



Professional Learning Communities in Partnership: A 3-Year Journey of Action and Advocacy to Bridge the Achievement Gap

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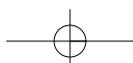
ABSTRACT: This article details a strategic planning model and concurrent 3-year research study focusing on the benefits of preK–16 professional development school learning communities for the participating preK–16 educational leaders in a midwestern school–university partnership network. Results of the study, along with the strategic plan’s success at achieving identified outcomes on a fixed timeline, indicate that participating educational leaders developed deeper understanding of issues relating to early-childhood school readiness, English-language learners, and family–school–community partnerships; they transformed educational practices; they built leadership capacity within individual organizations to facilitate change; and they developed and implemented action plans for advocacy.

No Child Left Behind legislation has identified an achievement gap for students placed at risk. School districts that do not make adequate yearly progress must develop improvement plans that include staff development training. Administrators often attempt to implement change by inviting knowledgeable practitioners and researchers to make presentations to district staff on best-practices instruction. However, research has shown that in-service staff development in the form of one-shot presentations does little to generate lasting institutional changes. Many believe that

if there is anything that the research community agrees on, it is this: The right kind of continuous, structured teacher collaboration improves the quality of teaching and pays big, often immediate, dividends in student learning and professional morale in virtually any setting. (Eaker, DuFour, & DuFour, 2002, p. xii)

Professional development school (PDS) partnerships between school districts and universities have the potential for ongoing staff development that bridges theory and practice (National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education, 2001). Carefully determining mutually meaningful, relevant, and essential joint work to serve children, families, and communities is at the core of PDS partnerships. When stakeholders share a vision, they eagerly embrace responsibility for action. This vital interplay between mutual cooperation and responsibility uniquely characterizes the midwestern PDS partnership that is the subject of this research.

The purpose of this article is to describe how a professional learning community (PLC) model was developed within the plan of this PDS partnership, how networking and relationships evolved over time, and how action plans resulted from 3 years of implementing





the PLC model. Finally, as the PDS relationships and connections deepened, a transformation occurred whereby systemic educational reform became the focus for leadership and staff development training in several partner districts.

Review of the Literature

PLCs: Developing a Shared Vision for Continual Improvement

The review of literature for this study addresses three themes: PLCs, developing a shared vision for change, and planning for continual improvement. To better understand the concepts, it is important to know that

the PLC conceptual framework includes (1) a solid foundation consisting of collaboratively developed and widely shared mission, vision, values, and goals, (2) collaborative teams that work interdependently to achieve common goals, and (3) a focus on results as evidenced by a commitment to continuous improvement. (Eaker, DuFour, & DuFour, 2002, p. 3)

However, in-depth PLC collaborations among preK–16 educators in multiple districts are rare, particularly when it is for an extended period. Rarer still are policy changes and advocacy resulting from these collaborations. A review of the literature concerning PLCs revealed no studies that included multiple district collaborations; rather, most PLCs occur in a school or a district.

The PLC model has as its core the assumption that the mission of formal education is not simply to ensure that students are taught, but to ensure that they learn (DuFour, 2005). PLCs can be structured in various ways. In general, a group determines a time, location, duration, and focus for its PLC meetings. Participants are asked to commit to regular attendance, reading, and preparation before each meeting. Participants must be willing to engage in and contribute to discussions. Leadership is often shared, although it can be delegated. PLCs are usually face-to-face interactions, although some

meet online. The key elements are commitment and engagement.

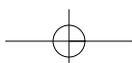
PreK–16 leadership matters in the creation and long-term maintenance of PLCs. Furthermore, the quality of teaching, learning, and relationships that stem from involvement in PLCs hinges on the quality of leadership (Dietz, Green, Piper, & Williams, 2001). With the ever-increasing demands placed on schools, teachers can become lost in the action of daily teaching routines and so feel powerless to effect systemic change. Educators will be equipped to meet these increasing demands only through strong leadership that supports a vision of individual professional development for teachers and works for systemic improvements in the school organization. The commitment to the systematic ongoing staff development that PLCs provide is one way to inform and empower educators to collaborate for enduring change.

