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Professional Learning Communities:  
A Case Study of the Implementation of PLCs at an Elementary School Based on  
Huffman and Hipp's Five Dimensions and Critical Attributes

By  
Shannon Long

A Dissertation Submitted to the  
Gardner-Webb University School of Education  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Doctor of Education

Gardner-Webb University  
August 2009

## Approval Page

This dissertation was submitted by Shannon Long under the direction of the persons listed below. It was submitted to the Gardner-Webb University School of Education and approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education at Gardner-Webb University.

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## Abstract

Professional Learning Communities: A Case Study of the Implementation of PLCs at an Elementary School Based on Huffman and Hipp's Five Dimensions and Critical Attributes. Long, Shannon, 2009: Dissertation, Gardner-Webb University, Professional Learning Communities/Teacher Perception/Professional Development

The purpose of this case study was to examine the change in perceptions of instructional staff in regards to five dimensions as it proceeded in establishing a professional learning community. The researcher utilized focused interview sessions, group interview questionnaires, and Huffman and Hipp's Professional Learning Survey to determine how the staff perceived the implementation of professional learning communities. The findings of this study will help the school of study determine the next steps of their journey of implementing professional learning communities.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

### *Introduction*

In recent years, conversations dealing with accountability for student achievement have become more prevalent in our national educational system. There are accountability standards in place for all 50 states, and the passage of the No Child Left Behind in 2001 has further defined national expectations for improved student achievement (NCLB, 2002).

The concept of a “professional learning community” (PLC) has become increasingly popular among educators in recent years. Through its implementation, many researchers believe that student achievement can improve in schools. The term PLC has several definitions and can take different forms; however, researchers have identified particular components that must be in place for an organization to function as a learning community (Dufour, 2004; Hord, 1997a; Lambert, 1997). This study uses Huffman and Hipp’s (2003) five dimensions and critical attributes to determine the change of an instructional staff’s perceptions of professional learning communities (PLCs). Data were collected and analyzed in order to verify the existence of a professional learning community in this school and whether its existence is indeed in place according to staff perceptions.

### *Statement of the Problem*

The school district of study began to provide training to schools in the 2008-2009 school year in the implementation of a PLC. Sustained and ongoing support is being given to each school throughout its first year of implementation and thereafter. Only a few schools have embarked on all aspects of the comprehensive campaign to build a PLC at their school. The school that was the focus of this study was in its first year of

implementation of PLCs. This school was actively implementing the PLC concept and anticipated that the implementation of the professional learning concept would move them forward in increasing student achievement in all tested subject areas.

### *School Characteristics*

The school district of interest, located in the southwest region of the state, was the seventh largest K-12 school system in North Carolina with a student population of 33,000 (Gaston County Schools, 2009). During the 2007-2008 school year, 42 of the 53 schools in the school district made expected growth and 19 achieved high growth. The district's average Student Assessment Test score for the 2007-2008 school year was 1,445 combined total of mathematics, verbal, and writing sections of the SAT, which was a 12-point jump from the previous year. There have been significant gains at all levels within the school system over the past few years (Gaston County Schools, 2008). However, the elementary school where the research took place did not show significant gains over the past 3 years. Overall math scores increased 10.1% between the 2006-2007 and the 2008-2009 years. The reading scores showed a tremendous decrease with a 27.3% drop in test scores over the same 3-year period.

The elementary school in this study was located in the southwestern part of North Carolina in a suburban setting. The school served kindergarten through fifth-grade students with a total enrollment of 558 students. There were 37 teachers and 18 support personnel who were directly involved instructionally with the students. Of these teachers, 100% were highly qualified and 19% had advanced degrees. This elementary school had seven National Board Certified teachers. Sixty-five percent of the educators in this school had 10 or more years of experience, 19% had 4 to 10 years of experience and 16% had 3 or less years of experience. The administration was stable over 3 years.



Table 1 shows that the teaching experience at the school of study during the 2008-2009 school year was primarily comprised of experienced teachers and only 16% of the teachers had less than 3 years experience. With only a 1% teacher turnover rate, the staff maintained stability.

Table 1

*Teaching Experience at School of Study 2008-2009*

	< 3 Years	4 – 10 Years	10+ Years
Our School	16%	19%	65%
District	24%	23%	52%
State	24%	29%	47%

*Note.* Public Schools of North Carolina, 2009.

The school of study had a higher percent of white students than the district, but was very near the district average in all other areas (see Table 2). The school boasted an average daily attendance rate of 95.88%.

Table 2

*Race Percentages at School of Study*

	Am. Indian	Asian	Hispanic	Black	White	Multi. Racial
School	.18%	1.58%	7.22%	13.38%	75.35%	2.29%
District	.21%	1.45%	7.47%	20.34%	68.19%	2.34%

*Note.* Public Schools of North Carolina, 2009; see Table 3.

The state of North Carolina categorizes all public schools based on the percentage of students who are performing on grade level. The state also evaluates whether students have learned what is expected of them according to state-established guidelines. The school of study received the ranking of “School of Progress” for the 2007-2008 school

year. Within the district of study, 48% of schools received this same designation. At the state level, 51% of schools received this performance level.

Table 3

*Performance Ratings*

Category	Performance rating
Honor School of Excellence	At least 90% or more of their students performing at grade level and have made adequate yearly progress (AYP)
School Of Excellence	90% or more of their students performing at grade level
School Of Distinction	80% to 90% of their students performing at grade level
Schools of Progress	60% to 80% of their students performing at grade level
No Recognition School	Least 60% to 100% of their students performing at grade level
Priority School	At least 50% to 60% of their students performing at grade level or less than 50% at grade level
Low Performing School	Less than 50% at grade level

*Note.* Public Schools of North Carolina, 2008.

In Table 4, the scores for the 2008-2009 school year are shown for the school of study. The overall test scores for this school did not increase tremendously over the past 3 years. Actually, reading scores dropped significantly. The school did not work collaboratively towards increasing test scores and the implementation of PLCs will hopefully give this school the push needed to move towards a significant increase in student achievement. In comparison with statewide scores, the school of study was

generally below average in reading and math. There are specific areas of improvement that were identified in the school improvement plan for 2008-2009.

Table 4

*Test Scores of School of Study 2007-2008*

	Grade 3		Grade 4		Grade 5		Overall	
	Reading	Math	Reading	Math	Reading	Math	Reading	Math
School	66.7%	83.8%	57.3%	80.6%	63.2%	87.4%	62.3%	83.7%
# of Tests Taken	99	99	103	103	87	87	289	289
District	53.4%	73.6%	55.4%	69.6%	53.1%	68.9%	52.6%	66.4%
State	54.5%	73.2%	59.2%	72.8%	55.6%	69.6%	55.6%	69.9%

*Note.* Public Schools of North Carolina, 2008.

The stability of the teachers and administration has been constant over the years. This study investigated the possible relationship between the existence of a professional learning community and whether the instructional staff perceived the professional learning community concept as directly impacting the student learning within this time span. Student achievement results were not a part of this study.

#### *Purpose of the Project*

The purpose of this mixed methods case study was to determine the change of the perceptions of instructional staff concerning PLCs based on Huffman and Hipp's (2003) five dimensions and the critical attributes. The five dimensions to be studied were shared values and vision, collective learning and application, shared personal practice, and supportive conditions, both relationships and structures. The qualitative research method supported by a quantitative method used provided feedback to the administration, staff, and central office administration about the perception of the implementation of PLCs into their elementary school.

The case study took place at an elementary school in the southwest region of North Carolina. All participants in this study were considered instructional staff at the school of study and were actively involved in a school-based PLC. The information gathered during this study may help the school determine the next steps of their journey of implementing PLCs. Through the regular collaborative team meetings and better instructional quality in the classroom, the students may improve in their achievement levels in reading, math, and science subjects.

### *Background of the Problem*

*A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform* (1983) served as an eye opener for our country. Schools in the United States were often considered to be the most advanced in the world. *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform* reported that the U.S. schools were not measuring up to those in other countries. The call for change came from the American people and politicians. Since the late 1980s, changing teaching practices, culture, and management practices in public schools has been a central focus (Elmore, 2000).

In the book, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art & Practice of a Learning Organization*, Senge (1990) envisioned that a learning organization should be a place where individuals actively seek knowledge. The idea of businesses serving as learning organizations began to shift into school settings. Senge's teachings influenced the new thoughts of systems thinking, team learning, and shared vision.

Fullan (1991) recommended reorganizing schools into places where innovation and improvement are part of daily life in schools. Darling-Hammond (1996) added to the discussion, citing shared decision making as a factor related to reform and the transformation of teaching roles in some schools. Hord (1997a) worked with a school that

functioned as a professional learning community (PLC) and witnessed the high level of collaboration and support for change and improvement. The term *professional learning community* describes a collegial group of administrators and school staff who are united in their commitment to student learning. The community shares a vision, works and learns collaboratively, visits and reviews other classrooms, and participates in decision making (Hord, 1997b). The benefits to the staff and students include a reduced isolation of teachers, more informed and committed teachers, and academic gains for students. Hord (1997b) noted, “As an organizational arrangement, the professional learning community is seen as a powerful staff-development approach and a potent strategy for school change and improvement” (p. 72).

Educators committed to working collaboratively in ongoing processes of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve. Professional learning communities operate under the assumption that the key to improved learning for students is continuous job-embedded learning for educators. (Dufour, R., Dufour, R., & Eaker, R., & Many, T., 2006, p. 3)

Research suggests that teaching is often still conducted in isolated environments (Eaker, Dufour, & Dufour, 2002; Talbert & McLaughlin, 2003). Researchers who support the concepts of PLCs believe that collaboration and teamwork is the most effective means to achieve challenging goals of making a difference in student achievement (Reeves, 2005; Sparks, 2005). “Where single individuals may despair of accomplishing a monumental task, teams nurture, support, and inspire each other” (Tichy, 2002, p. 78). The benefits to the staff and students of implementing PLCs include a reduced isolation of teachers, better informed and committed teachers, and academic gains for students (Hord, 1997a). As an organizational arrangement, the PLC is seen as a powerful staff development

approach and an important strategy for school change and improvement.

