

## HOW ONE HISTORICALLY UNDERPERFORMING DIVERSE RURAL HIGH SCHOOL ACHIEVED A SUCCESSFUL TURNAROUND

### Abstract

*“Central High School,” a rural school composed largely of students of color from low income homes, experienced a quick, remarkable turnaround of student academic success, measured by State and Federal accountability standards. This turnaround began with an external restructuring grant initiative that required a state-approved external consultant. A qualitative study of this turnaround reveals that a minimally implemented Accelerated Schools Project was followed by a much stronger Professional Learning Community model developed by the external consultant. The professional literature regarding these two models is reviewed and applied, providing context for a description of the turnaround process at this diverse rural school. The triangulated, chain-sampled interviews are analyzed and supported by student achievement data.*

Central High School was a historically underperforming rural high school located in the Southern United States with a population of approximately 350 students. Community apathy and unrest, due primarily to racial strife in the school and community, coupled with an entrenched attitude of failure, prevailed throughout both the school and the community. This environment was compounded when the high school was labeled “Unacceptable” by the state accountability system and cited as not having met “Adequate Yearly Progress” or AYP by the federal accountability system during the 2005–2006 and 2006–2007 school years. Additionally, Central High School had not met AYP in 2004–2005.

However, in spite of several factors—including the low achievement scores, the deficit attitude within the community and on campus, and shifting demographics of higher percentages of students from low income homes—student performance (as evidenced by substantial gains in the state accountability scores) improved fairly rapidly. This “turnaround” was evidenced most notably when the percentage passing the state assessment scores in math for African-American students, as one selected subgroup, went from 11% passing in the 2002–2003 school year to 71% passing in 2007–2008. Similar results were evidenced in science with African American students’ scores increasing from 5% passing in 2002–2003 to 75% passing in 2007–2008. Thus, Central High stands out as one example of a successful rural turnaround school.

## Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

In the study of this successful rural turnaround school, the research revealed the development not only of a minimally implemented Accelerated Schools Project (ASP) Model but, much more importantly, according to the study participants, a strong professional learning community (PLC) developed initially as part of that ASP Model that was led by a skillful external consultant. In regard to successful school transformations generally, such as the one experienced by Central High School, Richardson (2009) suggests in the preface to a recent leadership book commissioned by the National Association of Secondary School Principals, “Transformations do not take place until the culture of the school permits it, and no long-term, significant change can take place without creating a culture to sustain that change” (as cited in Skrla, McKenzie, & Scheurich, 2009, p. xi).

One means of facilitating such culture change is the development of a professional learning community. For example, Biddle (2002) conducted a study of twenty Midwestern schools in which an ASP model was implemented along with a strong professional learning community emphasis. Her work found that a strong culture, shared values, and strong relationships are needed to fully implement an ASP model aimed at developing a strong learning community. The results of her work imply a strong connection between the implementation of the ASP Model and the formation of a learning community, which was similar to what was found in this research. Thus, the appropriate literature to set the context for this Central High School study includes literature on both the ASP Model and on developing effective professional learning communities.

### *Accelerated Schools Model*

In the case of this study, development of a professional learning community was the positive outgrowth of an initial ASP Model implementation. To better understand how that occurred, it is important to understand the history and overarching framework of the ASP Model. In response to Gardner’s (1983) *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform* report, Henry M. Levin, an education and economics professor at Stanford University, began to research the “so-called educationally disadvantaged student to find out what had happened” (Levin, 2005, p. 139). After publishing two reports (Levin, 1985, 1986), Levin began to look for solutions to increase the achievement of students who were determined to be “at risk” (Levin, 2005). Levin’s solution resulted in the creation of the ASP Model, which is a comprehensive school reform model that he started in 1986 with two pilot elementary schools (Levin, 2005). By the time the ASP model had completed its first decade in existence in 1996, Levin’s comprehensive school reform model had grown to be a part of nearly 1000 elementary and middle schools in about 40 states (Levin,

2005). While the ASP Model had mainly been implemented in elementary and middle schools, by 1996 high schools were beginning to implement the highly successful model as well (Eidson & Hillhouse, 1998).

Indeed, of the main comprehensive school reform models that were created in response to Gardner's (1983) report, the ASP Model proved to be one of the most effective, since teachers using the ASP Model were shown to change their pedagogical practices extensively. Additionally, ASP Model teachers were shown to maintain high levels of fidelity to the implementation of the model in subsequent years after the model's initial implementation year (Educational Alliance, 2004). Most importantly, the ASP Model has been shown to create the kind of social capital "at risk" students need to increase student achievement (Aladijem & Borman, 2006).

One of the reasons the ASP Model has been so successful is due to its overarching framework, which has two key components (Brunner & Hopfenberg, 1992). The first component or "Big Wheels" focuses on "powerful learning" and consists of five primary processes that include:

- taking stock (identifying and building on the different strengths and challenges that are part of the school community)
- forging a consensual vision of changes needed
- setting priorities regarding the choice of changes to implement
- forming governance structures or well-developed communication structures that ensure all community members have a voice in decision making
- adopting a systematic research or inquiry-based decision-making process to monitor changes.

(Accelerated Schools, 1994, as cited in Endsien, 2003, 8–9).