Although individuals may personally benefit from participation in a PLC because of the complex, multilayered variables that exist in schools, real change at a building level will not occur without the involvement of key personnel representing the various stakeholder groups (Sparks, 2005). There must be a broad vision for change, and it must include key leaders, as well as a grassroots understanding of the multiple diverse factors that exert influence on any given classroom—such an understanding that can be provided only by classroom teachers. Profound change in leaders results from, and is revealed through, deeper

understanding of complex issues related to professional learning communities, beliefs that are aligned with quality teaching and high levels of learning for all students, and “next action thinking” that moves learning into action and sustains the momentum of change over time. (p. 10)

According to Lucas (2000), the National Association of Secondary School Principals advocates that principals foster the following practices within their school communities:

- encourage and support teachers and others to learn about students and their communities





- cultivate caring, engaged relationships with students and their families
- provide information about the educational system and the larger U.S. society
- build collaborative relationships with agencies and institutions that serve the students and their communities
- support professional development to build knowledge, skills, and dispositions for teaching ELLs, and
- facilitate and participate in collaboration to bring about educational change. (p. 4)

When university and preK–12 faculty wrestle together with these complex issues, faculty can better tap into the school districts' perspectives and bring real-world issues of achievement to the forefront of their instruction—all of which results in better preparation of teacher candidates. To meld these calls to action on the part of preK–16 educators, skillful PLC facilitation is required. According to Sparks (2005),

well-implemented PLCs are a powerful means of seamlessly blending teaching and professional learning in ways that produce complex, intelligent behavior in all teachers. Teachers create knowledge about teaching and learning, communicate it to one another, organize it within themselves and for others to make it more meaningful and accessible, and act on that knowledge for the purpose of improving student learning. (pp. 9–10)

In PLCs where participants operate from different educational realities, each educator has a different role to play. According to Ellertson's (2006) research, midcareer university faculty are often interested in finding new and creative outlets, networking and collaborating, developing solutions to institutional problems, engaging in interdisciplinary work, and more deeply engaging in teaching and mentoring students. They may also provide information on current best practices. PreK–12 faculty bring classroom experience and the current realities of teaching. Community partners bring experience from the world of work. As such, this community-based focus provides multiple lenses for viewing school reform. Therefore, in teacher education, a preK–16 PLC can be a

powerful means to understand and address issues associated with ongoing, sustainable, and effective school improvement.

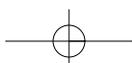
PLCs: A Process for PreK–16 Continual Improvement via Strategic Planning

According to Dietz and colleagues (2001), members of an effective PLC must first clarify the purpose for their efforts (“What do we want? and “What do we hope to accomplish?”). Second, they need to identify an entry point for the learning and change efforts. Third, they need to consider the organization's culture and commitment to learning, as well as its readiness level for change, to determine what skills will need to be developed to achieve their purposes. Through the process of defining purpose, entry point, and readiness, a PLC can establish its focus for facilitating a change effort, which leads to the next two steps—namely, building a plan and designing the process for how to implement the plan. Finally, after beginning implementation and in the spirit of continual improvement, the PLC must establish opportunities for feedback and adaptation. In this midwestern PDS, a needs assessment was conducted as part of the overall strategic plan. It was this assessment that helped determine that PLCs should be implemented. The strategic plan also called for a continual feedback loop to be incorporated into the structure of the PLCs.

In the following section, we report on the process of initiating five PLCs, the ongoing professional development that resulted, the participants' reactions, and the actions that occurred in response to participants' increasing understanding and awareness of complex educational issues.

Quality Matters in Collaboration: The Midwestern PDS-Based PLC Project

The midwestern university that is the subject of this article established PDS partnerships





with seven area school districts in 2001. This PDS is atypical of most partnerships in that it comprises a focal university and seven partner districts. This partnership features ongoing clinical placements with partner districts at all stages of the teacher candidates' educational path, and it includes the following stakeholders:

PDS Governance Council: a leadership team composed of authorized decision makers—superintendents from each district, the dean of the College of Education, and the director of the Center for School–University Partnerships (CSUP). This council allocates resources (such as release time and funding), brings forth common district and university concerns (particularly in regard to staff development), and charts the course of the PDS partnership based on priorities identified by each unit (school district or university).

Teachers on special assignment: teachers who are released from regular classroom teaching duties and work half-time for the university, serving as district-level clinical placement coordinators and student teacher supervisors, leaders of district-level mentoring and induction programs for new teachers, PDS communications liaisons, and expeditors for curriculum and leadership initiatives for their home district. Teachers on special assignment form a core cadre of engaged leaders who act as communication links between their home district and the university. They meet regularly with the director of the CSUP to facilitate communication, brainstorm ideas, and help implement overall planning for the partnership.

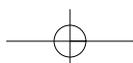
Teaching fellows: teachers working in the school districts as graduate assistants. Fellows are fully licensed teachers who continue their education in graduate-level course work at the university and who are mentored by teachers on special assignment. Fellows are considered

1st-year teachers and concurrently participate in a Fellows Learning Community, as facilitated by the director of the CSUP. This relationship allows the teacher on special assignment to be released from teaching duties.

