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**Professional Learning Communities:
Are Schools Ready to Collaborate to Educate?**

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Introduction

Every school in Texas has a common goal: students must pass the state-mandated test called the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS). With pressure from the state and federal government to raise achievement scores, schools are frantically searching for a program that will guarantee student success. Unfortunately, no program will be found because it is *people*, not programs, who make a difference in education.

The authors selected a rural, elementary school, located in a small East Texas community that serves approximately 350 students: 21% African American, 21% Hispanic, and 58% White (Texas Education Agency, Academic Excellence Indicator System (AEIS) report, 2007-2008). Since 2002, this elementary school has earned the rating of *Recognized* seven times. *Recognized* recognition is accomplished when 80% of the students master the standardized tests. Each year, teachers and students work diligently to raise the campus to the next level, *Exemplary*. *Exemplary* recognition is accomplished when 90% of the students master the standardized tests. Like many schools in Texas, new programs are initiated with hopes of helping all students succeed, yet these programs are discarded quickly as something new promises better results. In the past five years, the teachers at this school have witnessed several program changes. After spending two years developing the Craine curriculum document, that curriculum was promptly set aside to make room for C-Scope, another curriculum document designed to help educators teach students at a higher level, thereby giving students the tools to be successful on TAKS.

Amidst all the programs, there must be an answer to better educate our students. That answer comes not in the form of a program but in a change of how the school community operates. Rather than working individually, the school must recognize the importance of every component and work collaboratively to educate all students. For more than a decade, a growing influence of research and practice has indicated that our best hope for success in schools is through the creation of professional learning communities (Blankstein, 2004). This idea does not cost money or require a program change. It does, however, necessitate a change in thinking.

Research Questions

This study aims to answer one fundamental question: (1) Are the characteristics of a professional learning community present at Elementary School A? Before responding to this question, an in-depth analysis of a professional learning community is essential.

Review of Literature

Historical Background

Rose (2008) noted that the American ideal of a free public education for all children has been a historic cornerstone of our public education system. The researcher found that the initial conception of our "common school," the goals of public education have included shaping the values of a diverse population in order to mold the landscape of democracy and American society. Horace Mann pronounced education as the equalizer for the masses (Tyack & Cuban, 1995). John Dewey advocated that education should be designed to advance intellectual and moral growth in our society (Dewey & Dewey, 1962). The architects of the American school system were ambitious, and many of those initial tenets and philosophical ideals have remained true. Light and Pillemer (1982) noted that the investment in education and the exchange of ideas

and thoughts are educational building blocks in our quest for life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

As a cornerstone of American democracy, the educational community in the United States has experienced a litany of reform initiatives and models. Over the past twenty years, there have been intense efforts to restructure schools from a variety of disciplines (Zemelman, Daniels, & Hyde, 2005). Although these reform efforts were rooted in principles designed to improve education and the educational system, history shows that most of these reforms have been unable to change practice on a large scale, have left teacher knowledge and skills untouched, and have failed to yield long-term results in the classroom (Elmore, 2004; Fullan, 2005; Sparks, 2002).

Current Trend

According to Guthrie and Springer (2004), 21st century school reform is symbolized by the measurement of outcomes and highly structured accountability systems. This wave of reform has been prompted by the *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) legislation. NCLB is a reauthorization by Congress of the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act aimed at providing compensatory educational services primarily to help low income students. The significance of this legislation is the requirement that schools must make adequate yearly progress by ensuring that students perform at high levels of proficiency on achievement tests and that achievement gaps between advantaged and disadvantaged students are closed (Grider, 2008).

The last decade and a half of school improvement has led some schools to form professional learning communities to promote a collaborative approach to education. The current national trend of schools held accountable for a variety of student outcomes has many leaders bound to the belief that the most effective method for working within an atmosphere of

constant scrutiny, while maintaining focus directly on the students, has been for schools to create and maintain an environment of collaborative discourse and action (Sparks, 2003). Educators can impact instruction and learning by tapping into the collective wisdom found within the walls of schools and the hearts and minds of teachers. Roland Barth (2001) opined about how many children's lives could be saved if we educators shared ideas with each other.

The Importance of Teachers

Ultimately, reform efforts to improve education have been slow to address the fundamental aspect of schooling – what happens in the classroom. Fullan and Hargreaves (1991) emphasized that change starts in the classroom with teachers and no matter how grandiose the reform proposals might be, change will not occur if teachers do not adopt them as their own.

