1 The Professional Learning Community

An Overview

PREVIEW OF THE CHAPTER

Today, a great deal is known about what leads to school improvement and about the change process in schools. In the current literature, there is extensive discussion of the learning community as an effective model for fostering school improvement and general consensus about high-quality learning activities as essential factors in the improvement of teaching and learning. This chapter provides the theoretical basis for an understanding of the learning community as a metaphor for schools and the rationale for the strategies that lead to schools characterized by collaboration, shared leadership, and ongoing learning. The evolution of the learning community in the research literature is explored and an in-depth discussion of the characteristics and impact of the learning community on students, teachers, and staff is provided. The chapter specifically addresses the following questions:

- What is a learning community?
- What are the characteristics of a learning community?
- What is the role of the learning community in an age of accountability?
- What are the key elements of the school improvement framework for learning community schools?

- How is student achievement affected by the learning community model?
- How are teachers affected by the learning community?
- How do reflection and reflective practice contribute to the building of learning communities?

WHAT IS A LEARNING COMMUNITY?

Dr. Karla Brownstone is just beginning her tenure as the superintendent of the Merlo School District, an urban/suburban-type district where achievement scores and teacher morale have been on the decline for several years. The former superintendent had a highly directive leadership style that limited his ability to improve the schools and resulted in a high turnover in the administrative staff. In her initial meetings with the board of education, teachers, and other staff and community members, Dr. Brownstone had shared her vision of providing the kind of leadership that would facilitate the transformation of each of the district's schools into learning communities. Her ideas had generated some interest among the district's building principals and supervisors.

When she initially toured the schools in the district, the superintendent observed that the teachers in the elementary and middle schools all taught in self-contained classrooms in which the children were homogeneously grouped. In a survey conducted by the district staff, the teachers had overwhelmingly indicated their approval of the manner in which students were assigned to their classes.

Superintendent Brownstone found that most curriculum and instruction decisions were made by a curriculum-planning committee composed of central office staff and chaired by Jack Carson, the director of curriculum and instruction. The declining achievement scores in mathematics had recently led the planning committee to implement a new mathematics program in the district. The central office personnel were ready for a change that would lead to an improvement in school climate, more effective teaching, and higher academic achievement in their schools. The achievement data had led them to realize that the strategy they were using had not improved teaching and learning in Merlo's schools. Dr. Brownstone is now planning a series of meetings with the teachers and staff in each school to share with them the meaning of a school as a community of learners. What information should she include in her presentation?

Over the past several decades, the research literature on school improvement and school reform has focused on the characteristics of effective schools and the importance of the principal's leadership role and behavior (Leithwood, Seashore-Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004; Purkey & Smith, 1983; Sergiovanni, 1992). The metaphor for schools that dominated the literature during this period was the notion of schools as formal organizations. The 1990 publication of Peter Senge's work *The Fifth Discipline* led members of the education community to explore new ways

of improving how schools operated and the professionalism of teachers and administrators.

Senge's Learning Organization

Senge (1990), whose focus was on corporations rather than schools, argued that if corporations are to survive, they must change themselves into learning organizations that recognize the threats to their survival and the opportunities for their continued growth. Senge described five learning disciplines that must effectively be employed to build a learning organization: (1) personal mastery, (2) mental models, (3) team learning, (4) building shared vision, and (5) systems thinking. In implementing these principles, people learn from each other and develop more effective ways of doing things. Practical ideas and tools that can be used to help educators apply the five learning disciplines in schools can be found in *Schools That Learn* (Senge, Cambron-McCabe, Lucas, Smith, Dutton, & Kleiner, 2000).

In recent years the school reform literature reflected a view of schools as communities of learners (Blankstein, Alan, Houston, & Cole, 2008; Hord & Sommers, 2008). Transforming a school into a learning community, however, can pose some significant challenges for educators. Building a learning organization requires organizational members to have access to such resources as time to collaborate, ongoing leadership support, information, and ready access to colleagues (Senge, 1994). A lack of meaningful opportunities to engage in learning activities can limit the capacity of schools to become learning organizations (Ingram, Louis, & Schroeder, 2004; Lashway, 1997). In our experience schools typically do not encourage shared thinking; rather, teachers are generally free to make their own instructional decisions.

The views stated earlier on schools as learning communities beg the question, *what does a learning community school look like?* A snapshot of such

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Online Resources 1.1

Do you want to know more about Senge's ideas on the learning organization? Read the article *Peter Senge and the Learning Organization* at http://www.omahaodn .org/Articles/July%202005.pdf. Information is provided on the five disciplines (systems thinking, personal mastery, mental models, building shared vision, and team learning) that Senge identifies as the core disciplines in shaping a learning organization.
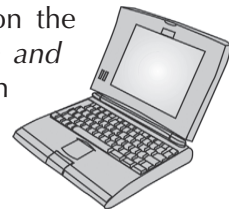
a school, in which one of the authors served as the college supervisor of administrative interns, follows.

A Snapshot of a Learning Community School

Walking about the halls of a New York City high school, I noticed that in many ways this school was different from others. The four-year-old school, which was housed in an older school building, lacked many of the facilities of other newly founded schools in the city. However, I was struck by the fact that the doors to the classrooms were always open and the students and teachers were all deeply involved in learning activities. During my twice-a-month visits to the school, as I freely moved from classroom to classroom, it struck me that an unusual amount of student talk took place in the classrooms. Students felt comfortable in probing for understanding. They freely entered into dialogue with their teachers; students and teachers alike challenged one another's thinking with their questions. The environment was exciting, and I came to the realization that the students in this school were continually searching for meaning and accepting responsibility for their own learning. I rarely saw this level of student engagement in the other high schools I visited. More often, students were treated as receptacles for information, and instruction was more likely to be teacher-centered and narrowly planned around the state testing program.

When this school first opened, the teachers had been permitted to make their own decisions collaboratively about the kind of programs they wanted to implement. The faculty had decided to utilize a thematic interdisciplinary curriculum incorporating a team-teaching approach. Each team of teachers decided on the norms that specified how the teams would work together.

The program had been implemented after a year of training. The teachers had selected key staff from another well-regarded school that used a collaborative approach to providing professional development. During the period of training, as they interacted with teachers from the other school, made interschool visits, and learned more about team teaching and thematic curriculum development and implementation, faculty members had come to realize that they had mutual responsibility for their own learning as well as the learning of the all the students on their teams. Over time this approach to teaching and learning resulted in a level of interdependence among the faculty that fostered collaboration within and among the teaching teams. Additionally, faculty members discovered that reflecting on their ideas and activities and making and carrying out decisions were intellectually stimulating and motivating. The decisions they made affected the breadth and depth of their students' learning as well as how they felt about themselves as educators.

A visit to the teachers' room revealed the same level of interest in learning as I found when visiting classrooms. The conversations of the teachers were invariably concerned with the plans being made for their classes. A bulletin board in the teachers' room announced various activities planned around teaching and learning issues. Reminders were posted about regularly scheduled school leadership team meetings, study groups meetings, activities for new teachers, meetings of the peer coaching team, and purely social events. With the support of the principal, all of these activities were collaboratively planned and led by teachers.