### *Significance of the Problem*

The U.S. Department of Education's No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 made it necessary for schools to raise student achievement. "People accomplish more together than in isolation; regular, collective dialogue about and agreed upon focus sustains commitment and feeds purpose; effort thrives on concrete evidence of progress; and teachers learn best from other teachers" (Schmoker, 1999, p. 55). With the evolution of professional learning communities, the entire school staff comes together toward a single outcome, increasing the academic achievement of all students.

With the use of partnerships, technology, and diverse teams, staff members in public schools hope to improve instructional staff collegiality and at the same time increase student achievement by creating PLCs. With the growing interest in schools becoming learning organizations, the information gathered from this case study gives information to other schools that may be considering the implementation of professional learning communities.

### *Theoretical Framework*

There are several frameworks in the literature about PLCs. Tichy (1997) contended that great leaders are able to translate the purpose and priorities of their organizations into a few big ideas that unite people and give them a sense of direction in their day-to-day work. The framework of the PLC concept is based on Huffman and Hipp's (2003) five dimensions of PLCs, which were derived from Hord's (1997a) five components of a PLC (see Table 5), which include supportive and shared leadership, shared values and vision, collective creativity, shared practice, and supportive conditions. Supportive conditions include relationships and structures.

Table 5

*Dimensions of Professional Learning Community*

Hord	Huffman and Hipp
Supportive and shared leadership	Supportive and shared leadership
Shared values and vision	Shared values and vision
Collective creativity	Collective learning and application
Shared practice	Shared personal practice
Supportive conditions	Supportive conditions

Huffman and Hipp's (2003) dimensions also adapted the following three ideas, which shape the current case study. The three big ideas of PLCs as explained in Rick Dufour's book *Learning by Doing* (Dufour et al. 2006) are listed below:

1. We accept learning as the fundamental purpose of the school and therefore are willing to examine all practices in light of their impact on learning.
2. We are committed to working together to achieve our collective purpose.
3. We cultivate a collaborative culture through development of high-performing teams.

We assess our effectiveness on the basis of results rather than intentions. Individuals, teams, and schools seek relevant data and information and use that information to promote continuous improvement.

*Definitions of Terms*

The following operational definitions were used throughout the study:

*Professional Learning Community* (PLC). Educators committed to working

collaboratively in ongoing processes of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve. Professional learning communities operate under the assumption that the key to improved learning for students is continuous job-embedded learning for educators.

*Instructional Staff.* Certified and classified staff members who have direct impact on the teaching and learning process.

*Proficiency.* Percentage of students performing at or above grade level as measured by the North Carolina student accountability model.

*Student Achievement.* The performance composite of proficiency as defined by the North Carolina ABCs of Education. Schools are given designations based upon the percentage of students passing the end-of-grade tests in reading and math in Grades 3-5.

#### *Research Questions*

1. What changes in perception of the five dimensions of a professional learning community have occurred over the 9 months after the implementation of a PLC?
2. What are the strengths and weaknesses of the implementation of a professional learning community as perceived by the instructional staff?
3. What are the critical next steps identified by the instructional staff that need to be taken further to advance the professional learning community?

#### *Summary*

“If schools want to enhance their organizational capacity to boost student learning, they should work on building a professional learning community that is characterized by shared purpose, collaborative activity, and collective responsibility among staff” (Newmann & Wehlage, 1995, p. 37). The remaining chapters of this study will explore the perceptions of one elementary school’s instructional staff and its first



year of professional learning community implementation.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### *Introduction*

The purpose of this mixed methods case study was to determine the change of instructional staff's perceptions of professional learning communities (PLCs) based on Huffman and Hipp's (2003) five dimensions and the critical attributes—shared values and vision, collective learning and application, shared personal practice, and supportive conditions, both relationships and structures. The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB, 2002) required states and school districts to pursue reform efforts that have been scientifically evaluated and shown to be successful in improving student academic success. With the passage of NCLB there is a belief that schools as they currently exist are not organized for student success and that only with changes in the culture of schools can real educational improvement occur. The PLC is one school's reculturing effort being proposed as a way to rethink the ways in which schools are organized for teachers' work (Eaker et al., 2002).

### *Overview*

During much of the early and mid 20th century, many businesses were influenced by Taylor's theories of scientific management (Nelson, 1980). Taylor, an engineer, believed there were rational, logical solutions to any problems that may arise. Taylor thought that it took total management control in all jobs and processes. Employees had virtually no input in what jobs they were assigned and how those jobs were to be completed. The hierarchical system began to crumble during the 70s and 80s and there was increased international competition and technology was beginning to develop rapidly (Nelson). Managers began to seek practices that could solve these corporate troubles. These practices allowed for more employee input.

In 1990, Senge's book on the learning organization in the corporate world began to find its way into educational writings. Senge and others (Block, 1993; Galagan, 1994; Whyte, 1994) emphasized the importance of nurturing individual staff members and supporting the collective engagement of staff in activities such as shared vision development, problem identification, learning, and problem resolution.

In a study of the educational environment, Rosenholtz (1989) introduced teachers' workplace factors into the literature on teaching quality. Feeling much the same, Fullan (1991) recommended a "redesign of the workplace so that innovation and improvements are built into the daily activities of teachers" (p. 353). McLaughlin and Talbert (1993) confirmed Rosenholtz's findings that teachers wanted a voice in their schools. Darling-Hammond (1996) then added to the discussion, citing shared decision making as a factor related to reform and the transformation of teaching roles in some schools. In such schools, scheduled time was provided for teachers to work together planning instruction, observing each other's classrooms, and sharing feedback.

The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards developed five core propositions that became the basis of the certification process. The following propositions became the baseline of what practices are expected of an exemplary teacher.

1. Teachers are committed to students and their learning.
2. Teachers know the subjects they teach and how to teach those subjects to students.
3. Teachers are responsible for managing and monitoring student learning.
4. Teachers think systematically about their practice and learn from experience.
5. Teachers are members of learning communities (NBPTS, 2009).

Working as a community is an important part of providing evidence to prove that

educators are deserving of this high teaching honor. Evidence of this is now required to be interwoven throughout the entire National Board process.

Hord's (1997a) five components of a PLC included supportive and shared leadership, shared values and vision, collective creativity, shared practice, and supportive conditions. The overview section expands on Hord's components by discussing situations based on Huffman and Hipp's (2003) five dimensions of PLCs.

#### *Shared and Supported Leadership*

The facilitative participation of the principal, sharing decision making and encouraging leadership roles among the staff are behaviors that are important in collaborative leadership. Encouraging site-based decision making is one way a leader can give some authority over to the teachers (Ortiz & Ogawa, 2000). Ortiz and Ogawa explored the increased complexity that site-based management brought to the school's environment. They also found that giving the staff more voice in decision making began to increase the social capital for the school.

Strickler (1957) noted that administrators are responsible for staffing that is designed to release the creative ability of individuals. The administrator was viewed as a positive leader who cared about all school stakeholders (Ortiz & Ogawa, 2000). Both Ortiz and Ogawa explained that decisions made by teams help the entire staff respect the leadership at the school.

#### *Shared Values and Vision*

Shared values and vision involves an outcome statement created by the staff, working together to identify and articulate common values and goals (Hord, 1997a). Rogus (1990) indicated the importance of creating a vision and mission statement at school sites. The mission statement is simply a statement that identifies the school's

major reason for being. A school with the presence of a clear image of the future state of the organization has a central vision. The vision statement will be the heart of the school's activity and the focus of every faculty member in the organization. All members of the organization should internalize the vision and mission statements (Rogus).

External the United States, public school systems are also promoting shared values and visions. Action planning can shift the culture of a school. This has proven evident at Claresholm Elementary School in Alberta, Canada (Hewson & Adrian, 2008). Hewson, the principal at Claresholm, built an organization of collaborative action planning and team capacity. Claresholm's model is highly collaborative, focused on results, and builds staff capacity. School improvement planning is ongoing, meaningful, focused, and sustainable (Hewson & Adrian). Since the mid-1900s, the Dufours have spear-headed the concept of the PLC model for school improvement. A PLC places its emphasis on learning for all (students and adults), building a collaborative culture, and maintaining a constant focus on results. These factors are critical to the sustained and substantive school improvement process that characterizes a PLC at work.

In 1999, the article, "Improving Schools, Strengthening Families and Communities: The Vision Statement of the Coalition for Community Schools," reported that communities are focused on making their schools better by incorporating a community aspect to improve academic achievement (Tirozzi, 1999). All stakeholders in the community schools are involved in the schools' success. The many partners are made up of children and their families, educators, administration, and community support groups. With all participants working towards a common goal, the high expectations become more attainable and realistic to all of the students in the school community (Barth, 1990).

The National Commission on Teaching and America's Future reported in *What Matters Most: Teaching for America's Future*, "All teachers will have access to high quality professional development and regular time for collegial work and planning" (NCTAF, 1996, p. 63). This statement was made because of the need for schools to explore avenues to encourage time for teachers to work together. Professional learning communities have become one of the most talked about ideas for reaching this goal. In the current movement of educational reform and school improvement, collaboration works to successfully achieve this goal. There are various North Carolina public schools implementing this concept at their school sites in the hopes that student achievement will improve. When the adults begin to commit themselves to working collaboratively around teaching and learning, this can happen. If continuous professional learning is one of the favored options to improving quality teaching, then taking this action may improve student learning and achievement in schools.

#### *Collective Learning and Application*

Collective creativity involves staff learning together and applying that learning to address students' needs (Hord, 1997a). In *Improving Schools From Within*, Roland Barth (1990) described a community of learners as "a place where students and adults alike are engaged as active learners in matters of special importance to them and where everyone is thereby encouraging everyone else's learning" (p. 9). Barth also explored the role of teachers and principals as learners and the importance of cooperative and collegial relationships as important.

In *Recreating Schools*, Myers and Simpson (1998) described learning communities as "cultural settings in which everyone learns, in which every individual is an integral part, and in which every participant is responsible for both the learning and

the overall well-being of everyone else” (p. 2). The goal is for all educators in the PLC to work collaboratively rather than struggle in isolation. Myers and Simpson encouraged educators to work together as a learning team and break new ground in reaching all learners in the classroom.

Hord (1997a) of the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL) believed that as an organizational arrangement, the PLC is seen as a powerful staff-development approach and a potent strategy for school change and improvement. Hord felt that any change must be accepted, appreciated, and nurtured by the principal.