Reform will not be achieved unless teachers are experts in their work, share their expertise, and seek to create new knowledge to sustain their work (Louis, Kruse, & Raywid, 1996). The only way to ensure that reform efforts are successful is to build a strong foundation of teacher knowledge, sustained by a commitment to structural change (Darling-Hammond, 1996).

The difficulty resides in determining how to build the foundation of teacher knowledge. Schmoker (2005) noted that teachers do not learn best from outside experts; they learn best from each other. In her research of effective schools as determined by reading and math achievement, Rosenholtz (1989) found that school climates were characterized by either isolation or collaboration. She also found that working in isolation, teachers had great autonomy with little oversight, classroom goals were individualistic, and discourse with colleagues rarely included instructional topics. The researcher noted in contrast, in effective schools, teachers' work lives

were places of intellectual sharing and collaborative planning characterized by cooperative and frequent communication with a focus on continuous improvement (Rosenholtz, 1985).

Examination of Professional Learning Communities

There has been overwhelming research (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Karhanek, 2004) to support that professional learning communities attribute to higher achievement for all students. According to Marzano (2003), an analysis of research conducted over a thirty-five year period demonstrates that highly effective schools produce results that almost entirely overcome the effects of student backgrounds. The researcher also found in professional learning communities, all stakeholders play a role to support student success. To be most effective, teachers, students, administrators, and parents are vital to the programs and initiatives designed for the students. Although these environments are known to benefit the teacher professionally, the overall goal is to improve the academic performance of the students through the utilization of best teacher practices (Fovargue, 2008). The path to change in the classroom lies within and through professional learning communities (DuFour & Eaker, 1998).

The term 'Professional Learning Community' depicts three foundational pillars. 'Professional' refers to someone who has received advanced training in his or her position and is responsible to remain up to date in the changing knowledge base of one's own field (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). 'Learning,' within this model, refers to an unwavering commitment to ongoing study coupled with unending questioning and curiosity. The term 'community' implies members connected by their interests (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). Richard DuFour (2007) emphasized that a school does not become a professional learning community by enrolling in a program; it becomes one by the persistence of the educators within it.

Implementing Professional Learning Communities

A review of the literature on collaborative efforts, systems, and results revealed several common themes and characteristics. Whole school reform, with external and complicated components rarely works (Darling-Hammond, 1997; Fullan cited in Sparks, 2003). Reform needs to be simple and less prescriptive (Schmoker, 2004). Schools need to promote creative thought and high levels of autonomy based on the needs of students (Hord, 1997). Researched best practices are most effective when teachers invent, adapt, and refine lessons in context according to the needs of the students (Hughes & Kritsonis, 2006; Reeves, 2004; Wagner, 2004).

DuFour (2004) specified three core principles of professional learning communities: (a) ensuring that students learn, (b) a culture of collaboration, and (c) a focus on results. The core mission of education is not to make certain that students are taught, but rather to ensure that they learn (Rose, 2008). According to DuFour's Professional Learning Community framework, all teachers must engage in conversation and exploration around three critical questions:

- What do we want our students to learn?
- How will we know when they have learned it?
- How will we respond when students experience difficulty?

In order to create a culture of collaboration, DuFour (2004) suggested schools need to create structures in which educators systematically analyze and improve classroom practice. Ongoing cycles of questions to promote deep levels of learning, leading to higher levels of achievement, are necessary (Rose, 2008). Schools need to make public what has traditionally been private; DuFour (2004) specified goals, strategies, materials, pacing, questions, concerns, and results as examples. Every educator needs to belong to a team which focuses on student

learning. Time for teachers to meet during the workday throughout the year is crucial. Teams should develop norms or protocols to clarify the expectations of roles, responsibilities, and relationships among team members (Rose, 2008).

DuFour (2004) maintained that in order to attend to student results, educators should base their views of their effectiveness on the results of their students. He found that teams should be involved in an ongoing process which includes creating student-centered measurable goals and identifying the current student achievement levels through common, formative assessments that correspond to those goals. The data generated should be collected, analyzed, discussed, and ultimately, serve as a catalyst for improved teacher practice (DuFour, 2004).

The highest level of collaboration is defined as individuals working jointly to build a team of leaders and learners (Fullan, 1996). Schools who reach this stage have a school culture and climate where members can give quality feedback, share responsibility, spend time in critical dialogue, value collective knowledge, demonstrate consistent instructional practices, and honor all voices of the team (Richardson, 1998).

