

# **Developing a Professional Learning Community Among Urban School Principals**

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*This article describes how ten exemplary urban school principals worked together under a Wallace Foundation Grant to advance the understanding of urban school leadership. The grant's intent was to contribute to the development of a national model for the assessment of master principals by demonstrating how building-level leadership in urban schools can significantly improve student academic performance. Principals were required to submit portfolios reflecting their contributions. Instead, these principals submitted a co-authored book revealing their study of the nature of "urban" and highlighting their individual case stories. In so doing, a unique professional learning community emerged that spanned across urban schools and school districts.*

The value of professional learning communities (PLCs) in improving student learning is widely accepted in the educational community (Hord, 1997, 2004; Louis, Kruse & Byrk, 1995; Newman & Wehlage, 1995; Olivier & Hipp, 2006; Rosenholtz, 1989; Sackney, Mitchell & Walker, 2005; Schmoker, 2006). Creating PLCs in schools is difficult, but sustaining them is even more challenging, particularly in complex urban school districts. What follows is the story of how 10 exemplary K-8 principals from two urban school districts, Green Bay and Milwaukee, worked collaboratively on the Wisconsin Urban Schools Leadership Project, funded by a Wallace Foundation Grant over a period of one and a half years. In so doing, a unique and powerful administrative learning community emerged that advanced the concept of a PLC from a "brick and mortar," building-based community to one that had no tangible physical boundaries and extended across school districts.

As a result of this cross-district administrative learning community, the principals achieved the purpose of the grant, built lateral capacity

across school districts, and deepened their understanding of the importance of PLCs in sustaining student achievement. Moreover, as they exchanged stories, opened their schools, and examined the literature, they identified three emerging themes that separate “urban” from other school contexts: magnitude, urgency and complexity.

The strategy of learning from others outside of one’s school PLC is consistent with Hord and Hirsh’s (2008) observation that “. . . learning is restricted to what the PLC members know and the skills that members can share. This strategy is an efficient and effective one as long as the expertise to address a need or goal resides in the group. . .” (p. 34). Even though these principals were selected for the project because of their individual expertise in improving student learning, they realized that in order to sustain their own PLCs and continuous student achievement, they would benefit from the skills and experience of other exemplary principals.

The selection process was based on criteria developed by the district administration in Milwaukee and Green Bay. In Milwaukee, the principals served for a minimum of three years in schools demonstrating predominant patterns of high test scores that were high value added over the last three years. In Green Bay, principals were rank ordered based on their vision, student learning, change agent activities, leadership and management skills, and contribution to the profession (Weber & Hipp, 2007, pp. 8-9).

### **Background of the Wallace Grant**

The 10 principals with whom we worked were a part of 30 principals from Wisconsin’s five largest school districts selected to become Wallace Fellows for their demonstrated exemplary leadership in improving student achievement. Although we conducted formal research with our cohort of 10 principals (Weber & Hipp, 2007; Weber & Hipp, 2008), the purpose of this paper is to describe the process by which these Fellows became a professional learning community, not to report the results of our research.

The 30 Fellows were experienced K-12 principals that worked in three collaborative cohorts facilitated by higher education professors from the University of Wisconsin - Madison, the University of Wisconsin – Milwaukee, and Cardinal Stritch University to foster their own individual growth and address the struggles and challenges necessary to advance an understanding of urban school leadership. The

Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction coordinated and supported the work across cohorts to fulfill the purpose of the grant, which was “to foster individual growth, advance urban school leadership, and to collaboratively develop a national model for the assessment of master-level principals to demonstrate how building-level leadership in urban school settings can significantly improve student academic performance” (Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, 2005, p. 2).

### **Becoming a Professional Learning Community**

To show how these principals became a professional learning community, we use Shirley Hord’s (1997) five related dimensions of a PLC to provide a glimpse of our story: shared values and vision; shared and supportive leadership; collective learning and application; shared practice; and supportive conditions – relationships and structures.