The ability for a school to implement these five overarching processes is supported by the second component or term "Little Wheels." This latter term refers to the changes in teacher practices as teachers begin to integrate various innovations in their classrooms while striving for improved student achievement (Levin, 1994).

Proponents of ASM suggest that using the accelerated schools process and philosophy will move schools toward success by creating unity of vision through collaborative work to meet goals (Levin, 1994). Yet sustaining the collaborative work of comprehensive reform models has been found to wane in terms of the commitment of teachers (Little & Bartlett, 2002). However, incorporating professional learning communities in conjunction with the ASP Model has been argued to have the potential to provide teachers with the opportunity to engage with their colleagues around the processes of the model (Biddle, 2002). In summary, understanding these basic tenets of the ASP Model provides insights into the accelerated turnaround process that Central High School underwent, including the emergence of a strong PLC that, in effect, superseded the ASP Model effort.

### *Professional Learning Communities*

Research on effective school reform reveals that one of the key factors in transforming school environments and cultures includes the development of a professional learning community or PLC (DuFour, 2004; Fullan, 2002; Huggins, 2010; Maxwell, 2009). A number of other advocates for school improvement have suggested that effective schools and strong professional learning communities are synonymous (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Giles & Hargreaves, 2006; Louis & Kruse, 1995; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001; Scribner, Cockrell, Cockrell, & Valentine, 1999). Additionally, whether these efforts are called professional learning community (Hord, 1997), academic teaming (Clark & Clark, 1994), or leadership networking, as described in previous decades (Scribner, Sawyer, Watson & Myers, 2007), these community-building strategies are all worthy of note in regard to successful efforts at school reform.

The concept of professional learning communities comes from organizational learning (Arygris & Schön, 1978; Garvin, 1993; Huber, 1991), where organizations seek to re-examine their learning processes for continuous improvement. Specifically, professional learning communities are “where teachers work collaboratively to reflect on their practice, examine evidence about the relationship between practice and student outcomes, and make changes that improve teaching and learning for particular students in their classes” (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006, p. 3–4). Consequently, professional learning communities are espoused as a reform effort that provides just-in-time professional development via collective collaboration to assist in changing teacher practice that is focused on increasing student learning (Huggins, 2010). However, the essential component of professional learning communities is the action teachers take to change their practice based on meeting together with their colleagues in collaboration (Hord, 1997). Simply discussing and exchanging ideas is not sufficient; the process must result in changed teacher practice for increased student learning.

To create professional learning communities, schools have to consider what organizational factors influence the establishment of professional learning communities, since professional learning communities are not extraneous to organizations, but housed within them. In fact, it is important to consider the principal leadership, organizational history, organizational priorities, and organization of teacher work (Scribner et al., 1999) within schools. Additionally, Louis, Kruse, and Marks (1996) found that influential organizational factors for professional learning communities include school size; scheduled planning time; empowerment that included influence over school, teacher, and student policy; and low staffing complexity. While those factors affect professional learning communities in some ways, Louis and Kruse (1995) found the organizational factors supporting professional learning communities include both structural condi-

tions and human and social resources. The structural conditions found to aid professional learning communities consist of time to meet and talk, physical proximity, interdependent teaching roles, communication structures, and school autonomy. Further, the human and social resource factors that support professional learning community are a supportive principal, respect, openness to innovation, feedback from parents and colleagues, and focused professional development. Thus, several organizational factors have to be in place for successful professional learning communities. However, having supportive organizational factors in place does not necessarily create a highly functional professional learning community.

According to Sergiovanni (1994), the idea of community calls for individuals to see themselves in personal commitment to their colleagues instead of merely contractual obligation. Thus, professional learning communities require a high level of dedication from teachers to their colleagues. As a result, in the initial creation of community, teachers must move beyond their own personal ideas to create and practice shared norms and values (Louis et al., 1996). Indeed, shared norms and values are the first crucial characteristics in establishing professional learning communities. However, Louis et al. (1996) also include focus on student learning, reflective dialogue, de-privatization of practice, and collaboration as essential characteristics. Once teachers are committed to changing their practice through collectively agreed upon norms and values, the focus of professional learning communities becomes about teacher learning, about student learning, and about changing teacher practice based on their learning through continuous collaboration with colleagues. Therefore, it is important to understand how teacher learning occurs in professional learning communities.

Teacher learning in professional learning communities comes through communication (Borko, 2004). Indeed, communication is singularly important in professional learning communities, not only to collaborate on ideas to increase student learning, but also to understand how to work within the confines of schooling to ensure student success. Thus, communication in professional learning communities must strike a balance among members having the belief that they can express themselves without censure, helping other teachers learn by encouraging them to contribute to large group discussion, pressing others to clarify their thoughts, eliciting the ideas of others, and providing resources for others' learning (Grossman, Wineburg, & Woolworth, 2001). The difficulty that often arises, though, is when teachers de-privatize their practice through reflective dialogue (Louis & Kruse, 1995). This kind of communication requires a level of vulnerability that many teachers would rather not experience. Yet, having teachers consciously and critically looking at their own classroom instruction practices is critical to improving student learning (Huggins, 2010).

