Essays in Education

Professional Learning Communities to Increase Student Achievement

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Abstract

Professional learning communities have long been used in many academic settings to improve student achievement and to help a diverse staff become a team. At the school being researched, a professional learning community will be developed whose specific purpose is to work on the problem of flagging student achievement and bring together the educational staff for the purpose of raising achievement and finding success in a hard to teach area.

Academic Setting

Factors and Considerations

There are major problems in the academic setting that is the centerpiece of this project. High crime, low socio-economic status, lack of teacher and administrative motivation, poor parent communication, all add up to a troubled school that has low test scores and low hopes for the future. Couple that with the problem of adequate yearly progress, state and federal funding issues, and a whole host of other problems, and what happens is students do not succeed despite teachers trying their hardest and never understanding why things do not improve and usually blaming the administration for the problem.

With all the recent pushing of educational reform, the federal No Child Left Behind act, the emphasis on teacher credentialing and training, and the growing public clamor for better and more efficient education, it is small wonder that in a school that may have once been considered to be at the worst average is now considered to be a failing school.

The school in question has traditionally performed low on all major achievement tests due to several factors that come into play. One major factor is the student population is very low in socio-economic status (SES). SES plays a role in low test scores due to the fact that many of the parents of the students are working more than one job, many of the parents do not speak English or at the very minimum speak English very poorly, which creates a communication problem between the school and the community. Another major factor is the rise in neighborhood crime that has not left the school untouched. In the 2005-06 school year, 72 laptop computers, 50 LCD projectors and many other smaller items were stolen from the school. Break-ins were a regular feature of the weekend and even weeknights, creating an environment of distrust in the community.

The school has steadily improved its test scores, yet since the implementation of No Child Left Behind in 2001, the scores have not met adequate yearly progress making the school in danger of losing federal funds or a complete takeover if things to not improve. The faculty of

the school is well trained, yet has long felt hampered by the lack of voice in changing the school climate. Under the Federal NCLB law, the intent is to raise the achievement of minorities and other sub-groups in the school. "The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 is a landmark in education reform designed to improve student achievement and change the culture of America's schools" (U.S. Department of Education, 2002, p.3).

According to the U.S. Department of Education, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), implemented in 1965 and created such programs as Title I (of which the study school has greatly benefited), American students still lag behind many of their foreign counterparts and there is a growing demand for American students to keep up (p. ix). The NCLB act encompassed four major core principles, "stronger accountability for results; greater flexibility for states, school districts and schools in the use of federal funds; more choices for parents of children from disadvantaged backgrounds; and an emphasis on teaching methods that have been demonstrated to work" (p. 3). These core principles of NCLB have created higher demand on quantitative data that is now driving much of the decision making in the academic settings. While the last test results for the school showed a 9 point increase in its API or Academic Performance Index, just three points away from making AYP or Adequate Yearly Performance, growth must meet a certain calculable minimum to keep a school out of a "needs to improve" process, of which the study school is now in year four.
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Discussion

Many of the teachers at the school, including the school administration, have encouraged and hoped for the implementation of professional learning communities in the hopes that a more motivated and better equipped faculty will be able to meet the growing challenges. There has been a growing awareness among the faculty and staff that the increasing demands place on the educational environment has created a great rise in employee stress and worry. So many pieces of paper are passed to teachers weekly that getting everything done and finding time to teach has been a very major growing concern. One of the major changes that occurred in the 2006-07 school year is a school boundary change which has resulted in an influx of higher SES students who have shown greater academic achievement. The school faculty and administration hopes to capitalize on this change and improve student achievement to bring the students to meet their adequate yearly progress. It is critical to keep in mind however, that a boundary change will not be the answer to higher student achievement; however it may be a small contributing factor. As NCLB ages (bearing in mind that NCLB was signed into law in 2002), more students are benefiting from its effects and are entering into the middle grades better prepared and more able to handle the rigorous and fast moving curriculum that is now in place.