#### ***Shared values and vision***

To guide the behavior of the cohort, we asked the Fellows to reflect on the values that have the greatest impact on their schools and on student learning, and then to create a shared set of values that would guide the behavior and practices of the cohort itself to ensure a successful learning experience. Together, consensus was built around the following values:

- Honesty
- Integrity
- Shared learning
- Compassion
- High expectations for self
- Trust

This exercise was the most powerful driver of this learning community as it established the foundation upon which collective learning and dialogue would occur. The Fellows relied on these values to hold themselves and each other accountable while also reflecting on their own schools as PLCs. In addition, the principals surveyed their respective staffs regarding their leadership practices and openly discussed the results with one another using an informal tool that was aligned to the Wallace target areas of Administrator as: a) advocate for student learning, b) communicator and change agent, c) community builder, and d) manager of the organization. Sharing perceptions of their leadership through the eyes of their staffs required transparency, honesty

and trust early in the project. After examining their perceived successes and continuing challenges, they united around a common vision of creating schools that close the achievement gap.

Our Fellows shared their stories, embarked on structured site visits, reviewed the literature, and posed difficult questions that inspired conversation and study around the “nature” of urban. To realize their vision, they focused on the realities identified in urban settings to guide future practice: a) a sense of *urgency* in overcoming the volume of systemic barriers affecting student achievement that challenge urban educators; b) the *complexity* of interrelated parts that cannot be understood or addressed separately; and c) the sheer *magnitude* in terms of size and scope related to issues of race and class:

- the achievement gap between wealth and poverty, inequities, and bigotry;
- poverty-stricken neighborhoods rife with gangs, crime, abuse and neglect, alcohol and drugs, homelessness, hunger, transience, poor housing, families uninsured and underinsured;
- Special Education, Limited English Proficiency (LEP), growing diversity in immigrant populations, limited parent/family involvement, and increased responsibilities amid the lack of responsibility and commitment of the larger community;
- scarce resources, overcrowded classes, truancy, mobility;
- social and disciplinary problems, teacher turnover, low sense of efficacy and morale, a disconnect between the background of most teachers and the students they serve, inexperience and unpreparedness in meeting the needs of urban students;
- inability to meet federal state and local expectations;
- negative perceptions in the media, insufficient fiscal capacity, ineffective data and resource management; and
- the implications of poverty on healthcare, politics, economic and social justice issues,

It is apparent that “to be urban is to be immersed in complex human conditions that remind society that it has not lived up to its promise for its entire people – particularly our urban children” (A Wallace Fellows project in cooperation with Cardinal Stritch University, 2007, p. 4). Un-

like their colleagues in other settings, urban leaders must navigate large and complex organizational hierarchies while advocating for the needs of their students. With these challenges in mind, these principals openly shared what strengths they could each contribute individually as well as what could only be learned collectively. They were inspired as to how to offer hope to the future of urban education, where, too often, only doubt and despair exist.

### ***Shared and supportive leadership***

As part of the project, principals were required to submit individual portfolios profiling their leadership mastery. Our 10 principals reflected on the cohort's vision of creating schools that closed the achievement gap and questioned how such an individual portfolio project could advance urban school leadership. Subsequently, they were granted permission to reshape the requirement in a more meaningful way to meet their professional needs by discussing and finding solutions to unique urban issues in the community with other principals facing similar problems, not by any traditional route.

The Fellows recognized the leadership strengths of each cohort member and were motivated by a strong sense of collective efficacy. Thus, they committed to writing and submitting a book, in lieu of individual portfolios, that could only be realized through developing broad-based, lateral capacity across the schools. This undertaking would require trust, respect and shared and supportive leadership as they documented their own best practices as well as sought insights from the literature.

For example, one principal shared how her school improved reading scores by addressing a disjointed reading curriculum amid a reluctance to change. Another principal revealed the details of moving student writing achievement from the lowest to the highest school in the district, making her teachers a vital resource to the entire district. In brief, these examples illustrate how the principals shared their best practices for improving student learning.