Summary of Literature Review

Even the grandest design eventually translates into hard work. The professional learning community model is a grand design – a powerful new way of working together that profoundly affects the practices of schooling (DuFour, 2004). However, initiating and sustaining the concept requires hard work. The school faculty must focus on learning rather than teaching, work collaboratively on matters related to learning, and hold itself accountable for the kind of results that fuel continual improvement. When educators do the hard work necessary to implement these principles, their collective ability to help all students learn will rise (DuFour, 2004).

Methodology

To answer the proposed research question, survey research was conducted utilizing a questionnaire to obtain quantitative data. The specific descriptive details of the study are as follows.

Selection of Participants

There are 25 professional educators employed at Elementary School A: Headstart – 1; Pre-K – 1; Kindergarten – 3; First Grade – 4; Second Grade – 3; Third Grade – 3; Fourth Grade – 4; Special Education – 2; ESL/Reading Recovery – 3; and Physical Education – 1. All 25 educators participated in the survey (23 female and 2 male). The racial composition of the participants is 92% White and 8% African-American. Approximately half of the participants (12) have one to five years of teaching experience, while 10 participants have over ten years of teaching experience. Salaries range from \$28,320 for beginning teachers to \$45,520 for teachers with over twenty years of educational experience.

Instrumentation

The questionnaire used in the study was developed by Huffman and Hipp (2003) titled *Reculturing Schools as Professional Learning Communities*. To maintain reliability, the questionnaire utilized a Lickert scale: an instrument composed of statements that permit responses along an “agree . . . disagree” continuum (Mertler & Charles, 2008). There were 45 statements divided into 6 categories: Share and Supportive Leadership; Shared Values and Vision; Collective Learning and Application; Shared Personal Practice; Supportive Conditions – Relationships; and Supportive Conditions – Structures.

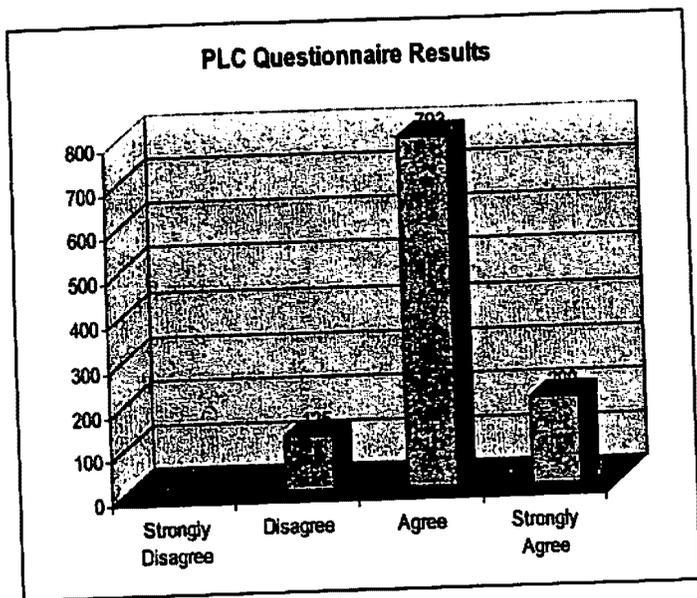
Data Collection Procedures

A team leader meeting was conducted after school with a representative from each grade level present. After providing team leaders with a memo defining professional learning communities and explaining the purpose of the questionnaire, team leaders were asked to provide each member of their team with a copy of the questionnaire. After completion, questionnaires were returned to the researcher by placing them in the office box. These procedures were in place to ensure accurate disclosure and confidentiality: guiding principles of research to credibly obtain reliable information.

Data Analysis

Once all 25 questionnaires were returned, the researcher analyzed the descriptive data by calculating the average level of agreement and disagreement for each statement. Although participants were concerned with their minimal knowledge of a professional learning community, the results of the survey revealed Elementary School A has the foundation necessary for a professional learning community to be constructed. The bar graph (Fig. 1) below presents the overall findings of the data collected.

Figure 1. Teacher Questionnaire Results



Presentation of Data

In the *Shared and Supportive Leadership* section of the questionnaire, all participants agreed with statements 4 and 9 (see Table. 1). The highest level of disagreement (28%) was seen in statement 10 regarding the shared responsibility and accountability of stakeholders for student learning.