The effort to sustain such a far-reaching PDS partnership organization initially taxed the entire system. However, in the fall of 2004, as it became clear that there were significant areas of common concern, the university and partner districts focused on how to collaborate to address a continual improvement plan, subsequently making a resolution to “serve the whole learner to bridge the achievement gap” (as written in internal documents). During the 2004–2005 academic year, the PDS Governance Council met with other district and university leaders to identify key issues that would present significant challenges to the PDS partners over the next decade. They identified the three most important challenges as

- early-childhood school readiness,
- English-language learners (ELLs), and
- family–school–community partnerships.

The council and the leaders determined that systemic improvement would occur only if staff development for leaders, as focused on these areas of concern, happened before they brought forth any initiatives to member districts. A 3-year strategic plan was developed to guide the partnership. As part of the plan, five PLCs were formed with the intention of sharing resources and expertise. Participants were invited and so included PDS leaders who were university faculty from the College of Education, preK–12 administrators and teachers, and several key community members. Faculty members from two other nearby private colleges were also invited to participate in the PLCs. The PLCs met once every 3 weeks for 3 years while the university was in session. As members of a PLC, educators engaged in discussion of professional readings, viewed web-based conferences, spoke with regional experts, shared resources and local expertise, and





networked with one another regarding important issues in education.

Organization of the PLCs

As part of her job as director for the CSUP, one of the authors was responsible for the overall organization of the PLCs. This included facilitating the meeting where the strategic priorities were identified, developing the PLC model, building understanding of the PLCs' form and function, and arranging all details in the preparation for each PLC.

As described in the review of the literature, the director utilized a process generated by Dietz and colleagues (2001) to develop the PLC model. This process included defining purpose, entry point, and readiness, which helped to establish a focus for facilitating change and which led to the next steps—building a plan for the PLCs, designing how they would be implemented, and establishing opportunities for feedback and continual improvement (p. 2). The director also utilized Thomas Guskey's (2005) five levels of professional development evaluation in a continual feedback loop that noted participants' reactions and their new understanding, learning, and use of skills; in response, she fine-tuned organizational support and made any necessary changes:

The five levels in this model are arranged hierarchically from simple to more complex. With each succeeding level, the process of gathering evaluation information requires more time and resources. Because each level builds on the preceding level, success at one level is necessary to succeed at higher levels. (p. 13)

The director also followed Guskey's recommendation that "educators must plan backward, starting with the final goals and then working back" (p. 17).

Research Questions

Because PLCs had not been implemented at the university or in most of the partner districts, it was important (1) to assess the beliefs of the participants about how they contributed

to their own learning and sense of efficacy, (2) to determine what direct actions and advocacy could be attributed to membership in the PLCs, and (3) to determine what changes would make these PLCs more effective. The following questions guided the research:

- What were the most important benefits that members ascribed to participation in a PLC?
- What concrete actions occurred as a result of members' participation in a PLC?
- What would members change about the PLC?

Research Methodology

We were participant observers in the PLCs, although we each played a different role. The first author participated in the ELL learning community from its inception; the second author participated in the ELL learning community for 1 year; and the third author was the CSUP director, who coordinated the learning communities. To reduce bias, she did not participate in the data analysis but provided essential background information about the PLCs.

Participants

In total, 57 persons attended the PLC meetings. The CSUP director attended all PLCs. Forty-nine participants were women and eight were men. PLC members included administrators and teachers from all seven PDS partner districts, as well as faculty from four departments in the College of Education at the public university and three faculty members from the English department who taught course work dealing with ELLs. In several PLCs, community members, as well as faculty members from a nearby private college, also participated. This diverse group of educators formed five learning communities. Two focused on early-childhood education; they were the most homogeneous and they later merged into one group. Two focused on ELLs; they were the most diverse PLCs and they later merged into

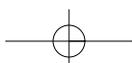


Table 1. Participants in the Professional Learning Communities (n)

<i>Institution</i>	<i>English-Language Learning^a</i>	<i>Early-Childhood Learning^a</i>	<i>Family-School-Community Partnership</i>	<i>Total</i>
District A	3	2	2	7
District B	3	0	5	8
District C	1	0	0	1
District D	2	1	2	5
District E	2	0	0	2
District F	1	0	1	2
District G	1	0	0	1
Other participants	1	0	3	4
College of Education: Public institution	6	9	3	18
College of Education: Private institution	3	3	0	6
University, other	2	0	0	2
Total	25	15	16	56 ^b

^aStarted as two groups, then merged into one.

^bThis total does not include the director of the Center for School-University Partnerships, who attended all professional learning community meetings.

one group. One PLC focused on family-school-community partnerships; it had the largest percentage of administrators and higher education faculty. Table 1 shows the demographics for the PLCs.

Data Collection

During the 3-year period that the PLCs met, activities and impressions were recorded through field notes, which consisted of self-reflections of PLC activities, feedback and comments from participants, and notes from meetings. Data analysis also included documents generated by the PLC participants, such as reports, action plans, meeting materials, and memos. Further examination and analysis were undertaken of several districts' action plans, staff development minutes, and reports, to corroborate the claims of the surveys regarding the effectiveness and impact of the learning communities.