One of the building principal's priorities is to provide the instructional support that the teachers felt they needed. At the recommendation of the faculty, positions for half-time coordinators of technology, science, and audiovisual and instructional materials have been carved out of the available teaching positions. The coordinators are available to support teachers in all content areas and to provide for or arrange learning resources as requested by the teaching team.

The entire faculty keeps its focus on student learning by taking advantage of the available opportunities to talk about and learn about teaching strategies and students' needs. The principal provides the teachers with available achievement data, which the teams use to plan for instruction. On a regular basis, teachers collaboratively analyze the data from tests developed by the teams to make plans for instruction. The teachers have become socialized to the extent that they maintain open classrooms, which other teachers can enter and observe on an informal basis.

All activities are built around the school's core mission, which is focused on advancing student achievement. Plans have been made for a small group of teachers to meet to reexamine and update the existing mission statement. They will share it with the teachers at a faculty meeting. The faculty will discuss and modify it, if necessary, before moving to adopt the statement. The principal plans to carry this process out every two years, as she believes the mission as stated helps some of the faculty focus.

Clearly, the school described in this snapshot has learning as its focus. How, though, do we define a learning community? And what learning community characteristics have become embedded in the culture of this school?

Defining Learning Community

The term *learning community* has taken on a variety of meanings in the literature. In *Improving Schools From Within,* Roland Barth (1990) described a community of learners as "a place where students and adults alike are engaged as active learners in matters of special importance to them and where everyone is thereby encouraging everyone else's learning" (p. 9). He also explored the role of teachers and principals as learners and the importance of cooperative and collegial relationships as important aspects of community.

In *Recreating Schools*, Myers and Simpson (1998) described learning communities as "cultural settings in which everyone learns, in which every individual is an integral part, and in which every participant is responsible for both the learning and the overall well-being of everyone else" (p. 2). Collay and her associates (Collay, Dunlap, Enloe, & Gagnon, 1998) noted that not only are individual and collective growth cherished in a learning community but also the processes for attaining that growth are valued.

Speck (1999), who asserted that shaping a learning community is the most pressing task of the building principal, defined a learning community as follows:

A school learning community is one that promotes and values learning as an ongoing, active collaborative process with dynamic dialogue by teachers, students, staff, principal, parents, and the

school community to improve the quality of learning and life within the school. Developing schools where every aspect of the community nourishes learning and helping everyone who comes into contact with the school to contribute to that learning community are important concepts. (p. 8)

As defined earlier by Speck, members of a learning community are mutually responsible for building the community. Thus building a school learning community becomes the collective pursuit of the principal, teachers, students, parents, and all other community members. To accomplish their goals, community members must carry on conversations about the fundamental issues that influence the quality of the available learning opportunities offered to all members of the school community.

In a more recent study, Seashore (2003) and colleagues stated:

By using the term *professional learning community* we signify our interest not only in discrete acts of teacher sharing, but in the establishment of a school-wide culture that makes collaboration expected, inclusive, genuine, ongoing, and focused on critically examining practice to improve student outcomes. (p. 3)

They further noted that, with respect to advancing student outcomes and teacher professional learning, how teachers connect with one another outside the walls of their classrooms may possibly be as important as their classroom practices and behavior. The model offers an environment in which all teachers come to assume responsibility for the learning of all students (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006).

WHAT ARE THE CHARACTERISTICS OF A LEARNING COMMUNITY?

The literature identifies characteristics that are associated with the development and maintenance of communities of learners. Our discussion in this section is based on the work of Kruse, Louis, and Bryk (1995) in *Professionalism and Community: Perspectives on Reforming Urban Schools*. The characteristics that they identified (Figure 1.1) serve as the theoretical basis for the ideas and activities described throughout this book.

A professional community, as identified by Kruse, Louis, and Bryk (1995), has as its focus the cultivation of learning and interaction among teachers and administrators so as to improve teaching and learning outcomes for students and for the school community at large. As a result of extensive research, they cited five elements of a professional community: (1) reflective dialogue, (2) focus on student learning, (3) interaction among

Figure 1.1 Kruse, Louis, and Bryk (1995) Formulation of the Professional Community

	Dimensions of the Professional Community
Characteristics	Reflective dialogue Collective focus on student learning Deprivation of practice Collaboration Shared values and norms
Structural Conditions	Time to meet and discuss Physical proximity Interdependent teaching roles Teacher empowerment/school autonomy Communication structures
Human/Social Resources	Openness to improvement Trust and respect Supportive leadership Socialization Cognitive/skill base

SOURCE: Kruse, S. D., Louis, K. S., & Bryk, A. (1995). An emerging framework for analyzing school-based professional community. In K. S. Louis & S. D. Kruse (Eds.), *Professionalism and Community: Perspectives on Reforming Urban Schools* (p. 23–42). Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press. Adapted/reprinted by permission of Corwin Press. All rights reserved.

teacher colleagues, (4) collaboration, and (5) shared values and norms. Each element is briefly defined here.

Reflective dialogue is described as those conversations that focus on teaching behaviors and learning outcomes to encourage teachers to discuss their teaching practices and collaborate on how they can be improved.

In explaining the element of a *focus on student learning*, Kruse, Louis, and Bryk emphasized that the purpose of all actions in a professional community should be the growth and development of all the students. This element is characterized by ongoing conversations and decision making about curriculum, teaching, and learning that concentrate on student outcomes.

It is through *interactions among teachers* that professional relationships are developed that encourage teachers to share ideas, learn from one another, and help their colleagues. This element, which is also described as the *deprivatization of practice*, includes behaviors that lead teachers to open their classrooms for observation by other teachers.

Traditionally, teachers work alone in their classrooms, where they create a learning environment for up to thirty or more students at a time. Kruse, Louis, and Bryk indicated that *collaboration* occurs when teachers share

instructional strategies and techniques, make decisions about instructional issues, and come up with ideas that enhance learning for all members of the school community.

The characteristic *shared values and norms* expresses the idea that the members of the professional community have reached agreement about the mission of their school and the values and norms that are to shape their behaviors as professionals.

Louis and Kruse (1995) also cited five structural conditions and five human/social resources that are essential for establishing professional community. The structural conditions are (1) providing adequate time for teachers to meet and exchange ideas; (2) locating teachers physically closely to one another so that they can observe and interact with peers; (3) ensuring teacher empowerment and school autonomy so that teachers may feel free to do what they believe to be best for their students; (4) creating schoolwide communication structures, including regularly established meetings devoted to teaching, learning, and other professional issues; and (5) employing methods, such as team teaching, that require teachers to practice their craft together.

The human/social resources consist of (1) support for teachers who are open to improvement, as demonstrated by a readiness to analyze, reflect on, and try out new approaches to teaching; (2) trust in and respect for the abilities of all members of the learning community; (3) processes for socializing teachers into the collegial school culture; (4) support from those in leadership positions; and (5) opportunities to acquire new knowledge and skills needed to build a learning community.

