KEY ELEMENT #1: PURPOSE

Overview

Before you can begin to build a professional learning community (PLC), your school community needs to agree on the stated purpose of the program. What is missing in your school, and how will a PLC address those deficits? Agreeing on a purpose for the PLC is similar in process to agreeing on a school vision - it reflects the ideas, hopes and wisdoms of the school community and becomes the foundation of everything that follows. You can’t make decisions about the organization of a PLC, its content, how it will be assessed, or what kind of leadership it will have until you know why you want the program in the first place. This section will help you to determine and articulate this crucial first step toward starting an advisory program at your school.

What the Literature Says About Purpose

A core characteristic of the vision (of PLC’s) is an undeviating focus on student learning, maintains Louis and Kruse (1995), in which each student’s potential achievement is carefully considered. These shared values and vision lead to binding norms of behavior that the staff supports. In such a community, the individual staff member is responsible for his/her actions, but the common good is placed on a par with personal ambition. (Hord, 1997)

According to Roland Barth, the collective purpose of successful professional community include:
- Educators talking with one another about practice
- Educators sharing their craft knowledge
- Educators observing one another while they are engaged in practice
- Educators rooting for one another’s success.       (Barth, 2006)
Billie Donegan has suggested purposes for PLC’s that include:
• Developing curriculum that delineates the essential knowledge and skills each student is to acquire
• Creating frequent common assessments to monitor each student’s learning on a timely basis
• Collectively analyzing results from those assessments to identify strengths and weaknesses
• Helping each other develop and implement strategies to improve current levels of student learning.
  (Donegan, 2005)
SCHOOL NEEDS ANALYSIS

**Instructions**: Identify what is missing in your school and be specific in identifying the impact on students and other key stakeholders, e.g., student achievement (core or 21st century knowledge and skills, social/emotional growth, civic responsibility, and/or post-secondary preparation and access).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WHAT IS MISSING IN YOUR SCHOOL?</th>
<th>WHAT IS THE IMPACT?</th>
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SCHOOL CULTURE GRID EXERCISE: IMPACT OF PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITY

Instructions

1. On the following page, descriptions are provided for the four corner cells of the grid below.
   • The characteristics of the cells between the corners can be inferred from the corner descriptions.
2. Read the descriptors on the next page, and place your school in the cell that is most reflective of your school’s current culture.
   • Note that cells D & G are shaded, as it isn’t possible to have high achievement and personalization with the level of control indicated - no schools can be placed in those cells.
3. Place an “X” on the grid that reflects where you would like to be able to move your school to in the next 2-3 years.
4. List below the three things that a PLC will accomplish in your school, and note on the grid how it will impact your culture:
   •
   •
   •

SCHOOL CULTURE GRID

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Students</th>
<th>LOCUS OF DECISION MAKING/CONTROL</th>
<th>Administrators</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>A. EMPOWERED - PEAK PERFORMANCE, EQUITY, &amp; ACCOUNTABILITY</td>
<td>D. N/A</td>
<td>G. N/A</td>
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<tr>
<td>B.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>C. UNFOCUSED - CHAOS &amp; VIOLENCE</td>
<td>E.</td>
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<td>Low</td>
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<td>F.</td>
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### A. EMPOWERED - PEAK PERFORMANCE, EQUITY, & ACCOUNTABILITY

1. Governance/Structure  
   • Shared authority - students have significant role - leadership truly distributed  
   • Only enough structure to function well - minimum red tape  
   • Focus on reward and recognition for performance  
   • No bells  
   • No hall monitors or security officers  
   • Later start time  
   • Flexible scheduling  
   • Union full partner in goal setting and planning

2. What You See  
   • Color and variety  
   • Respect for the physical plant  
   • Walls reflects student interests and needs - art on wall, etc.