Another major shift has been perhaps a more dramatic outward attention grabber, at minimum from the standpoint of some educational stakeholders such as parents and community groups. The entire school district went from a year-round calendar with four tracks, to a traditional calendar where all students and all teachers are on at the same time. This shift has made the implementation of professional learning communities even more viable now that there is no longer any need to repeat information, training, etc. across the four tracks. Now all the faculty and students benefit from the same material and training together. This calendar shift has also dramatically changed another dynamic that was a major force in the schools. During the year-round scheduling, there was effectively four schools within the walls of one campus. Now

under the more traditional (yet slightly modified) calendar, the staff and students have been forced to segregate, for lack of a better term. Given this shift and several other factors not related to the calendar but more in keeping with NCLB compliance, the faculty implemented in the school year prior to the new calendar, a reorganization committee to work on a re-organizational plan. One change that has already been implemented that will further assist in the development of professional learning communities is the twice monthly flex day where the school is on a minimum day schedule and the portion of the day that was once instructional time is now staff development and in-service time. There has also been a slight increase in instructional time daily, among a few other changes that have been made by the faculty at large.

Action Plan

Identify the Problem

Student achievement has become quite a buzz word in the educational community over the past several years. The problem that has risen, however, is just how to implement and promote a rise in student achievement, while allowing for academic diversity and promoting the growing multicultural environment and awareness in the educational setting. With the implementation of No Child Left Behind (NCLB), it is now a major concern of administrators and educators to find ways to raise test scores. The term "teaching to the test" has sadly become a favorite catch phrase to indicate what is occurring in an average classroom. The increasing clamor for the state standards has at times threatened to drown out learning opportunities. Faculty stress is also a major factor given that increase in pressure on numerical performance as opposed to more traditional, non-measurable achievement that was once the norm of educational assessment.

What has been of major concern is the does a students test score accurately reflect his understanding and comprehension? What impact do teachers and administrators have on this comprehension, and how can teachers work together to find a solution? What does a school do with a student population that is either not motivated or is poorly motivated towards academic excellence? All of these questions can be met rather effectively in the use and implementation of professional learning communities.

Collaboration

One suggested method that has been receiving a great deal of attention recently is the concept of professional learning communities, or PLC's. In a PLC, educators and administrators collaborate together in teams or communities to seek out common ground and in so doing help to find problems and solutions, together. As can be seen in a review of the available literature, the professional learning model is quickly developing into a major cornerstone of educational reform and is driving much of the professional discussion that is focusing on student achievement. Collaborative efforts may seem at first to be hard to organize and keep going, yet under the PLC model of small groups working together within a larger group, the collaborative teams can be organized as either academic, grade level, or any other sub group that works well within the framework of what the PLC's are hoping to accomplish. This paper will focus on the PLC model and how it can be used effectively to answer the identified problems of student achievement, student motivation, decreasing faculty stress, and faculty/administrative collaboration.

Research Method

A very practical research method that has been receiving a great deal of attention is that of participatory action research or PAR. Participatory research is emerging as a method to help not only empower underprivileged people, but in fact is "emerging as a self-conscious way of empowering people to take effective action toward improving conditions in their [own] lives" (Park, 1993). This form of research has quite high reaching goals, in that it explicitly works towards promoting human dignity and freedom through empowerment and acting as a "catalytic intervention in social transformative processes" (Park, 1993). Through the use of collaborative PLC's and participatory research, the research in this action plan will be able to seek out in an empowered fashion a solution to the problem, making sure that each major stakeholder in the educational environment does not feel left out of the decision making process but each individual and collective voice is heard and counts

A brief overview of the PAR process shows how effective a strategy of research and implementing that strategy into the PLC process can be. As noted at The Third World Encounter on Participatory Research, held in the Philippines in 1989, PAR can be distilled into sixteen basic tenets. All sixteen tenets will not be discussed in this paper, however several key tenets are important to be discussed and will contribute to the PLC model.

Participatory research always starts small, in small groups, and begins to work only on minor changes that will help the group (or in this case the PLC) to begin to work together collaboratively (another of the sixteen tenets) and establish itself as a learning body that works towards achieving larger goals over time. PAR helps it's participants to develop critical analysis of the institutional structures, as well as helping the participants to objectify their experiences and put them into records that help in both reflecting on the institutional and group practices themselves and how the action research process is going (McTaggert, 1989).