Louis and Marks (1998) found that when a school is organized into a PLC, the following occurs:

1. Teachers set higher expectations for student achievement.
2. Students can count on the help of their teachers and peers in achieving ambitious learning goals.
3. The quality of classroom pedagogy is considerably higher.
4. Achievement levels are significantly higher.

The most powerful forms of staff development occur in ongoing teams that meet on a regular basis, preferably several times a week, for the purposes of learning, joint lesson planning, and problem solving. These teams, often called learning communities or communities of practice, operate with a commitment to the norms of continuous improvement and experimentation and engage their members in improving their daily work to advance to achievement of school district and school goals for student learning. (Louis & Marks, 1998.)

A recent study, which explored the link between teacher learning, teacher instructional behavior, and student outcomes, showed that engaging in an ongoing

learning process led teachers to identify and carry out practices that resulted in increased graduation rates, improved college admission rates, and higher academic achievement for students. The students benefit directly from teachers who share ideas, learn innovative and better ways of teaching, and try the newly learned approaches in the classroom (Ancess, 2000).

### *Shared Personal Practice*

Shared practice involves visitation and review of staff and teacher by peers, providing feedback leading to improvement (Hord, 1997a). One form of feedback may be that of peer assessments that can be used to help the staff use teamwork to identify and overcome hindrances and create team productivity (Sluijsmans, Brand-Gruwel, & Merrienboer, 2002). Masten, Morison, and Pellegrini (1985) studied peer relations in the development of competence. They used a technique called “class play” to determine how students interacted with their peers socially during daily activities. The results obtained indicated that there is considerable promise in students who work together in a social environment. Sluijsmans et al. reported the effects of peer assessment training on the performance of student teachers. Students that were involved in these groups scored significantly higher for end products than from those who worked alone (Sluijsmans et al.). Peers review and give feedback on instructional practice in order to increase individual and organizational capacity (Huffman & Hipp, 2003).

### *Supportive Conditions*

Supportive conditions involve physical and human conditions; such as time and space to meet, communication structures, and trust and respect. All combined support the staff in developing and sustaining a PLC (Hord, 1997a). Huffman and Hipp (2003) look at the supportive conditions through two main areas, (a) relationships, and (b) structures.



*Relationships.* Many schools handle student academic and behavioral referrals at the school level through multidisciplinary teams (Knotek, 2003). The method of that referral process differs in various school districts. Knotek researched the problems of using these teams and how bias affects the referrals. Knotek's findings showed that often teachers have bias to many student characteristics such as gender, social class, and ethnicity. The study proved that these referrals were not always obtained in the most fair and objective circumstances (Knotek).

In 1996, the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future explained that creating schools that are learning communities is critical to ensuring that achievement gaps across racial, ethnic, and economic groups are closed and that the academic performance of all students soars. If we are to assure that all students have competent, caring, qualified teachers, we must restructure schools to break down the barriers that isolate teachers and create and sustain small and well-focused learning communities.

*Structures.* The importance of creating an environment that is conducive to learning has been a topic of concern for many years (Maxwell, 2000). Maxwell conducted a case study that concluded students do feel more comfortable in an environment that is safe and pleasant. Students as young as 9-years-old are aware of their physical surroundings and can identify positive and negative features of a building (Maxwell). This study showed that if the environment is this important to students, it can almost certainly impact learning in adults.

Students at Wedgewood Elementary School in Seattle were encouraged to take bottled water to school after complaints were given about high level of contaminants being in the supply (Bach, 2003). After a parent showed up at a board meeting with

orange-colored tap water from the school, the problem was immediately corrected (Bach). In these restructured school settings, teachers have the necessary time, flexibility, and resources needed in order to meet 21st century needs of students. Teaching and learning prosper because they are structured around what we know about how people (teachers as well as students) learn and grow.

According to a qualitative case study (Scribner, Cockrell, Cockrell, & Valentine, 1999), there are four organizational factors that influence the establishment of a professional community: principal leadership, organizational history, organizational priorities, and organization of teacher work. Schools as formal organizations undergo much tension between a professional community ethic of caring for students, reflecting, and collaboration with peers and bureaucratic issues on the other side. A school improvement plan can provide the organizational foundation that can support a professional learning community. Huffman and Hipp's (2003) five dimensions look closely at all of the components of a professional learning community.

### *Current Findings*

The previous U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings visited North Carolina in 2008 to voice her opinion of the No Child Left Behind Act (No Child Left Behind, 2002). Spellings' opinion varied immensely from the opinion of the North Carolina Association of Educators (NCAE) President Eddie Davis. Davis believed that the NCLB Act has failed nationwide. The focus of the act was to raise student test scores and close achievement gaps. Reading and math test scores, according to Davis, were improving at a faster rate before NCLB than since its enactment (North Carolina Association of Educators, 2008).

In a study conducted by Freeman (2005) on the impacts of grade span

configuration, findings indicated that often students are more successful in a school that includes all grade levels from K-8. If a student's level of personal competence is high enough, the grade span does not matter. If the student is lacking in personal competence, then the level of personal support given to the student is critical for the student's school success (Freeman). The K-8 organizational format may offer the greatest level of personal support to create a positive academic atmosphere free of deficiencies and problems (Freeman).

The framework of a professional learning community is inextricably linked to the effective integration of standards, assessment, and accountability...the leaders of professional learning communities balance the desire for professional autonomy with the fundamental principles and values that drive collaboration and mutual accountability. (Reeves, 2005, pp. 47- 48)

“Well-implemented PLCs are a powerful means of seemingly blending teaching and professional learning in ways that produce complex, intelligent behavior in all teachers” (Sparks, 2005, p. 156).

#### *Principal, Administrator, and Teacher Leadership*

The traditional roles of principals and teachers have changed and improved organizational teamwork, which is fostered by all members of the learning community assuming decision-making roles (Leech & Fulton, 2008). Twenty-first century schools will develop the ability to cultivate creativity through learning networks. This plan must be a vision shared by all members of the school community and led by the principal (Leech & Fulton). Each stakeholder, regardless of his/her level, plays a part in the community concept—the principal, all other administrators, and teachers.

*Principal.* Williams, Persaud, and Turner (2008) conducted a study examining

whether principals' performances on selected leadership tasks would improve school climate and if these tasks correlated to student achievement. The results included that instructional planning, interpersonal skills, decision-making skills, school facilities planning, and evaluation in relation to school climate were related to positive principal performance.

*Administrator.* Instructional leadership teams are helping districts to refocus the role of the principal (Seatonl, Emmett, Welsh, & Petrossian, 2008). Seatonl et al. addressed the role of the administrator as one that improves teaching and learning, and developing leadership capacity through coaching and professional learning. Professional learning is embedded in the day-to-day work of the staff and overseen constantly by members of the team and the administrator. The success of this practice rests in the site walk-throughs by teachers and strong principal coaching.

*Teachers.* The teacher leadership affects the culture of a school (Muijs & Harris, 2007). Leech and Fulton's study revealed that schools will evolve into learning organizations if relationships between teachers' perceptions of leadership and their perceptions of the level of shared decision-making practiced at their schools. Shared culture and goals were found to be very important in fostering teacher leadership. The teacher leadership affects culture of the school (Muijs & Harris).

Muijs and Harris (2007) studied school culture and school structures and how they related to teacher leadership within schools. They found that teacher leadership will flourish in a school where both the culture and associated structures allow leadership to develop. Educators must feel as though they are actively involved in the school. Teachers should take an active part in all decision making to create a shared feeling of responsibility to the organization's goals. Muijs and Harris' study suggested that in

schools where teacher leadership has been successfully introduced there was a strong culture of trust. This sets the stage for quality teacher communication. Trust will develop if relationships are strong and if the staff feels as if they really know each other.

In a Georgia elementary school, the learning atmosphere improved when the principal transferred leadership to teachers (Kelehear & Davison, 2005). This Georgia school has gone from a school that worked for the principal to one that work together as a team. The teachers come together, decide on focus and direction, and then report to the principal their findings and recommendations. The teachers feel as though they are part of the leadership. According to Kelehear and Davison, teachers have a clear sense of direction and acceptance and the principal has created a community of trust and a positive attitude in the school.

#### *Professional Development*

Fullan (2006) took a different stand on PLCs and looked at the title more as that of Leading Professional Learning (LPL). Fullan believed that PLCs run the threat of becoming another program that teachers view as a “may be here today and gone tomorrow” program. The work of transforming schools means all or most schools will be involved in the change within a school system. This will require a system change. Although schools may be collaborative within themselves, schools must change the culture of the system as a whole (Fullan).

As principal of Viewmont Elementary School in Hickory, NC, Waddell transformed this once struggling school into a community of learners (Waddell & Lee, 2008). Waddell created a culture of inquiry and a commitment to do whatever it takes to reach all students. The staff was committed to reflection, research, and professional growth in every day work. The staff's attitude changed from seeing themselves only as

teachers to learners, just like their students. The idea of using data to drive instruction and creating dialogue within the staff earned the school the statewide designation of school of distinction (Waddell & Lee).

Gilrane, Roberts, and Russell (2008) studied the effectiveness of a professional development effort that supports each teacher in acquiring the tools to carry out effective literacy instruction. The school used surveys to assess professional development needs. Structures were put into place to support teaching, support personnel were available to aid in classroom management, and frequent time was allotted for reflection. Teacher development was focused to provide relevant professional development opportunities (Gilrane et al.).

Gerla, Gilliam, and Wright (2006) recognized a school district that is using a cooperative staff development model designed for the improvement of literacy. The model differs from others based on the partnerships with the school, district, and the local university. The staff learned what a dynamic impact a cooperative staff development program can have on administrators, university faculty, university students, and the students in the classroom (Gerla et al.).

### *Technical Integration*

School systems are still limiting teachers' capacities by continuing to work under a standardized, test-driven, accountability-based curriculum (Cowan, 2008). The advances of technology have forced educators to look at the importance of technology integration in the classroom. According to Cowan, the appeal of technology and the wide variety of ability levels and learning styles must also be applied to the teacher's strengths. The appropriate technology and instructional materials should be available to the staff. Technology can allow for numerous alternative assessments and curriculum

enhancements (Cowan).

