowledge that unscheduled drop-in visits from the administrator are likely. During initial visits, the administrator should watch and record the events and discussion for later assessment, but during later unscheduled visits, the administrator should ask questions and nudge teachers toward taking appropriate actions or toward more genuine interpretation of data.

Collaboration should also reveal shared decision making. Even if some members speak less than others, all PLC members should act with the understanding that their thoughts, preferences, and expertise are valued. Administrators can discover the extent to which members feel their input is valued through interviews and informal discussions, and through minutes kept by the PLC and submitted for review to the principal. For example, if minutes demonstrate that a member consistently casts the dissenting vote, the administrator should investigate why that member’s approaches to collaboration differ consistently from her peers, and should investigate whether the dissenting member feels that her input is valued before the votes are cast.

Reflective Dialogue

PLC activity must include reflective dialogue that focuses on identifying challenges, considering all viable solutions, and developing plans for resolving the challenges. The dialogue among members should be authentic, grounded in data analysis and best practices, and should consider previous attempts to solve similar concerns. Often in schools, the same problems recur because they were not resolved sufficiently. PLCs must address student achievement deficits with a consideration for historical attempts to address similar challenges. For example, if a PLC examines trends in poor attendance, members might consider what strategies have been implemented previously, within their school and other schools, to address the problem, but if they find strategies that did not succeed, they should not dismiss them out of hand without researching why the attempts failed. PLCs may find that strategies fail sometimes because of poor implementation, not because the strategies themselves are a mistake.
Administration

Administration of PLCs addresses the logistical requirements of regular meeting attendance, setting an agenda, keeping minutes, and ensuring that documentation accurately reflects the discussions and actions of the team. The most important component to the Administration indicator is measuring the school administrator’s impact on the PLC. Here, the school administrator must self-assess to determine if he supports the PLC through ensuring the teachers have sufficient resources and time to meet; through providing feedback on their agendas, minutes, common formative assessments, data analysis reports, and other documents; and through observations, visits, and verbal feedback. Teachers and administrators alike should understand the expectations for accountability, and the administrator may choose to solicit input from teachers on their perceptions of his support.

Depth of Change

The final accountability measure of PLC efficacy is the depth of the changes enacted by PLCs. Some PLCs collaborate, but for the wrong goals, while others suffer from setting low expectations for their work on the right goals. PLCs may become stalled on inconsequential classroom management tasks, such as how students should place names on papers. PLCs may also stall by addressing the same topics at every meeting without moving toward implementing potential solutions. The school administrator must ultimately determine a PLC’s success based on student achievement data. If student achievement increases in the areas on which a PLC has focused, the PLC is successful. If student achievement does not increase in those areas, the PLC must change to become efficacious.

Recommendations

Multiple sources of data should be analyzed under the scope of the Efficacy Rubric, and the Rubric should guide administrators and teachers to hold all educators to higher standards of collaboration. Using concrete measures of PLC progress to guide growth will demonstrate to teachers the practices they are to implement within PLCs.
References