PAR is a much larger process that what can be discussed here, however it is important to point out several of the distinguishing characteristics that present why the use of PAR is an effective method of research that supports and sustains the professional learning community.

Conduct a Literature Review

Part of the process of any sound action plan is to conduct a literature review to seek out information and sources of support for implementation strategies. Research shows that PLC's do work. They may not work all at once, and sometimes they fail because of faculty or administrative disinterest, yet they do work. This literature review will focus on the efficacy of PLC's and on the concepts of faculty and administrative collaboration and will seek out how they have effectively managed change in educational settings.

Review Data

Another step in the action plan is to compile and review available testing data and other empirical data that can be used to set baselines and benchmarks to help measure student achievement as the plan is carried out. This is actually a three step process consisting of reviewing available data, collecting any new data necessary and analyzing the data and is all part of the participatory process. In support of this step of the action plan to implement the PLC, one of the tenets of PAR according to McTaggert is "Participatory action research allows and

requires participants to build records of their improvements" (1989) and also use the gathered evidence and records to support their's and each others claims.

Present Findings

Once all the data is fully gathered and compiled from data and the literature review, a succinct report of the action plan and implementation strategies will be written and presented to the administration for final approval. This step also fits well into the PAR model because of the political nature of both a PLC and a action research undertaking. It will be important that any findings that are presented are given in proper context and in consideration of long held beliefs and "factions" that exist in an education setting (McTaggert, 1989).

Implementation

The hardest part of any action plan is implementation. Because this plan seeks to form professional learning communities to boost student achievement, a first major step would be to form PLC's in the school, present the action plan and get to work as a group to implement the plan. It must be considered that the educational environment can be compared to fiefdoms of the middle ages. Each department or academic team has its own way of doing things, and these groups have a certain level of buy-in to the status quo. This makes implementation very difficult, though it is not an insurmountable task if every group is represented in not only the research but also in the PLC.

Professional Learning Communities Literature Review

Introduction

Professional learning communities (PLC) are a growing phenomenon in educational settings. Many schools and school leaders, seeking reform or new ways of measuring and increasing student achievement have increasingly looked toward the PLC model as an innovative means of inviting meaningful and lasting reform. While there are many outcomes and goals surrounding professional learning communities, the literature identifies four key themes that make the PLC successful.

In a review of the literature, four major themes presented themselves, two of which will be the discussion in this literature review: teachers feel unsupported in reform efforts, teachers need time to collaborate in order to promote effectiveness, teacher collaboration must be continuous and reinforced, and principals or site administrators need to model leaning for the PLC model to work. The two major themes that will be discussed have been chosen because they directly relate to the workplace.

Teacher Support

According to Buffum and Hinman, many teachers feel as if they are pawns in a larger game of chess. Districts, administrators, state standards, and a whole array of outside influences can be seen as placing obstacles in front of teachers and preventing them from effectively doing their job (2006). Additionally, a school environment can be a very fragmented place, according to Riley and Stoll (2004). They point out several barriers to implementing a PLC model such as subject areas, some subject areas having precedence over others, "physical layout of some schools [inhibit] collaborative activity (Riley & Stoll, 2004, p. 35)." The very nature of teaching in which has always been a "private activity carried out within a Western culture that is far more

individualistic than many societies in the East (Riley & Stoll, 2004, p. 35).

Comparatively, Thompson, Gregg and Niska concur with the sentiments of Riley and Stoll when they point out how many educators often feel as if the traditional model of staff development where "new ideas that came from someone else without teacher input (2004, para. 17)" are often seen as a waste of time and not true support. They go on to relate how teachers, even when those in charge feel they are promoting collaboration, are rarely given an opportunity to put into the base of knowledge their own experiences and creating their own meaning (2004).