At the conclusion of the 3-year commitment to the PLCs, further data were gathered, both quantitative and qualitative. Quantitative data included a self-report via an anonymous online survey developed by the researchers and sent to all participants. Qualitative data included three focus groups that occurred after the PLCs had finished meeting, as well as an in-

dividual interview with the CSUP director. During the focus groups, follow-up questions to the surveys were asked (see appendix). These focus groups were tape-recorded and transcribed. The transcripts were then coded with an open-coding methodology using NVivo software, which resulted in the following broad themes being identified: overall satisfaction and benefits, key factors for effectiveness, organization, group forming and norming, personal growth and benefits, participation, leadership, follow-up, actions/results, and suggestions for change.

Data Sources: Participants in the Survey and Focus Groups

An online survey was sent to all of the PLC members, with a response rate of 39%. In total, 22 participants completed surveys. Although the response rate was low, it did represent a cross-section of participants from each unit as well as from each PLC study group. Further triangulation confirmed most of the results from the surveys—namely, through three representative focus groups and through a review of documents, including meeting minutes and action plans. Nine persons (seven women and two men) participated in focus groups, which were held at various locations,

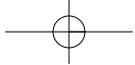


Table 2. Responses to Surveys and Focus Group Participation (n)

<i>Participants</i>	<i>Survey</i>	<i>Focus</i>
K-12		
Teachers	6	2
Administrators	3	3
Others	3	2
Higher education faculty	6	2
Early-childhood (community members)	4	0
Participated in community		
Early-childhood learning	9	3
English-language learning	8	3
Family-school-community learning	5	3

for the convenience of the participants. The director for the CSUP was interviewed individually. Table 2 shows a breakdown of the survey responses and focus groups.

Participation

According to the survey data, participation varied in each learning community. Participation in the PLCs is rated in Table 3. All groups are combined. About half the participants had a high level of commitment, which did not significantly vary by unit or job description. However, participation did fluctuate because many participants were in leadership positions or had teaching schedules that varied by semester. Members received readings at each meeting, and if they were not present, they were sent the information by mail. Members who had lower levels of participation generally expressed regret at not being able to attend more meetings and reiterated the importance of the PLCs.

Participants were also asked to rate their level of participation. Data from all groups were combined. Focus group comments indicated that some who were generally accustomed to speaking out said less during the meetings because they did not feel as though they had the background knowledge necessary

to add to the discussion. Their comments were more likely to be generated as questions. Several university faculty who participated in the ELL community, which had the greatest discrepancy in background knowledge among the membership, reported that they held back comments because they wanted all participants to develop ownership for their learning rather than look to the faculty as the resident experts. However, K-12 educators in the family-school-community partnership PLC reported that higher education faculty tended to dominate the discussions. In the early-childhood PLC, participation focus group data confirmed that participation was more balanced.

Table 5 identifies the questions asked in the survey, along with overall combined results (reported in percentages). Results indicate positive views of the PLCs. All the participants responding to the survey reported that they agreed or strongly agreed that their voices were heard in the PLC. More than 95% reported that the PLC was a place that helped them develop new knowledge and skills, establish or strengthen professional networks, and plan a course of action, whereas more than 94% believed that the PLC would have a long-term impact on them. Ninety percent of participants felt a sense of belonging and believed that their participation translated into

Table 3. Participation in Professional Learning Community Meetings

<i>Descriptor</i>	<i>Participants (%)</i>	<i>Indicator: Attended . . .</i>
Very active	54.5	Four to six meetings per year
Somewhat active	40.9	One to three meetings per year
Other	4.5	Via e-mail or sporadically over the 3 years

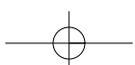


Table 4. Level of Participation

<i>Descriptor</i>	<i>Participants (%)</i>	<i>Indicator</i>
Very involved	27.3	Took a leadership role. Spoke often. Frequently contributed resources or ideas.
Somewhat involved	40.9	Spoke frequently. Occasionally contributed resources or ideas.
Minimally involved	18.2	Spoke occasionally. Occasionally contributed ideas. Did not contribute resources.
Did not get involved	4.5	Rarely spoke and did not contribute in other ways.

tangible, concrete actions. More than 86% believed that PLC participation had an impact on their work with colleagues, as well as on their ability to affect student achievement.

Findings

In the next section, we discuss the differences among the PLCs, the participants' satisfaction with the PLCs, the key factors that helped make the PLCs successful, the concrete actions that stemmed from the PLCs, the changes in district policies or procedures as a direct result of PLC participation, and the suggestions for improvement. In some cases, a specific PLC is referenced where reported information deviated from the norm. All other reported information reflects a composite of the findings because most of the identified beliefs were shared by the majority of the participants, as evidenced in the qualitative and quantitative data sources.