3. Teachers  
   • Facilitators of learning versus instructors  
   • Differentiated instruction - relevance for each student  
   • Shared leadership, voice heard and respected, creativity rewarded

4. Upside  
   • Achievement focus - good performance for all students  
   • Morale positive across the board

5. Downside  
   • None

### H. FIRM BUT FAIR - TURNAROUND

1. Governance/Structure  
   • Focus on discipline  
   • Top down - administrators control all aspects of school functioning  
   • Highly structured - red tape - approvals required for everything  
   • Low flexibility/rule-bound

2. What You See  
   • Reflects some student interests and needs - art on wall, etc.  
   • Institutional feel - sameness/blandness in look and feel

3. Teachers  
   • Empowerment restricted  
   • Differentiated instruction - relevance for each student

4. Upside  
   • In a position to move toward greater student empowerment re: goal setting & planning  
   • Good level of personalization

5. Downside  
   • Student leadership capabilities not developed  
   • Becomes very difficult to change - giving up control is difficult  
   • Lack of empowerment can stifle creativity and create morale problems
## C. UNFOCUSED - CHAOS & VIOLENCE

1. Governance/Structure
   - No one in charge; weak leadership
   - Lack of appropriate structure
   - Lack of appropriate discipline
   - Gangs allowed to exert control
2. What You See
   - Abused physical plant
3. Upside
   - None
4. Downside
   - Learning not the focus
   - Fear, violence
   - Low empowerment and morale of students, teachers, administrators

## I. DICTATORIAL - INSTITUTION

1. Governance/Structure
   - Top down - administrators control all aspects of school functioning
   - Highly structured - red tape - approvals required for everything
   - Focus on discipline
   - Low flexibility/rule bound
2. What You See
   - Sterile physical plant
   - Blandness and uniformity
3. Upside
   - May be required to provide safety and security as the first step in turning a school around
4. Downside
   - Learning not the focus
   - Lose a lot of students - drop outs
   - Teacher and administrator burnout and turnover
   - Becomes very difficult to change - personalization often seen as giving up control
   - Low empowerment and low morale of students and staff
BENCHMARKING OTHER PROGRAMS: EXERCISE #1

Instructions:

1. Conduct a jigsaw reading of articles by Dufour, Barth and Schmoker with the focus being an understanding the purpose of a PLC, and the context in which PLC’s are successful.

2. Fill in the chart below for your assigned reading/schools, and be prepared to share your observations.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PURPOSE</th>
<th>CONTEXT: WHAT WAS MISSING?</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>1.</td>
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CHALK TALK: EXERCISE #2

USING THE CHALK TALK PROTOCOL RESPOND TO THE QUESTION: WHAT COMPELLING NEEDS IN OUR SCHOOL CAN A PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITY ADDRESS?

Chalk Talk is a silent way to do reflection, generate ideas, check on learning, develop projects or solve problems. It can be used productively with any group—students, faculty, workshop participants, committees. Because it is done completely in silence, it gives groups a change of pace and encourages thoughtful contemplation. It can be an unforgettable experience.

Format
Time: Varies according to need; can be from 5 minutes to an hour.
Materials: Chalkboard and chalk or paper roll on the wall and markers.

Process
1. The facilitator explains VERY BRIEFLY that chalk talk is a silent activity. No one may talk at all and anyone may add to the chalk talk as they please. You can comment on other people’s ideas simply by drawing a connecting line to the comment. It can also be very effective to say nothing at all except to put finger to lips in a gesture of silence and simply begin with #2.

2. The facilitator writes a relevant question in a circle on the board.
Sample questions:
   • What did you learn today?
   • So What? or Now What?
   • What do you think about social responsibility and schooling?
   • How can we involve the community in the school, and the school in community?
   • How can we keep the noise level down in this room?
   • What do you want to tell the scheduling committee?
   • What do you know about Croatia?
   • How are decimals used in the world?
3. The facilitator either hands a piece of chalk to everyone, or places many pieces of chalk at the board and hands several pieces to people at random.