Used as a reform effort in several educational settings, professional learning communities have clearly shown not only to change the culture of teacher learning in a school, but also to change the culture of the

school itself (Vescio, Ross, & Adams, 2008). Through that change, professional learning communities can lead teachers to a level of focus on improving student learning that has the potential to benefit schools with large numbers of economically disadvantaged students (Battistich, Solomon, Watson, & Schaps, 1997). Thus, as a reform effort, professional learning communities have been found capable of helping schools that have historically struggled with creating student success for students from low-income families. However, professional learning communities not only have the potential to foster success for students for whom schools have struggled to create success in the past, but they also have a hardy potential to be sustained by providing a resistance against traditional practices and norms and the process of teacher attrition and change (Giles & Hargreaves, 2006). Consequently, professional learning communities exist as one of the most promising strategies that school leaders can use to foster improvements in student achievement.

Ultimately, the ASP process itself facilitated, in the case of Central High School, creation of the PLC from the very beginning. That is, the teachers and administrators involved in the turnaround were not only receiving professional development in conducting the ASP process, but the language used throughout the process itself created a common vocabulary among the members of the emerging PLC. Thus, while the ASP Model process was significant at the beginning of the turnaround of Central High School, eventually the ASP process was for the most part supplanted by the PLC that ultimately led to this successful turnaround.

## Methods

### *Research Design*

This study employed qualitative methods with researcher(s) as instrument (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 1990). The principal sources of data were thirteen face-to-face, typically hour-long interviews conducted by the researchers (Patton, 1990). These interviews were conducted on site in the school district, university offices, public school classrooms, the teacher's lounge, and anyplace an hour could be captured with these practitioners during their busy school days. In proceeding with the study, we selected a semi-structured interview approach including an interview protocol composed of a list of questions (see Appendix) designed to get the interviewees to talk openly and candidly about the turnaround. However, we followed Bernard's (2002) lead—"the idea is to get people to open up and let them express themselves in their own terms, at their own pace" (p. 206).

The participants for the study were selected through snowball sampling, or chain sampling, which occurs when in a group of cases that are selected by asking one person to recommend someone suitable as a case of the phenomenon of interest,

then recommends another person who is a suitable case or who knows of potential cases; the process continues until the desired sample size is achieved. (Gall, Borg, & Gall, 1996, p. 770)

Implementation of this snowballing process for informant selection began when the lead researcher first met the initial interview participants after hearing them speak about their professional learning community at an event. Those initial panel participants were then invited to consent to interviews. Once they were interviewed, they were asked to recommend other teachers and staff from their campus to interview. Eventually, the researchers interviewed thirteen participants, including classroom teachers, both veteran and newly certified, as well as administrators and an external university consultant. As these thirteen participants were interviewed, field notes were kept to document whether their recommendations for other persons to interview overlapped. That is, several informants were named as credible interview candidates by several different people. The researchers regarded this emergent triangulation as desirable to the credibility of the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

### *Establishing Trustworthiness and Credibility*

In seeking trustworthiness, Lincoln & Guba (1985) indicate that the researcher should be concerned with activities that increase the probability that credible findings will be produced. One of the typical ways for establishing credibility is through prolonged engagement, which is the “investment of sufficient time to achieve certain purposes; learning the ‘culture’, testing for misinformation introduced by distortions either of the self or of the respondents, and building trust” (p. 301). As a result, the prolonged engagement we sought in completing this research was to facilitate the development of trust and rapport with the interviewees. For example, the lead researcher spent many days within the district conducting hour-long interviews. In the case of one informant, the external coach for the campus, multiple interviews were conducted for clarification of data. Additionally, at least once midway through the process, another means of ensuring trustworthiness, i.e., member checks (Erlandson, 1993), was implemented. For example, the researchers requested that the external coach review the manuscript for accuracy and clarification on the sequence of events. That clarification was embedded into the manuscript. Finally, triangulation as a means of establishing trustworthiness was implemented. For example, another informant was also interviewed after the analyses of the data to ensure credibility of the data from other participants. The data this informant provided was consistent with themes observed in the responses of a number of the informants, particularly as related to the PLC being the main key to the turnaround in the school.

These multiple efforts to ensure trustworthiness supported the ongoing data analysis, as the researchers worked to code the data by themes

into spreadsheet files, while carefully looking for data that would discount any emergent themes. For example, Reissman (1993) suggests that considerations such as how the narrative is organized and “why does an informant develop her tale this way in conversation with this listener?” (p. 61) are significant to note. Important as well is recognition that “individuals’ narratives are situated in particular interactions...” (p. 61). Both of these considerations were significant in attempting to understand the turnaround narrative from the volume of data provided by the participants.

### Context

In order to provide context for the reader, information is foregrounded here regarding student demographics and academic results. Knowledge of this information will contextualize the significance of this school’s turnaround with the shift in demographics and the concurrent noteworthy gains in student achievement.

#### *Student Demographics*

To frame this study, it is particularly important to know the demographics of the school and the improvements in the state accountability scores of this school. Over a six year period, the demographics experienced a notable shift with the percentage of African American students increasing and the percentage of White students decreasing. For example, Table 1 provides specific district demographic data for Central High School between the years of 2003–2008, revealing that the percentage of African American students in the district increased during that time period, while the Hispanic population remained steady and the White population dwindled. Additionally, the percentage of economically disadvantaged students also increased nearly ten percent during this time period.