In an interesting note on the topic by Engstrom and Danielson, they point out that the U.S. Department of Education has as one of its goals the "need to support teachers by calling for job-embedded support mechanisms that tie teacher learning to student achievement (2004, p. 170). The growing need for support, especially in the context of the PLC, is an increasing concern that is not limited in scope or size. Researchers are raising other major concerns in the literature.

Collaboration Time

Another major issue that the literature demonstrates is the availability of time teachers and others need in order to be effective in their collaboration and implementation of a PLC. Instructional minute, of which most states mandate in law daily or weekly minimums, has been shrinking due to extra-curricular activities and announcements, to name a few. Some schools, as demonstrated by Buffum and Hinman, are changing their bell-schedules to build in professional development time (2004). Riley and Stoll bemoan the fact that even some of the best-devised PLC's suffer because of insufficient time set aside. They argue that if a PLC is to mature into a worthwhile professional activity, time must be a priority, and both school leaders and its faculty must follow through on their commitments.

Thompson, Peltier and Perrault consider the issue of time systems thinking (2004). Systems thinking is the ability to see an organization as a complex, interdependent organization and requires school leaders to recognize that complexity and interdependency (2004, p. 222). The systems in place in the educational setting are rather apparent, departments clamoring for precedence, grade levels, permanent versus non permanent teachers, etc. Change in the system must occur if PLC's are to be effective, and the school and district must be "proactive rather than reactive when they are making substantive changes in programs and practices (para. 17)." One systems change that is proposed in the study done by Engstrom and Danielson (2006) is to create common planning times between teams of teachers, or "providing release time on a regular basis for the work (Engstrom & Danielson, 2006, p. 172).

Literature Review Conclusion

While much can be said of the implementation and planning necessary to put into place a professional learning community, two major themes that seem, according to the literature, to be the most prevailing issues, teacher support and time, have resounding impact for present and future collaborative models and need to be included in already developed professional development materials. The researchers and literature surveyed for this paper is just the tip of a growing iceberg of literature that points out how critical it is that appropriate attention to the swirling issues be given due consideration.

Approval Plan

The best devised plan, poorly implemented and lacking administrative approval, will fail. In fact, while the action plan is being fully developed, administrative approval should be sought at all steps to ensure that once the plan begins implementation, it will be put to work instead of shelved for a future that is not assured. Gaining administrative approval or at the very least administrative interest after each step of the process may seem burdensome and even to some persons involved in the process counterintuitive, it would be a shame for an entire organizational plan to be created, studied and prepared, for it to not be implemented because of administrative concern of outright denial of the PLC's work. After initial approval to form the PLC and begin the work, considerations such as time-frame, budget and personnel need to be considered and appropriate proposals made.

In the educational environment getting appropriate and sufficient time for the amount of research and planning that will need to take place is difficult at best. Since the implementation of the flex day schedule, this time will be less of a burden on instructional time. Additionally, despite the fact that the PLC model is starting small, the flex days can be used to promote faculty buy-in and support that will ensure that the entire work will not crash and burn because of enough support. In the case of the school where this plan would be put to use, the school Cabinet would need to approve budget expenditures and the like for the process to go forth. The school's Cabinet makes most of the major decisions on funding and school-wide student or faculty activities. Getting the support of this group will be critical as one of the more important sub-groups within the school.

Strategies

Because a professional learning community takes as essentially as it's research method that of participatory research, one technique that will be useful in gaining administrative approval throughout the process from planning to evaluation, gathering as much support from the faculty and parents would be a strategy that will work well in an academic setting. The use of a participatory research method gains its strength because the research and implementation is not person centered but community centered. (Park, 1993). The use of a participatory research model in gathering support for approval will allow for individual voices to be heard in a more powerful forum.

Evaluation

No plan for change would be complete without evaluation of the plan and the results achieved from the implementation of the plan. If as in this example, the plan involves the use of professional learning communities to assist in raising student achievement, then the evaluation of that plan should also take the form of a PLC, while not forgetting the action research methods used to keep everything flowing well and avoid clashing with the by now established procedures. Evaluation techniques that can be used in a PLC model stem from the same approach taken in all aspects of the PLC, collaboration that supports a goal. The evaluative model that is used should also be in support of the PLC goals and objectives. This paper outlines a multi-step process in the

evaluation of records, data and other qualitative and quantitative information that can be readily accessed or gathered with perhaps only minimal effort on the part of the PLC.