4. People write as they feel moved. There are likely to be long silences—that is natural, so allow plenty of wait time before deciding it is over.

5. How the facilitator chooses to interact with the Chalk Talk influences its outcome. The facilitator can stand back and let it unfold or expand thinking by:
   • circling other interesting ideas, thereby inviting comments to broaden
   • writing questions about a participant comment
   • adding his/her own reflections or ideas
   • connecting two interesting ideas/comments together with a line and adding a question mark.

Actively interacting invites participants to do the same kinds of expansions. A Chalk Talk can be an uncomplicated silent reflection or a spirited, but silent, exchange of ideas. It has been known to solve vexing problems, surprise everyone with how much is collectively known about something, get an entire project planned, or give a committee everything it needs to know without any verbal sparring.

6. When it’s done, it’s done.

DEVELOPING PURPOSE THEMES
### APPLYING KEY ELEMENT #1 (PURPOSE) TO YOUR SCHOOL

Reflect on the chalk talk exercise and consider how program emphases can be crafted to address the needs identified.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Program Emphasis</th>
<th>Addresses students’ needs in what ways?</th>
<th>Reflects the needs of the school community in what ways?</th>
<th>Consensus reached - priority?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>IMPROVING TEACHER CRAFT KNOWLEDGE</td>
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<tr>
<td>TEACHER OBSERVATION TO IMPROVE PRACTICE</td>
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<tr>
<td>DEVELOP ESSENTIAL LEARNING CURRICULA</td>
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<td>CREATE COMMON ASSESSMENTS</td>
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<tr>
<td>EXAMINE STUDENT WORK</td>
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</table>
Begin the Focusing Four exercise (see Focusing Four protocol, p. 93). Brainstorming, clarifying, and advocating should be done among the entire group so everyone benefits from discussion of all the possibilities. Canvassing, however, should be done in teams. Canvassing can take place by a hand count or by using post-it notes next to top three or four choices.
PROGRAM PURPOSE: Based on the consensus you reach about program emphasis using the Focusing Four protocol, what specific purpose(s) will your PLC program be designed to meet?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Your Program Purpose</th>
<th>Priority value:</th>
<th>Addresses students' needs in what ways?</th>
<th>Reflects the needs of the school community in what ways?</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1 Essential, non-negotiable</td>
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<td>2 Important, but negotiable</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3 Experimental and negotiable</td>
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</table>
DRAFT STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

**Instructions:** Based on your analysis of your students’ and school community’s needs, and your team’s consensus re: purposes(s) and priorities, draft your “First Cut” statement of program purpose. (The “Second Cut” and “Third Cut” will be addressed shortly.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>STATEMENT OF PURPOSE</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A. <strong>First Cut:</strong></td>
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<td>B. <strong>Second Cut:</strong></td>
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<td>C. <strong>Third Cut:</strong></td>
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</table>
FINAL EVALUATION OF YOUR DRAFT PURPOSE STATEMENT

**Instructions:**
1. On your own, respond to each question.
2. Compare your results to those of your team members.
3. Use the items the team agrees is either a “no” or “somewhat” as input in creating your “Third Cut” draft purpose statement in the chart on page .

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ITEMS</th>
<th>YES</th>
<th>NO</th>
<th>SOMEWHAT</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. The statement reflects commonly held beliefs of the school community concerning student needs.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. You can directly relate your PLC purpose to student and school community needs.</td>
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<td>3. The way you have stated the PLC purpose will be easily understood by all stakeholders.</td>
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<td>4. The statement reflects the consensus of your team.</td>
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<td>5. The statement will have a positive emotional impact on those who read it.</td>
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<td>6. If the PLC as implemented will bring the purpose statement to life, it will result in meaningful changes, versus just tweaks.</td>
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<td>7. The statement reflects an approach to meeting student needs that can’t be met in any other way that is more efficient or effective.</td>
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