**Table 1**

*Demographic Shift at Central High School for 2003–2008*

	African-American	Hispanic	White	Economically disadvantaged
2003	53.2	30.1	16.4	71.6
2004	59.3	26.3	14.4	77.2
2005	62.0	28.3	9.7	81.2
2006	62.1	28.5	9.4	76.4
2007	63.8	27.7	8.4	81.9
2008	60.6	27.8	11.6	82.6

*Academic Results*

Ultimately, increasing accountability standards and poor student performance in the key areas of math and science highlight the difficulties this school faced. Early in the six-year period, student achievement began to slowly improve at Central High School. However, in September 2005, efforts to improve were intensified by a restructuring grant project. This grant and its initiatives, as outlined later in the results portion of this paper, continued until February 2007. Moreover, the external coach, who was hired as part of the grant effort, was rehired by the campus through local funding after the grant ended so she could continue working with the teachers and administration. Then, in 2008, scores increased dramatically, seemingly overnight. Those results, as depicted in each of the tables below, reveal not only the years of struggle, but ultimately the fruits of the successful turnaround. For example, in Table 2 below, the state accountability ratings are listed. For the first year listed, 2003, no state ratings were provided, with the implementation of a new test for the state. In subsequent years, the campus was rated “Unacceptable” for three of the six years before ultimately being labeled by the state as a “Recognized” campus for meeting and exceeding the required state passing percentages for each subpopulation of students. Moreover, during 2008 when the campus met state accountability and was cited as “Recognized,” the campus was also listed as having met AYP by federal guidelines after not having met AYP in the 2004–2005, 2005–2006, and 2006–2007 school years.

**Table 2***Accountability Ratings*

	State rating	Federal rating
2003	Acceptable	Met AYP hold harmless-severe weather
2004	Not rated	Met AYP on appeal
2005	Unacceptable	Missed AYP
2006	Acceptable	Missed AYP
2007	Unacceptable	Missed AYP
2008	Recognized	Met AYP

In Table 3, scores reflect math testing during this time period. Increases in math scores were sixty-nine percent for all students, with a seventy-one percent increase in African-American student scores during the six-year period, with the most notable gains between 2007 and 2008. Scores for other subpopulations also increased.

**Table 3**

*Student Percentage Passing in Math for 2003–2008*

	African-American	Hispanic	White	Economically disadvantaged	All groups
2003	11	13	30	13	15
2004	9	25	52	16	19
2005	25	36	56	29	32
2006	28	41	50	28	34
2007	41	47	63	42	45
2008	82	88	83	82	84
% change 2003–2008	71	55	53	65	69

In Table 4, scores are provided that reflect science testing during this time period. Increases in science scores were seventy-five percent or higher for all students and all subpopulations of students between 2007 and 2008.

**Table 4**

*Student Percentage Passing in Science for 2003–2008*

	African-American	Hispanic	White	Economically disadvantaged	All groups
2003	5	4	27	5	8
2004	28	23	67	29	31
2005	25	50	80	36	38
2006	38	45	33	32	40
2007	32	46	44	35	38
2008	78	100	90	83	85
% change 2003–2008	75	96	77	78	77

While scores in other areas, including reading or social studies, are also available and reflect a similar pattern, the math and science scores reported above provide clear evidence of the school's turnaround. The story of this successful turnaround follows.

### *Background Information*

Central High School received a state education agency High School Redesign/Restructuring grant in September of 2005. This grant

provided funding to support hiring an approved external consultant. That consultant was part of a state-sponsored ASP Model project. Part of that project focused on the provision of extensive professional development to the campus, including a key component focused on building a professional learning community to be significantly facilitated by an external consultant. Thus, an external consultant was a key component of this ASP Model and especially critical in the facilitation and development of the PLC, which sustained the turnaround beyond the original ASP involvement during the initial grant period. This external coach, Mary Jones (pseudonym), was invited to apply for her position based upon her positive professional reputation within the geographical area. While she was clearly affiliated with the ASP Model that hired her to facilitate the grant, she stressed to us in our multiple interviews and interactions with her:

One thing we learned through all this, it wasn't a program. Administrators go to conferences and hear about programs. There are boxes and boxes of unopened programs at Central High School that the seven principals who came through here in recent history bought. We found out in the research that it wasn't a program. It was the people. You have to have the right people, and they have to have the same vision. We went through the process of coming up with the vision. This included parents, students, administrators as well as school board and community.

Thus, as the researchers listened to her compelling story and that of other informants, this theme of foregrounding the process and the people surfaced repeatedly in conversation. The research shared in this study, then, is not only about how Central High School initially implemented the ASP Model, but more importantly about how Central High School embraced the ASP Model framework and ultimately took ownership of that process to the point that it was difficult to ascertain exactly when the intersection of the ASP model and the PLC actually occurred. In fact, while development of a professional learning community is customarily only one component of the ASP Model, in the case of Central High School, the PLC ultimately gained strength, power, and influence as the staff began to work as a unit with the PLC superseding the ASP model for this turnaround.

## **Results**

Crisis can often bring people together. Central High School was in crisis. In the midst of this, Central High School embraced a turnaround process that was successful. What follows is a step-by-step description of this successful school transformation that involved not only the initial implementation of early components of an ASP Model but also the subsequent development of a strong PLC. However, as Biddle (2002) says, building PLCs is not a linear process. In fact, she refers to them as, "passionate, non-linear, and persistent endeavors" (p. 10). While the restruc-

turing grant formally cited the ASP Model as the reform framework, the researchers in this project heard passionate responses from the informants indicating that it was the PLC process, the external consultant, and the school staff that were the primary bases for their success story. Informants told the researchers, for example, “We feel like we [the teachers, the administrators, and the external consultant] were the cornerstone. We did all the research ourselves. We are the cornerstone.” Thus, their story as a PLC led by the external consultant is foregrounded against the ASP Model, the initial beginning that soon largely disappeared. Their story begins, though, with the first steps of putting the right staff in place.