Role of External Agencies

More recently, an exhaustive study (Bolam, McMahon, Stoll, Thomas, & Wallace, 2005) reported that effective learning communities were also

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Online Resources 1.2

What Are the Benefits?
This activity is designed to guide teachers to reflect on the benefits of collegial teamwork. The activity can be used in an introductory workshop on the professional learning community or on team building. Visit the site of the SERVE Center (University of North Carolina at Greensboro) at http://srvlive.serve.org/EdQuality/ProfLearnCom/Benefits.php to access this activity and other activities designed to support professional learning teams.

characterized by openness to support from and participation in networks and partnerships. In our own work, we have observed that this feature can be an important hallmark of schools that seek to expand their opportunities for continuous learning. For example, a school's efforts can be supported and sustained by the external support of the leadership at the district level. We have also observed that strong, well-structured affiliations with higher educational institutions, social service agencies, businesses, and other entities can be powerful sources of support, additional funding, or technical assistance.

The Challenge of Building a Collaborative Culture

Many challenges are associated with shifting a school from a traditional model to a professional learning community. Essentially, the shift to a learning community model requires a change in the culture of a school. *School culture* has been defined as "the set of norms, values and beliefs, rituals and ceremonies, symbols and stories that make up the 'persona' of the school" (Peterson, 2002, p.10).

Culture is enduring, and as Peterson (2002) reminded us, plays a hand in "the ways people think, feel, and act" (p. 10). He pointed out that we can see culture's imprint on attitudes toward professional learning and development as well as on the willingness to change. Resistance to a cultural shift is often powerful and persistent. The shift requires new outlooks and behaviors as learning community schools call for teachers to examine what they believe about how teaching and learning are to occur. Principals are often faced with ingrained cynicism and other significant challenges when they attempt to sway the way things have generally been done in a school.

Why then should educational leaders try to nurture a school's culture? Typically in the school-reform movement, the weight of a reformer's effort is positioned on such activities as altering the organizational structure of schools, aligning curriculum with state content standards, test-best preparation, and training teachers to use new methods of instruction. When these strategies are applied without attention to the norms, values, and beliefs that drive and sustain a school's culture and that inform teacher behavior, they do not necessarily result in the deep change necessary for achieving targeted learning outcomes.

However, the good news in this picture is that researchers and educators have increasingly come to recognize the importance of nurturing what Peterson (2002) refers to as a *healthy school culture* characterized by shared values, planned opportunities for collaboration, and continuous learning. Based on their review of the literature, Marzano, Waters, and McNulty (2005) confirmed that "an effective culture is the primary tool with which a leader fosters change"; and they identify such leadership behaviors as developing a shared vision and supporting teacher's collaborative efforts

Figure 1.2   Learning Community Characteristics and School Culture
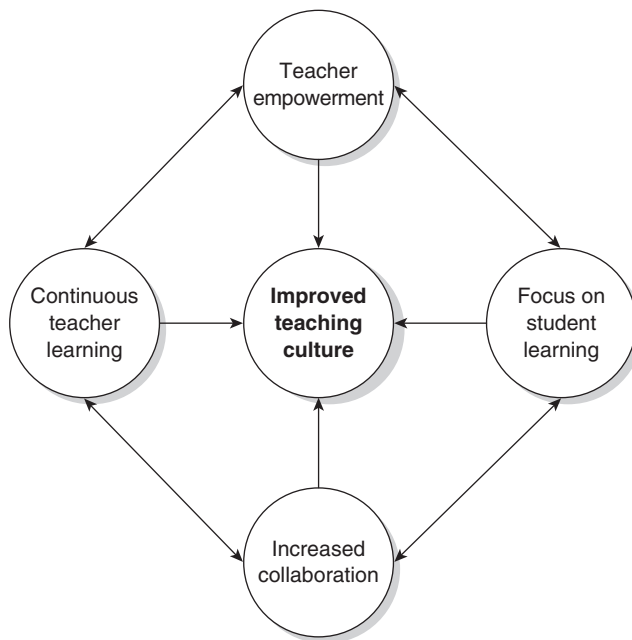
SOURCE: Developed by the authors based on Vescio, V., Ross, D., & Adams, A. (2006). A review of research on professional learning communities: What do we know? Retrieved January 20, 2008, from http://www.nsrfharmony.org/research.vescio_ross_adams.pdf

as contributing to the growth of an effective culture (p. 48). It should be kept in mind that school leaders are not the only transmitters of cultural norms and expectations; teachers also play a role as they send signals about a school's culture to the wider community through their interactions with students and parents (Richardson, 2001a).

Even more good news is found in a recent literature review that presented evidence that the learning community characteristics working in concert with one another fostered a change in the teaching culture of the schools under study (see Figure 1.2). It was concluded, ". . . culture is improved because the learning communities increase collaboration, a focus on student learning, teacher authority or empowerment, and continuous learning" (Vescio et al., 2006, pp. 17–18).

As schools work toward developing learning communities, it is important to keep in mind that shared values and norms are the cornerstone on which the community rests and from which the other dimensions will take root (Kruse et al., 1995). At the same time, teachers can feel empowered to act on their shared beliefs only if the school and district leadership offer them the autonomy, the opportunity, and the time to meet that they need to decide about improving teaching and learning.

> ### *Online Resources 1.3*
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> **Auditing the Culture of Your School**
> To assess the culture of your school
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> 1. read *An Audit of the Culture Starts with Two Handy Tools* at http://www.nsdc.org/library/publications/jsd/wagner233.cfm.
> 2. use one of the survey instruments at http://www.nsdc.org/library/publications/jsd/wagtools233.pdf to conduct a culture audit of your school.

WHAT IS THE ROLE OF THE LEARNING COMMUNITY IN AN AGE OF ACCOUNTABILITY?

The policies and mandates of the 2002 No Child Left Behind legislation have had a deeply felt impact on the way in which teachers, schools, and school districts operate. In some instances NCLB has been viewed as a constructive and promising vehicle for improving learning and promoting educational accountability. At the same time, the legislation has posed many challenges for the educational community. Unquestionably, this standards-based accountability model, together with its high-stakes testing mandate, is having a significant impact on how schools operate and what students learn. Favorably, NCLB raises expectations for academic improvement as it requires states to adopt challenging standards that specify what all children are expected to know and be able to do. By mandating annual reading and math assessments in Grades 3 through 8, plus in one year of high school, the legislation has provided the impetus for states to revisit or strengthen their assessment systems. Annually, the assessment data are to be made available to the public in the form of report cards on school-learning outcomes and statewide achievement.

Another constructive feature of NCLB is the attention it directs to the academic needs of low-achieving students by requiring that achievement data be disaggregated and reported by subgroups. The information gathered through this process is to be analyzed and used to inform decisions about school policy and guide the selection of programs and practices that address the identified needs of subgroups in the student population. By requiring that all teachers of academic subjects be highly qualified, NCLB obliges schools and districts to give significant attention to the selection and ongoing preparation of those they choose to hire as teachers.

Although the aforementioned provisions of the legislation do offer some promise, NCLB also poses some unique challenges and noteworthy concerns for the educational community.