Similarities and Differences in the PLCs

According to an interview with the CSUP director and an analysis of focus group data, each PLC went through similar paths of metamorphosis, although the changes occurred at different rates. All PLCs began by forming group functions, establishing ground rules, and developing trust. This occurred quickly in the early-childhood groups because these were smaller and less diverse and because they shared a common knowledge base about early-childhood education.

The ELL community was the most diverse, as well as the most fluid. There was a greater

number of participants, and there was more turnover in group membership. The unity of the group was initially slower to develop, but over time the original two ELL communities became cohesive and eventually combined to form one large group. They also had the greatest differences in participants' initial level of background knowledge. Some of the university faculty and the teachers of English as a second language brought years of experience and in-depth understanding, whereas other participants had minimal knowledge of ELLs.

A sense of community was quite slow to develop in the family-school-community partnership PLC, where participants indicated that it was difficult to find a common focus. Attendance for this group was sporadic. This group illustrated the differences that can occur when a group has difficulty with the forming phase (i.e., developing a sense of community, respect, group norms). In this PLC, mostly comprising higher education faculty, several voices became dominant, which had a negative effect on the cohesiveness and positive feelings of this group. Several members indicated that they thought that discussions went around in circles and that they became confrontational on certain occasions. Participants also indicated a lack of direction. However, the confrontational nature of the group—with several individuals dominating the conversations and expressing generally negative attitudes—actually served to bond the rest of the group members. Even though this group struggled, one group member said in an interview how excited he was to be able to call on others for support. Interestingly, those dominating individuals left their positions at the close of the 3 years. Whereas the other PLC members were feeling a sense of closure at this point, the remaining

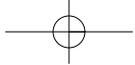
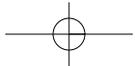


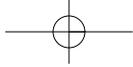
Table 5. Survey Questions and Responses (in Percentages)

<i>Question</i>	<i>Agree/Strongly Agree</i>	<i>Disagree/Strongly Disagree</i>	<i>Not Applicable</i>
Participating in a PLC assisted me to develop new knowledge and skills.	95.5	4.5	0.0
Participating in a PLC helped me establish or strengthen professional networks.	95.5	4.5	0.0
I felt a sense of belonging in my PLC.	90.0	9.0	0.0
Belonging to the PLC has impacted my work with colleagues in my work area.	86.3	9.0	4.5
Belonging to the PLC has impacted my work with parents.	63.6	22.7	13.6
Belonging to the PLC has impacted my relationship with my community.	72.7	18.2	9.1
I completed the outside readings and was fully prepared to participate at each PLC.	59.1	31.8	9.1
I believe the PLC was a place where my voice was heard, respected, and valued.	100.0	0.0	0.0
I believe my participation in the PLC will have a long-term impact.	94.4	4.5	0.0
My participation in the PLC translated into tangible, concrete actions.	90.0	9.0	0.0
I believe a PLC is a place to be social.	81.8	13.6	4.5
I believe a PLC is a place to develop a plan of action.	95.5	4.5	0.0
I believe it is possible to measure the progress of a PLC.	59.1	13.6	27.3 ^a
Believe their participation in this PLC has impacted their ability to affect student achievement.	86.4	9.0	4.5

Note. PLC = professional learning community.

^aUndecided.





participants in the family–school–community partnership PLC refused to stop meeting; they believed that with the departure of those individuals, they were just beginning to understand the direction that they wished to head with their group. Rather than disband, they continued to gather for discussion, and they worked to write a successfully funded grant on family–school partnerships.

For most of the groups, the second phase of the PLCs focused on learning. The ELL community spent 2 years in this phase. The early-childhood PLC had a great deal of background knowledge and so was able to move immediately into a deep understanding of specific issues. The family–school–community partnership group had no one who was considered an expert in this area. Members reported that it was initially difficult for them to find a clear focus and to find helpful literature. They finally found a focus when they were presented with copies of *Beyond the Bake Sale: The Essential Guide to Family–School Partnerships* (Henderson, Mapp, Johnson, & Davies, 2007). This book laid the groundwork for the grant that was written.

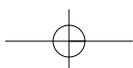
The third phase in each group was a call to action. For the early-childhood PLC, this occurred during the 1st year, when they wrote position papers to present to the state legislature. For the ELL community, the same action (writing position papers) occurred in the 3rd year. The family–school–community partnership group entered the action phase at the end of the 3rd year, when they decided to write a grant and continue with its implementation.