### *Starting the PLC Conversation: Putting the Right Staff in Place*

The funded state High School Restructuring/Redesign Grant that supported this school change process included drastic measures related to reconstituting staff on the campus. In fact, federal guidelines for school turnaround block state grants frequently demand the removal of the principal and 50% of the teaching staff as part of the agreement to accept funding (McNeill, 2009). Thus, as a component of the grant and the turnaround process, the campus had to be restructured. That meant a new principal had to be hired, and at least 50% of the teachers needed to be replaced.

*Hiring of the new principal.* The process began in March 2005 when the sitting superintendent hired a former Central ISD superintendent, an African-American, to come in to evaluate and ultimately reconstitute the instructional staff. Mr. Bryan, then, was seen as a strong choice to assist in this turnaround of a majority African-American school. He had the respect of the community: he was an African-American in a predominantly African-American community, and he had a track record of success.

*Firing one-half of the teaching staff.* For Central High School, firing half the staff ultimately resulted in the removal of seventeen teachers from the campus, and the hiring of new teachers who agreed to “buy into” the proposed reform process. The external coach told us

Mr. Bryan did have to get rid of seventeen teachers—ushered out seventeen teachers. Some of them had been there a while, and they were very angry. They weren’t going to be happy working there. They were being held accountable. I was there eighteen hours a week in their classrooms pushing them to change, and they didn’t want to. Some of them had gotten lazy with seven principals in and out and little guidance or accountability.

Thus, this difficult work had to be done by the newly hired principal, but it was critical for the campus to move forward.

*Other restructuring efforts by the new principal.* The new principal was also responsible for other aspects of getting Central High School

back on track as was dictated by the ASP Model and the sitting superintendent. Part of this charge, according to the newly hired principal/former superintendent, was to identify and develop successive principals and assistant principals.

*Hiring of an external coach.* Another key player in the turnaround process alluded to earlier was Mary Jones. Her charge was primarily to facilitate the ASP Model process and, more specifically, to engender the development of a professional learning community among teaching staff and ultimately with students as part of that process. In fact, Mary did such an exceptional job during the grant period that the district hired her with local funding beyond the grant period to continue to facilitate the strong PLC that had emerged.

According to Mary, as part of the initial grant effort, she worked in the district two days per week the first year. Interviews with virtually every informant revealed the external coach, Mary Jones, was a key to the success of this school turnaround effort. For instance, informants shared the following comments about Mary's impact, "Mary treated us as professionals," and "She was our cheerleader." In response, Mary said, "For me, it was common sense and a lot of hard work."

*Hiring of internal coaches.* In addition to these key players, two internal coaches were hired to assist with internal logistics of the turnaround. These two internal coaches as well as the external coach all attended ASP Model training once every two months during the grant period but were for the most part left on their own to facilitate the change on the campus. Ultimately, the internal coaches assisted with the data collection during the "Taking Stock" process, but the external coach assumed responsibility for the professional development and facilitation of the PLC. Thus, once all these key players were in place, including a new principal, a newly hired teaching staff, the external coach, and the internal coaches, the next step in the process was to conduct a needs assessment.

#### *Initiating the PLC Conversation: Taking Stock, the Needs Assessment*

The leadership and the external coach engaged the teachers and community in a research effort, which was developed and implemented within their emerging PLC, focused on "taking stock" of the situation not only at Central High School, but also in the community of Central Valley as it related to Central High School. "Taking Stock" is the first component of the ASP Model, the purpose of which is "identifying and building on the different strengths and challenges that are part of the school community" (Accelerated Schools, 1994, as cited in Endsln, 2003).

*Creation of six teacher research teams.* In order to "take stock," Central High School also simultaneously implemented another component of the ASP Model, when they "adopted a systematic research or inquiry-

based decision-making process to monitor changes” (Finnan & Swanson, 2000, p.104). This led to the creation of six teacher research teams. According to Jones,

during the first week of school, teachers were divided into six groups.... These six groups of teachers were then taught how to conduct research. These teachers were then sent out to interview parents, community members, school board members on the various topics of student achievement, attendance, professional development, public impression of the school, etc.

Throughout the first year of the grant, these six teacher teams became unified in their purpose. They developed a sense of community within each team and also helped build the whole school PLC.

*Doing research in the community.* Following the directions of the leadership, the teachers dispersed throughout the Central Valley to interact with all of the community’s stakeholders. The results of this research, based on both the community surveys conducted door-to-door by the teachers as well as analysis of district internal data records, were published in an internal report called, “Taking Stock.” According to Jones, the purpose of this research was to find out not only what was “really wrong” with the school, but also what the misconceptions were about what was wrong in the Central community. The research revealed some interesting, albeit not completely unexpected, findings.

