

PROMOTING ORGANIZATIONAL AND CULTURAL CHANGE IN NEW BRUNSWICK SCHOOLS

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School systems around the world are faced with high expectations for student achievement to meet the learning needs of the 21st century. To meet these expectations, the concept of *professional learning communities* (PLCs) is gaining widespread acceptance among educators and policy makers. Accordingly, the New Brunswick Department of Education's (2007) document *When Kids Come First* included the goal: "Ensure the professional learning communities concept is expanded throughout the K-12 system" (p. 14). Core elements of PLCs include common vision and values, shared decision-making, collaborative practice, collective responsibility, and a focus on learning. However, implementation of these elements of PLCs requires a significant commitment to organizational and cultural change within school systems. Such change in education often faces challenges and obstacles.

In 2006, we received research funding to conduct a provincial study entitled *Institutional Barriers to Tri-Level Educational Reform*. The purpose of our study was to examine barriers to the implementation of PLCs at three levels of the school system (school, district, and province) and to create assessment tools that could be used by schools, school districts, and provincial departments of education to identify the extent to which they were operating according to PLC principles. For educators at each level of the school system, our goal was to create a questionnaire that they could complete to help them assess their own organizational policies, practices, structures, and culture according to the key characteristics of PLCs. We made a deliberate choice to work at three levels of the school system because research indicates that sustainable, large-scale reform in education requires commitment, support, and modelling at all levels of the school system. This view runs counter to the experience and practice in many school jurisdictions of major educational reform being imposed from government or educational leaders upon schools, teachers, and students, often referred to as *top-down reform*. Because of the complexity of schools and school systems, such reform

initiatives have been largely unsuccessful in bringing about sustained improvements in student learning.

When we began our project, we were determined to model the core principles of PLCs as we worked with teams of educators at each level of the system. This included building trust, working collaboratively, and promoting learning among all participants in the process. To build trust among all participants in our work, we continually emphasized that the instruments that we were creating would be for internal use only. In other words, if the members of a school staff chose to use the instrument, then the report generated from their responses would be shared only within that school and not with any external body in any identifiable way, unless the school chose to do so. This was very important so that teachers in a school, for example, could answer questions honestly about the culture of their school without fear of external reprisals or evaluation. Our collaborative efforts at each level occurred primarily in our work with teams of educators and stakeholders at all stages of development, testing, and administration of the questionnaires. In meetings with our research teams, everything was on the table for discussion with respect to topics, format, and wording of questions, and this collaboration has contributed to the quality and usefulness of the instruments.

The issue of individual and collective learning is a significant feature of the PLC concept. Our intention for this study was to promote organizational change in New Brunswick schools through the implementation of PLCs. We share the following examples of how our work has promoted learning and change in our school system at each level.

School-level example. In working with school teams to develop the school instrument, we had opportunities to discuss the concept of PLCs with teachers and principals. We learned that the term PLC had become part of the vocabulary of many schools and districts, but with widely varying interpretations and practices. As researchers have found elsewhere, some educators would claim that any activity performed by teachers in a group constitutes a PLC. We could use the definitions of PLCs in the research literature to show teachers that an activity lacking one or more of the key PLC features, particularly the shared responsibility for decision-making and focus on learning, could not be considered a true PLC.

District-level example. In our work with school districts, our most interesting observation was the perceived role of principals. In a school-based understanding of PLCs, a key characteristic is that teachers share responsibility for the interests and needs of the whole school with the school administration team, including the principal. By analogy, we promoted during our work with the district research teams the idea that, according to principles of PLCs, the principals of each school in the district needed to share responsibility for the whole district with the district office administrators, including the superintendent. When we proposed the term *district*

level educators to describe both principals and district office educators, the embedded hierarchical culture of school districts came to light in views expressed by district office staff and principals. Through collaborative work with the district team members, we eventually settled on the term *educational leaders in the district* and we included a definition of the term on all copies of the questionnaire for greater clarity. In our view, the most important outcome of the discussion both within our team and among these leaders was an enhanced understanding that principals and district office staff need to share leadership and work collaboratively to model PLC principles within a school district.

Provincial-level example. An interesting question that arose in our work on the provincial questionnaire was this: Who are the educational leaders in the province? Although we had originally planned to work only with educators in the Department of Education and later with representatives of superintendents and directors of education, our collaborative discussions led to the inclusion of the New Brunswick Teachers' Association and the District Education Councils in our provincial research team. In the process of developing the provincial instrument with these four groups of provincial education leaders, we believe that a valuable outcome will be enhanced relationships and shared learning that will benefit all aspects of New Brunswick education.

The move in the school system towards PLCs represents a significant organizational and cultural change at all levels. We believe that our work has contributed to the promotion of the principles of collaborative practice, supportive relationships, and collective learning across our province.

Reference

New Brunswick Department of Education. 2007. *When kids come first*. Retrieved on September 25, 2010 from http://www.gnb.ca/0000/publications/comm/4578_report_E.pdf