

# School improvement: the effectiveness of professional learning communities



## School Improvement: The Effectiveness of Professional Learning Communities

### Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to examine a multitude of peer research that has been written on the effectiveness of professional learning communities and how they seek to provide improvements in public schools. This review inquiries into the evidence that supports the theory that effective professional learning communities provide educators with the tools vital to affect school climate and increase learning engagement in the classroom.

### Summary of Topic Research

Today's educators face a variety of challenges and most must be addressed in several different ways. School districts and leaders are being required to do more with less. Often facing frequent changes in federal and state policies that make doing the job of an educator even harder. The ongoing transformation of the public-school system is one such challenge that must be addressed if educators are going to meet the various needs of today's learners.

The mention of professional development (PD) has most educators picturing an expert sharing content knowledge or instructional strategies from a PowerPoint at the front of a crowded and silent staff meeting. If we see little gain in student knowledge through a teacher directed learning environment, with little opportunities to apply or discuss new concepts, how should we expect educators to achieve in-depth knowledge from the same style of

learning. Therefore, most teachers would describe an effective PD as interactive, content relevant, and sustainable over time. This has led to research in the recent years that supports teacher collaboration in improving upon teacher effectiveness (Watson, 2014). The large question at the forefront of this research is; “ What happens during teacher collaboration meetings? And how can teacher collaboration be leveraged to promote purposeful professional learning?” (Watson, 2014).

Professional learning communities, further known in this literature review as PLCs, are a type of collaborative approach to professional development and have been at the forefront of educational reform for some time now. PLCs are small groups of content related or grade-level specific educators that plan and meet regularly. Discussion during meetings is centered around new concepts, shared expertise and insights from their various teaching experiences, where they can collectively engage in problem solving. Research shows that PLCs are a viable means of transforming schools and increasing student engagement and achievement within the classroom through teacher collaboration.

## Research Evidence

### *School Climate and Improvement*

Great teaching can almost always yield great learning. Nonetheless, we have learned over time that the secret to a great education lies more than just within the individual classroom. Tableman states in the *Best Practices Brief* that “ school administration struggles with reform to improve students’

academic performance, their concerns must encompass more than  
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instructional change” (2004). This style of thinking leads the educational reform to look at educating the whole child and focusing on all needs, both physical and mental. More recent studies have adapted the theory that a positive school climate may be the missing link that will bridge the gap and increase student achievement.

Key components have been established through a multitude of research that have a positive impact on student achievement growth in positive school climates. Those components are; teacher leadership is key and listen to your students and their families (Tableman & Herron, 2004). Even schools that begin the school improvement process with high levels of student achievement and a positive, safe school environment can show gains through the growth of their school climate.

### *Professional Learning Communities and School Improvement*

Prior to the introduction of the concept of professional learning communities, much of the focus of student achievement was centered on improving the individual teacher. School districts worked to create teacher supervision plans that would allow administrators to evaluate their subordinates (teachers) on their classroom performance levels. Despite the astounding amount of evidence that show very little teacher growth is done through this type of professional development, many districts still maintain their traditional values.

The PLC process was not created to diminish the importance of the individual teacher. This “ systems approach” to education was created as a rebuttal to the individual isolation and independence of previous school improvement

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mindsets. Focusing the mindset of school improvement on creating systems that would promote continuous improvement and interdependence amongst educators.

Yet, we still face the issue of how to create a buy in for teachers to embrace the new era of effective professional development. Nothing can persuade a teacher better than presenting them with evidence of consistent data and growth. The key component of frequent common assessment data that serves as the cornerstone of the PLC process can provide the irrefutable evidence that is needed for teacher buy in. When a teacher sees the student success that is reached in a colleague's classroom on team-developed lessons and assessments, they are more apt to changes in their own instructional strategies. Most educators are more receptive to change when it creates a more engaging learning environment and higher levels of student achievement.

## Conclusion

Substantial evidence has been provided to leaders in education that conclude that the best way to improve student achievement and establish a positive school climate is to organize teachers into collaborative teams. Those professional learning communities should be used to clarify student learning goals, track leading indicators, and discuss instructional strategies that provide high levels of student engagement or those that do not achieve student growth. Robert Marzano states that the concept of PLCs is “ one of the most powerful initiatives for school improvement I have seen in the last decade” (2003). Teacher performance in the classroom is paramount to

quality education and school climate. Professional learning communities provide teachers with a system that, when established correctly, can ensure teacher effectiveness that will in turn increase growth in students.

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