*Compiling the results of the research.* The resulting “Taking Stock” internal report, developed within the PLC, focused on several key areas, including a) misconceptions among the public and students; b) curriculum implementation, alignment issues, and types of instructional strategies utilized by teachers; c) quality and amount of professional development received by instructional staff; and, d) other data related to the state tables, such as student achievement, attendance, discipline, and Advanced Placement (AP) enrollment.

First, misconceptions permeated the public conversation regarding discipline at Central High School. Seven principals had served on the campus in recent history and inconsistency caused by that turnover did impact campus discipline. However, the newly hired principal was stalwart and consistent, working student by student to enforce discipline in a caring, positive way, sometimes even taking students to the local dollar store to buy a belt, for example, and then returning them to campus. Another public misconception about teacher quality related to the misconception about the alternative teacher certification process. Because many of these alternatively certified teachers were among those conducting these door-to-door community surveys, these teachers themselves were able to assist in dispelling the community perception that “anyone off the street could teach at Central High School.” A final significant finding in the “Taking Stock” report related to student perceptions of themselves. Mary Jones

shared the following statements made to her by students when she shared the visioning statements from the six teacher teams with several groups of students. Students said,

Teachers have no respect for each other and for us.

Why would you (Mary Jones) or anybody want to work in Central?

We are the ‘leftover’ students. (This comment refers to the nearby school district that had recruited white students and hadn’t recruited them [students of color] to transfer to that district.)

Comments like these, instead of being the low point, became a turning point. It was the PLC conversations about this sort of perception data that truly began to get at the heart of what was “wrong” at Central High School.

The second finding of the “Taking Stock” report, conducted by the six PLC-based teacher research teams and led by the external and internal coaches, revealed that there was no curricular alignment between content and passing standards in teacher classrooms content alignment and passing standards on the state accountability testing. Moreover, a review of the instructional strategies used to implement the curriculum revealed a preponderance of assessment-driven worksheet review and few experiences, such as science laboratory work or authentic reading and writing opportunities. Thus, there was a clear lack of curriculum alignment and an equally clear deficit of good instructional strategies.

The third finding of the “Taking Stock” report revealed that there had been insufficient professional development for 90% of the teachers. In ten years, only one teacher had attended any extended professional development, and the entire staff had attended only a one-day reading workshop. However, Jones continued to encourage and support teachers within the PLC conversations, letting them know that it was important to understand, “the good, the bad, and the ugly” in order for the campus to begin to move forward.

The final set of research data in the “Taking Stock” report was related to several selected key state data table indicators. As previously listed in Tables 2–4, student achievement during the period of 2003–2005 that initiated the need for a turnaround indicated that about one-third of all students were passing math and science, and that subpopulations of students were performing at very low levels. In addition to the student achievement woes, low student attendance, high retention rates of students due to failures, and high incidence of disciplinary infractions were other state data table indicators reflective of the state of the campus.

For example, only 162 students out of 330 students attended school 96% of the time, while 108 students out of 330 students had at least 10 excused or unexcused absences. The data revealed that 7.5% of students (or 25 students) were retained in the previous grade with 16 of those 25 being 9th graders and 15 of the 25 being African American. In addition, there

were 9 violence-related disciplinary incidents, including assaults, fights, or weapon possessions. There were also 232 students with two or more discipline referrals out of 330 students—74% of the student body (“Taking Stock” Report).

Central High School, then, was a school in trouble. Accordingly, the “Taking Stock” report established a baseline of data, both quantitative and qualitative, in a variety of areas based on the larger PLC, and then the smaller teacher research teams as well as the external consultant could use this report to move forward, focusing on key areas where improvement was direly needed.

### *Acting on the Conversation: Implementing Recommendations*

The formal and informal Central High School administrative team set out to implement recommendations that stemmed from the PLC-based community research findings as well as from the state data from the years prior to the 2005–2006 school year. As part of this priority-setting process, the leadership decided that they and the staff needed to change the culture of the community and the school by a) improving the perception of Central High School, including the public, students, and even teachers’ perception of not only their school, but also their understanding of the accountability process; b) providing the needed professional development for veteran teachers and new hires; and, c) making logistical scheduling changes related to student instructional needs.

*Improving perceptions.* To accomplish these changes, one of the first steps the newly hired principal, who took over from the former superintendent serving as high school principal in 2006–2007, and the newly hired assistant principal initiated was to schedule and conduct parent meetings throughout the Central Valley community in order to educate parents about the state accountability system. The result was that even the Central Valley community itself began to change the deficit conversation to one more supportive of higher expectations. Simultaneously, while this education of the parents and community was occurring, the principals held meetings with the students to help them understand the accountability system. Teachers who were interviewed shared their observations about changes in students following these reform efforts:

Students can build trust with teachers because the teachers stay.

Students are willing to help one another.

Students realized that there was a shift in thinking going on.

Teachers also revealed changes in themselves:

We have higher expectations of our students.

We all wanted to get out of the [low performance] place we were in.

Now we have teachers who are staying; teachers are not running away.

As evidenced by these various comments, the discourse at Central High was changing substantially with a culture of success and hope replacing the previous culture of failure.

*Providing professional development.* A second major component of the reform initiative focused on providing professional development in the PLC context, supported by coaching on the campus two days per week, which was provided Mary Jones, the external consultant. According to Mary,

I spent two days per week on campus coaching and encouraging teachers.

I had to be “up” and “on” for two days straight to help turn this campus around.