Table 1

Shared and Supportive Leadership

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
1 The staff is consistently involved in discussion and making decisions about most school issues.		2 (8%)	20 (80%)	3 (12%)
2 The principal incorporates advice from staff to make decisions.	1 (4%)	2 (8%)	19 (76%)	3 (12%)
3 The staff has access to key information.		1 (4%)	22 (88%)	2 (8%)
4 The principal is proactive and addresses areas where support is needed.			22 (88%)	3 (12%)
5 Opportunities are provided for staff to initiate change.		5 (20%)	19 (76%)	1 (4%)
6 The principal shares responsibility and rewards for innovative actions.		3 (8%)	19 (76%)	3 (12%)
7 The principal participates democratically with staff sharing power and authority.	1 (4%)	3 (8%)	20 (80%)	1 (4%)
8 Leadership is promoted and nurtured among staff.		2 (8%)	20 (80%)	3 (12%)
9 Decision making takes place through committees and communication across grade and subject areas.			20 (80%)	5 (20%)
10 Stakeholders assume shared responsibility and accountability for student learning without evidence of imposed power and authority.	1 (4%)	6 (24%)	16 (64%)	2 (8%)

Under the *Shared Values and Vision* category, all participants agreed (statements 4, 9, and 14) that the principal is proactive in addressing areas where support is needed and decision making is communicative and aligned. However, 52% of teachers surveyed disagreed with statement 16: school goals focus on student learning beyond test scores and grade (see Table 2.)

Table 2

Shared Values and Vision

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
11 A collaborative process exists for developing a shared sense of values among staff.		2 (8%)	19 (76%)	4 (16%)
12 Shared values support norms of behavior that guide decisions about teaching and learning.		1 (4%)	19 (76%)	5 (20%)
13 The staff shares vision for school improvements that have an undeviating focus on student learning.		1 (4%)	17 (68%)	7 (28%)
14 Decisions are made in alignment with the school's values and vision.			20 (80%)	5 (20%)
15 A collaborative process exists for developing a shared vision among staff.		2 (8%)	18 (72%)	5 (20%)
16 School goals focus on student learning beyond test scores and grades.	1 (4%)	12 (48%)	10 (40%)	2 (8%)
17 Policies and programs are aligned to the school's vision.		1 (4%)	21 (84%)	3 (12%)
18 Stakeholders are actively involved in creating high expectations that serve to increase student achievement.		8 (32%)	16 (64%)	1 (4%)

The *Collective Learning and Application* portion of the questionnaire yielded the most positive results with 60% of participants selecting "agree" and 40% of participants selecting "strongly agree" to statement 26 (see Table 3). Teachers firmly believe the school staff is committed to programs that enhance learning. On the other hand, 36% of participants feel the school staff and other stakeholders are not working together to apply new knowledge and solve problems (statement 25).

Table 3

Collective Learning and Application

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
19 The staff works together to seek knowledge, skills, and strategies and apply this new learning to their work.		1 (4%)	15 (60%)	9 (36%)
20 Collegial relationships exist among staff that reflects commitment to school improvement efforts.			18 (72%)	7 (28%)
21 The staff plans and works together to search for solutions to address diverse student needs.		1 (4%)	19 (76%)	5 (20%)
22 A variety of opportunities and structures exist for collective learning through open dialogue.		1 (4%)	21 (84%)	3 (12%)
23 The staff engages in dialogue that reflects a respect for diverse ideas that lead to continued inquiry.		3 (12%)	20 (80%)	2 (8%)
24 Professional development focuses on teaching and learning.		1 (4%)	19 (76%)	5 (20%)
25 School staff and stakeholders learn together and apply new knowledge to solve problems.		9 (36%)	15 (60%)	1 (4%)
26 School staff is committed to programs that enhance learning.			15 (60%)	10 (40%)

Thirty-two percent of participants disagreed with statement 27 in the *Shared Personal Practice* section (see Table 4). Although teachers feel comfortable sharing ideas and working collaboratively with their peers, one-third of teachers believe there is little opportunity to observe their peers and offer encouragement.