- Under NCLB the instructional focus in schools has all too often shifted to test preparation (Meier et al., 2004). Teachers frequently share with us their sense of frustration with the test-besting practices that result from the law's focus on testing as the measure of learning outcomes.
- The unrelenting focus on required testing in math, reading, and science often shifts the curriculum emphasis and much of the instructional time away from other important areas of learning (Meir et al., 2004).
- Teachers often complain that test data fail to provide useful information about instructional practices and student learning (Ingram et al., 2004).
- Many important areas of learning are not measured by the standardized tests that are used to assess academic progress (Smith & Piele, 2006).
- Data-driven decision making by teachers is often hampered by a lack of time to analyze test results and make instructional decisions (Ingram, et al., 2004).
- NCLB has set an expectation that is indisputably out of reach by requiring that all students must achieve the level of proficiency or greater in math and reading by 2014.

Many have argued forcefully that the unrelenting focus on test results as NCLB's measure of performance has, in effect, become the proverbial 800-pound elephant in the classroom that needs to be revisited and revised. In the face of these challenges, the question that each school must address, however, is this: *How can we make certain that our students are offered the instructional programs that address essential learning outcomes and meet the rigorous accountability standards mandated by NCLB and established by their school districts?*

The learning community model provides some answers to this question. It provides a vehicle for teachers to share ideas about standards-based instruction and assessment. When teachers in a learning community collaborate and resolve issues around what content to teach and how best to teach it, they are searching for a common understanding of what effective teaching looks like for all children in their school community. The collegial decisions they make are more likely than traditional approaches are to offer teachers, staff, and all children the opportunity to learn because their collective focus is always on the outcomes of instruction (Little, 1990). Accountability for standards becomes a community issue as teams of teachers work together to accomplish their shared vision.
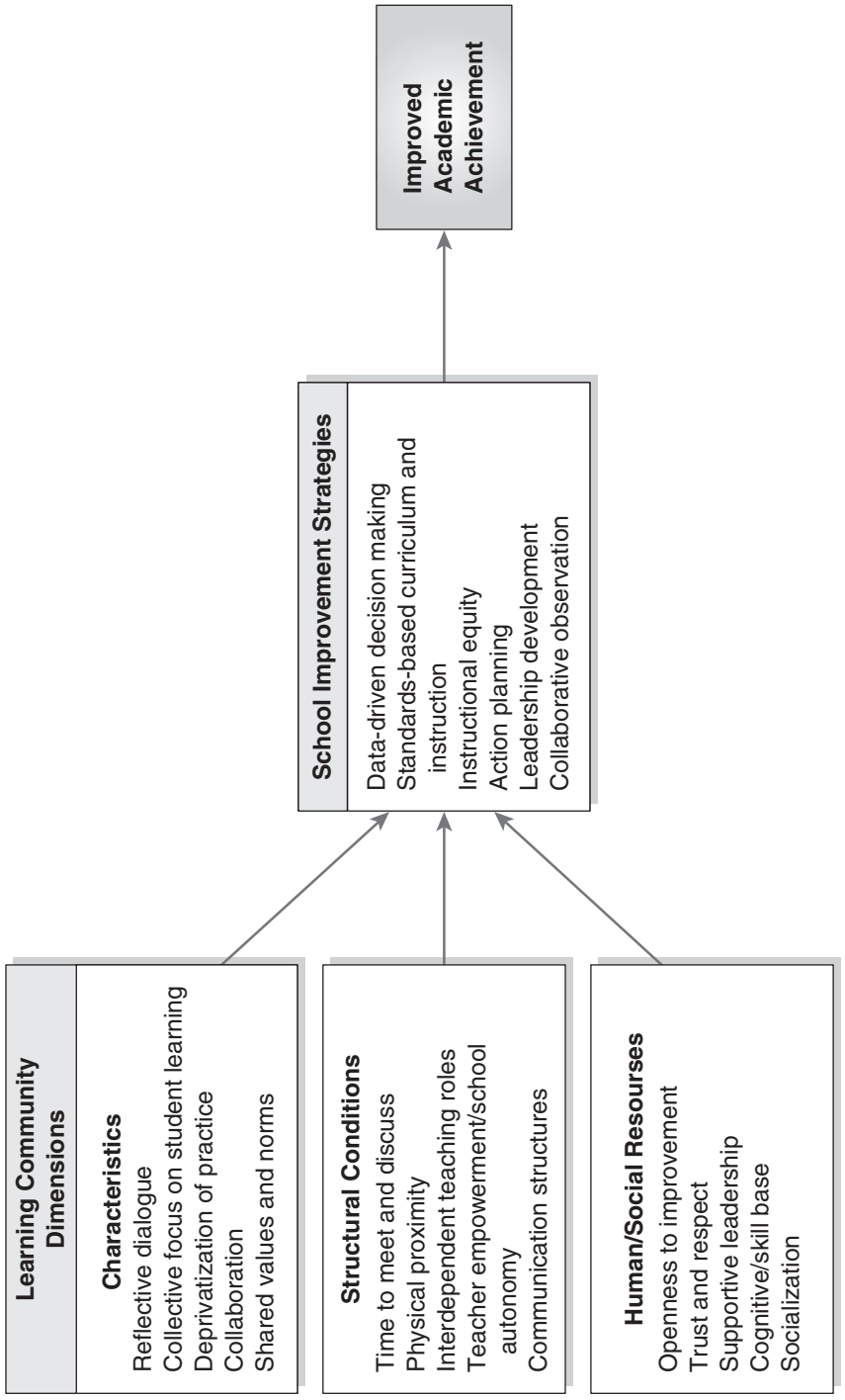
Clearly, schools with learning community characteristics can foster a school culture in which teachers can continuously learn to prepare students to perform to standards. A high-quality learning environment for teachers translates into greater learning opportunities for students.

WHAT ARE THE KEY ELEMENTS OF THE SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT FRAMEWORK FOR LEARNING COMMUNITY SCHOOLS?

The characteristics of learning community schools are clearly aligned with the strategies used by schools and districts to foster school improvement (see Figure 1.3) and to address the challenges and mandates set forth in the NCLB legislation. The key school improvement strategies, which operate interdependently, are reflected in the activities that are included in the chapters in this book. The key strategies include the following:

- *Leadership development of teachers:* Teachers in learning community schools provide leadership by collegially sharing ideas for improving instruction and by opening up their classrooms for all teachers to learn about effective instructional practices. In effect, they become leaders of learning for one another as well as for all of the students in their schools. This leadership role is consistent with the reality of their responsibility for the learning that takes place in their classrooms.

- *Implementation of a standards-based curriculum:* NCLB calls for demanding state academic standards that can are used to measure student progress in meeting agreed upon benchmarks. Teachers must, therefore, be prepared to collectively select and use appropriate curriculum, instruction, and assessment strategies to ensure that all students have an opportunity to achieve the standards.

- *Data-driven decision making:* Analyzing data is a powerful and essential strategy for ensuring that all students have an equal opportunity to learn and for meeting the requirements set forth in NCLB. Teachers in learning community schools improve their classroom practice by collectively analyzing classroom and districtwide assessment data and using the results to plan for instruction. Through these procedures they learn from one another to make decisions that improve instructional practice.

- *Focus on instructional equity:* Another major purpose of the federal legislation is to bring attention to the instructional needs of low-achieving children and to bridge the achievement gap between high- and low-performing students. To address these instructional equity issues, NCLB mandates that assessment data be disaggregated by "poverty, race, ethnicity, disability, and limited English proficiency." In the learning community model, teachers are afforded the time and opportunities to meet and to collectively focus on student data. They are uniquely situated to turn a light on the instructional needs of the subgroups in the student population.