The use of technology is such an important piece in a successful school structure. It can serve as a collaboration tool for all educators in the school. Leadership and the staff should support technologies, then technologies can be expected to be integrated into the curriculum. Technology is another supportive condition within the school structure (Cowan, 2008). Lachance, Benton, and Klein (2007) addressed the success of the school-based Activities Model. This model encourages the use of collaboration and strong partnerships in schools. Preservice teachers work closely with tenured teachers to share and deliberate about new ideas involved in technology curriculum. Trust and lasting relationships are built between these individuals. Teachers are eager to be a part of this collaborative effort and the new knowledge that is learned directly impacts student achievement (Lachance et al.).

Brooks-Young (2007) identified a team of teachers that was moving forward with technology as a driving force in its PLC. The team was dedicated to using the web as a key tool in areas of communicating among the staff, with parents, and primarily with students. The purpose of the learning community is to enable teachers to establish an online presence that promotes and modernizes communication. This tool has also helped identify research-based strategies to initiate and sustain systematic change (Brooks-Young).

Jun (2004) studied the influence of quality technology support on teachers' effective technology integration in relation to the maturity of a schoolwork environment as a professional learning community. Jun discovered that collective learning provides a foundation for peer support for technology integration. Shared and supportive leadership provides a foundation for technology facilities (Jun).

### *Diversity*

In the San Francisco Bay area, a program has begun that encourages teachers to stay in low-performing schools (Nuñez & Fernandez, 2006). A growing issue exists of teachers entering low-poverty, low-performing schools and leaving the profession to teachers with just as little experience year after year (Nuñez & Fernandez). The program model emphasizes PLC collaboration between the higher education institutions, public school districts, and community-based organizations. New teachers network regularly and participate in pedagogical seminars. The collaborative and supportive environment has resulted in teachers remaining in these positions for longer terms (Nuñez & Fernandez).

Building relationships first within the school was a focus of the work of Bryan and Henry (2008). A school counselor wanted to better reach her urban students. Only when the counselor began to develop a school-wide school-family-community partnership did her urban students flourish. The counselor wanted students to feel valued and cared for, and the counselor attained this goal with a partnership approach.

### *Teacher, Family, Community, and International Partnership*

The vision and mission of the school drives the focus in the classroom and in every school event in the community (Bryan & Henry, 2008). Administrators must maintain the basis that collaborative meetings and conversations take place within the building. Even in counseling, bridging connections with teachers, school staff, and then to the families of the students is crucial. All students become more successful when the school team works together (Bryan & Henry).

Moore and Sampson (2008) indicated that the benefits of teacher collaboration have become evident in teacher education programs throughout the country. The



importance of working together has made such a deep impact in schools that the idea of community has become a large part of practice in teacher preparation programs in colleges and universities. The findings of Moore and Sampson showed that collaboration in which partners are equally vested in the goals and issues of the relationship and the process ultimately changes both organizations and the members of the organizations for the better.

Casey's (2005) main focus upon taking the role as a new superintendent was to establish a new vision and strategic plan. With the expectation to move the organization forward, the task of establishing a shared vision was a necessary piece to pull the entire organization together. The vision would unite the members of the school community as well as the community at large. The vision also served the purpose of giving a clear focus on meaningful student outcomes (Casey).

The East Sussex County Council (2007) in the United Kingdom promoted shared values that can be clarified by a consultation process involving the whole school community. Many schools are updating the school handbooks to include a value statement and make this a part of the shared values of all school activities. Schools are creating value statements to set the standard for the personal, social, emotional, and thinking skills that should be developed across the curriculum. These shared value statements help to create commonality within the school society (East Sussex County Council).

Andrews and Lewis (2004) examined Australian schools that implemented a whole-school renewal process known as IDEAS (Innovative Designs for Enhancing Achievement in Schools). A parallel relationship between the principal and members of the professional community create the collaborative culture of the school. Australian

schools have seen the success of drawing on the importance of every school member to encourage ongoing growth (Andrews & Lewis).

The project has enhanced the professional capacity of teachers and their relationships within the school (Andrews & Lewis, 2004). Teachers work together collaboratively with administrators to transform their practice. Teachers participate in professional conversations and direction towards a common goal. The schools act as a PLC by sharing purpose, developing identity and new systems of meaning, relationships with the community, and the coherence of school operation. The vision of the school is a high priority and is clearly articulated and is unique to the individual school community (Andrews & Lewis).

### *Summary*

There are common themes throughout all of the literature that has been presented. The characteristics of professional learning communities have been discussed as they align to Huffman and Hipp's (2003) five dimensions. Collaboration is a key component through shared and supportive leadership. The importance of working towards shared values and vision has been presented. Collective learning and application and shared personal practice have also presented to be important in a community environment. All of these are critical threads in conjunction with strong supportive conditions.

## Chapter 3: Methodology

### *Introduction*

The purpose of this mixed methods case study was to determine the change of instructional staff's perceptions of professional learning communities (PLCs) based on Huffman & Hipp's (2003) five dimensions and the critical attributes—shared and supportive leadership, shared values and vision, collective learning and application, shared personal practice, and supportive conditions, both relationships and structures. The case study took place at an elementary school in the southwest region of North Carolina. All participants in this study were considered instructional staff at the school of study and were actively involved in a school-based professional learning community.

The qualitative and quantitative research methods used in this study provided feedback to the administration, staff, and central office administration about the perception of the implementation of professional learning communities at the elementary school. The staff was eager to see if, through the regular collaborative team meetings and better instructional quality in the classroom, the students would indeed improve in their achievement levels in reading, math and science subjects. The results also provided central office administration perceptions of staff in the implementation of PLCs. The information gathered will help the school of study determine the next steps of their journey of implementing professional learning communities.

### *Research Questions*

The perceptions of the employees at this elementary school were evaluated and information from the administration and instructional staff were collected and compared. Instructional staff included the media, resource, physical education (PE), art and music teachers. Three questions guided the study:

1. What changes in the staff's perceptions about the five dimensions of a professional learning community have occurred 9 months after the implementation of a PLC?
2. What are the strengths and weaknesses of the implementation of a professional learning community as perceived by the instructional staff?
3. What are the critical next steps identified by the instructional staff that need to be taken to advance the professional learning community?

### *Participants*

All instructional staff members were currently participating in PLCs at the school study site. There were a total of 45 participants at the school who participated in the pre- and post-professional learning community surveys. These participants included 25 classroom teachers, 11 teacher assistants, 3 exceptional children teachers, 4 itinerant teachers, and 2 administrators. There were four teachers per grade level (K-5) except for third grade where there were five teachers. Two group interviews were conducted at the school. The participants of the group interviews were randomly selected and were comprised of at least one representative from each grade level, a teacher assistant, and one support staff member or itinerant teacher. Individual interviews were given to the principal and assistant principal along with six classroom teachers. The classroom teachers were chosen randomly by selecting three teachers from Grades K-2 and three teachers from Grades 3-5.

### *Instruments*

The following three instruments were used to conduct the case study: (a) focus group questionnaire, (b) interview questionnaire, and (c) Professional Learning Community Assessment (Appendix A). The interview and focus group interviews were

used to gain a better understanding of the perceptions of the participants that were a part of the PLC implementation process.

#### *Group Interview Questionnaire*

The investigator-designed group questionnaire had components that were derived from Huffman and Hipp's (2003) five dimensions (see Appendix B). The focus group interview included questions that helped clarify the teachers' perceptions concerning the implementation of each of the domains of the Professional Learning Community Assessment. Five questions were formulated that focus on the five dimensions of Huffman and Hipp's Professional Learning Community Assessment to be included in this group interview. In addition, three global questions were formulated for the participants to give a global perspective of the state of the professional learning community implementation.

#### *Interview Questionnaire*

Individual interviews were conducted by the researcher to gather more qualitative data to validate the survey results. The one-on-one individual interviews also allowed for more personal feedback from staff members on the implementation of professional learning communities at their school site.

#### *The Professional Learning Community Assessment*

The teacher questionnaires were used to collect information from all instructional personnel on their current perceptions of professional learning communities. Huffman and Hipp's (2003) assessment consisted of a 45-item Likert scale assessment designed in 2003. The Professional Learning Community Assessment (PLCA) extends Hord's (1997a) work through the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL). This instrument addressed the behaviors of administrators and staff across the five dimensions

of a PLC. The reliability of the PLCA was tested using Cronbach's Coefficient Alpha. The coefficients span was .83 to .93. According to this tool, the PLCA has a high level of internal consistency. Participants answer on a four-point Likert scale consisting of the following categories: strongly agree, disagree, agree, and strongly agree. The researcher was granted permission by Huffman to administer the survey at the elementary school of study (Appendix C).

Huffman and Hipp (2003) worked to create a new instrument that more accurately represented the phases of professional learning development from initiation to implementation (Fullan, 1991). The questionnaire was designed to assess perceptions about the school's principal and staff based on the five dimensions of a professional learning community and the critical attributes (Oliver, Hipp, & Huffman, 2003). This assessment extended Hord's (1997a) work and was a more descriptive tool of how those practices are observed at the school level. The results of the survey given at the beginning of the year served as a baseline for the changes in perception of the instructional staff and administration throughout the PLC implementation period.

#### *Data Collection*

To undertake this case study, the perceptions of administration and instructional staff were investigated in relation to the changes that accompany the implementation of professional learning communities at an elementary school. The study explored and described how teachers and administrators perceive the professional learning community's impact on teaching and learning. Data collected from surveys, focus groups, and interviews identified the perceptions of the teachers and the administrators. These various instruments were used to provide an in-depth study of the implementation of the professional learning community within the school of study.

The researcher met with teachers at a staff meeting after school to explain to them that they were going to be a part of a study throughout the school year. Staff members were told that they did not have to participate in the study. The directions for the initial baseline survey were given. Teachers were given a 2-week time period in the month of August to complete the first baseline survey. The survey was housed on the district server and a Zarca survey of the Professional Learning Community Assessment (PLCA) was available for teachers to complete at their leisure. It was discussed that all answers would be confidential and that they were to answer questions as accurately as possible. They were also given contact information for support and questions that may occur. A response rate of 70% was the acceptable standard for this study. Eighty percent, or 36 staff members, completed the baseline survey given in August. Throughout the entire process, the participants were told to contact the researcher with any questions through e-mail or phone. There were 80% percent of participant responses for the baseline survey. For the second survey, the same procedure was in place.