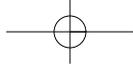
Satisfaction and Benefits

In survey data and focus group discussions, participants indicated a high level of satisfaction with the PLCs. When asked whether they would participate in a PLC in the future, 18 of those surveyed indicated yes, 4 said maybe, and no one said no. Of the 22 participants who responded, 21 said that their knowledge increased as a result of participation in the PLC and 1 said that it did not. However, when asked whether one's beliefs changed as a result of the PLC, only 6 strongly agreed, whereas 7

said that their beliefs changed somewhat. Nine indicated that their beliefs did not change as a result of their interaction in the PLC. Although at first glance this seems to indicate less effect than what would be hoped for, it is important to note the experience base of the educators: No one had fewer than 11 years of experience in education; 7 reported 11 to 15 years of experience; 4 reported 16 to 20 years of experience; and 11 reported more than 20 years of experience.

In focus group discussions, all nine participants indicated their enthusiasm for the PLC format, with comments such as “The diversity of experiences provided for rich dialogue and also kept the groups focused on real issues.” Focus group participants also reported highlights in the form of networking and developing contacts with other partners. They expressed appreciation of this time to share concerns and successes; to generate discussions of importance; and to read, study, and dialogue around best-practice research. When asked whether there were any drawbacks to participating in a multidistrict PLC, every focus group participant said that it was a great advantage. One participant stated that the variety of jobs, districts, and communities and the multiple perspectives and voices helped to increase awareness and knowledge. The few drawbacks were that districts of various sizes have different needs and that different administrators have implemented different policies such that one-size-fits-all philosophies and practices could not be developed. Rather, each district needed to contextualize the information based on its needs, priorities, and resources. As a result, action plans varied. Nevertheless, many participants made statements such as “I gained valuable insight from hearing how other districts were addressing issues of concern.” Several people mentioned that ideas from one district were modified to fit the context of their district. One example of this was the implementation of the PLC model within the districts. One small district had been engaging in PLCs before the advent of the multidistrict PDS-based PLCs. Their experiences were shared with the other districts, although the implementation of PLCs in a





larger school district ended up looking quite different.

Keys to Effective PLCs

During focus group sessions, one key theme involved the factors that made the PLCs effective. Among those identified were the level of advance organization provided by the facilitator; the participation by stakeholders with different roles; the intentional focus on shared leadership, group norming, and respect for all participants; and the follow-up to questions raised by participants.

It was not the intent of this article to focus on one individual who was critical for the success of the PLCs; however, after consideration of the comments from the surveys, as well as the discussion in the focus group, it was clear that without the key involvement of the CSUP director, these PLCs would not have been as successful. Some of these findings are described next.

Organization Before the Meeting

Focus groups indicated that small details in organization made the PLC experience overwhelmingly positive. Without some seemingly small details, the overall experience would have been far less positive. Attention to those details was attributed directly to the director and included the following: making all the arrangements for the rooms (including refreshments); securing parking passes for off-campus participants; selecting and copying readings; arranging for speakers, videos, and other information; recruiting participants; and publicizing the meetings as well as sending reminders out beforehand.

All focus group participants indicated that although it required a great deal of effort to schedule their participation, their way was smoothed over because of this organization. It was this attention to detail that decreased worries and helped participants make the extra effort to attend. Everyone knew that the director was taking great pains to make the PLCs productive, efficient, and easy to attend. For example, meetings were held at regularly

scheduled intervals and usually in the same room. "One could be on autopilot when coming to the meetings," said one of the participants. Parking, always a problem at the university, was made as accessible as possible by providing a parking pass to the closest parking lot. In sum, the members appreciated how all details were taken care of in advance, on their behalf.

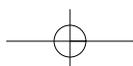
Group Forming and Norming

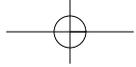
During initial meetings of the PLCs, time was focused on the forming and norming phase of group development. Focus group participants believed that the mixers and the activities designed to help participants know one another were critical for the success of the PLCs. One participant in the ELL community indicated,

When new members joined the group [which occurred rather frequently in the ELL learning communities], the director made sure there were introductions as well as a few minutes devoted to bringing the newcomer up to speed with what the group had accomplished to this point.

Refreshments were also provided, and the first few minutes were reserved for participants to check in with one another. Participants considered this networking time important. One participant commented, "The learning communities were more than a social gathering. Friendships developed over time." Others expressed that they eagerly anticipated seeing other PLC members each month, and they expressed appreciation for the much-needed networking. Several participants indicated that they would frequently seek advice during this social time.

Readings were assembled before each meeting and were nestled in purple folders, which allowed participants to file them for easy, future reference once they left the meeting. That organization was a key factor in reminding many of the participants to read the articles before the next meeting, which was an expectation that PLC members took seriously. Nevertheless, a number of participants indicated that it was difficult to keep up with the





readings. Only 60% of those surveyed agreed or strongly agreed that they fully prepared for each meeting. Focus group participants cited time constraints as a problem in keeping up with the readings.