- *Collaborative observation*: Collaborative observation is a strategy in which colleagues provide support and feedback to one another about the effective use of new instructional practices (Peters & March,

Figure 1.3 School Improvement Framework for Learning

Learning Community Dimensions

Characteristics

Reflective dialogue
Collective focus on student learning
Deprivatization of practice
Collaboration
Shared values and norms

Structural Conditions

Time to meet and discuss
Physical proximity
Interdependent teaching roles
Teacher empowerment/school autonomy
Communication structures

Human/Social Resourses

Openness to improvement
Trust and respect
Supportive leadership
Cognitive/skill base
Socialization

School Improvement Strategies

Data-driven decision making
Standards-based curriculum and instruction
Instructional equity
Action planning
Leadership development
Collaborative observation

Improved Academic Achievement

1999). It includes such activities as coaching, peer observation, mentoring, and interclassroom visitation programs. Many activities that involve some form of collaborative observation are included in the chapters in this book. When collaborative observation becomes an integral aspect of a school's culture, the focus is continuously on the classroom practices that foster student and teacher learning.

- *Action planning:* An inherent component of many of the school improvement strategies listed earlier is the action planning process. In learning community schools, action planning is an inherent aspect of all of the aforementioned school improvement strategies. Teachers use their collective voices to plan for sharing ideas and providing feedback to their peers and to examine and improve their teaching and learning practices throughout the school day. They plan to work and learn together to improve student learning.

HOW IS STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT AFFECTED BY THE LEARNING COMMUNITY MODEL?

The ultimate purpose of the movement to the learning community model is to improve learning opportunities and outcomes for students. Teachers in learning community schools engage in collaborative activities directed toward helping them to improve their instructional practices. Their students are likely to be the beneficiaries as the teachers share ideas, learn innovative and better ways of teaching, and try the newly learned approaches in the classroom.

A study that explored the link between teacher learning, teacher instructional behavior, and student outcomes showed that engaging in an ongoing learning process led teachers to identify and carry out practices that resulted in increased graduation rates, improved college admission rates, and higher academic achievement for their students (Ancess, 2000).

The Hugo Newman College Preparatory School (Public School 180) in New York City provides evidence of how the shift to a learning community model can affect the academic achievement of students. Under the dynamic leadership of Dr. Peter McFarlane, the school has been transformed from one of the poorest performing schools in New York City to a center of educational excellence. The goal of attending college is uniformly acknowledged as attainable for the students in this prekindergarten through sixth grade school that is expanding to include grades seven and eight. Since McFarlane's arrival at Hugo Newman in 1998, the school has successfully addressed the leadership, curriculum, and instructional issues that previously mired it in failure. In 2006, as a result of the school's metamorphosis, it was placed on the New York State Department of Education's list of high-performing schools. In 2007 the school was assigned the grade of A by the New York City Department of Education. In 2008 Hugo Newman was the recipient of the Panasonic National School Change Award.

Many learning community characteristics have been embedded within PS 180's culture. Teachers and leaders work collaboratively to accomplish the learning goals they have established for their students. The school's leaders continually seek ways to provide their teachers with opportunities for learning, for developing leadership skills, and for examining their instructional practice. Guided by a distributive leadership model based on the work of James Spillane (2005), teachers take on a number of leadership responsibilities, from schoolwide leadership to grade-level leadership. The teachers weigh in and identify their professional development needs. Plans for professional development in English as a second language and cross-grade planning teams have been developed. Strategies at PS 180 include structured opportunities for teacher collaboration, the analysis of data for program improvement, and an unrelenting focus on academic achievement.

Structured Opportunities for Collaboration

At PS 180 many structured processes are in place that provide for teacher collaboration, community building, and collective learning.

- *Cross-grade planning teams*: In collaboration with a local college, cross-grade planning teams meet monthly for cross-grade conversations that advance their understanding of the content of and expectations for the major areas of the curriculum. The focus of this ongoing project is vertical and horizontal curriculum planning in English language arts, social studies, mathematics, and science. Each staff member in the school sits on one of these teams.
- *Schoolwide leadership team*: The state-mandated school leadership team develops school-based educational policies and ensures that resources are aligned to implement those policies.
- *Grade-level planning teams*: Twice a month the literacy and math coaches effectively work with teachers at the grade level meetings to ensure curricular alignment at each grade level.
- *Higher education partnership*: Another university partnership addresses the improvement of literacy instruction by embedding ongoing professional development activities throughout the school day.

Through these structured, ongoing activities and partnerships, teachers build community and expand their knowledge of curriculum and instruction. They are better prepared to assume collective responsibility for the learning of all students in the school community.

Data Analysis

Data-driven decision making is another important element in PS 180's school improvement process. Data from state-level and classroom assessments are pooled into a database, and improvement plans are developed

for all students. Achievement profiles for each grade level as well as for the subgroups in the school are developed and analyzed to advance planning for improved student achievement.

In addition to the data collected in formal assessment processes, teachers are increasingly looking at daily classroom activities as a source of data. Each PS 180 staff member maintains a data binder containing all of their classroom data, including the information gathered from measures of early literacy skills, reading inventories, running records, and other interim assessments. Each teacher is responsible for developing an intervention plan and, during his or her common planning period, looks at student work with either the literacy or mathematics coach to determine how best to support student needs based on the data.

Notably, PS 180 has been resourceful in including students in the community-building process. Teachers hold conferences with students to discuss student progress and to learn how it can be improved. Students use a password for online access to their achievement data. These activities encourage students to become more involved and assume an active role in their own learning. At the same time, these teacher-student interactions also provide a learning opportunity for the teachers in the form of feedback about their teaching practices.

Academic Achievement

Specifically, how are the school's students affected by these activities? In 1999 only 13 percent of the students achieved the state-established profi-

Figure 1.4   Percent of Students Achieving Academic Proficiency at PS 180
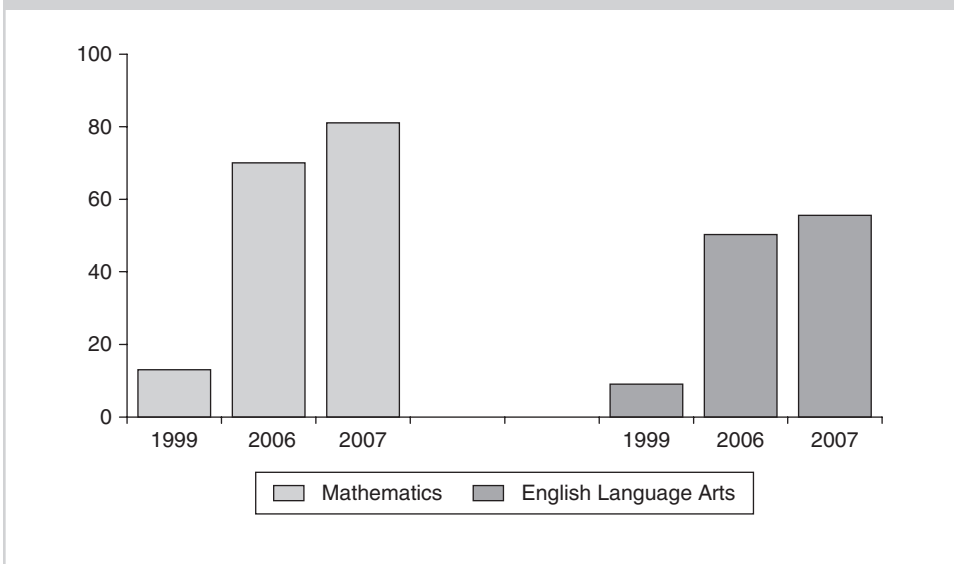
ciency level in math, and 9 percent achieved the state-established proficiency level in English language arts. During McFarlane's tenure as principal, the percentage of students achieving the proficiency level has gradually risen to 81 percent in mathematics and 56 percent in literacy (Figure 1.4).