Participants were notified by both e-mail and memo inviting them to participate in a group interview session. The notice included brief instructions indicating the purpose of the group interviews. The following questions were used to lead the discussion:

1. Talk about the leadership opportunities at your school with respect to the decision-making process.

2. What is the vision of your school and what role did you have in the development of the vision?

3. How have the professional development opportunities available to you during the 2008-2009 school year contributed to your understanding of a professional learning community and its implementation?

4. How would you describe relationships at your school? Is trust evident? Have the relationships changed over the past year?

5. How does the school facilitate opportunities for you to collaborate? Give me specific examples.

6. Are there any issues, challenges, or successes that have not already been addressed that you would like to discuss?

7. How do you feel about the overall experience with the implementation of PLCs in your school?

8. Tell me how your professional learning community is going to help you attain your vision.

The researcher recorded the participants to maintain confidentiality. Each group interview member was given a copy of the transcription and was asked to sign off on the authenticity of the transcription. The researcher noted on a frequency chart the key terms mentioned in each dimension. These common themes are identified through this content analysis.

Individual interviews were conducted by the researcher to gather more qualitative data to validate the survey results. Fifteen instructional staff members, including teachers, teacher assistants, and instructional support personnel, were randomly selected from the staff roster and were included in the interviews. In addition, members of the administrative staff were interviewed for their perspective on the progress of the professional learning community implementation. The questions that lead the individual survey were as follows:

1. Tell me about the process that was in place this year for the implementation of PLCs?



2. What do you consider to be the main obstacles or challenges that your staff has faced with the implementation of PLCs?

3. How do you feel about the overall experience with the implementation of PLCs at your school this year?

4. Are there any other comments or concerns that you would like to address that have not been covered?

### *Data Analysis*

The results of this case study provided feedback to the faculty and staff about the implementation of PLCs at this elementary school. The data was analyzed to give staff meaningful information about the overall perceptions of PLCs in their school. Descriptive statistics on the responses of each question giving the mean response for each question and each domain was performed. A Chi-squared test was also performed on each domain. The Chi-squared test tested the null hypothesis that the distribution of responses in September was the same as the distribution of responses in June. The responses were turned into a score for each domain and how well each domain was addressed will be determined. This was done for both the baseline data and the post-survey. A comparison of where the school was at the beginning of the study and where it is now was obtained. The qualitative data obtained from the individual interviews and the group interviews were analyzed using text analysis. The key words were counted to derive common themes. The focus of the analysis was to determine if there were themes that emerged from the interviews and conversations from the qualitative data collections. These themes were used to better describe the state of the implementation of the professional learning community and to validate the findings in the survey.

*Delimitations of the Study*

The study was delimited to surveying and interviewing instructional staff at one public elementary school in North Carolina. This study took place over a very short amount of time.

*Limitations of the Study*

One limitation could be whether or not the staff was truthful and honest with the researcher concerning their feeling or perceptions about the PLC.

*Summary*

The purpose of this mixed methods case study was to determine the change of instructional staff's perceptions of professional learning communities (PLCs) based on Huffman and Hipp's (2003) five dimensions and the critical attributes—shared and supportive leadership, shared values and vision, collective learning and application, shared personal practice, and supportive conditions, both relationships and structures. This chapter has given a summary of the methodology that will be used throughout this study. The instruments, methods, and procedures that were used to conduct this study have also been discussed.

## Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this study was to determine the change of instructional staff's perceptions of professional learning communities as they are implemented at this school site. The following research questions were used to guide this study.

### *Research Questions*

1. What changes in the staff's perceptions about the five dimensions of a professional learning community have occurred 9 months after the implementation of a PLC?
2. What are the strengths and weaknesses of the implementation of a professional learning community as perceived by the instructional staff?
3. What are the critical next steps identified by the instructional staff that need to be taken to advance the professional learning community?

In order to examine these questions, the following data sources were utilized:

1. Focus group interviews including randomly selected staff members;
2. Interview Questionnaire; and
3. Professional Learning Community Assessment.

### *Description of Sample*

The participants for this study consisted of 45 staff members (certified and classified) at the study site. All staff members were given the PLCA, a 45-item Likert scale questionnaire. Thirty-six staff members completed the initial PLCA in September, which represented an 80% response rate. Thirty-nine staff members completed the survey in June which represented 86.7% of the staff. Staff members were also randomly selected to participate in one of two focus group interviews. Fourteen staff members participated in the focus group interviews which represented 31% of the population. Individual

interviews were also given to the principal, assistant principal and six other staff members from the school site.

### *Analysis of Data*

The PLCA data, focus groups, and individual interviews were collectively used to determine the change of instructional staff's perceptions of professional learning communities (PLCs) based on Huffman & Hipp's (2003) five dimensions and the critical attributes—shared and supportive leadership, shared values and vision, collective learning and application, shared personal practice, and supportive conditions, both relationships and structures.

Table 6 represents the responses to the PLCA in the dimension of shared and supportive leadership. The data showed that on the pre-survey 325 of 360 (90.28%) total responses were in agreement, and 362 of 390 (92.82%) total responses were in agreement on the post-survey. In this dimension of the survey, the general trend of the responses was to progress more to the middle responses of disagree and agree. This was evidenced by the decrease in the percentage of respondents answering strongly disagree on all questions and a decrease in the percentage of respondents answering strongly agree on all of the questions. Even with these shifts from the stronger positions on the questions, participants increased their approval for the tenets of shared and supportive leadership by 2.54%. The largest gain in positive responses was on the statement, "Stakeholders assume shared responsibility and accountability for student learning without evidence of imposed power and authority." The responses to this question showed an 8.55% increase in positive responses. Two statements, the principal incorporates advice from staff to make decisions and opportunities are provided for staff to initiate change, showed a decline in positive responses of -1.92 and -1.71, respectively.

Table 6

*Results of survey questions 1-10, aligned with “Shared and Supportive Leadership” in school of study; results indicated in percentages, rounded to the whole*

Themes	Pre-Survey N=36					Post-Survey N=39				
	SD	D	A	SA	NR	SD	D	A	SA	NR
The staff is consistently involved in decision making.	3	1	19	13	0	2	1	25	11	0
The principal incorporates advice from staff to make decisions.	3	0	20	13	0	2	2	22	13	0
The staff has accessibility to key information.	3	0	18	15	0	1	2	24	12	0
The principal is proactive and addresses areas where support is needed.	3	1	16	16	0	2	1	23	13	0
Opportunities are provided for staff to initiate change.	3	1	18	14	0	3	2	23	11	0
The principal shares responsibility and rewards for innovative.	3	0	18	15	0	1	1	23	14	0
The principal participates democratically with staff sharing power and authority.	3	0	20	13	0	2	0	23	14	0
Leadership is promoted and nurtured among staff.	4	0	19	13	0	1	2	22	14	0
Decision making takes place through committees and communication across grade and subject areas.	3	0	20	13	0	1	1	23	14	0
Stakeholders assume shared responsibility and accountability for student learning without evidence of imposed power.	3	1	21	11	0	1	0	24	14	0

The total gain score for the shared and supportive leadership dimension was .03, representing a 0.82% positive increase. Question 10 showed the largest gain score of .20, representing a 6.32% gain. This question focused on the assumption of responsibility and

accountability for student learning without evidence of imposed power and authority. Data from group interview sessions and individual interviews did not provide a significant amount of data for the shared and supportive leadership dimension. However, it was evident that instructional staff members feel as though they have decision-making power at the school level. Participants generally felt as though the leadership opportunities and the support that guided these individuals was in place and evident. There were consistencies with the interview participants that the actual system of teacher leadership in place at the school site was effective. Participants generally felt as though the leadership opportunities and the support that guided these individuals were in place and evident at this school site.

Table 7 represents the responses to the PLCA in the dimension of shared values and vision. The data show that on the pre-survey 271 of 288 (94%) total responses were in agreement and 300 of 312 (96%) total responses were in agreement on the post-survey. In this dimension, the general trend of the responses was to progress more to the answers of agree and strongly agree. This was evidenced by the increase in the percentage of the respondents answering agree and strongly agree on all questions. Participants increased their approval for the tenets of shared value and vision by 2.06%. The largest gain in positive responses was found on two statements: “A collaborative process exists for developing a shared vision among staff,” and “stakeholders are actively involved in creating high expectations that serve to increase student achievement.” The responses to these two questions each increased 7.70% in positive responses. Question 17, which referred to the policies and programs that were aligned to the school’s vision, showed a decline in positive responses of -2.14.

Table 7

*Results of survey questions 11-18, aligned with “Shared Values and Vision” in school of study; results indicated in percentages, rounded to the whole*

Themes	Pre-Survey N=36					Post-Survey N=39				
	SD	D	A	SA	NR	SD	D	A	SA	NR
A collaborative process exists for developing a shared sense of values among staff.	2	1	23	10	0	1	0	23	15	0
Shared values support norms of behavior that guide decisions about teaching and learning.	2	0	23	11	0	1	0	26	12	0
The staff shares visions for school improvement that have an undeviating focus on student learning.	2	0	21	13	0	1	0	24	14	0
Decisions are made in alignment with the school’s values and vision.	2	0	20	14	0	1	1	22	15	0
A collaborative process exists for developing a shared vision among staff.	2	0	22	12	0	2	0	21	16	0
School goals focus on student learning beyond test scores and grades.	2	0	20	14	0	2	1	20	16	0
Policies and programs are aligned to the school’s vision.	2	0	20	14	0	1	0	25	13	0
Stakeholders are actively involved in creating high expectations that serve to increase student achievement.	2	0	22	12	0	1	0	22	16	0

The total gain score for the shared values and vision dimension was .07, representing a 2.22% positive increase. Question 15 showed the largest gain score of .19 representing a 6.19% gain. This question focused on the area of collaborative processes

existing for developing a shared sense of values among staff. The group interview sessions and individual interview sessions gave various examples of how educators at this school collectively share values and vision. It was revealed that the school vision was created in a team atmosphere at a faculty meeting. The evidence showed that educators at this school perceived that a shared value and vision was in place.