Table 4

Shared Personal Practice

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
27 Opportunities exist for staff to observe peers and offer encouragement.	8 (32%)	13 (52%)	4 (16%)	
28 The staff provides feedback to peers related to instructional practices.	7 (28%)	13 (52%)	5 (20%)	
29 The staff informally shares ideas and suggestions for improving student learning.	1 (4%)	15 (60%)	9 (36%)	
30 The staff collaboratively reviews student work to share and improve instructional practices.	2 (8%)	18 (72%)	5 (20%)	
31 Opportunities exist for coaching and mentoring.	2 (8%)	15 (60%)	8 (32%)	
32 Individuals and teams have the opportunity to apply learning and share the results of their practices.	1 (4%)	17 (68%)	7 (28%)	

All participants agreed with statement 33 under the *Supportive Conditions - Relationships* category (see Table 5). Obviously, caring relationships built on trust and respect, exist between teachers and students. Twenty-eight percent of participants disagreed with statement 36, which referred to a sustained and unified effort to embed change.

Table 5

Supportive Conditions - Relationships

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
33 Caring relationships exist among staff and students that are built on trust and respect.			18 (72%)	7 (28%)
34 A culture of trust and respect exists for taking risks.	1 (4%)	17 (68%)	7 (28%)	
35 Outstanding achievement is recognized and celebrated regularly in our school.	2 (8%)	16 (64%)	7 (28%)	
36 School staff and stakeholders exhibit a sustained and unified effort to embed change into the culture of the school.	7 (28%)	14 (56%)	4 (16%)	

In the final portion of the questionnaire, *Supportive Condition - Structures*, all 25 participants agreed that communication systems promote a flow of information among staff (statement 44) (see Table 6). Interestingly, 8 participants (28%) disagreed with statement 42: the school facility is clean, attractive and inviting.

Table 6

Supportive Conditions - Structures

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
37 Time is provided to facilitate collaborative work.	4 (16%)	17 (68%)	4 (16%)	
38 The school schedule promotes collective learning and shared practice.	4 (16%)	16 (64%)	5 (20%)	
39 Fiscal resources are available for professional development.	2 (8%)	22 (88%)	1 (4%)	
40 Appropriate technology and instructional materials are available to staff.	1 (4%)	19 (76%)	5 (20%)	
41 Resource people provide expertise and support for continuous learning.	6 (24%)	17 (68%)	2 (8%)	
42 The school facility is clean, attractive and inviting.	3 (8%)	5 (20%)	15 (60%)	2 (8%)
43 The proximity of grade level and department personnel allows for ease in collaborating with colleagues.	1 (4%)	17 (68%)	7 (28%)	
44 Communication systems promote a flow of information among staff.			20 (80%)	5 (20%)
45 Communication systems promote a flow of information across the entire school community, including central office personnel, parents, and community members.	4 (16%)	15 (60%)	6 (24%)	

Implications and Recommendations

Although student success can be measured in a variety of ways, achievement test scores are typically the primary factor that determines whether or not a school is considered successful. Constantly, schools are bombarded with programs guaranteeing student success; however, individuals are quickly finding that new programs do not automatically equate high test scores.

Rather than spending more money to implement yet another “new and improved” program, this study placed a greater emphasis on the people already involved in the school. The researchers set out to answer the following question: (1) Does Elementary School A possess the qualities of a professional learning community? After a thorough analysis of the descriptive data collected, it is clear that Elementary School A is poised and ready to operate as a professional learning community.

Initially, numerous participants expressed that they were not familiar with the term “professional learning community.” Regardless of their prior knowledge, the results of the survey revealed an extremely high percentage of agreement with the overall components of the survey: approximately 88%. The majority of faculty members at Elementary School A believe that the school community works collaboratively to meet the unique needs of every child.

The researchers discovered two areas of concern. First, more than half of teachers surveyed (52%) disagreed with the following statement: “School goals focus on student learning beyond test scores and grades.” Apparently, a majority of teachers believe Elementary School A is primarily concerned with short-term achievement rather than long-term success. Secondly, 28% of participants expressed concern over the cleanliness and attractiveness of the school facility. A safe and positive school environment plays a large role in the effectiveness of a school.

Although Elementary School A is ready to “collaborate to educate,” the development of a true professional learning community will not happen automatically. The principal must take advantage of this fertile soil and plant the seeds of effective communication and collaboration. More time needs to be set aside for teachers to share ideas, discuss concerns, and solve problems collaboratively. Teachers must learn to work as a team, striving to meet the goals of the entire

school. The Site-Based Decision-Making Committee needs to be restructured to accommodate greater parent and community involvement. With strong guidance and supportive leadership, Elementary School A has the potential to become a professional learning community dedicated to student success.

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