The Role of the Central Office in a Professional Learning Community

Robert Eaker and Janel Keating

2009 OACOA/OASE Winter Conference
Salishan, Gleneden Beach, OR
January 29-31, 2009
The Role of the Central Office in a Professional Learning Community

Robert Eaker and Janel Keating

Adapted from: Revisiting Professional Learning Communities At Work Richard DuFour, Rebecca DuFour & Robert Eaker

Despite the emphasis on site-based school improvement that is inherent in PLC practices, the central office plays a powerful role in enhancing the capacity of schools to function as professional learning communities.

“...it became clear that school improvement resulting in increased student achievement could only be sustained with strong district support.”

--Larry Lezotte
Recent research has revealed a statistically significant relationship between district leadership and student achievement.

--Waters & Marzano

• See phone

A Professional Learning Community “Way of Thinking”

A professional learning community is not a “program”, it is fundamentally, a “way of thinking”.

One aspect of this “way of thinking” is this; when addressing an issue, first gain shared knowledge.
Leadership in a Learning Organization

Developing the structure and culture that engages people in learning is the primary task of leadership and perhaps the only way a leader can genuinely influence or inspire others.

—Peter Senge

Three Ways to Get People to Change

• Force
• Persuasion
• Deep Learning

So, What Do We Know?
Common Research Themes

Shannon & Bylsma identified common research themes in the recommendations for district leaders, clustering them into four broad categories:
Ensure quality teaching and learning through coordinated and aligned curriculum and assessment, coordinated and embedded professional development, and quality classroom instruction.

Provide effective leadership by establishing high expectations focused on learning goals and eliminating distractions and competing programs. Provide stable leadership to sustain improvement programs until they are institutionalized.

Develop support for system-wide improvement through timely use of data from a variety of sources. Provide the technological infrastructure, the training, and the time for teachers to delve into the data to inform their practice.
Promote clear, collaborative relationships by ensuring understanding of school and district roles with a balance between autonomy and control. Nurture a professional culture and collaborative relationships. Manage the impact of the external environment on schools.

(From: Revisiting PLC’s at Work)

Twelve Keys

The research of Steve Anderson identified twelve keys to district support for school improvement.

(From: Revisiting PLC’s at Work)

A district-wide sense of efficacy.
2

A district-wide focus on student achievement and the quality of instruction.

3

Adoption of and commitment to district-wide performance standards.

4

Development and adoption of district-wide curricula and approaches to instruction.
5
Alignment of curriculum, teaching and learning materials, and assessment to relevant standards.

6
Multi-measure accountability systems and system-wide use of data to inform practice, hold school and district leaders accountable for results, and monitor progress.

7
Use of targets and phased-in focuses of improvement.
8

Investment in instructional leadership development at the school and district levels.

9

A focus on district-wide, job-embedded professional development and support for teachers.

10

A district-wide and school-level emphasis on teamwork and professional community (including, in several cases, positive partnerships with unions.)
11
New approaches to board-district relations and in-district relations.

12
Strategic relations with state reform policies and resources.

Do Not Limit the Search
Our search for “shared knowledge” should not be limited to educational research findings.
We can learn from other high performing districts and research from the worlds of business, organizational development and leadership.
Peters and Waterman, in their study of high-performing organizations, found that high-performing organizations are simultaneously “loose” and “tight”.

This concept has tremendous implications for successful implementation of professional learning community practices.

Both “Top Down” & “Bottom Up”

Leaders who create schools and districts capable of sustained substantive improvement are not laissez-faire in their approach to education.

They are skillful at using the concept of simultaneous loose and tight leadership—and thus are able to foster

- autonomy and creativity (loose)
- clear, nondiscretionary priorities and parameters (tight)

-- DuFour, DuFour and Eaker
The Secret

Of course, the secret is knowing what to be “tight” about and those things about which we can be “loose”.

Central Office Leaders Must Be Tight

We must be “tight” on the fundamental purpose of the organization (learning) and a few big ideas—insisting that those within the organization act in ways consistent with those concepts and demanding that the district align all of its practices and program with them.

--Richard DuFour

Ironic, Isn’t It

“One of the great ironies in education is that it takes strong and effective leaders to create truly empowered people who are capable of sustaining improvement after the leader has gone.”

--DuFour, DuFour, Eaker & Many
So, What Are We “Tight” About

To embed the mission of ensuring high levels of learning for all students deep into the district culture, the central office should be “tight” and insist that each school will:

Make student learning the priority of the school

and

align all practices and procedures to promote student learning.

