

Professional Learning Communities (*DuFour et al.*)

In professional learning communities, teachers and school administrators continuously seek out and share learning experiences, and act on what they learn. The ultimate goal is high achievement and continuous improvement for all students, regardless of their individual circumstances. The objective is to enhance professional effectiveness and improve students' learning. The key questions that guide the development of a professional learning community are:

1. What do we expect students to learn?
2. How will we know if students have learned it?
3. What will we do if students have not learned it?

The key ingredients of a successful learning community are:

- supportive leadership from principals who share authority, and empower and facilitate the work of their staff
- a shared vision that is focused on student learning and reflects the staff's commitment to students' learning
- collaboration among teachers in planning instruction, observing each other's classrooms, providing feedback and applying what they have learned to new solutions to address students' needs
- capacity to analyze data and use it to guide decisions
- a supportive environment that includes adequate resources, policies that foster collaboration and effective communication and staff development
- shared accountability for student achievement
- above all, time—structured time to allow teachers to work together, assess their students' learning, adjust practices and continuously improve their students' results.

Research studies of professional learning communities suggest several clear benefits.

Benefits for staff include:

- reduced isolation of teachers
- increased commitment to the mission and goals of the school
- shared responsibility for the development and success of students
- definition of good teaching and classroom practice
- better understanding of the content teachers teach and the roles they play in helping students meet expectations
- significant advances in adapting instruction to students
- more satisfaction and higher morale
- lower rates of absenteeism.

The benefits for students include:

- increased school completion rates
- lower rates of absenteeism
- enhanced learning and critical thinking
- greater academic gains
- smaller achievement gaps among students from different backgrounds.

A number of schools in Alberta have taken steps to become professional learning communities, often through the support of the Alberta Initiative for School Improvement. The Alberta Teachers' Association (ATA) has also been actively working with schools to implement the professional learning communities model in the Alberta context. A series of interactive workshops that draw heavily on the work of researchers such as Richard DuFour, Linda Lambert, Peter Senge and Michael Fullan is offered by ATA staff to develop a school's capacity to function as a professional learning community.

Because there is no set formula for becoming a learning community, each school must consider its culture of learning and determine which structures will lead to the best course of action. The workshops focus on supporting teaching to enhance student learning while providing opportunities for participants to reflect on the unique needs of their school and community as well as their own teaching practices.

Related publications

DuFour, Richard et al. *Whatever It Takes: How Professional Learning Communities Respond When Kids Don't Learn*. Bloomington, IN: National Educational Service, 2004.

Eaker, Robert, Richard DuFour and Rebecca Burnette. *Getting Started: Reculturing Schools to Become Professional Learning Communities*. Bloomington, IN: National Educational Service, 2002.

Hord, Shirley M. *Professional Learning Communities: Communities of Continuous Inquiry and Improvement*. Austin, TX: Southwest Educational Development Laboratory, 1997.