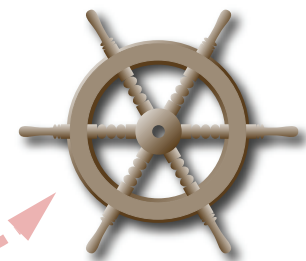


Charting Your Course FOR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT



Professional Learning is Instructional Time

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The Nova Scotia Teachers Union has been working with the Department of Education and Board partners to develop a collective understanding of what makes up an effective professional learning community (PLC). Across the province we see teachers who are enthusiastic about their PLC. Those teachers and administrators reflect on how the professional conversations among colleagues have enhanced their own empowerment to effectively address the learning needs of students in their classes. We also hear from teachers and administrators for whom the term “Professional Learning Community” only conjures up feelings of resentment and frustration. For these teachers any thought of expanding the role and presence of PLCs only represents an added burden that detracts from both student learning and rewarding teaching.

The partners’ working group reached a clear understanding that effective Professional Learning Communities can only exist amidst an environment of trust, collegial collaboration and support that enables teachers and administrators to talk about their practice in non-evaluative ways and try new approaches without any fear of censure or reprimand if success is not immediate or obvious. For many in our schools, classrooms have isolated teachers from both colleagues and administration. We are not encouraged to cooperatively teach, to engage in conversation with fellow teachers about the strengths and weaknesses of our approach to a lesson topic or specific student needs. Admission that we don’t have all the answers or know everything is seen as failure and as something upon which a negative evaluation can be based.

To ensure effective Professional Learning Communities, two critical components must be provided. First of all, there must be a cultural shift that enables and encourages an environment of trust and collegiality. Secondly, we must find the time for people to participate in these learning communities. It is very important to note that because effective PLCs require the cultural changes, they cannot simply be mandated.

FINDING THE TIME

One of the major impediments to enabling Professional Learning Communities within the Nova Scotia framework has been the regulatory requirement of a minimum of 300 minutes of instruction each day. Some parents have argued that early dismissal of students to allow teachers to meet, discuss and learn with respect to instructional strategies, assessment, differentiated instruction, etc. violates this regulatory requirement. However, this problem is based on a false categorization of teachers’ professional learning communities as outside the

definition of “instruction”. While there may have been a time when “instruction” was synonymous with being under the direct supervision of a teacher, our understanding of learning, pedagogy and education has discarded this simplistic viewpoint.

Research clearly establishes that teacher learning, focused on the learning needs of the teachers’ students, is directly related to student learning. It is therefore clear that teacher learning is not separate from instruction, but an integral component of it. However, it is important to distinguish between some broad categories of teacher learning that fit under the general umbrella of “professional development” and this much more focused aspect of teacher learning that is most effectively captured within our understanding of Professional Learning Communities. The former, while it may also assist with student learning, is not part of the instructional day and specific time has been negotiated to provide opportunities for teacher professional development. The latter is new in Nova Scotia. This new form of teacher learning is a part of the instructional process and effective instruction cannot be separated from it.

If we hope to see Professional Learning Communities succeed in Nova Scotia, it is imperative that we communicate to students, parents, government and the public in general that what takes place within the framework of PLCs is intimately bound with what and how students learn. Teachers who better understand new approaches, the learning challenges, assessment *for* learning and differentiated instruction improve and expand what students are learning. The time used for this professional learning does not take away from student learning; this time actually improves student learning.

We also need to understand the minutes that define the instructional day are not minimum and maximum along a continuum of quality. The time to deliver a viable curriculum is defined by that curriculum and that is the time required. The inclusion of a range of time allows for the logistics of a provincial education system and it does not follow that a school with a 300-minute instructional day is inferior to a school with a 315-minute instructional day.

It will be difficult for most teachers to see the addition of PLC time as anything other than an addition to an already demanding workload, even if they understand the underlying theoretical justification. Adding to the school day for teachers is counter-productive to the efforts to engage teachers in Professional Learning Communities.

THE CULTURAL SHIFT

We must also recognize some political dimensions to efforts to realize professional learning communities in Nova Scotia schools. While we all agree that time is



required for teachers to engage in this focused professional learning, we also have recognized that there is a cultural shift that is required. The provision of time is a necessary condition for an effective PLC, but it is not a sufficient condition.

Two major cultural changes must take place. The first is a move away from individual practice to shared practice. For teachers accustomed to conducting their classrooms as independent entities, within the structure of the PSP, the shift to accepting the input from colleagues about teaching and assessment practice is a significant change. Developing common assessments among a group of teachers will inevitably come up against favourite and treasured assessment strategies and tools. Having colleagues and administrators observe, participate and suggest in a teacher’s classroom will generate disequilibrium. While we will certainly find schools in which this change is well underway, the structure of the school day, classrooms and the conventional model of school provide a great deal of inertia.

The second cultural change is to an atmosphere of trust; trust of colleagues and trust of and among administrators. This clearly happens in many schools, at least to some degree, across the province. However, it is not true systemically. There is confusion, and suspicion, concerning the role of mentors and coaches. When a principal or department head “observes” a class, the anxiety level increases. Making the shift from “evaluation” to a focus on teamwork will take time and dedicated effort from all participants. The underlying premise of mutual respect and of working together must be continually emphasized at every opportunity. The two cultural changes together, shared teaching and trust, transform the experience of someone else in the classroom from one of evaluation to one of support and learning.

EFFECTING CHANGE

In order to produce sustainable organizational change, research clearly identifies three critical components—confidence, competence and motivation; confidence that the change is achievable

because it is supported by the system with time and material resources; competence is the belief by the participants that they have the personal resources to make the change; and motivation is the desire to make the change.

Motivation itself has three essential components – autonomy, mastery and purpose. Autonomy is essential for teachers’ motivation. There is no incentive to be engaged in a change if teachers have no authority over that change; if it is simply “top down” and mandated by someone else. Teachers must have the opportunity to develop competence in the areas of change. Nothing detracts more from a person’s motivation than the knowledge that he or she will be expected to carry out a task for which they are poorly prepared. Finally, teachers need to understand what the intrinsic benefit of the change will be. Why are we doing this or that? The answer must be seen as worthwhile, not just expedient or to benefit bureaucratic obligations. Teachers do not oppose accountability provided they are held accountable for those things over which they have control.

These change components mean a very messy process. It is much easier for experts to determine the best model and tell everyone to carry it out. Unfortunately, this approach will fail. If we want to change the system culture in education we must be prepared to implement a process that engages teachers in that process and gives them ownership of the results. This is not quick and it’s not easy, but it is the only way to be successful.

One of the most effective strategies for addressing the need for PLC time, one that will be seen as inviting rather than imposing, is to allocate whatever PLC time is needed from within the existing school day, however that may be defined in each individual school. This will require a sustained and effective communications effort to educate students, parents, politicians and the general public that this time is the most effective approach to enhancing and improving student learning. However, that effort is one that will provide an excellent *return on investment*.

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