(Of course, the central office must do the same thing at the district office level.)
Tight: A Focus on Learning

The central office should ensure that...

Each school makes student learning the priority and aligns all practices and procedures and promotes student learning.

TIGHT

Each school measures all major decisions against the probable impact on learning.

TIGHT
Each school engages all staff in building shared knowledge regarding what each student must learn by course, grade level, and unit of instruction.

Each school aligns essential learning outcomes with state and district standards.

Robert Marzano talks about a guaranteed and viable curriculum... What do we expect students to learn?
Doug Reeves and Robert Marzano talk about power standards and pacing guides.

What do we expect students to learn?

Is this more work we have to do?

NO!

Each school monitors each student's learning through the development of frequent and timely formative assessments.

TIGHT
Each school creates systems to provide students with additional time and support when they experience difficulty in learning.

**TIGHT**

Each school creates systems to enhance and extend the learning of students who demonstrate mastery of essential learning outcomes.

**TIGHT**

Loose: A Focus on Learning

Schools and teachers can enjoy some autonomy in creating a focus on learning.

For example...
Teacher teams should clarify and prioritize essential outcomes for each subject or course based on a collaborative study of state and district standards and the state summative assessment.

**Loose**

Teacher teams should develop their own common assessments.

**Loose**

Individual teachers should use the instructional strategies of their choice as long as they demonstrate results.

**Loose**
Systems for monitoring student learning and providing intervention and enrichment may vary from school to school.

**Loose**

Tight: Collaborative Teaming

To ensure a collaborative culture is embedded into every school culture, the central office should expect that...

**Tight**

Collaboration is embedded into the routine practices of each school.
Time for collaboration is built into the school day and school calendar.

Teams focus on the key questions of learning.

Products of collaboration are made clear.
Team norms guide the collaborative work of each team.

A New Insight

“The quality of the work of teacher teams is directly related to the quality of work of the principal teams.”

Eaker and Keating

Tight: A Focus on Results

School improvement efforts must be measured against results rather than “activity “or “intentions”.

Therefore, the central office should ensure that...
Each school makes student learning the top priority and aligns all practices and procedures to promote student learning.

Each school works collaboratively to ensure each student learns at high levels.

Each school develops one or more SMART goals that are aligned with the district goals.
Each school develops a plan to monitor the attainment of goals, both formatively and summatively.

**TIGHT**

Each school requires each team to develop and implement strategies to improve the current levels of student achievement based on the team’s analysis of both formative and summative assessment results.

**TIGHT**

**Loose: A Focus on Results**

Schools and teachers can enjoy some autonomy in creating a culture that focuses on results.

For example...
Schools and teams should create their own goals in addition to district goals.

Loose

Schools should identify the indicators they will use to assess their progress toward the attainment of their goals.

Loose

Schools and teams should analyze their own data results rather than having someone else present them with conclusions.

Loose
Schools, teams, and individuals should develop their own improvement strategies.

You Must Care Enough to Confront

Nothing destroys the credibility of the leader faster than an unwillingness to address an obvious violation of what the organization is suppose to stand for.

--James McGregor Burns

Successful districts are collaborative, but they are not always congenial and consensual.

Working in a high-trust yet demanding culture, participants view disagreement as a normal part of change and are able to value and work through differences.

Helpful Hints

DuFour, DuFour and Eaker in their book, *Revisiting Professional Learning Communities at Work* (2008), offer four keys that can help leaders successfully implement professional learning communities throughout a district.

**Key 1**

District Leaders must use every aspect of an effective change process and present a compelling rationale for moving forward.

**Key 2**

District leaders must communicate priorities effectively, consistently and with one voice.
District leaders must limit initiatives to allow for the sustained focus that is essential to a successful change initiative.

District leaders must help teachers and principals build their collective capacity to raise student achievement by embedding on-going professional development into the routine work of every educator.

Assumption: Districts Must Create A Culture of High Expectations

A major problem facing many districts (and schools and classrooms) is not so much closing the “knowing-doing” gap, but rather closing the “expectations-acceptance” gap.
That is being willing to accept work that is far below the quality that is expected.

In a professional learning community there are “collaboratively agreed upon ways of doing things”.

The QUALITY of work that is performed throughout the district should be expected to meet collaboratively developed criteria (rubrics) that are clearly understood by all.
Closing the Gap: Reciprocal Accountability

One way to close the “expectation-acceptance” gap is to provide faculty and staff with the resources necessary to help them be successful.