Leadership was viewed as shared responsibility and commitment, and decisions were made by consensus and followed accordingly. Different people took the lead at different times with no one person or district standing above the rest. It was not uncommon for different principals to assume the role of unofficial "leader" at our meetings; rather, it was the norm (A Wallace Fellows project in cooperation with Cardinal Stritch University, 2007, pp. 86-87).

### ***Collective learning and application***

Before writing the book, the principals explored what needed to be learned about effective urban education and how to go about it. They learned the formal skills of effective dialogue (Senge, Kleiner, Roberts, Ross, & Smith, 1994) that would contribute to a successful process, balancing advocacy and inquiry, and building on divergent thinking. Then, the two university facilitators and the principals gathered resources that would be beneficial to the group, such as books, articles, websites, and shared practices.

To fulfill the requirement for the collective portfolio, each principal reviewed data and wrote a case story that met the Wallace criteria related to their most noteworthy successes as well as ongoing challenges to meet student needs. The Fellows worked together to edit, critique and refine each other's stories, and collected evidence of school practices during structured site visits. The cohort spent a day in each school informally interviewing teachers and observing classrooms related to a specified student learning goal and "look fors" as to "What does successful leadership look like in action" aligned to the purpose of the site visit. Subsequently, principals applied their collective learning by utilizing each other's strategies in their own schools. The work they engaged in supported their vision of bridging the achievement gap for all students and sustaining ongoing school improvement.

### ***Shared practice***

An essential element in becoming a professional learning community and one that is least evident in most schools was sharing personal practice. Each of the principal's schools was visited and critiqued based on the collective learning that took place during cohort meetings related to a student learning goal. Transparency of practice was important in helping the individual principal while at the same time increasing the effectiveness of the cohort of principals as a whole. The case stories were rich in detail about the effective practices in each school and invited further inquiry. These stories also promoted conversation about specific areas in which each principal struggled. For example, one of the principals recounted her first staff meeting at a new school in which several teachers sat with their backs to the principal to express their displeasure at a woman being hired as principal. This incident led to discussion among the principals about dealing with recalcitrant staff members and working toward a common vision. One principal indicated,

*“I used a lot of the information and strategies learned through Wallace at my own school and we also incorporated some of the information and strategies in our district. For instance, we created norms at my school and the elementary principal meetings. We worked on relationships first. Once we got to know each other, it was easier to work together and we figured out we had the same issues/problems”.*

Another principal shared how she learned how to build culture, the importance of the principal’s visibility, rapport and openness with staff, and the high expectations that prevailed for staff and students and how these expectations were communicated and followed in day to day practice. A related insight came as a result of a site visit:

*“Something I put into practice was the honors board I saw at Samuel Morse Middle School, which was displayed across from the office. It helped me see the importance of allowing the students, staff, parents and community see the high expectations and achievements at the site. It also reminded me of the importance of celebrating our successes, which is something we don’t do as often as we should. It was a simple idea that had a lot of power behind it in regards to building positive school climate and culture”.*

Others learned about different leadership styles and how great leaders collaborate:

*“To work toward developing our PLC, I think starting with setting norms right from the beginning was very valuable. We developed a sense of trust very quickly. We also realized our similarities and differences and looked upon those differences as strengths to learn from and expand our mental models. Our sense of creating a vision of what we wanted to learn and support through Wallace was important as well. Building off of each other’s ideas in a room of outstanding leaders was a joy to be part of. We built friendships and collegial support to help us in the administrative role”.*

Still other examples involved practices and partnerships such as conducting celebratory assemblies, sharing building space, and sharing an employee’s services to address violence prevention. Not only were practices shared among the principals, but collective learning was scaled up at the district level from which others could benefit. For example, the principals in one district applied the learning that occurred in the

cohort to their own district’s principals meetings. As a result of this project and the collective learning that took place, these Fellows were charged with facilitating the content and processes for administrative workshops in their own district.