Step One – Data Gathering

The first step in evaluating an action plan's success or failure is to gather data that will help in that evaluation and also assist in determining if proper procedures were put into place to allow for effective evaluation. Another effective use of data that is gathered, especially if the goals and objectives of a PLC are diverse, is data that supports the opinions of the members of the PLC. Researchers and data gathers of course need to be careful in their research techniques that their methods of data collection do not skew the results and dramatically affect the PLC and the PAR process and in so doing damage the outcome of the entire process.

After a period of time, in this case one full school year would be a good time frame to use, the PLC that designed and implemented the achievement plan should reconvene and begin the process of collecting such measures as testing data, teacher feedback, etc. Once the data that the PLC believes is necessary, and is in accordance with the implemented action plan, is gathered, then step two in this evaluation can begin.

Step Two – Data Evaluation and Conclusions

One extremely effective way to measure growth, especially if the major data available is testing data, which by nature is usually quantitative, is to compare the new information against previous school years in which the action plan was not implemented or perhaps even devised yet. By comparing the data to previous years, it is possible to measure the growth and determine if a change has indeed occurred, thereby creating a testing baseline that is an effective tool in demonstrating a rise in achievement, even if measurable data such as can be found in state testing scores does not show as large or marked a rise.

Once the data has been evaluated, it would need to be compiled into a report that can be presented to the administration and faculty for review. It would also be necessary that the PLC continue with the participatory research model and solicit real feedback from the faculty, administration and parents so that the process continues and does not stop after some success has been achieved.

Step Three – Continuing Implementation

A professional learning community is more of a process than a product. Stopping the efforts that have brought change would damage the school environment and could result in declining achievement. As stated previously, it is imperative that as part of this action plan for increasing student achievement, successful continuing implementation occurs to ensure that student achievement continues to rise and not become stagnant or recede. One strategy that could be most effective is to make the professional learning community model used a standing committee and continued discussion and data gathering using the participatory model continue.

Another effective strategy of continuing implementation is to break the faculty into it's natural sub-groups such as departments, academic teams, grade levels, etc., and once the process of a PLC has been developed and fine tuned for the unique atmosphere of the school, each sub-group then begins to identify outcomes and objectives, and using similar or the same procedures

that have already been demonstrated to be effective, begin working on changing other aspects of the educational environment.

Conclusion

After careful review of the literature in support of the use of PLC's in increasing student achievement, after constructing an action plan and an evaluation plan that can be effective to promote faculty collaboration and an atmosphere of trust, it can be seen that while the use of this plan for change may not completely reverse the negative trends that have so severely impacted student achievement, if nothing is done or if the status quo is observed, student achievement will continue to slide instead of improve. It is time that educators begin to break themselves of the habit of academic freedom and isolation and begin to work together.

A professional learning community that utilizes the action research methods that bring empowerment and focus to a group, large or small, can be shown through the literature and discussion to be effective and perhaps what is needed in the current cultural and political environment that is in the classroom and the staff lounges of schools.

NCLB is not going away anytime in the near future. It is incumbent on educators to adapt to the demands placed on them and help our students achieve academic excellence. Working together, collaboratively, both administration and faculty, sends the right picture to the community and the students. It shows the stakeholders that while there are still problems in the school, the school is committed to improving the lives of its student population. Blending the divergent goals of student achievement with the views and ideas of a diverse faculty and administration will not be an easy task. Yet educators cannot afford to let these issues deter them from seeking what all good teachers want at the end of the school year, successful students. It will not be an easy path to solve the problem of low achievement, yet as a group, a group that works together towards a common goal, solving the achievement gap can be a first yet vital step in creating an atmosphere where real learning occurs and young lives are changed. After all, is not the changing and molding of young lives why most teachers teach?

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