Table 8

*Results of survey questions 19-26, aligned with “Collective Learning and Application” in school of study; results indicated in percentages, rounded to the whole*

Themes	Pre-Survey N=36					Post-Survey N=39				
	SD	D	A	SA	NR	SD	D	A	SA	NR
The staff work together to seek knowledge, skills, and strategies and apply this new learning to their work.	2	1	21	12	0	1	1	21	16	0
Collegial relationships exist among staff that reflects commitment to school improvement efforts.	2	1	24	9	0	1	1	22	15	0
The Staff plan and work together to search for solutions to address diverse student needs.	2	1	22	11	0	2	0	22	15	0
A variety of opportunities and structures exist for collective learning through open dialogue.	2	1	21	12	0	2	1	22	14	0
The staff engages in dialogue that reflects a respect for diverse ideas that lead to continued inquiry.	2	1	21	12	0	2	1	21	15	0
Professional development focuses on teaching and learning.	2	0	20	14	0	1	0	22	16	0
School staff and stakeholders learn together and apply new knowledge to solve problems.	2	2	21	11	0	1	1	20	17	0
School staff is committed to programs that enhance learning.	2	1	17	16	0	1	1	19	18	0



Table 8 represents the responses to the PLCA in the dimension of collective learning and application. The data showed that on the pre-survey 264 of 288 (92%) total responses were in agreement, and 295 of 312 (95%) total responses were in agreement on the post- survey. In this dimension of the survey, the general trend of the responses showed a steady increase towards strongly agree in this domain. This was evidenced by the increase in the respondents answering strongly agree, which was 97 of 288 in the pre-survey to 126 of 312 in the post-survey. The participants increased their approval for the tenets of collective learning and application by 2.88%. The largest gain in positive responses was on the statement, “Collegial relationships exist among staff and reflect the commitment to school improvement efforts.” The responses to this question showed a 13.46% increase in positive responses. The gain score for the collective learning and application domain was 0.12 representing a 3.63% increase. Question 20 showed the largest gain score of .20. The mean in September was 3.11 and it grew to 3.31 in June. During the interviews, participants discussed the various learning opportunities that were afforded to them and the time that was allowed for them to work together and dialogue about PLCs. Educators at this school felt very positive about the learning that was going on and the ability to discuss the changes and expectations. The interviews revealed a strong common theme in having the opportunity to learn new knowledge and strategies, applying the information, and sharing the results. The discussions were very favorable for the PLC process and the implementation at this site.

Table 9 represents the responses to the PLCA in the dimension of shared personal practice. The data showed that on the pre-survey 184 of 223 (83%) total responses were in agreement, and 216 of 234 (92%) total responses were in agreement on the post-survey. In this dimension of the survey, the general trend of the responses was an overall

increase towards positive results. This was evidenced by the significant increase of participants moving from strongly disagree to disagree and agree to more positive results. Participants increased their approval for the tenets of shared personal practice by 7.12%.

Table 9

*Results of survey questions 27-32, aligned with “Shared Personal Practice” in school of study; results indicated in percentages, rounded to the whole*

Themes	Pre-Survey N=36					Post-Survey N=39				
	SD	D	A	SA	NR	SD	D	A	SA	NR
Opportunities exist for staff to observe peers and offer encouragement.	2	5	23	6	0	1	5	26	7	0
The staff provides feedback to peers related to instructional practices.	2	5	22	7	0	1	3	28	7	0
The staff informally shares ideas and suggestions for improving student learning.	2	2	20	12	0	1	1	26	11	0
The staff collaboratively reviews student work to share and improve instructional practices.	2	3	24	7	0	1	1	27	10	0
Opportunities exist for coaching and mentoring.	2	2	24	8	0	1	2	25	11	0
Individuals and teams have the opportunity to apply learning and share the results of their practices.	2	3	22	9	0	1	0	26	12	0

The largest gain in positive responses was on the statement, “The staff collaboratively reviews student work to share and improve instructional practices.” The responses to this question showed a 6.20% increase in positive responses.

This dimension was the highest dimension in growth. There was a gain score of .12 overall from the assessment at the beginning of the year to the June assessment. This

represented a 4.04% increase. On the PLCA survey, individuals and teams having the opportunity to apply learning and share the results of their practice increased .20. The opportunity to apply learning and share the results of their practices was a high need area. The interviews for this dimension provided a lot of information to the researcher information about teachers' actual perceptions of the PLC process. It was discussed that sharing their personal practice served a difficult task although it is seen as an important one. The data showed that not all educators began the year working together and collaborating in teams, but that the perception was that it had improved as the year advanced.

Table 10

*Results of survey questions 33-36, aligned with "Supportive Conditions-Relationships" in school of study; results indicated in percentages, rounded to the whole*

Themes	Pre-Survey N=36					Post-Survey N=39				
	SD	D	A	SA	NR	SD	D	A	SA	NR
Caring relationships exist among staff and students that are built on trust and respect.	2	2	13	19	0	1	0	23	15	0
A culture of trust and respect exists for taking risks.	2	2	19	13	0	2	0	23	14	0
Outstanding achievement is recognized and celebrated regularly in our school.	2	2	17	15	0	1	0	23	15	0
School staff and stakeholders exhibit a sustained and unified effort to embed change into the culture of the school.	2	2	19	13	0	1	1	25	12	0

Table 10 represents the responses to the PLCA in the dimension supportive conditions-relationships. The data showed that on the pre-survey 128 of 144 (88.8%) total

responses were in agreement, and 150 of 156 (96.2%) total responses were in agreement on the post-survey. In this dimension of the survey, the general trend of the responses was an increase from disagree to agree. This was evidenced by a decrease in the number of respondents answering disagree on all questions and an increase in the percentage of respondents answering agree on all of the questions. Participants increased their approval for the areas of supportive conditions-relationships by 7.26%.

The total gain score for the supportive conditions-relationships was 0.04, representing a 1.18% positive increase. Question 35 showed the largest gain score of 0.08, representing a 2.56% positive increase. This question focused on outstanding achievement being recognized and celebrated regularly in our school. The group interviews showed that educators at this school are at various places in the relationships that are a part of PLCs. Trust was a common theme that was discussed and all participants seemed to feel as though it was a process that needed time to grow.

Table 11 represents the responses to the PLCA in the dimension supportive conditions-structures. The data showed that on the pre-survey 293 of 324 (90%) total responses were in agreement, and 326 of 351 (93%) total responses were in agreement on the post-survey. In this dimension of the survey the general trend of the responses was to progress towards agree and strongly agree on all the questions. This was evidenced by the decrease in the percentage of respondents answering strongly disagree and agree on all questions. Participants increased their approval for the areas of supportive conditions-structures by 2.45%. The largest gain in positive responses was on the statement, “The proximity of grade level and department personnel allows for ease in collaborating with colleagues.” The responses to this question showed an 11.11% increase.

Table 11

*Results of survey questions 37-45, aligned with “Supportive Conditions-Structures” in school of study; results indicated in percentages, rounded to the whole*

Themes	Pre-Survey N=36					Post-Survey N=39				
	SD	D	A	SA	NR	SD	D	A	SA	NR
Time is provided to facilitate collaborative work.	2	2	28	4	0	1	2	28	8	0
The school schedule promotes collective learning and shared practice.	2	1	27	6	0	2	1	27	9	0
Fiscal resources are available for professional development.	2	2	22	10	0	1	2	29	7	0
Appropriate technology and instructional materials are available to staff.	2	3	22	9	0	1	3	26	9	0
Resource people provide expertise and support for continuous learning.	2	1	24	9	0	1	0	27	11	0
The school facility is clean, attractive, and inviting.	1	3	21	11	0	1	7	22	9	0
The proximity of grade level and department personnel allows for ease in collaborating with colleagues.	2	0	25	9	0	1	0	23	15	0
Communication systems promote a flow of information among staff.	2	1	25	8	0	1	0	25	13	0
Communication systems promote a flow of information across the entire school community, including central office personnel, parents and community members.	2	1	24	9	0	1	0	26	12	0

The overall gain score for this domain was .08, representing a 2.66% increase.

Question 44 showed the largest gain score of .20, representing a 6.44% gain. The

question focused on communication systems promoting a flow of information among

staff. During the focus group interviews, the theme of time was mentioned often. Participants discussed the need for planning time in the PLC process and they felt as though they had that in place. During the principal interview, it was mentioned that time would be made for the staff to collaborate in PLC teams.

### *Chi-Square*

A two-way contingency table analysis was conducted to evaluate whether elementary school staff had more positive perceptions of the implementation of professional learning communities at the end of the school year than in the beginning of the school year. The two variables were time with two levels (June and September) and agreement with establishment of shared and supportive leadership with four levels (strongly disagree, disagree, agree, and strongly agree). Time and agreement were found to be significantly related, Pearson  $\chi^2(3) = 12.134$ ,  $p = .007$ . The proportion of staff who agreed or strongly agreed in September was 90%, compared to 93% in June.

Table 12

### *Agreement with Establishment of Shared and Supportive Leadership in September and June*

Time	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Total
September	31 (9%)	4 (1%)	189 (38%)	136 (38%)	360 (100%)
June	16 (4%)	12 (3%)	232 (33%)	130 (23%)	390 (100%)
Total	47 (6%)	16 (2%)	421 (35%)	266 (31%)	750 (100%)

A two-way contingency table analysis was conducted to evaluate whether elementary school staff had more positive perceptions of the implementation of professional learning communities at the end of the school year than in the beginning of

the school year. The two variables were time with two levels (June and September) and agreement with establishment of shared vision and values with four levels (strongly disagree, disagree, agree, and strongly agree). Time and agreement were found to be not significantly related, Pearson  $\chi^2 (3) = 2.501$ ,  $p = .475$ . The proportion of staff who agreed or strongly agreed in September was 94%, compared to 96% in June.

Table 13

*Agreement with Establishment of Shared Vision and Values in September and June*

Time	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Total
September	16 (6%)	1 (0%)	171 (59%)	100 (35%)	288 (100%)
June	10 (3%)	2 (1%)	183 (59%)	117 (38%)	312 (100%)
Total	26 (4%)	3 (1%)	354 (59%)	217 (36%)	600 (100%)

A two-way contingency table analysis was conducted to evaluate whether elementary school staff had more positive perceptions of the implementation of professional learning communities at the end of the school year than in the beginning of the school year. The two variables were time with two levels (June and September) and agreement with establishment of collective learning and application with four levels (strongly disagree, disagree, agree, and strongly agree). Time and agreement were found to be not significantly related, Pearson  $\chi^2 (3) = 4.041$ ,  $p = .257$ . The proportion of staff who agreed or strongly agreed in September was 92%, compared to 95% in June.