For Mary, then, this effort to change teachers’ perceptions and skills required an intense commitment on her part. Once the initial turnaround process of reconstituting and conducting the “Taking Stock” research was accomplished, Mary’s role was to work toward changing teacher practices in order to improve student achievement. In order to do this, she constantly had to work at shifting teacher attitudes and beliefs.

In addition to the coaching during the school day by Jones, all campus administrators, teachers, athletic coaches, and paraprofessional staff were required by the administration to attend a mandatory two-hour Wednesday afternoon PLC meeting. These meetings were led primarily by Mary Jones, who worked with the instructional staff on a variety of professional development topics, including how to work successfully with students from poverty, how to implement cooperative learning strategies based on Slavin’s (1980) Model, and how to utilize a range of other instructional strategies. While these meetings were somewhat dreaded at first, that dread did not last long, according to a number of informants:

Mary made the meetings fun! We began to look forward to them.

We weren’t talked down to at these meetings. They were conversations where if we knew we had a weakness, we could seek out help from our colleagues.

Another teacher said, “Our faculty meetings are not like most faculty meetings; ours are training and discussion of how to deal with situations that come up. Our meetings are more of a conversation.”

Additionally, because the athletic director, Tom Green, postponed starting football practice on Wednesday afternoons until 5:00 P.M. when these meetings were over, the importance of these weekly meetings was given a symbolic boost, as indicated in the quote from the athletic director below. If these meetings were more important than small town football in the South, they were definitely significant. According to Green,

What we did was so important. We [the coaches] didn’t have practice until these meetings were over. Our students improved because of our commitment to academics first and athletics second.

The burden of not passing lifted off our students' shoulders. Then they were "free" to play (and win!) on Friday nights. Consequently, because of the commitment from all staff on the campus, including the athletic director, there was strong support for improving student performance on and off the field.

*Making logistical changes.* One of the final components of the campus reform effort was to make the needed logistical changes related to student instructional needs. One of these included an initiative supported by both the principal and the teachers, focused on implementation of an eight-period day that allowed students who were being successful to go home after seventh period, but required those students who were not being successful to stay through the eighth tutorial period. According to several informants, the implementation of this eighth period had a significant impact on student achievement. For instance, one teacher said, "Students knew that tutorial period wasn't going away. The teachers were going to ensure student success." As several informants indicated, it was only when students did pass all sections of the state mandated test that they were allowed to leave campus and not attend this mandatory tutorial period.

Ultimately, the administration was willing to make difficult but necessary choices. This process was facilitated initially by the ASP Model, but everyone agreed that it was mainly through the PLCs, the external consultant, and the school staff that a successful turnaround was possible. By "Taking Stock" through working towards consensual visioning, voice, and governance among all stakeholders, but particularly among the staff in PLCs, and then prioritizing the implementation of changes, Central High School did turn around.

## Discussion

For nearly thirty years since Gardner's (1983) work, *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform*, schools have been looking for a silver bullet to solve their ills. While a number of successful reform models are cited in the school research literature, much of that work has involved larger schools and communities. However, rural and small communities are also critically significant to the overall well-being of the United States (Stern, 1994). Unfortunately, blatant rural stereotypes and societal barriers coupled with the lack of research resources has resulted in an atmosphere of abandonment for rural schools (Herzog & Pittman, 1995, Backman, 1990). Thus, for a number of reasons, there has been very little research on successful turnarounds of low performing diverse rural schools.

Moreover, there is very little research on successful use of PLCs in diverse rural schools, making this story of Central High School's successful turnaround timely and noteworthy. What is uniquely remarkable and reportable (Labov, 1972) about this Central High School turnaround process of success was the rapidity of the change, especially in light of the

depth of the entrenched deficit attitude that prevailed before the noteworthy improvement in both the community and the school. Additionally, it is the story of a successful rural turnaround, including overcoming issues that are unique to rurality, such as limited financial resources and limited faculty expertise in providing a comprehensive, high quality, rigorous curriculum (Hannum, Irvin, Banks, & Farmer, 2009).

However, state grant initiatives, such as the High School Restructuring Grant awarded to Central High School, can assist in filling these voids in funding to support school improvement in rural areas. Another key step, though, was the grant requirement that 50% of the teaching staff be removed (McNeill, 2009) along with the hiring of a new principal. Nonetheless, while these required steps were taken in this case and similar schools have taken similar steps with less impressive results, numerous intangibles influenced the ultimate success of the Central High School turnaround effort.

For example, the state funding agency provided a list of approved consultants that have a strong track record and research base to support their approval as providers. In the case of Central High School, the provider selected was an ASP Model project with a strong emphasis on implementation of a PLC facilitated in great part on the campus by the external coach. Thus, particularly significant to this turnaround, as noted by a number of the informants, was the hiring of an external coach who brought a track record of success and who had the energy and charisma to engage successfully the teaching staff at Central High School.

In essence, although Mary Jones was not a formal leader in the traditional sense, the role she played as a transformational leader (Bass & Riggio, 2006) or change agent on the campus is undisputed as the researchers were told over and over again by the informants. As a change agent (Lewin as cited in Caldwell, 2003), Mary Jones served as a facilitator striving for “consensus-seeking interventions based on open dialogue, feedback and group ownership” (Tichy, 1974, p. 169, as cited in Caldwell, 2003). Accordingly, inclusion of consultants like Mary Jones has successfully facilitated implementations of the various reform models that, in other instances, have been found to lack the sustained commitment of teachers (Little & Bartlett, 2002). However, because Jones was able to create the level of commitment that researchers have cited as necessary (Biddle, 2002, p.8), the PLC was successfully built and the work of the campus, as led by that PLC, was successful.