Richard Elmore puts it like this:

“Accountability must be a reciprocal process. For every expectation I have of you to perform, I have an equal responsibility to provide you with the capacity to meet that expectation.”

• Address: “What” (Clear Directions)
• Address: “Why” (Rationale)
• Address: “How” (Process)
• Address: “Criteria for Quality” (Rubrics and Examples)
• Address: “Time line” (When)
• Address: “Tips, Suggestions, Tools, Resources”
A Culture of Support

Helping shape the behavior of others throughout the district is a complex and incremental endeavor.

Kerry Patterson and his colleagues in their book, *Influencer: The Power to Change Anything* offer insights into how to change the minds and behavior of others.

Patterson and his colleagues contend that the issue of persuading someone to change comes down to two essential questions:

- *Is it worth it?* (Is the change worthwhile or desirable?)
- *Can I do it?* (Is the change feasible?)

Patterson suggests six sources that can be tapped in order to influence others to change.

- Influence personal motivation
- Enhance the personal ability of others
- Harness the power of peer pressure
- Find strength in numbers
- Design rewards and demand accountability
- Alter the environment to support the change

---From: *Revisiting PLC’s At Work*
Connecting the Dots: A Conceptual Framework

Various programs and initiatives impact one upon the other. For example, there are obvious connections between curriculum, instruction, assessment, student support, school improvement planning, staff development and resources allocation.

At the same time, there are connections to areas that, at first, may not seem quite so obvious.

For example, district leaders must have the conceptual skills to see the connections between:

- Hiring, interviewing, staff development and performance appraisal.
- The role of the support staff.
- School/Community relations.
- Assessing our progress in functioning as a professional learning community.
Leadership

Simply “knowing” what to do does not ensure that knowledge can be skillfully applied.

Differentiated Leadership Model
Robert Eaker and Janel Neatting
To paraphrase Mark Twain, the difference between knowing and successfully doing is as significant as the difference between a lightning bug and lightning.

Leadership and Modeling  
PLC Practices

The central office must model the behavior they expect of others.

For example, the central office can model PLC practices by asking these fundamental questions:

Collins Level 5 Leadership Practices
(1) What is it we want all our schools to do to develop their capacity to function as a PLC?

(2) How will we know if they are doing it?

What is the daily work of a team in a PLC?

• Identified team norms
• Analyzed student achievement data and established SMART goals
• Clarified the knowledge, skills, and dispositions for every grade level, course and unit
• Aligned essential learning/power standards with state standards and high stakes assessments

Eaker & Keating
What is the daily work of a team in a PLC?

- Identified course content and topics that can be eliminated
- Agreed to best sequence and pacing guide to help students achieve the essential learning
- Identified the prerequisite knowledge and skills students need to master essential learning
- Identified strategies and created instruments to assess whether students have the prerequisite knowledge and skills

Eaker & Keating

What is the daily work of a team in a PLC?

- Develop frequent common formative assessments
- Establish the proficiency standard we want each student to achieve examined by the common assessment
- Use the results of common assessments

Eaker & Keating

What is the daily work of a team in a PLC?

- Agreed on the criteria we will use in judging the quality of student work related to essential learning for the course
- Taught the students the criteria for judging the quality of their work
- Developed or utilized common summative assessments

Eaker & Keating
What is the daily work of a team in a PLC?

- Established the proficiency standard we want each student to achieve
- Formally evaluate our adherence to and our effectiveness of our team

Eaker & Keating

Teachers need to act their way into a new way of thinking then to think their way into a new way of acting.

Paraphrase—Dylan Wiliam

Eaker & Keating

(3) And, what happens if they don’t?
Motivate and Inspire

As Daniel Goleman notes, if leadership is to be successful it must ultimately “touch the emotions”.

District leaders must understand that “doing the right things” simply aren’t enough.

Effective Leaders Understand “Every Interaction Matters”

Leaders have the responsibility to motivate and inspire—to move the culture from one of compliance to a culture of commitment, from doing things because “we have to” to doing things because “we want to!”
Persistence: Staying the Course

The road to becoming a professional learning community is never completely smooth. There are the inevitable bumps along the way. The issue is not how to avoid the bumps, but rather, how well we deal with them.

—Eaker & Keating

"...the decision to undertake change more often than not is accompanied by a kind of optimism and rosy view of the future that, temporarily at least, obscures the predictable turmoil ahead."
It is...rough stuff...it has no end point, it is a continuous process, there are breakthroughs, but also brick walls.