It should be noted that the path to improving learning and teaching at PS 180 has not been without the challenges associated with a school stalled by a history of academic failure. Clearly, the arrival of a visionary principal who focused on leadership development, teacher and student learning, and building community has lead to a steady improvement in student outcomes at the school.

Visit the Web site of the Hugo Newman College Preparatory School at www.hugonewmanprep.org/home.aspx for additional information about the school and http://schools.nyc.gov/OA/SchoolReports/2006-07/QR_M180.pdf for the quality review report that describes how the school's focus on collaborative learning has contributed to a steady improvement in the academic achievement of its students.

HOW ARE TEACHERS AFFECTED BY THE LEARNING COMMUNITY?

The transformation of a school into a professional learning community has profound effects on the members of a school community. Based on the characteristics identified by Kruse et al. (1995) and Hord (1997), the community of learners movement recasts the roles, rules, and relationships that exist between and among teachers, administrators, students, and other community members. It cannot be overemphasized that "sustaining and developing school communities requires a revisioning of roles and relationships for all constituencies" (Hausman, & Goldring, p. 45, 2001).

The emerging picture of schools as learning communities reveals that the attributes of learning community schools have a significant influence on the daily work lives of teachers. The influence on teachers can be grouped into five categories: (1) teachers as colleagues, (2) teachers as leaders, (3) teachers as learners, (4) teachers as pedagogues, and (5) teacher/parent relationships.

Teachers as Colleagues

Our experiences as facilitators of school-change projects bear out that the dialogue that occurs when isolation is reduced is perceived by teachers as an exchange of valuable information with peers. Roland Barth (2006) emphasized the importance of collegiality. He argued: "The nature of relationships among the adults within a school has a greater influence on the character and quality of that school and on student accomplishment than anything else" (p. 9). Barth associated collegiality with such actions as conversing with one another about practice, sharing information about what works, observing one another in the act of teaching, and showing an active interest in one another's work.

Teachers have often informed us that consistently talking about their teaching permits them to learn new things, to contribute to each other's learning, and to receive help in improving the quality of their working relationships.

Unquestionably, a culture of sustained collegiality in which teachers talk about and share what they know and have opportunities to learn is essential for meaningful school change, for the building of community, and for the nurturing of teachers' commitment to their schools (Barth, 2006; Hausman, & Goldring, 2001).

Teachers as Leaders

We know from the research that leadership has a powerful impact on student outcomes (Leithwood et al., 2004*).* When teachers fulfill their commitment, individually or as a group, to take responsibility for the well-being of their schools, they are exercising their leadership roles (Barth, 1990; Drago-Steverson, 2004). In our own work we have observed that teacher leaders show evidence of a commitment to accepting responsibility for the learning of all students in the school community. At PS 180 Principal McFarlane recognizes that teacher leadership has played an important role in building community and improving achievement in his school, and he seeks every opportunity to develop teachers' leadership skills. Speck and Knipe (2001) pointed out that "the ideal is that teacher leadership becomes so embedded in a school that that when a principal leaves, teacher leaders are able to carry on the change process and provide continuity to the work" (p. 88).

Teachers as Learners

Teachers in learning community schools are found to focus on learning as opposed to teaching. When they collectively engage in regularly structured learning activities on a regular basis, members of the school community are able to learn from one anther and to stay on course toward achieving the outcomes they have set for their students. (Hord, 2007)

Teachers as Pedagogues

Increasingly the learning community model has been found to play a role in improving teaching and learning (Little, 2002). When teachers collaborate as part of a schoolwide community, they spend time sharing teaching strategies, planning for instruction, and looking for new ways to improve learning (Hord & Sommers, 2008). They work with administrators to identify what students should know and be able to do. In our work we find that they take on greater responsibility for student outcomes and for school improvement. One teacher wrote after a year long series of professional development sessions:

> Because we meet a lot to talk and plan together for our teaching, I have a better grasp on how to teach the content we are supposed to teach.

We know that our students are learning more. In the long run, we expect to see better achievement scores on the state tests. For the first time, I feel comfortable helping some of the less experienced teachers with how to teach the content. Actually, I enjoy teaching more than in the past. I believe that I have the help I need to help my students reach the standards set by the district. Most of the teachers feel more positive about student outcomes. Actually, the more I learn about teaching, the more I like teaching because the more my students learn.

Teacher/Parent Relationships

Students, parents, and teachers benefit when parents assume the role of learners. Principals must ensure that a structured process is provided through which teachers can share information and know-how with parents and other members of the broader school community (Hausman & Goldring, 2001). When building a professional learning community, parents should be invited and encouraged to serve as collaborators in the community-building process. If well-informed parents understand the work of the learning community, they can become active advocates for their children and for the instructional changes that teachers want to put into place for all of a school's students.

HOW DO REFLECTION AND REFLECTIVE PRACTICE CONTRIBUTE TO THE BUILDING OF LEARNING COMMUNITIES?

The process of reflection provides teachers with the opportunity to cast light on and make sense of what they have learned while engaging in collaborative dialogue with their peers. Reflective practice involves stepping back to think deeply about and acquire a renewed understanding of individual or group goals, beliefs, and practices. It leads to renewed understandings and functions as the groundwork for actions that lead to improved educational practice and ongoing teacher and student learning. (York-Barr et al., 2006).

The importance of reflection has been affirmed by the Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (INTASC), a program of the Council of Chief State School Officers, which has developed ten standards for licensing new teachers. INTASC Standard 9 states:

[t]he teacher is a reflective practitioner who continually evaluates the effects of his/her choices and actions on others (students, parents, and other professionals in the learning community) and who actively seeks out opportunities to grow professionally. (p. 6)

Reflective practice is critical for a number of reasons, including (1) it has the potential to improve teaching practices and educational outcomes; (2) it

can enhance teachers' sense of professionalism and lead them to explore a variety of alternative viewpoints about teaching and learning; and (3) it provides a forum in which teachers' individual and collective voices can be heard and their sense of efficacy can be enhanced (York-Barr et al., 2006). As pointed out in *Schools That Learn*, what most experienced teachers know about teaching and learning is acquired through systematic, ongoing reflection on classroom and schoolwide practices (Senge, et al., 2000). Reflective practice must be an aspect of the ongoing professional development of experienced as well as new and inexperienced teachers. An extensive knowledge base and deep understanding of teaching and learning practice is acquired by closely examining and questioning one's teaching behaviors.