Table 14

*Agreement with Establishment of Collective Learning and Application in September and June*

Time	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Total
September	16 (6%)	8 (3%)	167 (58%)	97 (34%)	288 (100%)
June	11 (4%)	6 (2%)	169 (54%)	126 (40%)	312 (100%)
Total	27 (5%)	14 (2%)	336 (56%)	223 (37%)	600 (100%)

A two-way contingency table analysis was conducted to evaluate whether elementary school staff had more positive perceptions of the implementation of professional learning communities at the end of the school year than in the beginning of the school year. The two variables were time with two levels (June and September) and agreement with establishment of shared personal practice with four levels (strongly disagree, disagree, agree, and strongly agree). Time and agreement were found to be not significantly related, Pearson  $\chi^2 (2) = 5.852$ ,  $p = .119$ . The proportion of staff who agreed or strongly agreed in September was 85%, compared to 92% in June.

Table 15

*Agreement with Establishment of Shared Personal Practice in September and June*

Time	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Total
September	12 (6%)	20 (9%)	135 (63%)	49 (23%)	216 (100%)
June	6 (3%)	12 (5%)	158 (58%)	58 (25%)	234 (100%)
Total	18 (4%)	32 (7%)	293 (65%)	107 (24%)	450 (100%)



A two-way contingency table analysis was conducted to evaluate whether elementary school staff had more positive perceptions of the implementation of professional learning communities at the end of the school year than in the beginning of the school year. The two variables were time with two levels (June and September) and agreement with establishment of supportive relationships with four levels (strongly disagree, disagree, agree, and strongly agree). Time and agreement were found to be significantly related, Pearson  $\chi^2 (2) = 9.983$ ,  $p = .019$ . The proportion of staff who agreed or strongly agreed in September was 89%, compared to 96% in June.

Table 16

*Agreement with Establishment of Supportive Relationships in September and June*

Time	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Total
September	8 (6%)	8 (6%)	68 (47%)	60 (42%)	144 (100%)
June	5 (3%)	1 (1%)	94 (60%)	56 (36%)	156 (100%)
Total	13 (4%)	9 (3%)	162 (54%)	116 (39%)	300 (100%)

A two-way contingency table analysis was conducted to evaluate whether elementary school staff had more positive perceptions of the implementation of professional learning communities at the end of the school year than in the beginning of the school year. The two variables were time with two levels (June and September) and agreement with establishment of supportive structures with four levels (strongly disagree, disagree, agree, and strongly agree). Time and agreement were found to be not significantly related, Pearson  $\chi^2 (2) = 3.202$ ,  $p = .362$ . The proportion of staff who agreed or strongly agreed in September was 90%, compared to 93% in June.

Table 17

*Agreement with Establishment of Supportive Structures in September and June*

Time	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Total
September	17 (5%)	14 (4%)	218 (67%)	75 (23%)	324 (100%)
June	10 (3%)	125 (4%)	233 (66%)	93 (26%)	351 (100%)
Total	27 (4%)	29 (4%)	451 (67%)	168 (25%)	675 (100%)

## Chapter 5: Discussion

The purpose of this study was to determine the change of instructional staff's perceptions of professional learning communities as they were implemented at this school site. The following research questions were used to guide this study.

### *Research Questions*

1. What changes in the staff's perceptions about the five dimensions of a professional learning community have occurred 9 months after the implementation of a PLC?
2. What are the strengths and weaknesses of the implementation of a professional learning community as perceived by the instructional staff?
3. What are the critical next steps identified by the instructional staff that need to be taken to advance the professional learning community?

Chapter 4 included a data analysis to respond to these questions.

### *Elaboration of the Five Dimensions*

*Shared and Supportive Leadership.* Based on data gathered from the PLCA, group interview sessions, and individual interview sessions, the school showed evidence of an overall gain in the area of shared and supportive leadership. Of the five dimensions on the survey, this domain showed the least growth. The total gain score for the shared and supportive leadership dimension was .03, representing a 0.82% positive increase. The perceptions of the staff showed that they felt as though the leadership is promoted at the school and that they collectively share responsibility for student learning. The survey data showed that the area of opportunities being provided for staff to initiate change decreased the greatest between the pre- and post-survey. The interviews revealed that teachers at this school site worked closely together in decision making and that they have a process

in place for sharing ideas that move from grade level to school level. Although this dimension showed the least growth, it is clear from the interviews that the teachers have great respect for the principal. The school administrators are very dedicated to the success of the staff and students.

*Shared Values and Vision.* Based on the PLCA survey, the total gain score for the shared values and vision dimension was .07, representing a 2.22% positive increase. One thread that emerged strongly from the data was the degree of commitment of the staff to the students and to student achievement. A great deal of time was spent crafting a formal vision and mission statement that the entire staff contributed to and agreed upon. Throughout the interviews, the importance of collaboration was apparent and high expectations were in place for students. The staff expressed in the interviews that they have experienced a shift in thinking from “my kids” to a sense of collective responsibility for the success of all kids.

*Collective Learning and Application.* Both the principal and the teachers believe that the learning teams have had a major impact on student achievement at the school site. The participants increased their approval for the tenets of collective learning and application by 2.88%. This dimension scored second highest of all the dimensions. Working together in teams has begun to make a positive impact on the school as a whole. Teachers reported that time spent learning with colleagues has made them more effective classroom instructors. The collaboration has resulted in a consistent school-wide implementation of best practices. As evidenced in both the survey and the interview sessions, teachers felt very strongly that a collaborative process exist for developing a shared sense of values among staff.

*Shared Personal Practice.* This domain received the highest score on the PLCA

questionnaire. There was a gain score of .12 overall from the assessment at the beginning of the year to the June assessment. This represented a 4.04% increase. During the interviews, it was expressed that moving towards sharing practices was an arduous task at first, but soon became an important piece to the implementation of PLCs at this school. The principal ensured that teachers at every grade level would have shared planning time and teachers expressed during the interviews the importance of protecting this time for team planning and collaboration. During the interviews, it was expressed that the staff meets on a regular basis, and the staff informally shares ideas and suggestions for improving student learning.

*Supportive Conditions-Relationships.* This dimension showed only a minimal amount of improvement. The total gain score for the supportive conditions-relationships was 0.04, representing a 1.18% positive increase. Specific themes in reference to relationships were mentioned during the interviews and also were shown on the PLCA. Many teachers shared that their grade level teams were at different levels in their relationships. Many felt that their teams were already in place before PLCs, and others felt that the implementation of PLCs encouraged their teams to begin that process. The importance of achievements being recognized within the school and being celebrated regularly increased the most from the pre- to the post-assessment. The only area that showed a decline in the gain score was the area of caring relationships existing among the staff. It was evident that relationships were in place at the school site although there was still room for growth in this dimension. Teachers felt as though relationships would improve as trust among staff increased and the PLC process grew at this school site.

*Supportive Relationships-Structures.* The school schedule was built on the PLC concept. The principal has developed a schedule that is conducive for collaboration

among most staff members. The staff also perceived that structures were in place to support the PLC concept. The overall gain score for this domain was .08%, representing a 2.66% increase. During the interviews, teachers expressed the support given to them in having collaborative time. However, numerous teachers expressed that the amount of time needs to be increased. It was also expressed that this may increase next year by planning a back-to-back block time for teachers to ensure a longer PLC planning time. One participant expressed the need for teachers in special areas to try to become more involved in the grade level PLC meetings. In terms of the structure for the PLC process itself, most participants felt positive.

#### *Overview of the Findings*

*Research Question #1. What changes in the staff's perceptions about the five dimensions of a professional learning community have occurred 9 months after the implementation of a PLC?* The school was in the initial stages of the development of PLCs. The staff was tackling the challenge of implementing the PLC model. It was evident that developing a culture of collaboration in a PLC takes time in schools and the teachers at this school were beginning to change the way teachers perceive their roles. In a collaborative culture, teachers are empowered to analyze data and take action as a team. The transition at this school site was moving slowly, but moving in a positive direction. Teachers were beginning to take more active roles in creating the collaborative culture that is necessary in a successful PLC. The area of shared personal practice demonstrated the most growth over the 9-month period and is one area that could be used as a milestone to move the school forward in this process. According to the data, the area of shared and supportive leadership was the weakest. During the interviews, it was evident that the principal was well liked and respected. Based on the interviews, it was possible

that the administrator may lack the knowledge to effectively encourage and support PLC teams at this school.

*Research Question #2. What are the strengths and weaknesses of the implementation of a professional learning community as perceived by the instructional staff?* One of the strengths was that the school staff began to meet collaboratively to review student work and to share and improve instructional practices. During the interviews the teachers felt that one of the most important themes in the PLC implementation process was that of working together. They expressed that many grade levels had previously met regularly but had been spending time doing “housekeeping” for the grade level rather than sharing best practices, looking at data, and discussing students’ work. They felt as though they had found a more defined use of their team planning time over the 9-month time frame. It was also expressed by the administration and during staff interviews that communication had improved.

The weaknesses were evident as well. The process began with much negativity among the staff. There were some staff members who felt PLCs were just another program and just something else to do. It was expressed that trust and respect were still issues and time would need to pass for them to be gained. Talking with their peers about faults intimidated a few of the teachers. Teachers also felt as though they needed more support and there were a few scheduling issues that did not allow all staff members to meet with a regular PLC team.

*Research Question #3. What are the critical next steps identified by the instructional staff that need to be taken to advance the professional learning community?* Numerous staff members expressed the issue of common planning time as a critical next step in the success of PLC implementation. Common planning was in place throughout

the school at grade levels, but the media specialist, music, art, PE, and exceptional children teachers were unable to participate regularly in PLC team meetings. Many individuals felt as though this needed to be a priority.

Another area that was discussed that may need special attention was the area of professional development. During the interview discussions, there were many PLC themes mentioned that staff felt would be good areas to have additional PLC professional development sessions scheduled. The areas of common assessments, SMART goals, and discipline measures were identified as special needs areas in the PLC process.

The administrative team also expressed interest in whether the school would see an increase in student assessment scores with the new PLC collaborative culture in place.