***Supportive conditions – relationships and structures***

The Wallace Fellows understood that gathering 10 high-powered principals in the same room could lead to a competitive rather than a collaborative spirit, so it was important to establish supportive structures and processes that would create a safe and open climate, drawing out the best from each member. As a result, they developed group norms for meeting behavior:

- Active Listening
- Equitable Responsibilities and Participation
- Value Opinions of Others
- Agree to Disagree
- Respect Confidentiality
- Encourage Variety

University facilitators and principals alike assumed responsibility for ensuring that meeting norms were followed. One principal emerged as the unofficial “keeper of the norms” and regularly “took us to task,” reminding us that the norms were our agreed upon behaviors.

Besides establishing meeting norms, the principals recognized that extensive time would need to be devoted to the project and took it upon themselves to schedule additional meetings, confer by phone, visit each other’s sites, and do whatever was necessary to ensure quality and integrity in the contents of the book.

Relationships were built around trust and respect and developed as Fellows openly shared diverse opinions, made their practices transparent, and relied on each other to complete assigned tasks. Not only did Fellows grow professionally, but they compassionately supported each other in their personal lives and occasional struggles. All of this served to provide the supportive conditions necessary for successfully completing the task and becoming a professional learning community.

**Conclusion**

At the start of this project, the primary goal was not necessarily to become a professional learning community, but to make a difference in the lives of urban children. As the principals stated, “The Wallace

Fellows have and continue to approach urban school leadership and learning as a real matter of life and death for the children they believe they are honored and privileged to serve” (A Wallace Fellows project in cooperation with Cardinal Stritch University, 2007, p. 141). However, as a result of establishing shared values and vision, supportive and shared leadership, collective learning, shared practice, and supportive conditions, we believe that the principals became a professional learning community, one that grew beyond the bounds of a single school or district.

***Shared values and vision*** – the importance of establishing a cohort vision of closing the gap could not be underestimated and was the focus of every meeting. The Fellows continually evaluated plans and classroom practices aligned to the vision to examine what teachers were doing differently to meet the needs of students when other schools were not as successful. Moreover, their values bonded them together.

***Shared and supportive leadership*** – there was no evidence of grandstanding; everyone had a role to play and readily played their part. Decisions were made by consensus in all joint efforts. Constructive criticism was embraced as we revealed insights from our site visits, particularly feedback from teachers, and effort was placed on potential areas of growth.

***Collective learning and application*** – following our norms and *living* the values promoted effective dialogue around the cohort’s vision and sharing urban concerns. The principals worked in small teams on all aspects of the portfolio and edited each other’s work. Within the portfolio each principal contributed successful practices related to the intent of the grant, as well as applications of ideas gleaned from one another, and augmented by our book studies and review of the literature around urban issues.

***Shared personal practice*** – there were many examples of how the principals utilized each other’s successful practices in developing teacher leadership; helping their staff members understand the nature of “urban” – magnitude, urgency and complexity; reaching out to the larger community; learning how others focused unflinchingly on an area of concern and, in turn, witnessed significant improvements in student achievement; and discovering the intricacies of building an “instructional” culture that challenge schools to develop a high sense of collective efficacy.

***Supportive conditions – relationships and structures*** – the conditions created and maintained reflected the integrity of the program and how the Fellows defined the experience as meaningful. Both personal and professional relationships developed and grew as these exemplary principals championed a common cause. Each rose above the occasional challenge and used the structures co-constructed to problem solve and set direction.

The implications of this story speak to the realization that building lateral capacity across peers is a powerful learning strategy (Fullan, 2005), one that can be used in and across any school district to sustain individual school learning communities. As practitioners, we need to turn to one another and view those with a common vision as potential contributors to our own learning communities. “. . . System leaders have a special responsibility to foster and support cross-system networks, where people across a region, state, or country learn from each other. When done well, this has multiple payoffs for our system sustainability agenda” (Fullan, 2005, p. 93).

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