Group reflection as well as self-reflection are elements of many of the collaborative activities discussed throughout this book. Team meetings, committee meetings, study groups, preobservation and postobservation conferences, grade-level meetings, portfolio development, walk-throughs, and a host of other community-building strategies involve teachers in the process of reflecting on their professional practice. We have observed that when group reflection occurs in structured activities, teachers are empowered by the support and feedback received from their peers. As a result, they are more likely to try new ways of teaching. Exactly what does group reflection look like in a learning community?

One of the authors served as the facilitator for a group of high school mathematics teachers who wanted to engage in discussions about their instructional practices. The group had been meeting every other week for about two months to discuss activities that would help them to teach to the mathematics-content standards. The teachers were uncertain about making contributions to the conversation when they first began the reflective process. The group had decided that a different teacher would take the leadership role at each meeting. Some group leaders tended to focus on getting the work of the group done while others were overly sensitive to how they believed individual members of the group might feel about the conversation. Once the group was trained in group processes, they began to develop trust and to feel more comfortable with one another.

As the group's conversations became more spontaneous, they felt freer to publicly discuss their beliefs about standards and their instructional needs. Individual members of the group began to bring ideas and questions about teaching to the group. They began to share ideas about what worked and what did not work in their classrooms. Prodded by the facilitator, they focused on teaching and learning rather than on the students' backgrounds, their parents, and socioeconomic factors as issues related to student achievement.

They gradually generated a set of questions to guide their reflections. When members tried out an activity suggested by the group, follow-up reflective questions were raised, such as *Do you think the activity helped to improve student learning? Were there any unexpected outcomes? What changes could be made in the activity to make the teaching process better?* Over time as

they learned more about teaching and learning, group members became more committed to the reflective process.

Reflective-Cycle Process

Group reflection involves members of a learning group subjecting their personal views and practices about teaching and learning to critical analysis, and it should result in the application of what they have learned to improve outcomes for students (York-Barr, 2001).

Many models of reflective practice are described in the literature. The seven-stage process of reflective practice described here can be adapted for groups or individuals. In addition to being influenced by our own experiences, it is based on an adaptation of the work of Carol Rodgers (2002) and York-Barr and her colleagues (2001, 2006). The seven steps are:

1. *Identifying a practice/product for group reflection:* A team may select or a teacher may share a teaching practice or product to be examined collaboratively. An instructional program, student work, a classroom teaching practices, or a specific lesson plan are all examples of what may be selected for the reflective process.

2. *Setting the stage for successful group reflection:* Effective reflective practice requires that preparation be made for group meetings. An agenda should be prepared; necessary resources should be obtained; lesson plans, journal articles or other products should be

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Tips for Leaders 1.1

Reflecting on Reflection

Reflection is an integral part of the learning process. To encourage reflection among your teachers

- look for opportunities to openly discuss classroom issues of importance to teachers, such as test scores and student motivation.

- invite a guest facilitator to dialogue with teachers on an issue of importance to them.

- where appropriate, participate with teachers and others in your school in reflective practice groups.

- ensure that a reflective practice activity is a component of all of the school's professional development activities.

distributed; a meeting place should be secured; and, participants should be notified of the meeting in a timely manner.

3. *Explaining the practice/product selected for group reflection:* The activity, practice or product selected for review must be carefully explained so that all team members share a common understanding of the program, lesson, or product being reviewed. Team members can pose questions to obtain an objective picture of the teachers' thoughts and feelings about the practice or product and how it affects student outcomes in the learning community. It is important that sufficient time be allowed for this step to uncover information that can be used for meaningful reflection.

4. *Examining the practice/product selected for reflection:* During this stage the team engages in the reflective dialogue that sets the stage for collaborative learning. Members of the group must openly but courteously share their thoughts and feelings about the product or about what has occurred and what could have been done differently. Questions around why the particular instructional practice or product was chosen may be posed. *How did students respond to its use? What did the teacher learn from its use? Does it help students to achieve a particular district standard?* The team may identify what worked, what did not work, and what needs to be changed or modified. Finally, group members should summarize what has been learned during this stage.

5. *Acting on what is learned during reflection:* Based on what is learned through reflection, a plan to improve the teaching practice or product is developed and carried out by the teacher.

6. *Assessing the outcome of the plan:* Collective learning is the focus of this step. After the recommendations have been tried, the outcome of the planned actions should be discussed. The team should reflect on how the planned changes affected student and teacher learning. Individual members of the team should describe what they learned from the process.

7. *Building community through the cycle of reflection:* Community-building will be promoted by preparing and disseminating a list of what has been learned through collaborative reflection. Other members of the team should be encouraged to share instructional practices or products and repeat steps 1 through 6 to promote the ongoing building of professional community.

A learning community is nurtured by ongoing structured activities that require teachers to engage in cycles of reflection through which they can learn from one another's practice. As Ostermann and Kottkamp (2004) pointed out, reflective practice, which serves to elevate professional practice, "is an important and effective change process that is integral to the learning organization" (p. x).

For extensive in-depth information on reflection and reflective practice, we recommend *Reflective Practice to Improve Schools: An Action Guide for Educators* (York-Barr et al., 2006). A review of their work will provide ideas that can be used to prepare some questions to guide the discussion at each of the six steps in the process.

Some Final Thoughts on Reflection

Trust-building is an important aspect of the reflective group process that must be addressed. When teachers sit down to reflect on one another's teaching practices or activities, the members of the group may feel threatened. It is not characteristic of teachers who traditionally carry out their professional roles in isolation to publicly discuss concerns they may have about their teaching. Leaders should consider that levels of trust have a significant impact on a team's ability to engage in reflective practice and that, in fact, the inability to trust may delay progress toward community building. Useful strategies for building trust are discussed in Chapter 2.

It is also important to keep in mind that controversy, another aspect of the group reflective process, can be useful because it develops deeper understandings. Different perspectives enrich conversations and help a team look at teaching and learning more deeply.

A Teacher Reflects

In our work with schools, we have found that teachers' sense of professionalism is enhanced when they work as colleagues, make instructional decisions, and develop a sense of community. One teacher in a school in which we serve as facilitators shared the following eloquent statement with us in her professional journal:

Our school has developed clear shared mission and vision statements. Our work was accomplished with the help of an outside facilitator and a newly appointed, understanding, committed, and very, very patient principal. During the principal's first year, the teachers were given a lot of opportunities to work together on projects in which they were interested. Slowly, as they began to feel more comfortable and valued, more teachers and parents became interested in the direction the school was taking.

I think it took about three years before I could see the beginning of definite changes in the way things were being done in our school, changes in the way things were being done by the teachers. It was worth the time that we put into the process. Now many teachers are willing to work together to solve the problems that come up in the school, to improve their teaching, and to try new ways of doing things. We really enjoy talking and reading about teaching

and learning and visiting each other's classrooms. Our principal is very good about scheduling time so that we can meet to talk about our ideas and participate in staff development activities.