#### *Summary*

The data showed that some of the components of the five dimensions of a PLC were perceived to be in place at this school site. Overall, the perceptions of the staff were that the implementation of professional learning communities were in the beginning stages at this school of study. Many teachers saw a positive impact over the 9 months of the study, while some of the teachers were apprehensive about the process. Continuity of the processes will be important to the further implementation of PLCs at the school of study. Evidence shows that the staff has begun the process of sharing and working together in teams. There was a strong support system among the staff and they were very eager to move the PLC process forward next year.

#### *Recommendations for Further Research*

For the purpose of this research, the case study was limited to one school. However, future studies could consist of more than one school to allow for a comparison of the PLC process.



A further recommendation would be to study the impact of professional learning communities on student achievement in schools that have a more diverse population.

Schools could utilize the PLCA as both a pre- and post-assessment to track and monitor progress towards a PLC.

A study could be conducted to research beyond teacher perception to see if there is indeed an increase in student achievement.

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Appendix A

Professional Learning Community Assessment



## Professional Learning Community Assessment

### Directions:

This questionnaire assesses your perceptions about your principal, staff, and stakeholders based on the five dimensions of a professional learning community (PLC) and related attributes. There are no right or wrong responses. This questionnaire contains a number of statements about practices that occur in some schools. Read each statement and then circle the appropriate response that reflects your personal degree of agreement with the statement. Be certain to select only one response for each statement.

### Key Terms:

Principal = Principal, not associate or assistant principal

Staff = All adult staff directly associated with curriculum, instruction, and assessment of students

Stakeholders = Parents and community members

Thank you in advance for your participation. Make no identifying marks on this questionnaire. Please return to \_\_\_\_\_ by \_\_\_\_\_.

### *Shared and Supportive Leadership*

1. The staff is consistently involved in discussion and making decisions about most school issues.

*Strongly Disagree*      *Disagree*      *Agree*      *Strongly Agree*

2. The principal incorporates advice from staff to make decisions.

*Strongly Disagree*      *Disagree*      *Agree*      *Strongly Agree*

3. The staff have accessibility to key information.

*Strongly Disagree*      *Disagree*      *Agree*      *Strongly Agree*

4. The principal is proactive and addresses areas where support is needed.

*Strongly Disagree*      *Disagree*      *Agree*      *Strongly Agree*

5. Opportunities are provided for staff to initiate change.

*Strongly Disagree*      *Disagree*      *Agree*      *Strongly Agree*

6. The principal shares responsibility and rewards for innovative actions.

*Strongly Disagree*      *Disagree*      *Agree*      *Strongly Agree*

7. The principal participates democratically with staff sharing power and authority.

*Strongly Disagree*      *Disagree*      *Agree*      *Strongly Agree*

8. Leadership is promoted and nurtured among staff.

*Strongly Disagree*      *Disagree*      *Agree*      *Strongly Agree*

9. Decision making takes place through committees and communication across grade and subject areas.

*Strongly Disagree*      *Disagree*      *Agree*      *Strongly Agree*

10. Stakeholders assume shared responsibility and accountability for student learning without evidence of imposed power and authority

*Strongly Disagree*      *Disagree*      *Agree*      *Strongly Agree*

### ***Shared Values and Vision***

11. A collaborative process exists for developing a shared sense of values among staff.

*Strongly Disagree*      *Disagree*      *Agree*      *Strongly Agree*

12. Shared values support norms of behavior that guide decisions about teaching and learning.

*Strongly Disagree*      *Disagree*      *Agree*      *Strongly Agree*

13. The staff share visions for school improvement that have an undeviating focus on student learning.

*Strongly Disagree*      *Disagree*      *Agree*      *Strongly Agree*

14. Decisions are made in alignment with the school's values and vision.

*Strongly Disagree*      *Disagree*      *Agree*      *Strongly Agree*

15. A collaborative process exists for developing a shared vision among staff.

*Strongly Disagree*      *Disagree*      *Agree*      *Strongly Agree*

16. School goals focus on student learning beyond test scores and grades.

*Strongly Disagree*      *Disagree*      *Agree*      *Strongly Agree*

17. Policies and programs are aligned to the school's vision.

*Strongly Disagree*      *Disagree*      *Agree*      *Strongly Agree*

18. Stakeholders are actively involved in creating high expectations that serve to increase student achievement.

*Strongly Disagree*      *Disagree*      *Agree*      *Strongly Agree*

### ***Collective Learning and Application***

19. The staff work together to seek knowledge, skills, and strategies and apply this new learning to their work.

*Strongly Disagree*      *Disagree*      *Agree*      *Strongly Agree*

20. Collegial relationships exist among staff that reflect commitment to school improvement efforts.

*Strongly Disagree*      *Disagree*      *Agree*      *Strongly Agree*

21. The Staff plan and work together to search for solutions to address diverse student needs.

*Strongly Disagree*      *Disagree*      *Agree*      *Strongly Agree*

22. A variety of opportunities and structures exist for collective learning through open dialogue.

*Strongly Disagree*      *Disagree*      *Agree*      *Strongly Agree*

23. The staff engage in dialogue that reflects a respect for diverse ideas that lead to continued inquiry.

*Strongly Disagree*      *Disagree*      *Agree*      *Strongly Agree*

24. Professional development focuses on teaching and learning.

*Strongly Disagree*      *Disagree*      *Agree*      *Strongly Agree*

25. School staff and stakeholders learn together and apply new knowledge to solve problems.

*Strongly Disagree*      *Disagree*      *Agree*      *Strongly Agree*

26. School staff is committed to programs that enhance learning.

*Strongly Disagree*      *Disagree*      *Agree*      *Strongly Agree*

### ***Shared Personal Practice***

27. Opportunities exist for staff to observe peers and offer encouragement.

*Strongly Disagree*      *Disagree*      *Agree*      *Strongly Agree*

28. The staff provide feedback to peers related to instructional practices.

*Strongly Disagree*      *Disagree*      *Agree*      *Strongly Agree*

29. The staff informally share ideas and suggestions for improving student learning.

*Strongly Disagree*      *Disagree*      *Agree*      *Strongly Agree*

30. The staff collaboratively review student work to share and improve instructional practices.

*Strongly Disagree*      *Disagree*      *Agree*      *Strongly Agree*

31. Opportunities exist for coaching and mentoring.

*Strongly Disagree*      *Disagree*      *Agree*      *Strongly Agree*

32. Individuals and teams have the opportunity to apply learning and share the results of their practices.

*Strongly Disagree*      *Disagree*      *Agree*      *Strongly Agree*

### ***Supportive Conditions – Relationships***

33. Caring relationships exist among staff and students that are built on trust and respect.

*Strongly Disagree*      *Disagree*      *Agree*      *Strongly Agree*

34. A culture of trust and respect exists for taking risks.

*Strongly Disagree*      *Disagree*      *Agree*      *Strongly Agree*

35. Outstanding achievement is recognized and celebrated regularly in our school.  
*Strongly Disagree*      *Disagree*      *Agree*      *Strongly Agree*
36. School staff and stakeholders exhibit a sustained and unified effort to embed change into the culture of the school.  
*Strongly Disagree*      *Disagree*      *Agree*      *Strongly Agree*
- Supportive Conditions – Structures***
37. Time is provided to facilitate collaborative work.  
*Strongly Disagree*      *Disagree*      *Agree*      *Strongly Agree*
38. The school schedule promotes collective learning and shared practice.  
*Strongly Disagree*      *Disagree*      *Agree*      *Strongly Agree*
39. Fiscal resources are available for professional development.  
*Strongly Disagree*      *Disagree*      *Agree*      *Strongly Agree*
40. Appropriate technology and instructional materials are available to staff.  
*Strongly Disagree*      *Disagree*      *Agree*      *Strongly Agree*
41. Resource people provide expertise and support for continuous learning.  
*Strongly Disagree*      *Disagree*      *Agree*      *Strongly Agree*
42. The school facility is clean, attractive, and inviting.  
*Strongly Disagree*      *Disagree*      *Agree*      *Strongly Agree*
43. The proximity of grade level and department personnel allows for ease in collaborating with colleagues.  
*Strongly Disagree*      *Disagree*      *Agree*      *Strongly Agree*
44. Communication systems promote a flow of information among staff.  
*Strongly Disagree*      *Disagree*      *Agree*      *Strongly Agree*
45. Communication systems promote a flow of information across the entire school community, including central office personnel, parents, and community members.  
*Strongly Disagree*      *Disagree*      *Agree*      *Strongly Agree*

Source of questionnaire:

Huffman, J. B., & Hipp, K. K. (2003). *Reculturing schools as professional learning communities*. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Education.

Appendix B

Group Interview Questionnaire

## Group Interview Questionnaire

The following questions will be used to lead the discussion:

1. Talk about the leadership opportunities at your school with respect to the decision making process?
2. What is the vision of your school and what role did you have in the development of the vision?
3. How has the professional development opportunities available to you during the 2008-2009 school year contributed to your understanding of a Professional Learning Community and its implementation?
4. How would you describe relationships at your school? Is trust evident? Have the relationships changed over the past year?
5. How does the school facilitate opportunities for you to collaborate? Give me specific examples.
6. Are there any issues, challenges, or success that have not already addressed that you would like to discuss?
7. How do you feel about the overall experience with the implementation of PLCs in your school?
8. Tell me how your Professional Learning Community is going to help you attain your vision.

Appendix C

Author Permission Letter

Dianne F. Olivier, Ph. D.

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February 8, 2009

Shannon B. Long, M. Ed.  
Director of Professional Learning  
Gaston County Schools  
236 Eighth Avenue  
Cramerton, NC 28032

Dear. Ms. Long:

This correspondence is to grant permission to utilize the *Professional Learning Community Assessment* (PLCA) as your instrument for data collection in your doctoral study at Gardner-Webb University. I am pleased that you are interested in using the PLCA measure in your research. Information on the validation of the measure can be found in the Hipp and Huffman (2003) *Reculturing Schools as Professional Learning Communities* book. I am attaching Information relating to the reliability and validity of the measure, as well as a copy of the instrument. I am attaching a copy of the assessment, which includes items specifically related to data utilization.

Upon completion of your study, I would be interested in learning about your results. Should you or your committee members require any additional information, please feel free to contact me.

Thank you for your interest in our research and measure for assessing professional learning community attributes within schools.

Sincerely,

*Dianne F. Olivier*

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