Participation by Stakeholders With Different Roles

As mentioned earlier, participants were grateful to have the opportunity to interact with educators from other districts. K–12 participants in the focus groups also expressed an appreciation for the “expertise and knowledge of research on best practice shared by the university faculty.” However, K–12 teachers were most grateful for “the opportunity to interact with administrators in an equal-status manner.” A teacher of English as a second language reported that she frequently became the voice of authority as the group addressed the ramifications of No Child Left Behind, best-practice research strategies, and creative ways to implement change. Several teachers stated they did not have to go back and sell new ideas to the administration. “We had administration and people at multiple levels; you had decision makers at the table,” said one participant.

Shared Leadership and Respect

Although the director made the preparations before each PLC meeting, participants shared the leadership at each session. In the first few meetings, the director established the expectation that every voice would be heard. Responses from the surveys showed that this indeed occurred—specifically, 90% felt a good sense of belonging. Response from the focus groups showed that in most of the meetings, there was a real sense of shared leadership. “Leadership would emerge from different people at different times,” said one member. Another indicated that “people were excellent at asking questions and listening respectfully.” Interestingly, one member expressed the idea that group members “built capacity to ask the right questions.” Several administrators reported that they frequently took these ques-

tions that were raised in the PLCs back to other faculty for further discussion.

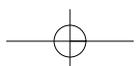
Follow-Up

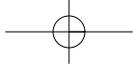
When questions and concerns arose at a PLC, the director followed up by the next meeting with a journal article, speaker, video, or other resource that directly related to the issue that had been raised. Participants indicated that this timely response was one key factor that kept them coming back. One member voiced a common feeling: “It felt like you were going to something important; there was an agenda and it was followed. We started on time and ended on time and everyone took something away.”

Particularly in the ELL group, there was initial time spent developing a shared understanding of the issues. Some participants indicated surprise at how much they did not know, once they began to delve into the issues. Perhaps for that reason, the attendance for this group was excellent. The amount of new learning did cause some members to report feeling overwhelmed but also that “the group provided encouragement, support, and realistic, practical strategies that could be used immediately, which helped address my feelings of discouragement.” Focus group participants from the ELL community also reported that they learned an incredible amount of information: “Our PLC, it was about learning. You didn’t have to know it all. It was profound for my personal growth.” Several people described this group as “dynamic” and said that they felt “passion” and “a genuine commitment to the topic.” Several administrators said that they had a stronger stake in realizing a successful outcome from their learning, given that their districts were concerned about making adequate yearly progress with their ELLs.

Actions, Advocacy, and Results

According to focus group data as well as internal PLC documents, the final stage of the PLCs was an action phase, where members grew restless with discussion and felt called to group advocacy and action. Members expressed a desire





to examine research in the context of district and university needs. They also developed a desire to advocate for young children and ELLs on a state level—a desire that enabled the participants from these multiple sites to experience a transformation from passive recipients of knowledge to active change agents. Leaders from these learning communities reported using information that they acquired as members of a PLC, to analyze district programs for ELLs and to undertake systemic changes.

As mentioned earlier, in the early-childhood and ELL communities, this advocacy took the form of writing position papers that were presented to the state legislature. In the family-school-community partnerships PLC, this led to the writing of a grant. Members indicated that it was this focus on outreach that truly bonded the groups. “We have become a powerful group. We are knowledgeable and now we are more focused on results,” explained a member of the early-childhood PLC.

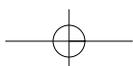
Focus group data also revealed that PLC members within the PDS partnership have taken further responsibility for building the capacity for learning and change within their organizations. Open-ended comments from survey data confirmed that district leaders readily embraced the shared vision, that the PDS strategic plan was considered effective, and that participants believed that the plan was the driving vehicle for moving the vision forward. Analysis of data and action plans from school districts and the university revealed that educational policies and practices had changed since the learning communities began. Outcomes from these learning communities varied by district; however, five districts reported increases in generative districtwide staff development. Three districts had adopted the PLC model and were working on this paradigm shift in staff development training within their districts, although each had personalized the PLC model to fit the particular district. Two of the smaller districts reported greater success than that of one larger district in creating the shared understanding of how PLCs deal with staff development across disciplines. Focus group data showed that imple-

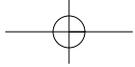
mentation of PLCs varied widely in these three districts.

An additional outcome attributed to the PLC collaboration included one district’s undertaking an extensive ELL program evaluation based on best practices. A report of the program evaluation was shared during one PLC meeting and so resulted in queries about program evaluations in two other districts. In all districts, collaborative research among teacher candidates, preK–12 educators, and university faculty was undertaken, as evidenced by numerous proposals that were developed and accepted for national and state conferences. Several articles were also developed as a result of this collaboration. As mentioned earlier, a series of position papers were developed and presented to the state legislature. Two successfully funded grants grew out of the family-school-community partnership PLC and were a result of collaborations among the university and two of the school districts. In addition, the public university and private college planned a joint conference on ELLs. This sort of broad-based collaboration is rare.