All of the staff development in our school is planned by a committee of teachers and a lot of it is done by the teachers themselves. We follow up on the training sessions in our peer group meetings and for the first time teachers really take the training seriously. I think that our students and parents are happier campers now because they have a more professional staff. We have made a good beginning. We still have a lot of challenges, but we are satisfied with our work and enjoy coming to school. It's all about learning new things.

CONCLUSION

Building learning communities requires a shift from the paradigm of schools as bureaucracies to a vision of schools as communities. Teachers in learning community schools work in teams where, collaboratively, through sustained reflection and inquiry, they learn by sharing professional practices. As educators collaboratively engage in conversation and deliberate about teaching and learning, they gain new knowledge and discover original ways to resolve instructional issues. In the process they develop a shared vision and strengthen their ability to achieve the vision that they want for their schools.

They are supported in their learning efforts by leaders who provide the encouragement, the time, and other conditions that permit them to collaborate, visit one another's classrooms, and experiment with new teaching strategies. The culture of a community of learners permits the teachers in a school to view themselves as members of a team of learners and leaders, rather than as participants in the traditional leader-follower roles.

MAKING IT WORK: LAYING THE FOUNDATION— ASSESSING THE IMPLEMENTATION OF LEARNING COMMUNITY CHARACTERISTICS

School Improvement Strategies

Data-Driven Decision Making
Action Planning
Leadership Development

Goal

One of the first steps that you will want to take when introducing teachers to the learning community model is to conduct a survey to assess

the extent to which they believe the learning community characteristics are presently operational in your school. The purpose of the survey is to lead teachers to an understanding of the characteristics, stimulate their thinking about the model, and provide a focus for a discussion of a school's implementation of the characteristics and their leadership role in the process. The items in the survey are based on the professional community attributes identified by Kruse, Louis and Bryk (1995) and Hord (1997).

When making plans for using the instrument, keep in mind that the instrument is not all inclusive and that the steps for a course of action suggested here can be amended to meet the needs of your school and your teachers.

Resources

Hardware for PowerPoint or overhead presentations; chart paper and markers for small group meetings

Steps

Place the topic of professional learning communities on the agenda of one of your regularly scheduled faculty or professional development meetings.

1. Before the announced meeting, have all teachers complete the *Assessment of Implementation of Learning Community Characteristics*. Identify a team, including members of the teaching staff, to

   • summarize the results of the survey;

   • prepare an item analysis; and

   • rank the individual items associated with each characteristic based on percentage of group agreement.

2. Plan and present a presentation on the characteristics of learning community schools at the meeting.

3. Following the presentation, members of the team that analyzed the survey data can present the results of their analysis.

4. Engage the teachers in a discussion of the results. When discussing the data, it is beneficial to discuss and reinforce the meaning of each characteristic as well as the individual items.

5. Divide teachers into teams or existing school-based committees. Provide each group with a list of questions to facilitate team discussion of the value of implementing the learning community characteristics in the school. Some sample questions include:

   • What are the primary ways in which you learn to improve instruction in our school?

- Which of the learning community characteristics can we imple-ment in our school to help improve teaching and learning?

- Is the learning community a practical model for our school and students? Why?

- What are the barriers to implementing a professional learning community in our school?

- What roles do teachers play in the process?

6. Reconvene the entire group and have each team report their responses. Summarize the responses and identify some agreed upon strategies that can be implemented by the faculty. Discuss the next steps.

Follow-Up Activity

Prepare and distribute to the teachers a summary of the results of the meeting.

ASSESSMENT OF IMPLEMENTATION OF LEARNING COMMUNITY CHARACTERISTICS

DIRECTIONS: Use the instrument here to evaluate the extent to which the characteristics of learning communities are found in you school. The instrument is not all inclusive: Its purpose is to stimu-late your thinking and provide a focus for a discussion of your school's implementation of the characteristics. Each item is rated on a scale of 1 to 3 (1 = *disagree*, 2 = *somewhat agree*, 3 = *agree*).

Shared Leadership in This School

1. The principal and supervisors encourage and support the develop-ment of teacher leaders.   1   2   3

2. Teachers are encouraged and provided time to coach and mentor other teachers.   1   2   3

3. Teachers can serve as heads of committees and as decision makers.   1   2   3

4. The recommendations made by teachers are given serious consid-eration and support.   1   2   3

5. Opportunities are provided for training in shared decision making and collaborative planning.   1   2   3

Collaboration in This School

1. Faculty, staff, and community members carry on conversations about teaching and learning.   1   2   3

2. Faculty, staff, and community members work together to solve identified problems.   1   2   3

3. Teachers dialogue across grade levels and content areas to promote understanding and share ideas.   1   2   3

4. In their classrooms teachers try out the ideas that they share in their conversations.   1   2   3

5. The teachers have input in selecting the decision making process used in the school.   1   2   3

Shared Values/Vision in This School

1. Faculty/staff members have participated in developing the school's vision statement.   1   2   3

2. Student learning is the consistent focus of the teachers and other staff members.   1   2   3

3. Channels for formal and informal communication among faculty/ staff members have been established.   1   2   3

4. Parents and other community members have been involved in developing the vision statement.   1   2   3

5. The teachers had input in selecting the decision-making process used in the school.   1   2   3

Structural/Social Supports in This School

1. Adequate time is provided for teachers/staff to meet and discuss issues.   1   2   3

2. Schedules have been established that reduce teacher isolation.
                                                                                                                  1   2   3

3. Teachers have some input in selecting new teachers, administrators, and other staff members.   1   2   3

4. Time is available for the faculty to meet and discuss issues.
                                                                                                                  1   2   3

5. Trust and respect are demonstrated among the teachers and administrators.   1   2   3

Shared Practice in This School

1. Faculty and staff members help one another to reflect upon and improve their practice.   1   2   3

2. Teachers have the opportunity to identify the focus of professional development activities.   1   2   3

3. In-service training is provided for parents on a regularly scheduled basis.   1   2   3

4. Supervisors and administrators participate in professional development activities with the teachers.   1   2   3

5. Regularly scheduled grade-level and content-level meetings are conducted by teachers.   1   2   3

This assessment process may be conducted annually to ascertain if there is a need to make changes in your priorities as a result of your teachers' perception of the implementation of the learning community model.

ACTIVITIES

Change in the Merlo School District

1. As the new Superintendent of the Merlo School District, you are going to conduct a meeting with the district's elementary school teachers. The topic of the meeting is *What is a learning community?* Use the information provided in the chapter and Information Online 1.1 to prepare the outline of a thirty-minute presentation that you will make to the teachers.

2. What factors present opportunities for building a learning community in your school? What factors pose as constraints to the building of a learning community in your school?

NOTES:
1. The material on characteristics of a professional community has been adapted from "An Emerging Framework for Analyzing School-Based Professional Community," by Kruse et al. (1995, pages 26–40). In Kruse et al. (Eds.), *Professional and Community: Perspectives on Reforming Urban Schools.* Copyright © by Corwin Press. Adapted by permission of Corwin Press.
2. Our thinking on reflective practice has been strongly influenced by material in *Reflective Practice to Improve Schools: An Action Guide for Educators* by York-Barr et al. (2001). Copyright © by Corwin Press. Reprinted/adapted by permission of Corwin Press.