Additionally, PLCs, such as the one facilitated by Jones, that focus on this sort of committed, collaborative work have been found to be successful in sustaining school reform. For example, Biddle’s (2002) research also noted that incorporating professional learning communities in conjunction with the ASP Model has the potential to provide teachers with the opportunity to engage with their colleagues around the processes of the model and the struggles with its continued implementation. In the case

of Central High School, the ASP Model process and development of the PLC, as led by Jones, were complementary processes with the PLC ultimately gaining the most strength, power, and influence as the staff began to work as a cohesive unit, leading to the PLC ultimately being given primary credit for the turnaround by those involved.

In this PLC setting, teachers had to move beyond their own personal ideas to create and practice shared norms, values, and vision (Louis et al., 1996). Additionally, by collectively focusing on student learning and demonstrating a willingness to expose their own vulnerability by: a) practicing reflective dialogue; b) creating transparency in their practice; and c) striving for collaboration among themselves (Louis et al., 1996), they were able to create a PLC environment that ultimately supported and sustained that shared vision that was truly evidenced by visible changes in teacher practices in their classrooms.

Moreover, the PLC conversations were used to put into place governance structures that provided teachers with a strong voice in the process. The resulting sense of ownership supported teachers assuming responsibility for fixing their school. Indeed, the creation of the weekly 90-minute PLC time for what teachers referred to as “conversations” set the tone for the school turnaround and helped solidify a sense of ownership. An unspoken assumption seemed to be the understanding that if reconstitution of Central High School could happen once, which resulted in the firing of teachers and reorganization of the administration, it could happen again. However, the new leadership, both formal and informal, including the new principal, assistant principal, and external consultant, heeded the need to provide their teachers with support, respect, and openness to innovation. Assuming this posture, the leadership supported the work of the teaching staff and helped build a collaborative learning community atmosphere on the campus.

Consequently, Central High School’s turnaround story is certainly unique. It began with an external restructuring grant initiative that required a state-approved external consultant. However, somewhere along the way, it no longer was about the ASP Model per se or the ASP Model recommendations to form a PLC, but rather, the turnaround took on a life and identity of its own. Ultimately, this successful turnaround supports research that the implementation of a strong professional learning community can lead to academic success in a rural school composed largely of students of color from low income homes. Moreover, this turnaround was highly effective even in an environment with deeply entrenched deficit attitudes (Battistich et al., 1997).

## **Conclusion**

For educators in a number of states, state-mandated assessments are the ultimate measure of success. One of the teachers involved in the success of Central High School in 2007–2008 told us,

When the scores came in, the whole school was cheering. Teachers were in the halls crying and screaming, and kids in the classrooms were crying and screaming, too. It was like after all these years, and everything against us, well, we did it!

For this school and community, the floodgate of emotions pent up by years of entrenched negative attitudes and failure had been overcome as evidenced by the sheer joy of everyone on the campus. The campus had become a learning community clearly focused on student success.

Peter Senge (1990) in *The Fifth Discipline* said, “a number of influential writers have advocated that schools in complex, knowledge-using societies should become learning organizations” (e.g. Fullan, 1993; Leithwood & Louis, 1998; Mitchell & Sackney, 2000). This study affirms that there are ways to achieve success in even some of the most difficult contexts by creating learning organizations. Moreover, we know from the research literature that the development of professional learning communities in schools can, when done well, contribute to successful school reform (Huggins, 2010). Thus, it is significant that examples of successful implementations, such as this turnaround story of one high needs high school, be documented. It is especially critical that this study of a rural school with historically underperforming students, overwhelming lack of community support, and an entrenched culture of negative attitudes have their story told as a means of describing what works and what can be accomplished by ordinary people doing extraordinary work.

### **Author’s Note**

To allow anonymity, all identifying names have been replaced with pseudonyms, including the names of the high school and the community. In addition, minor changes in numerical data, while retaining the original trend patterns, have been included to allow the anonymity of Central High School. Nor has the “Taking Stock” report been cited in our bibliography, for this same reason.

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## **Appendix**

### Interview Protocol

#### PLC Questions

1. What would you say are the components of professional learning communities on your campus?
2. Of these components, which would you say had the greatest impact?
3. Which other component do you think was critical?
4. What role do you feel like you played in the development of the professional learning community?
5. What is the most important thing you have taken away from participating in this PLC?

#### School Change Questions

1. Data on your campus seems to indicate rapid improvement in student achievement. To what do you attribute this rapid improvement?
2. Based on the factors involved in this rapid change, which would you rank as most significant?
3. Based on the factors involved in this rapid change, which would you rank as second most significant?
4. Can you elaborate on the various conditions on the campus over the past two to three years and the positive or negative effects of these?
5. Although student achievement is the focus of positive change, are there other indicators of improvement?
6. We understand that this school has sought to implement the professional learning community philosophy. How significant is the impact of that initiative?
7. What role do you feel like you played in the development of the professional learning community?
8. What would you say is the component of establishing a PLC that has had the greatest impact?