Suggestions for Change

When focus group participants were asked what they would change about the PLC, comments such as “nothing” and “not one thing” were common. However, several suggestions did emerge. One stated, “Perhaps we could have more guiding/essential questions to shape our reading of the articles and our discussions when we convene.” Another said, “More action steps or identifying a more definite outcome or purpose for the group.” One member indicated that it would be good to include all stakeholders, including parents, and another indicated that it would be nice to change the day of the week when the PLC met. Nearly all participants expressed sadness at the close of the 3-year project. Although most participants in the PLCs believed that they gained a great deal of knowledge from their learning community and that it was an important networking tool, their satisfaction went beyond a professional focus. During the focus groups, a number of interviewees indicated that belonging to





a PLC was something they did for themselves. In other words, it was a much-needed time for reflection, as well as a time to connect with those who shared similar concerns and beliefs. Members indicated that this type of event was rare in their busy lives: “There is a HUGE need for PLCs and for connecting people across contexts.” The majority of participants found the PLC model personally and professionally satisfying. Even among the members of the PLC that struggled to find its focus, there was satisfaction in addressing this conflict through courageous conversations. In some cases, the membership composition of the PLC may cause a group to struggle, owing to internal conflicts. Such conflicts can be a reality in a PLC; therefore, leadership and thoughtful facilitation are critical if they occur. Many of the PLC members were disappointed when the PLCs ceased meeting and so made suggestions for future action. Acknowledging the difficulty of continuing to be released from district responsibilities to meet with the PLC, several people suggested the possibility of further developing the PLCs through online or hybrid options. They also indicated that classroom teachers were an underrepresented group in the PLCs and that such alternative options might assist in getting them involved—that is, as additional people who would find it difficult to get away from teaching assignments during the day. Another person indicated that parents needed to be a part of future PLCs.

Several members indicated that they would like to see additional resource sharing. Now that they were no longer meeting, they suggested that all the PLCs get together to share ideas and questions and “cross-pollinate.” After building their knowledge base in their own learning communities, they were interested in hearing from other learning communities and identifying common areas of focus. Support for continuing action and keeping the momentum going was also a theme, with a number of people indicating that they wished to further develop their personal and district action items. One teacher indicated that as a direct result of the PLC conversations, her district hired an outreach worker

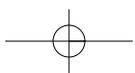
and began using parents as cultural liaisons. She said, “We are also *asking* parents for more involvement. We never really asked before.” A principal indicated that he had invited parents to speak to his faculty and tell the story of their immigrant experience. Another principal said, “We’ve moved from philosophical discussions on best practices to practical applications. We’ve built so much trust. Now we need to add parents and community members and get even more real.”

Discussion and Implications

In sum, there was an overall feeling of empowerment, a sense of efficacy, and a renewed energy to do good work. The PLCs were described as being inspiring and invigorating, especially because of the diversity of participants, which caused people to go outside their comfort zones. Many of the members thought that the focus on inquiry was key and that now they were ready to tackle some collaborative research based on their PLC conversations. They felt ready to look at real data and real growth. “When our work is real and deliberate, there is a focus and there is success,” said one participant.

Implication for Action

The PDS-based PLCs embody the spirit of collaboration. This midwestern school–university partnership has continued to evaluate the process of learning, sharing, and changing educational practices. Leaders from the PDS districts, including many people who did not participate in the PLCs, met in the fall of 2007 to look forward to the next step in the partnership. The goal was to continue to engage in shared work to improve outcomes for preK–12 students, teacher candidates, faculty, and other professionals at all sites. The knowledge gained from the PLCs is being used to generate a responsive model for systemic change that will continue to be shaped and molded and, as such, is very much a work in progress. However, it is clear from the success of the PLCs that both a top-down macroview and a





bottom-up microview of complex issues are critical. It is also clear that the PLCs served as a catalyst for synthesizing best-practice research, contextualizing complex issues, and developing strategies for proactive change. This is being accomplished with strategic planning around a shared vision using the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education's (2001) PDS standards as a guiding compass.

Appendix: Interview and Focus Group Questions

- Please describe your participation in the PDS PLC.
- Can you describe the process your PLC went through from start to finish? As an example, how did leadership develop? What were some of the outcomes?
- What were the most important benefits you derived from your participation in the PLC?
- What were the major strengths of your PLC?
- What were the weaknesses of your PLC?
- What would you change about your PLC?
- If you were to give advice to someone forming a PLC, what would you tell them?
- Do you have any other comments about the PLC? ^{SUP}

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